

# THE BIBLICAL EDUCATOR

*"To know wisdom and instruction; to perceive the words of understanding" Proverbs 1:2*

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## AN OBJECTIVE THEOLOGY OF THE COVENANT

*By David Chilton*

Many of you will assume that the following article is just another article on infant baptism. But it isn't. Many more will think it is not relevant to Christian school issues. But it is. So, on second thought, perhaps you'd better sit down and read it.

The Bible teaches us to think of salvation, the family, the church, and all of life in terms of the Covenant. From the beginning in the Garden, man's relationship to God — which covered every aspect of his existence — was covenantal: that is, salvation was not individualistic (concerned only with the individual believer), but instead involved his entire household. This does not mean, of course, that all members of a believer's household were regenerate: but we'll get to that in a few moments.

Consider some examples of covenantal relationships in biblical history: Adam was the Head of the Covenant between God and all mankind; when he rebelled, he and all his descendants were damned (Rom. 5:12, 18). The godly line of Seth is contrasted with the ungodly line of Cain, the high point in each covenantal line being the seventh generation from Adam (Gen. 4:1-5:24). Then came Noah, with whom God established the Covenant by which his whole household was saved (Gen. 7:18; 9:9). The Covenant with Abraham also involved his household — not merely his children, but his slaves as well (Gen. 17:9-13). As Meredith Kline has conclusively demonstrated in *By Oath Consigned* (Eerdmans, 1968), the biblical idea of *Covenant* is an *authority structure*: the Covenant is imposed upon a man and includes all those under his authority — wife, children, slaves, and so on. This aspect of the Covenant is inseparable from the Covenant itself. Thus, when Paul told the Galatians that their conversion placed them in the Abrahamic Covenant (Gal. 3:7, 29), he was telling them that their situation was exactly the same as that of any non-Israelite in Old Testament times who had become a believer: his initiation into the Covenant brought in his *household* /authority structure) as well (see Ex. 12:48). If you are in the Covenant, all those under your authority are to be placed into the Covenant structure as well.

Now, some of you are already disagreeing — and I haven't even gotten to the main point of the article yet. But in order to keep you reading, let me ask you a question: Do you believe in the Ten Commandments? Forget the "theonomy" thesis for a moment; just concentrate on the original Ten. Do you believe they're still valid? If so, you are *required* to believe everything I've said up to now. For if you believe in the Ten Commandments, you must believe the Second Commandment, including the part which is rarely quoted: "I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; and shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me and keep my commandments" (Ex. 20:5-6). This passage teaches that *curse and bless-*

*ing are covenantally passed from generation to generation.* If you believe the Ten Commandments, Covenant theology is inescapable. (And, by the way, if you believe that much, then you must also believe what Deut. 28 says about blessings and curses passing through generations, ultimately affecting whole cultures. And that makes you, in principle, a theonomist. Welcome to the club! Now you know why those who reject *theonomy* are finding it necessary to dump the Decalogue. There's no middle ground.)

All this is not just a bit of high-flown theologizing. It has a very definite bearing on our daily conduct. Our attitudes and actions toward one another must be in terms of the Covenant. This means much more than infant baptism alone: our whole life must be lived under Covenant law — and that holds implications which few of us have ever considered. In order to understand them, we must examine what Covenant membership involves.

### Covenant Membership

The visible sign of admission into the Covenant is baptism (which has taken the place of circumcision, Col. 2:11-12). In the Old Testament, all those under covenantal authority were members of the Covenant. Period. This is not to say all Covenant members were regenerate — far from it. In the line of Seth, both Methuselah and Lamech were alive when God announced His Covenant to Noah — yet they seem to have been included in the ungodly world. Lamech died before the flood came, but Methuselah died in the year of the flood, and perhaps in the flood itself. Another example is Ham, who was certainly in the Covenant, but who inherited a curse instead of blessing. Ishmael and Esau were children of the Covenant, but to all appearances unregenerate. And many Covenant members throughout Israel's history were unregenerate as well. I'm not saying any of this is ideal. We would like it to be otherwise. We would like all men to be saved. But I am saying this: *Regeneration is not, and never was, the condition of Covenant membership.*

