

COVENANT RENEWAL

THE COVENANTAL FORM OF THE LETTERS TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES

by Ray R. Sutton

On October 31, 1517, Martin Luther tacked his *Ninety-Five Theses* to the door of Wittenberg castle. I don't know what it was like on that day, but I do know that what Luther did changed the course of Western history. In one sense, I believe that what he did was not way out of the ordinary. I realize that the whole town did not stop and say, "Wow, let's all scurry down to the castle-door, because Luther just started a Reformation!" Why didn't they? Luther used the standard means for filing a grievance.

But in another sense, Luther's efforts were quite special. He knew what he was doing, and he was self-conscious about his actions. For one, he nailed these theses on All Saints Day, perhaps the most popular day of the year for laymen, as indicated by the name of the day, **All Saints**. For another, he chose as the subject of the theses one of the hottest topics, near and not-so-dear to the man in the street, **indulgences**; these were certificates purchased from the Vatican that declared forgiveness of a person's sins.

Most important of all, however, Luther registered his theses in a **legal** fashion. He presented his points as a **witness** against those who had been calling him a heretic. At the end of the theses, under the heading of *Protestation*, he said,

I, Martin Luther, Doctor, of the Order of Monks at Wittenberg, desire to **testify** publicly that certain propositions against pontifical indulgences, as they call them, have been put forth by me. Now although, up to the present time, neither this most celebrated and renowned school of ours nor any civil or ecclesiastical power has condemned me, yet there are, as I hear, some men of headlong and audacious spirit, who dare to pronounce me a heretic, as though the matter had been thoroughly looked into and studied . . .

Luther made a **legal** challenge, and not just a personal one. He came as a **witness** against the Church of Rome. He came to bring a **lawsuit**, because the witnesses in the Bible prosecute the lawsuit. Furthermore, he chose a format that broadly fit the pattern of the Biblical **lawsuit**; I call it a covenantal lawsuit. It follows the structure of the covenant, consisting of five parts:¹

Transcendence: Declaration from the Lord.

Hierarchy: Violations by the authority structure.

Ethics: Specific stipulations violated.

Sanctions/Curses: Judgment specified, sometimes as an anathema.

Continuity/Blessings: Benefits transferred to the one responding correctly to the lawsuit.

Luther's theses do not rigidly follow this pattern, but all of the lawsuit elements are there, and they do have a progression to them. A quick overview of the famous *Ninety-Five Theses* will establish the point.

Luther begins the theses with a statement of transcendence, "Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ in saying: 'Repent ye,' intended that the whole life of believers should be penitence."

Second, Luther generally criticizes the hierarchy of the Catholic Church for demanding indulgences in theses 5-20: especially the Pope in this section, as well as the priests.

Third, Luther broadly begins to speak of what doctrines Christians should be taught in such theses as 42-51, starting each one, "Christians should be **taught** [stipulation] that."

Fourth, toward the end of the theses, Luther places an **anathema** on anyone who would reject Apostolic pardon, which lines up with the sanctions portion of a covenantal lawsuit (Theses 71).

Finally, Luther closes his theses by referring to certain **blessings** on those who oppose false preachers and who support those who preach the Cross (Theses 72, 93), establishing proper continuity and discontinuity.

So, whether the German monk intended it or not, he **sued** the Catholic Church because of its practice of indulgences. As a matter of fact, he probably did have some sense of what his *Protestation* was launching, because he knew enough from his familiarity with the Biblical role of the witness, the prophet, who came bearing **testimony** against covenant-breakers, and he knew about Church history to know what would probably happen.

Besides, judging by the Catholic Church's response, as the debate escalated, whether or not Luther intended for his theses to be taken as a lawsuit, the Roman Catholic Church certainly took them that way! As a result, he was prosecuted, excommunicated, and he would have been executed, like the prophet John the Baptist who very interestingly died because he dared to bring a covenantal lawsuit against the State (Mark 6:14-29), if it had not been for Prince Frederick III (The Wise).

Revelation

Luther's method of reforming the Church by means of a lawsuit goes all the way to the Bible. There are many examples, but perhaps the best example in the New Testament is the Book of Revelation. The Deuteronomic model of the covenant is carried into the New Testament, and so the Book of Revelation conveniently falls into five sections.

