

Genesis 1:26-28

COVENANT RENEWAL

Matthew 28:18-20

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OH, FOR THE DAYS OF JOSIAH

by Ray R. Sutton

Guess what? Another newsletter from I.C.E. Surprise, surprise. OK, maybe you're not so surprised. But wait a minute. The title of this newsletter promises something of a little different caliber from your normal penetrating, bone-crunching, Gary Northese, rapier-like newsletter with something to offend everyone. This is a monthly newsletter about what I believe to be the **number-one organizing concept** in the Bible, but about which very **little is written**: the **covenant**! It follows on a book I have written about the same subject, *That You May Prosper: Dominion By Covenant*, to be released in February of 1987. The title is taken from Deuteronomy 29:9, "So keep the words of this **covenant** to do them, that you may prosper in all that you do." The title is deliberate. It is a calculated attempt to show that success, prosperity, and whatever can only come in terms of the **covenant**, not some kind of hocus pocus religion.

Let me tell you how this project (book and newsletter) began. It all goes back to a conversation I had with Gary North in early Fall of 1985. I had given him a manuscript on baptism. He read it, and he entered my office a few days later with a kind of glazed stare, like he was frustrated about something. He didn't scream. He didn't yell. But in his own quiet way he motivated me to put down on paper something that had been brewing in my head for many years. The following conversation took place, or a reasonable facsimile thereof.

Sutton: "Hey Gary, howsitgoing?"

North: "Not so good. I'm bothered."

Sutton: "Why, what's wrong?"

North: "I read the manuscript."

(A moment of silence followed. I might add that it was a moment of silent prayer for me. Screwing up enough courage, I started up the conversation again.)

Sutton: "Didn't you like the manuscript on baptism?"

North: "It's not so much that I didn't like it, but well. . . ."

(Interrupting him in my state of nervousness, I said . . .)

Sutton: "What is it then."

North: "You've assumed too much. Basically, you have a lot of good ideas in the book. But you lack structure to your arguments. Your position on baptism is tied into one basic idea . . . an idea which you never stop to explain."

Sutton: "Yea, go on."

North: "Everything you say in this book is based on something which almost no one knows anything

about. Everything is based on the **covenant**. It's always been this way. Whatever one's view of the sacraments, it reflects his view of the covenant. I just don't think people will understand what you're trying to say until they understand the **covenant**."

Sutton: "So what are you saying?"

North: "I'm saying we need another book before this one. You or someone needs to write a book on the **covenant**."

Sutton: "Not me, I'm not the one."

North: "Why?"

Sutton: "Someone from Westminster Theological Seminary or one of the other Reformed seminaries needs to write it."

(When I said that, I noticed that the hair on Gary's hands started to grow, his fingernails began to lengthen, his eye-teeth stretched out over his lips, and I received the "Failure of Reformed Thinkers To Go Into Print" speech, one that Gary is often fond, or not so fond, of giving.)

North: "I've waited for the Reformed community to go into print on the covenant for twenty-five years. They won't go into print on anything, much less the covenant. And what they do go into print with is practically incoherent to the **layman**, to anybody. We've waited **four hundred years** for that matter for a book on the covenant. Do you realize that since the Protestant Reformation, it's been generally assumed that **covenant** is the key to the entire event called the Reformation. Every single orthodox Reformed thinker centers his theology around the covenant. Yet, we're still waiting for a definitive, intelligible work on the subject. Pastors, and laymen alike, ask me for a book that will explain the covenant. I never have an answer. I'm tired of not having an answer for this one. If you'll write a manuscript, I'll seriously consider publishing it."

Sutton: "I'll try."

Gary North was right. **Covenant** really is the heart of the Biblical system. This is not to take Biblical theology away from God, unless one's view of the covenant is humanistic and not theocentric. The relationship of the Godhead itself is covenantal. God is a **Trinity**. The Three Persons of the Godhead relate in terms of a covenant among them. The covenant is central precisely because it is central to the Doctrine of God. Furthermore, there are two halves of the Bible: Old and New **Covenants**, called "testaments" most of the time.

Gary North was also right in saying that there really isn't

a single book that says, "Here's what it is, and here's how it works." It's not that there aren't any books on the subject. There are a few, and there are a few with some helpful insights along the way. In *Covenant Renewal* I hope to take a look at some of the more helpful works by men such as Baltzer, Kline, and Robertson to name only a few. In many ways, I have tried to build on these men, especially Kline. But none of the books on the covenant to my knowledge attempts to tackle the great theological and sociological ramifications of this central idea.