If not, what is the condition? *Covenantal obedience.* Look at it like this. Let's say an alien desired to join the Covenant in Old Testament times. He and all under his authority would receive the sign of circumcision, and from then on all would be ruled by Covenant law. All would have the right and responsibility to partake of the Old Testament version of communion (Passover and the other feasts). Can we assume that all members of the household were, subjectively speaking, "converted"? Not at all. Yet all were in the Covenant, with all the responsibilities and privileges that membership entailed.

Take a more extreme example. When Israel captured their enemies in battle, they took them as slaves. According to biblical law, these heathen slaves were immediately circumcised and included in the Covenant, with the right to eat at the feasts. Their defeat in battle and consequent status as slaves under a covenantal authority structure automatically rendered them members of the Covenant. They were *required* to put away their false gods and heathen practices, and to worship and obey the true God. Regardless of their personal attitudes, they were —

*objectively speaking* — no longer heathen. They were members of Israel, the people of God. It has always been true, of course, that “they are not all Israel, which are of Israel” (Rem, 9:6); Covenant membership does not guarantee saving faith. But all Covenant members were objectively on the same footing. All partook of communion. All were blessed or cursed by Covenant standards. All were addressed throughout the Old Testament as “my people” — until the time came when Israel’s disobedience resulted in the excommunication of the nation as a whole, and the Covenant line began to be filled by the Gentiles, who were grafted into the covenantal tree of life (Rem. 11:17-24).

The essential point to grasp here is that one’s covenantal status — one’s membership in the church, the people of God — is based on objective, not subjective, criteria. There is no rite of “confirmation” in the Bible for admission to the covenantal meals. If you are in the authority structure, you are (or should be) in the church. Membership is not voluntaristic. In the Bible, if oaths had been sworn over you by your lord huebend, parant, or owner), you were a member of the people of God whether you liked it or not. Ultimately, if you *didn’t* like it — if you rebelled against the Covenant — there was only one way out: being “cut off” from Israel (which, at the very least, meant excommunication).

Perhaps the best way to see what happens when we apply objective theology to practical issues would be to contrast it with the practice of two conflicting schools of thought — Realism and Nominalism.

#### Realism vs. Nominalism — vs. the Bible

Which is more important — *unity* or *diversity*? Should society’s needs come first, or should those of the individual? What is most basic to reality — collectivity or individuality? This issue is known in philosophy as the problem of *The One and the Many* (see R.J. Rushdoony’s book by that title). Historically, the question has been answered from three different perspectives. *Realism* (it’s called that in philosophy, for reasons that will become apparent; but Realism is *not* realistic, really) sees oneness and unity as being basic to all reality. It is the view that names, symbols and rituals are *real things*, which completely determine the particular things that they define. *Nominalism*, on the other hand, holds that symbols are just *names*, not realities. Nominalist see diversity and individuality as being most basic.

But the biblical answer is to be found in *Trinitarianism*. God is *triune*, and all reality is structured in terms of Him. A brief definition of the Trinity might be this: *One God without division in a plurality of Persons, and three Persons without confusion in a unity of essence*. God is not “basically” One, with the individual Persons being derived from the oneness; nor is God “basically” Three, with the unity of the Persons being secondary. God is One, and God is Three. There are not three Gods; there is only one God. Yet each of the Persons is Himself God — and They are distinct, individual Persons. But there is only one God. To put it in more philosophical language, God’s *unity* (oneness) and *diversity* (threeness, individuality) are *equally ultimate*. God is “basically” One *and* “basically” Three at the same time. And the same goes for all of creation. Both unity and diversity are important — *equally* important. Neither aspect of reality has priority over the other.