Covenantal Structure of Revelation

True Transcendence (Preamble): 1:1-20

Hierarchy (Historical Prologue): 2:1-22 (7 churches)

Ethics (Stipulations): 4:1-7:17 (7 seals)

Sanctions (Ratification): 8:1-14:20 (7 trumpets)

Continuity (Succession Arrangements): 15:1-22:21 (7 bowls)

1. I have discussed in detail how the covenantal lawsuit works in, Ray R. Sutton, *That You May Prosper* (Tyler, Texas: I.C.E., 1987), pp. 202-213.

Understanding Revelation as a covenant is the single most helpful insight about its structure. How so? The Book of Revelation is about an awful judgment on the earth. Fire and brimstone fall; a great battle called Armageddon is fought; even the dragon, Satan, is finally cast into the pit. If any book is about judgment, Revelation is.

The covenant model, however, connects this judgment with the **covenantal lawsuit** concept. A covenant lawsuit was brought against someone who had made covenant with God, broken it, and been unwilling to make amends. When this happened, God sent messengers to file the suit—normally three, since two or three **witnesses** were needed to obtain a conviction (Deut. 17:16). But in the case of God's lawsuit against someone, the witnesses announced a **verdict already** reached in the Lord's High Court of heaven. Revelation opens in this context, using the covenant structure to present the terms of judgment.

Who is the judgment against? First, the student of Revelation should realize that the language of the book itself restricts the prophecies, almost exclusively, to the **first century**. Revelation begins, "The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave Him to show to His bond-servants, **the things which shortly must take place**" (Rev. 1:1). Then, at the end of the book, the nearness of all the prophecies of Revelation is again underscored when John says, "The Lord, the God of the spirits of the prophets, sent His angel to show to His bond-servants **the things which shortly must take place**" (Rev. 22:6). Anyone, therefore, who takes the Bible seriously, should recognize that the prophecies of Revelation concerned the **immediate future**.

Second, having established the time brackets, we see that the specific judgments of Revelation are against the **Old Covenant people, system, and its center, the Temple in Jerusalem**. Everything in the book focuses on the destruction of the Old Covenant, particularly Jerusalem, the heart of the Old Covenant religion. Then, after an elaborate discussion of the annihilation of the old "holy people," the book concludes on a description of the "new" Temple, and Holy City (Rev. 21-22).

Most modern students of Revelation generally have a "futurist" perspective of Revelation, so this interpretation might seem novel, but the view I have proposed for Revelation, called a "preterist" interpretation, is not new. Commentaries are being published now which indicate this was one of the standard views of the church through the ages.² I will leave the details of this thesis, however, to David Chilton, a theologically orthodox thinker who has just completed a commentary on Revelation, *The Days of Vengeance*.³

Nevertheless, having explained "who is being judged" in Revelation, my concern is to concentrate on the second section of Revelation, the letters to the seven churches.

Letters to the Seven Churches

In my book, *That You May Prosper*, I discuss one of these letters to show that the Church is a **covenantal institution** (Revelation 2:1-7).⁴ I was not able at the time, however, to work out the covenantal structure in the other letters. I should have seen it, but I just hadn't worked enough with that particular part of Revelation.

Then, one day a friend of mine from seminary days called. He had received his Ph.D. from Cambridge, come back to

the States and started teaching at an evangelical seminary. He told me that he had been awarded a sabbatical and that he was going back to Cambridge to write a commentary on Revelation (presumably to refute Chilton's thesis). Later in the conversation, he happened to tell me that he had run across a couple of scholars at Andrews University, one who had talked about the general Hittite treaty (also known as the **suzerain treaty**) structure of Revelation, and the other **who had written articles on the structure of the letters to the seven churches back in 1983**.

William H. Shea is the one who wrote the insightful article, "The Covenantal Form Of The Letters To The Seven Churches."⁵ He argues that **all** seven letters follow the suzerain treaty structure, and furthermore, that they have a **five-fold** pattern, just as I have viewed the Biblical covenant's structure. He describes the five sections much the same way that I have done, varying only in the way he classifies them:

Preamble: Shea points out that "Each of these seven letters begins with a different title for Jesus."⁶ I have called this a reference to the **transcendent** author of the covenant.

Historical Prologue: "A refrain that occurs often is, 'I know your works. . . .' This sort of knowledge implies . . . past relations between suzerain Jesus, who has been identified by the preceding title, and the church, which is his vassal,"⁷ what I have called a **hierarchical** relationship.