Irony isn't it? The most important theological distinctive among Reformed groups, yet there's not a book, and hasn't been a complete book on the subject for four centuries. Is it any wonder we have a problem rallying people to a cohesive and coherent systematic way of thinking? How can we, when we haven't clarified the system everyone is supposed to be believing and practicing?

Everything Except Covenant

Here's where we are: We have a lot of people who believe **some** of the correct things, but they don't believe in or understand the covenant. Consequently, they are making some very serious mistakes in their teaching and practice.

First, there is the **dominion without covenant** group. They believe in dominion. They like dominion eschatology. They believe in Christians taking charge in society. They want Christians in political office. They want Christian influence. **But dominion without covenant can be very dangerous.** Dominion without covenant means people who take to the streets without law and structure. Dominion without covenant means influence without a clear, objective standard for having, or even gaining, influence.

You know what this means? It means we could get a repeat of the Anabaptist radicals of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, like the group at Münster, the precursors to the modern revolutionary movements (See Igor Shafarevich, *The Socialist Phenomenon* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975; Also, see David Chilton's *Preface 3*, which reviewed this book; write I.C.E. for it.). It means we could get men in office who act on the basis of hearing voices, instead of listening to God's already-Inscripturated-Voice, the Word of God, the covenant in written form. Men who hear voices tend to make careless mistakes.

It has always been this way. If we get this kind of dominion without covenant, **Christianity could experience its worst setback in the history of America.** That's right. A Christian leader who finally rises to power, but who doesn't understand the covenant, what it is, and how it works, could drive this country into an even worse spiritual condition, simply because he listened to the wrong voice one day. The bottom line on dominion without covenant is that we don't get the blessing of God.

Second, there is the **culture without covenant** group. These are your basic Reformed theology types. They like to talk about art, literature, and real sophisticated stuff. They like the **idea** of "Christian education." But the culture they want is a Christless culture. They want "Christian education" without six-day creationism. They want Christian government without four-fifths of the Bible (the Old Testament, or as they think of it, "God's Word, emeritus"). They want civilization without Biblical law. They want money without distinctively Christian economics. They want clean, white farms with neat little red silos, all supported by government-guaranteed price supports. They want **sophistication** without the Biblical word from which it is derived, "sophis," meaning **wisdom**. And sophistication without Biblical wisdom is **rationalistic snobbery**.

Biblical culture can't be built on rationalism (or irrationalism for that matter). Culture without covenant is impossible. The word culture comes from "cultus," meaning place of

worship. Biblically, this is where the covenant is cut, the place of covenant renewal, as we shall see in future newsletters. Thus, culture without covenant does not inherit the blessing of God; there is no real covenant, and there is ultimately no real culture.

Third, there are the **worldview without covenant** types. In the 60s **worldview** became popular among the shaker-and-mover intellectuals of evangelicalism. But folks didn't stop long enough to say, "Hey, what do you mean by this word?" They've just gone around oooing and goooing at the idea for nearly twenty years, when there is in fact no real definition, just a sort of vague consensus of meaning.

Today, some publishers are spending large amounts of money to publish volumes on this vagueness of meaning. As one of my professors once said, "When there is a mist in the pulpit, there's a fog in the pew." The new worldview libraries are creating bookshelves full of ambiguity with which to numb the Christian community into inactivity—or worse, into baptized political liberalism.

It just won't do to **talk** worldview. We have to define our term, if we're going to get anywhere. Ambiguity of meaning plays into the hand of ambiguous irrelevant leaders who really don't want a Christian society. If they did, they would go ahead and say, "Worldview means a civilization run by the Bible: the Family, Church, and **State**." But this would imply that all men are responsible to obey God's law. This would tie worldview into the covenant. Thus, worldview without covenant means a non-Bible view of the world. At best, it means a New Testamentism approach to life, a non-whole-Bible view of society. At its worst, it means a society that really isn't run by the Word of God. Worldview without covenant doesn't get the blessing, because without covenant there is no such thing as a **Christian** worldview.

Finally, there are those who could be classified as **covenant without Biblical covenant** people. There are a lot of these around today. They are the most **dangerous**. They are the most misleading. Why? They use the word **covenant** in all their literature. I received one of their publications the other day. There it was on the front page title, "Law, Covenant, and Society," or something or other. The title sucks you right in, or I should say, "down."