Let’s say a Realist and a Nominalist happen to see my wife kiss me. The Realist will say, “Aha! A kiss is symbolic of love. That kiss *proves* Darlene loves him!” But the Nominalist will retort, “Whaddya mean? A kiss is just a kiss, like the song says. Sure, it’s a *symbol* of love. But it doesn’t mean she really loves him. The question is, what’s the attitude of her *heart*?” I, however, am a Trinitarian; and when my wife kisses me, I recognize it as a *symbol* of her love, but I also enjoy it because it’s not a “mere” symbol. It is an act of love, and the two go together. I’m sure you’d like to read more of this hot stuff, but let’s go on to some less romantic issues of the Covenant, and consider how each of

these views approaches them.

1. *Government*. The Realist school, holding that unity is fundamental, maintains an *episcopal* form of church government — power from the top. The Nominalist, believing that diversity is ultimate, and that each person’s individuality is sacred, favors a *congregation/* pattern in which power is exercised democratically, from below. Realism tends toward totalitarianism; Nominalism tends toward anarchy. The biblical form of government is *presbyterian*, in which there is a balance of power within a structure of authority.

2. *Baptism*. Realists believe that ritual washing with water *really* removes original sin. Nominalist see baptism as “a visible sign of an invisible grace,” in which the important thing is whether the individual has already made a decision. They do not see baptism as a *means* of grace. To them, it is ultimately a “mere” symbol, and cannot be efficacious. The Bible, in contrast to Realism, does not teach that baptism regenerates; nor does it teach, in contrast to Nominalism, that one must give evidence of regeneration before being baptized. Baptism *is* a means of grace, and signifies *not* the subjective experience of the recipient, but the objective imposition of covenantal authority over him.

3. *Communion*. For the Realist, the bread and wine in the Lord’s Supper are *really* transformed into the body and blood of Christ. The Nominalist believes communion to be, again, a “mere” symbol of an inward attitude in the individual — and it’s the attitude that’s important. This is why most Nominalist practice open communion, in which anyone can walk in off the street and partake of the sacrament. The radical Nominalist (e.g. the Quakers) dispense with the sacraments altogether. The biblical teaching is that the bread and wine are always only bread and wine; and yet that in the Supper we are having dinner with Jesus, who feeds us with Himself as we eat and drink together.

4. *Excommunication*. When a Realist church excommunicates you, you’re damned. The decree of those in power effectively consigns you to eternal perdition. Of course, if you’re a Nominalist, you’ll regard the decree as just so many words, and you’ll start attending a Nominalist church down the street. Nominalist churches hardly ever excommunicate anybody — and if they do, the judgment has all the awesome significance implied in not receiving the church newsletter any more; and the excommunicated person gets his name listed on the rolls of another church.. The biblical doctrine is that a lawful sentence of excommunication places a person outside the visible body of Christ, and denies him the opportunity to meet the Lord at His Table. But excommunication does *not* necessarily mean damnation. It is, in fact, a last-ditch effort to bring the offender back to the faith. The judgment *is* efficacious (one way or the other); but it does not make a determination of the condemned person’s eternal state. Excommunication has to do with the visible church.

5. *Church membership*. For a Realist, eternal salvation is guaranteed by membership in the visible church — baptized children are unquestionably regarded as *regenerate*. For a Nominalist, eternal salvation has little, if anything, to do with church affiliation: everything depends on the individual’s decision to accept Christ — and if he has “decided for Christ,” he is considered a Christian. Church membership is nice, but purely voluntary. Children are unquestionably regarded as *unregenerate* (except for the Nominalist’s “safety net” — the wholly mythical, unbiblical notion of an “age of accountability,” before which children are not accountable to God for their actions, and are “saved” without being regenerated). The biblical view of church membership is objective and covenantal: All baptized persons (church members) who have not been excommunicated are to be regarded as in the household of God. They must be addressed as members of the Body of Christ, and even “little ones to Him belong.” Communion is to be served to all church members, unless they are under discipline. But communion is to be