Stipulations: "Following the evaluation of the nature of the past work of each of the churches, there follows a statement of counsel. Instructions are given for a course of action to rectify deficiencies described in the preceding sections of the letters [or in two cases, Smyrna and Philadelphia, an appeal to continued faithfulness]. These come in the form of imperatives. . . . The most common of these imperatives is 'repent.' Other imperatives present in these letters include 'remember,' 'do not fear,' 'be faithful,' 'awaken,' 'hold fast,' and 'strengthen.' Since these exhortations express the obligations of the churches to their Lord, they may be taken in a sense similar to those of the stipulations of the covenant,"⁸ what I have referred to as the **ethics** section.

Witnesses: Shea calls this segment of the letter "witnesses," because it "is particularly rich in the vocabulary of witnesses, and such were connected with ancient covenants in a special way."⁹ I have called the fourth part of the covenant **sanctions**. There is actually no difference between Shea and me because we differ only in "label." He goes on to talk about the heavy "witness theme" in the fourth part of the covenant, so for all intents and purposes we arrive at the same place.

Blessings: Shea also notices that each letter ends with a blessing, or an implied curse, pointing to what I have called **continuity/discontinuity**.

Thus, Shea understands the covenant in basically the same way that I have outlined it. He even goes so far as to summarize the covenant structure in the following manner:

With these **five elements** from the structure of the covenant identified in the letters to the Seven Churches,

2. Eugenio Corsini, *The Apocalypse* (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier Inc., 1983). Corsini, a Roman Catholic scholar, presents a brief summary of the early Fathers and then proceeds to develop Revelation in terms of a "preterist" model. Also, see J. Massyngberde Ford, *The Anchor Bible: Revelation* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1975), and Jay Adams, *The Time is at Hand* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1966).

3. David Chilton, *Days of Vengeance* (Ft. Worth: Dominion Press, 1987).

4. Ray R. Sutton, *That You May Prosper*, pp. 159-166. See also, David Chilton, *The Days of Vengeance* (Ft. Worth, Texas: 1987), pp. 85-86.

5. William H. Shea, "The Covenantal Form Of The Letters To The Seven Churches," *Andrews University Seminary Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (Andrews University Press, 1983), pp. 71-81.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

7. *Idem.*

8. *Ibid.*, p. 75.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 73.

the contents of the individual letters may be examined more closely. Outlines and charts of these contents may be found in many commentaries. What is suggested here is not that new outlines for these elements are necessary, but that more meaningful labels [covenantal ones] may be proposed . . .

Indeed, the principal propositions present in the letters to the Seven Churches are essentially **five** in number—**no more, no less**—and the principal sections present in the formulary of the suzerainty treaties are also **five** in number. The nature of the contents corresponds as well; and given this sort of correspondence both in the number of basic elements and the nature of the contents, it may be suggested that the pattern for the letters to the Seven Churches in Revelation is modeled after that of the older covenant formulary.¹⁰

Shea is the first suzerain treaty scholar that I have found who believes in a **five-fold** structure. I thought that I was the first to be dogmatic about the five-fold pattern, and I must admit, that I have tried to be very careful in my studies because I have strongly argued for a five-fold division for the Biblical covenant. I am glad to find another scholar who has come to the same conclusions, and one who did it before me! Oh well, better late than never. Believe me, I'd rather have the confirmation of the five-fold structure by other scholars' research, than know that I was the first! I think more and more are going to see the same, once they catch on to the covenant pattern all over the Bible.

So, I believe that Shea's work is invaluable. I think his covenantal outlines of the seven letters are so valuable that I have reproduced them below, making a few explanatory comments where I think they are necessary. You will notice that some of the outlines slightly alter the five-fold pattern, but he convincingly proves that there is still a general pattern, and most importantly, that the same five basic aspects of the covenant shape each letter, "no more and no less," to quote him again.

The Letter to the Church in Ephesus, 2:1-7

Preamble (vs. 1):

"The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands."

Prologue (vss. 2-4):

"I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance. . . . I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary. But I have this against you, that you have abandoned your first love."

Stipulations (vs. 5a):

"Remember then from what you have fallen, repent and do the works you did at first."

Curse (vs. 5b):

"If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place unless you repent." Note that a curse was sometimes attached to the stipulations (cf. Deuteronomy 5:9). Shea sees that the lawsuit goes quickly to the fourth feature of the covenant, because the Ephesian Church was particularly "weak in the faith," and needed an extra curse.¹¹ I favor the idea that this curse is attached to the stipulations section for the same reason we see curses attached to the stipulations in Deuteronomy. Either way, we are still only dealing with **five** fundamental elements of the lawsuit.