When you start to read about their view of the covenant, it's all about "white supremacy," or "Anglo purity." Racism. Let it be clearly understood that this is a **demonic substitute for the Biblical covenant**. The Biblical covenant is not based on, nor does it have anything to do with, an **ethnic** view of the covenant. Jesus said to the Jews, "As many as **received** Him, to **them** He gave the right to become **children** of God, even to those who **believe** in His name, who were born **not** of **blood**, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:13). **Faith, not race, is the basis of inclusion into the Biblical covenant.** Our identification ("identity") with Christ must be ethical; it can never be racial and also be blessed. Those who were racially identified with Christ, the Jews of His day, He cut off from the kingdom to give it to others (Matt. 21:43). Covenant without Biblical covenant results in power religion because in such a view, only one race can be pure at a time. All others have to be eliminated or subdued.

So, here we are. We have all these quasi, semi, minimally, and not-so Christian groups around, but we find very few people who know about the Biblical covenant. We are a generation that knows not the covenant. We have the same need as the time of Josiah.

A Time of Covenant Rediscovery

Josiah was a young Jewish king who came to power in the seventh century B.C. One day, someone found a copy of the Book of Deuteronomy in the Temple. They found the covenant, since Deuteronomy is laid out in the structure of a

covenant (Deut. 4:13; 29:9). Josiah was moved to re-implement the covenant in society. He became the greatest king in the history of Israel, not David, and not Solomon. "And **before** him there was no king like him who turned to the Lord with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his might, according to all the law of Moses; nor did any like him arise **after** him" (II Kings. 23:25). Josiah's generation found the covenant, and they changed their society. We need the same.

Covenant Renewal is a newsletter about the covenant: what it is and how it works. It is designed to help create what happened in Josiah's day. Like his time, "covenant" has been forgotten. Unlike his day, it has not yet been rediscovered. (Yes, a lot of Christians **talk** "covenant" and **talk** "accountability," but the doctrine simply has not been discussed in terms of what the Bible actually teaches.) Covenant is **the** answer at a time when we stand at the threshold of the death of Western culture.

America's Covenantal Tradition

We should never forget that **covenant** was the single most important theological idea in early America. Not only the Puritans, but virtually all Protestants came to the New World with this concept at the center of their theology and practice. Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Anglicans, Continental Reformed groups, and independents were children of the Reformation. Federal theology, as covenant thinking had been called on the continent, had taken root at the time of the Middle Ages. In many ways, the dawning of the Reformation was a revival of this ancient theology. Slowly it seeped into European and British cultures, but not deep or fast enough.

When these diverse, yet similar, Protestant groups came to America, they implemented what many Europeans had wanted for centuries. Their rationale for applying the covenant was simple. The members of the Godhead related by **covenant**.¹ Since heaven is a model for earth—as the Lord's Prayer says, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth **as it is in heaven**" (Matt. 6:10)—man is supposed to organize all of his life according to the same structure. People from England and the Continent were ready for this kind of society. They came to the New World because it offered what they had never been able to find in Europe: a society based not on "status but contract."² Their theology mandated it, and they acted on it.

The idea of a society based on the theology of the Reformation quickly spread through their literature. These were people with a religion of the **Book**, the Bible, and consequently they were heavily involved in the printed word. Because of this, the covenant idea probably became so pervasive. Two groups of note are the Puritans and the Anglicans.³

1. Edmund S. Morgan, *The Puritan Dilemma* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1958), p. 93.

2. Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, [1939] 1954), p. 399. Although Miller did "ground-breaking" work, he erroneously believed the "covenant" idea was original to the Puritans. George M. Marsden, "Perry Miller's Rehabilitation of the Puritans: A Critique," *Church History* 39, no. 1 (March 1970): 91-105, categorically proves that the Puritans derived the "covenant idea" from the teaching of John Calvin in Geneva.

The Christian colonists did not believe in a social contract theory, however, because their view of covenant forced them to have a high view of authority. God establishes institutions through this authority, not the consent of the people. For example, those coming to the New World from England all sought *charters* from the king. They were not anarchists, striking out on their own without accountability.