withheld from those who are not members of a church, regardless of their claims that they have accepted Christ. Unless they belong to Christ *visibly*, through membership in a real authority structure, there is no *objective* basis on which to regard them as Christians. Note: I am *not* saying a non-member is necessarily unregenerate; just that there is no *objective evidence* that he is. Nor am I saying that communion may be served only to members of my *own* congregation or denomination; but that communicants must belong to a visible structure *somewhere*. Communion is thus neither "open" nor "closed," but restricted,

#### Theology: Objective and Subjective

All those who are united to a visible church – by which I mean *any* orthodox, creedally-defined church — are to be regarded as fellow members of the Covenant. Their theological understanding may be woefully limited or defective; nevertheless, by their baptism into the triune Name, they are under the covenantal authority of Christ, and belong to Him. They are to be served communion. They should be required to tithe. In short, all the rights and responsibilities of Covenant membership belong to them. Voting and office-holding, however, are *not* automatic rights of the Covenant, and may legitimately be restricted to those heads of households who have received sufficient instruction in the faith, and who demonstrate in their lives those characteristics appropriate to the exercise of such responsibilities. Our ecclesiology (doctrine of the church) must be *objective*.

Yet this is not to discount the necessity of regeneration and personal faith. Regeneration cannot be visibly perceived (John 3:8), but it is no less *real*. Preachers must exhort their flocks continually to believe, repent, and obey the demands of the Covenant to which they were sworn. But they must *not* address their people as "presumptively unregenerate," for Covenant members are the people of God, the church of Jesus Christ. Read the writings of the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament apostles — do you ever find them speaking to the church as heathen? Never; not even in I Corinthians, and the congregation in Corinth was really a mess. Church members, even erring ones, are addressed as *called saints* (the same expression as *holy convocation* in the Old Testament). They are commanded to live in terms of their covenantal calling, and exhorted to refrain from living after the manner of the heathen (who were always differentiated from them). There is no rite of "confirmation" in the Bible, because there is no need for it: *Baptism is the confirmation into the Covenant*. You will never find a distinction in the Bible between "communicant" and "non-communicant" membership, because *all* Covenant members took communion (except for those who were excommunicated). One obvious objection to all this is that it can result in multitudes of disobedient, rebellious, apparently unconverted people taking communion. And such an objection is completely correct. That *will* be the result, until the day comes when church officers repent of their lily-livered pussyfooting and get serious about church discipline. The Table *can* be protected. But it does not need to be protected from children.

One of the chief reasons for the downfall of the Puritan theocracy was its confusion between subjective and objective theology. The Puritans rightly understood that eternal salvation is inseparable from regeneration and faith; but they confused that with requirements for church membership and communion. Thus they devised "tests of saving faith" which members had to pass successfully before being admitted to communion. These tests soon degenerated into *demands for a subjective, datable experience of conversion* — and such an experience had to conform to specific canons produced by the scholars of New England. If your experience didn't match the order contrived by the theologians — if you had no memorable "experience" at all — in short, if all you had was a love for God and a desire to serve

Him in covenantal union with His people: Sorry, try again next time the session meets.

The result was that thousands of church members became "non-communicants," thousands more never attempted to join the Covenant, and the Puritan Hope of a Christianized culture went down the drain. Solomon Stoddard's misguided attempt to salvage the situation was demolished by his grandson, Jonathan Edwards: and for all the good that was done by Edwards, Whitefield and the Tennent family in the Great Awakening, that event marked the end of a hope for a covenantal theocracy in America. Joining the Covenant became entirely relegated to a subjective, "spiritual" (i.e., neoplatonic) realm, completely unconnected to objective Covenant union in a visible church. Authority and discipline went out the window, and so did the possibility of Christian reconstruction. Now, almost 250 years later, true evangelicalism is synonymous with philosophical Nominalism. Subjective theology is the order of the day, and any attempt to return to a biblical worldview looks to most people like heresy. The first time I read Norm Shepherd's article on "The Covenant Context for Evangelism," I thought he had abandoned Calvinism. The trouble was that I hadn't been reading Calvin. I'd been reading Arthur Pink, Gardiner Spring, and the *Banner of Truth*.