Prologue Continued (vs. 6):

"Yet this you have, you hate the works of the Nicolaitans,

which I also hate." Note that prologue material is also often attached to the stipulations in order to set the context for some particular commands (cf. Deuteronomy 7:6-26). Shea sees this prologue segment as a continuation of the same prologue before the stipulations section above. I have no problems with this view, but I wouldn't see any problem with being totally consistent with the Deuteronomic pattern, and with including it under the stipulations section. Either way, we are still only dealing with the **five** basic covenantal elements in these letters.

Witness (vs. 7a):

"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

Blessing (vs. 7b):

"To him who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God."

Letter to the Church at Smyrna, 2:8-11

Preamble (vs. 8):

"The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life."

Prologue (vs. 9):

"I know your tribulation and your poverty (but you are rich) and the slander of those. . . ."

Stipulations (vs. 10):

"Do not fear what you are about to suffer. . . . Be faithful unto death."

Witness (vs. 11a):

"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

Blessing (vs. 11b):

"He who conquers shall not be hurt by the second death."

Letter to the Church at Pergamum, 2:12-17

Preamble (vs. 12):

"The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword."

Prologue (vss. 13-15):

"I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is; you hold fast my name and you did not deny my faith. . . . But I have a few things against you: you have some who hold the teaching of Balaam."

Stipulations (vs. 16a):

"Repent then."

Curse (vs. 16b):

"If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth."

Witness (vs. 17a):

"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

Blessing (vs. 17b):

"To him who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone which no one knows except him who receives it."

Letter to the Church at Thyatira, 2:18-29

Preamble (vs. 18):

"The words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze."

10. *Ibid.*, p. 76. Emphasis and brackets mine.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 82-83. Vol. I, No. 10/October, 1987

Prologue (vss. 19-21):

"I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first. But I have this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess. . . ."

Curse (vss. 22-23):

"I will throw her on a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her doings. . . . I will give to each of you as your works deserve."

Stipulations (vss. 24-25):

"To the rest of you in Thyatira . . . hold fast what you have, until I come."

Blessing (vss. 26-28):

"He who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, I will give him power over the nations, and he shall rule them with a rod of iron . . . and I will give him the morning star."

Witness (vs. 29):

"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

Letter to the Church at Sardis, 3:1-6**Preamble (vs. 1a):**

"The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars."

Prologue (vs. 1b):

"I know your work; you have the name of being alive, and you are dead."

Stipulations (vss. 2-3a):

"Awake, and strengthen what remains and is on the point of death, for I have not found your works perfect in the sight of my God. Remember then what you received and heard: keep that, and repent."

Curse (vs. 3b):

"If you will not awake, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come upon you."

Prologue Continued (vs. 4):

"Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments; . . ."

Blessing (vs. 5):

"He who conquers shall be clad thus in white garments, and I will not blot his name out of the book of life; I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels."

Witness (vs. 6):

"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

Letter to the Church at Philadelphia, 3:7-13**Preamble (vs. 7):**

"The words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one shall shut, who shuts and no one opens."

Prologue (vss. 8-10):

"I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an

open door, which no one is able to shut; I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. . . ."

Stipulations (vs. 11):

"I am coming soon; hold fast what you have, so that no one may seize your crown."

Blessing (vs. 12):

"He who conquers, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God; never shall he go out of it, and I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the New Jerusalem which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name."

Witness (vs. 13):

"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

Letter to the Church in Laodicea, 3:14-22**Preamble (vs. 14):**

"The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation."

Prologue (vs. 15):

"I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot!"

Curse (vs. 16):

"So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth."

Prologue Continued (vs. 17):

"For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing; not knowing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked."

Stipulations (vss. 18-20):

"Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, that you may be rich, and white garments to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, that you may see. Those whom I love, I reprove and chasten; so be zealous and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me."

Blessing (vs. 21):

"He who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne."

Witness (vs. 22):

"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

Conclusion

Jesus provides a model for how to **reform** the Church: covenant lawsuit. Luther used it in his day, perhaps unknowingly, although I rather doubt it. We, however, are afforded the opportunity of being much more self conscious, because of all the recent scholarship on suzerain treaties. We can now benefit from studies that have helped me and others to see the **whole Bible as a Covenant document**, providing a covenant model for everything in life, and especially for the correction of serious corruption in the Church!