3. Granted, the Puritans and Anglicans differed on their views of worship. Although the Puritans made some helpful contributions to American society, they were inconsistent with their view of covenant when it came to worship. They argued, "Do what the Old Testament teaches, unless the New Testament changes it." So they defended the right of magistrates to use the Old Testament civil laws as a guide. But their worship was "New Testament plain." The Anglicans used the same kind of argument regarding worship. They, too,

The Puritans produced hundreds of sermons, books, and tracts.⁴ The covenant theme occurs often. One of the first books ever published in America was a book on the covenant, the *Gospel-Covenant* by Peter Bulkeley.⁵ Other works basically reflected the same point of view, but maybe their greatest influence was expressed in their **creeds**.⁶ In whole or in part, these statements of faith found their way to many different religious groups in America and England.⁷ As covenant dominated their documents, the idea was able to cross denominational boundaries.⁸

The Anglicans were also quite influential in spreading covenant theology. Anyone who doubts the theological links between the Puritans and the Anglicans in seventeenth-century colonial America should consult Perry Miller's essay on "Religion and Society in the Early Literature of Virginia."⁹ The Anglicans' commitment to good Christian literature was commensurate with their dedication to the thought of the Reformation.¹⁰ In 1695, Thomas Bray wrote, *Proposals For Encouraging Learning and Religion In The Foreign Plantations*. What he really had in mind was books.¹¹ The result was the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (S.P.C.K.) in 1699. The king gave them their charter. One of the greatest movements in the history of the Church began. The S.P.C.K. disseminated a mountain of Christian literature in this part of the World. What kind of books? Mostly the print coming out of and influenced by the Reformation. Thus, the Anglicans, like the Puritans, created a conduit through which Federal theology poured into the New World.

Christians in the West have forgotten this story. They have forgotten the covenant. Somehow, they must rediscover it. But what in particular about the covenant shaped society? There were five key concepts.

held to the great reformational idea of the covenant. They, too, believed that the Old Testament should inform one's interpretations of the New Testament. They looked at the Book of Revelation and saw that the form of worship was remarkably similar to the worship of the Old Testament. God had not done away with a basic "routine" around the throne of God. Thus, their worship was not plain and stark like the Puritans' worship.

4. The Puritans also shaped culture through their high moral standards of living. Today, laws of the early Puritans against blasphemy, homosexuality, and adultery are still on many of the individual states' books, even though they are no longer taken seriously. And, Puritan family life is still studied to find out what made the interior of their lives so rich. Edmund S. Morgan, *The Puritan Family* (New York: Harper & Row, [1944] 1966), pp. 133-160.

5. Peter Bulkeley, *The Gospel-Covenant, or the Covenant of Grace Opened* (2nd ed., London, 1651). All future references to Bulkeley's work will be to this edition.

6. The most famous Puritan doctrinal standard is the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 1640s. Even though it was produced in England, it spread to America to the New England Puritans. Presbyterian and Congregational groups quickly began to adopt it. The New England Puritans wrote the *Cambridge Platform*, very similar in many respects to the *Westminster Confession of Faith*.

7. The *Second London Baptist Confession of Faith* 1677 is virtually a copy of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, the major differences falling in the area of baptism, etc. Nevertheless, it is almost word for word the same. Most of the early Baptist groups used this modified version of the *Westminster Confession*. W. L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, [1964] 1979), pp. 235-296.

8. Benjamin Warfield, *The Westminster Assembly and Its Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1931), p. 56. One of its greatest interpreters, he says of the *Westminster Confession*, "The architectonic principle of the Westminster Confession is supplied by the schematization of the Federal [Covenantal] Theology."

9. Perry Miller, *Errand Into The Wilderness* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, [1956] 1970), ch. 4.

10. Charles and Katherine George, *The Protestant Mind of the English Reformation* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1961), pp. 50-55. Specific reference is made to such great Anglican thinkers as Bishop Ussher, who was firmly entrenched in covenant theology. For that matter, the *Thirty-Nine Articles*, the confessional standard of the Anglican Church, is remarkably similar to the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. Both are products of the same pool of theology.

11. Edwin Scott Gaustad, *A Religious History of America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), pp. 76-77.

Key Covenant Concepts

First, the covenant taught a **transcendent** view of God. Not that He was distant but that He was **distinct** from His creation. This distinction meant God was Lord over everything. Men are not imbued with deity. Consequently, no one man or sphere (Family, Church, or State) is allowed to have absolute power. Europe had been dominated at times by clans, ecclesiocracies, and monarchical dictators. The application of God's transcendence did not allow any of these to have total control. It brought about a true separation of institutional powers, all ruled directly by God.

Second, the covenant taught a concept of authority, or **hierarchy**, based on **representation**. According to this system, people should be able to choose the kind of government over them. Once chosen, however, as long as the representatives met their duties, they were to be obeyed.