There are many applications we could make of Covenant theology, and I've hinted at a few already. But I'm running out of space, so I'll suggest one more, with specific relevance to Christian schools. If the children in your school belong to Covenant homes, do not treat them as if they need a conversion experience. Instead, speak to them on the basis of the oaths to which they are already bound. They are in the Covenant, they are members of Israel, the Body and Bride of Christ. They are not little angels, but they're not little pagans either. They have been sworn to Jesus Christ as His own. *Objective/y*, they are His children; *subjectively*, they must *live* as His children.

(For further reading on the issues raised here, see Shepherd's article, mentioned above, in *The New Testament Student and Theology*, ed. by John H. Skilton [Presbyterian and Reformed, 1976]; Jim Jordan's "God's Hospitality and Holistic Evangelism" [*Journal of Christian Reconstruction*, Vol. VII, No. 2]; Jordan's "Theses on Paedo-Communion," available from Geneva Divinity School; Edmund Morgan's *Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan /dea* [Cornell University Press, 1963]; and Terrill Eltniff's *The Guise of Every Graceless Heart* [Ross House, 1961].)

## BOOK REVIEW

*Celebrate the Feasts (of the Old Testament in Your own Home or Church)*, by Martha Zimmerman (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1881) \$4.95 pb.

*Reviewed by James B. Jordan*

Biblical education is closely tied to the home, especially when it comes to religious instruction. God set up the various feasts of the Old Covenant as dramatic and playful (in the best sense) means to accomplish this end. Christianity took over the concept of sacred play from the Bible and developed its own feasts, but these have been lost to us in recent years for two reasons. First, there has been the sterilizing effect of neoplatonism, which has no place for play at all, and which has given rise by reaction to our present fun-and-games-crazed society. Some branches of Christianity, especially those influenced by Zwingli, took over this anti-play and anti-festival mentality, and the result was the *loss* of the rich complex of play, dance, drama, music, festivity, and instruction associated with Christmas and Easter. The second reason why festivity in the Biblical sense is unknown to us is that the reintroduction of Christmas and Easter to "Calvinistic" America has been largely on a secular basis, and these festivities have largely been paganized in recent years.

This excellent book, by the wife of a Presbyterian clergyman, is designed as a corrective to this trend. Mrs. Zimmerman brilliantly and creatively sets out the meanings of the feasts of the Old Testament, and shows how they might be kept (on a voluntary basis, of course) in the home, as a means of teaching children. In seven chapters, she discusses the Sabbath, Passover, First Sheaf, Pentecost, Feast of Trumpets, Day of Atonement, and Feast of Booths. In each case, she competently sets forth the Biblical and Christological nature of each festivity. She then restructures the traditional Jewish rituals so as to bring out their true topological (Christian) meaning. She includes a sample ritual for each one, with activities for father, mother, and children, giving the rationale for each activity. She includes recipes for the various unusual foods, and helpful hints on such matters as how to build your own tabernacle in the back yard for the Feast of Booths.

Mrs. Zimmerman is well aware of the fact that with the coming of the New Covenant we are no longer obligated to keep these feasts. She is also aware, as many are not, that the instruction of children takes place best in an atmosphere of play and drama, and that this was partially the rationale for the feasts of the Old Covenant. She argues, correctly, from Romans 14:5,6 that the observance of voluntary domestic festivals is a good thing when done to the glory of God.