Third, covenant meant a society based on **ethics**, particularly the laws of the Bible.¹² "The covenant involved ethics in the very stuff of grace itself."¹³ Peter Bulkeley said:

We must for our part assent unto the Covenant, not only accepting the promise of it, but also submit to the duty required in it; or else there is no Covenant established betwixt God and us; we must as well accept of the condition as of the promise, if we will be in Covenant with God.¹⁴

These colonial Christians did not believe in works salvation, rather in a salvation that works. Miller remarks that their view of ethics included more than "individual honesty and charity; it included participation in the corporate organization and the regulation of men in the body politic."¹⁵ Men were judged, in other words, on the basis of behavior, no matter what their status. This gave "good" people a true chance to have upward mobility, something they could have never had in the Old World.

Fourth, the covenant implemented a system of **sanctions** based on an **oath**. Once an oath was made, a man was expected to keep it. Any violation met serious sanctions. Perjury in the realm of the State was in many cases punishable by death. Adulteration of the marriage oath met the same end. Apostasy from the Church covenant resulted in banishment. The oath and the sanctions that enforced it were an effective stabilizing factor in American culture.

Fifth, the covenant implied a system of **continuity** based on something other than blood relations. The Puritans attempted to make experience the test for church membership. Also, a person had to be a member of the Church to be

able to vote. Granted, these were misapplications. The first misapplication—experientialism—led to the Halfway Covenant, in which the grandchildren of church members were baptized, even though their parents had never joined the church formally. Though baptized, these "halfway covenant" children were not regarded as church members.¹⁶ The other misapplication—political—corrupted the Church. People joined the Church to be able to vote, not to commune with Christ and His people. Unbelievers were brought into the House of God in unbelief. Nevertheless, we do find hints of an extremely important aspect of a society rooted in contract and not in status. The mechanism of contract provided social continuity, and not blood or class. America, more than any other culture, had become a place of opportunity for the "little guy."

These seminal ideas of the covenant shaped American society. They created the strongest nation in the history of man. As they have diminished, so has every sphere: Family, Church, and State. If these institutions are to be saved, we must return to our Biblical roots!

Conclusion

My book, *That You May Prosper*, is only the beginning. And, by the way, I certainly don't think it's the final statement on the subject. But it is an attempt to find and develop the structure of the covenant, so that a person can say, "This is basically the mindset of covenant theology, and here is the Biblical rationale for it." Remember, I was trained at a Dispensational seminary (Dallas Theological Seminary). From the first day of the first class of my first year, I was taught that covenant theology is **wrong**. Moreover, I was taught that covenant theology is a system **foisted on the Bible**. But I had read Cornelius Van Til on my own, as an undergraduate student. My thinking had been shaped, but out of ignorance I went to a seminary that is diametrically opposed to everything Van Til stands for. Through my own studies, I have discovered that **covenant** is so endemic to the Bible itself that I can categorically say, "**There is no other system faithful to Scripture.**" The Reformers and other covenant theologians were not Biblical ignoramuses. They were allowing their thoughts **literally** (and not just "spiritually" as the Dispensies like to argue) to be shaped by a **literal** interpretation of the Bible.

Covenant Renewal is a follow-up to *That You May Prosper*. It will clarify and simplify many of the ideas in the book. But it will also expand on the ideas of the larger study. As I said, the book is only a beginning. Much more Biblical work needs to be developed, not to mention the need for sociological as well as other studies. The newsletter will be filling in gaps, doing book and movie reviews, and generally showing you what the covenant is, how it works, and how **you** can use it to change your world. With the combination of the book and the newsletter, you will not only have much, much food for thought, but you will gain plenty of concrete steps for **action**.

16. Edmund S. Morgan, *Visible Saints* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, [1963] 1968). Morgan argues that the "experiential" tests for church membership that they introduced in the early 1630s actually militated against their covenantal theology. Instead of having "objective" tests, they became overly subjective. They tried to do what only God can do, that is, *look into men's hearts*.

12. Harold J. Berman, *Law and Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), a liberal Jew and professor at Harvard Law School, argues that Western culture is clearly based on Christian law and influence, a background so much the warp and woof of society that the American way of life cannot continue to function if this background is abandoned. Even writers who want to deny America's Christian roots cannot avoid the reality that "America was generally Christian in the structure of its law, its institutions, and its culture." Mark A. Noll, Nathan O. Hatch, George M. Marsden, *The Search For Christian America* (Westchester, Illinois: Crossway, 1983), p. 150.

13. Miller, *Errand*, p. 88.

14. Bulkeley, *The Gospel-Covenant*, p. 316; cited by Miller, p. 88; cf. part IV of *Gospel-Covenant*.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 89.