Two of the happiest aspects of this book are the absence of the all too frequently encountered dispensationalistic interpretation of the festival calendar, and the continual stress on the abiding usefulness of the Old Testament laws. Dispensationalism sees the feasts of the Old Testament as pointing to all the various stages of the dispensational fantasy future; Mrs. Zimmerman takes no notice of this, but discusses the feasts in their relation to Christ. Secondly, as mentioned, throughout the book she repeatedly stresses that Christ came not to abolish the law but to implement it, and that we are not freed from the Law as a rule of life just because we are freed from it as condemnation.

I should like to make a few *minor* (let me stress that) criticisms of the book, designed to help the reader think through some issues on his or her own. First, Mrs. Zimmerman sets out a suggested Sabbath celebration that begins Friday night and continues on through Saturday and culminates with the resurrection on the Lord's Day. Some readers will have problems with this, since in some circles the term 'sabbath' is used for the Lord's Day. Theologically speaking, while there are connections between sabbath and Day of the Lord, they are not the same, and

the New Covenant does not speak of the Lord's Day as a sabbath, but speaks of the sabbath as cancelled. This is, more than anything else, a matter of terminology, and the reader should permit Mrs. Zimmerman to use her own language her own way, particularly since the Bible does not insist on any particular phraseology here. I should add that Mrs. Zimmerman also suggests a shorter Sabbath ritual which can be used starting on Saturday night. Keep in mind that all of this is designed for pedagogic purposes, and is optional.

Second, Mrs. Zimmerman's explanation of the meaning of leaven in the Passover ritual is not correct (p.58f.) Leaven does not signify sin, but signifies maturation. It is the old growth and maturation of evil that is to be cut off when Israel leaves Egypt. A new leaven of Spiritual growth is found in the Promised Land, which is why a *leavened* cake is used in the feast of Pentecost 50 days later (Leviticus 23:17). Searching through the house to get rid of leaven is appropriate, of course, but is a sign of cutting off the growth of evil. Children should be shown that a new leaven of righteousness takes up when the old leaven of wickedness is purged (Matthew 13:33).

Third, in common with a number of recent writers, Mrs. Zimmerman discusses the ritual of Passover in terms of the later Jewish rites. One would like some notice of what things were part of the feast of the Old Testament, and what things were later inventions. Frankly, I am not interested in celebrating a Jewish cultural feast, but I am interested in the actual Old Testament one. Of course, the problem is that we don't know exactly what was done in Jesus' day. We do know, however, that the use of shank bone and egg do not come from the Bible, and that charoseth apparently was part of the feast in Jesus' day. The use of three loaves of unleavened bread united by one napkin (to represent the Trinity, we are often told) while very dear to the ritual of Messianic Jews, is almost certainly a later invention. Edersheim discusses the Passover rites in *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah* and in *The Temple: Its Ministry and Services*. There are several editions of both books, and the reader might want to read these before deciding just what he wants to do in his own family, if anything.

Finally, one would like to have found a discussion of Hanukkah, which underlies our Christmas. While not an Old Testament prescribed feast, it had become a widely accepted voluntary feast by New Testament times, and Jesus himself attended it, and explained it in Christological terms, in John 10:22 ff.

Everyone should buy this book.

## Special Note

One of the most encouraging developments of recent years has been the rise of the "home education" movement. Resources for teaching children at home have increased dramatically, and a growing number of parents are realizing an awesome truth – Education is *not* the mysterious process that government-funded professors would have us believe; and teaching is *not* the monopoly of "educators." The secret has finally slipped out: *Parents can teach their children!*

A treasury of information on home education from a Christian perspective is the National Association of Home Educators (Rt. 3, Box 324-B, Gallatin, MO 64640; [816] 663-3793). NAHE publishes an excellent monthly newsletter for \$17.50 per year, and it is definitely worth the price. Articles cover a wide range: legal matters, teaching methods, educational philosophy and history, games for the kids, and resource lists for books, tapes and other materials. It is a well-informed, extremely helpful publication. Send in your subscription today.

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