

COVENANT RENEWAL

Genesis 1:26-28

Matthew 28:18-20

Vol. 1, No. 4

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April, 1987

COVENANT: THE AGENDA FOR CHURCH UNION

(Note: The following is a lecture to be given during the London Presbyterian Conference at London, England, April 11, 1987. The occasion is the formation of a new conservative, reformed, and theologically orthodox national Presbyterian denomination or association in the U.K. Since Trinity Presbyterian Church in Bolton, England is a mission of the Association of Reformation Churches, the denomination of the church that I pastor, I was asked to present a paper. The first LPC was held last September, attracting 300-400 attendees, including sixty Anglican ministers and the Bishop of London.)

Fathers, brethren, and distinguished guests, thank you for the opportunity to come so far to be part of such an important event. On behalf of the reformed community in America, and Trinity Presbyterian Church in Bolton, a mission of the Association of Reformation Churches in the U. S., I give you greetings in the name of our Savior and King, Jesus Christ.

The subject that I want to address is "Covenant: The Agenda For Church Union." Why? You are probably attempting the most significant Presbyterian project in England since the Reformation. You are trying to rally a scattered Church to lift a single voice to God, so as to present a clear, unified message of the Gospel in England. But you want catholicity in integrity. You want a broader Church base without destroying orthodoxy. And here is where the covenant comes to bear on your concerns. Covenant is the central organizing idea of Scripture. The Ten Commandments are called a covenant (Deut. 4:13). The Lord's Supper is called a covenant (Luke 22:20), and the Bible is divided into Old and New Covenants. At creation man was formed into a sort of covenantal fabric, so that he either makes a good covenant or a bad covenant, but he always covenants. He is either moving toward or away from covenant with God. He is either a covenant-breaker or covenant-keeper. He may be more or less self-conscious about the covenant — modern man is mostly unconscious about anything Biblical, and certainly the covenant — nevertheless, he can never be "non-covenantal." Everything he does is covenantal by definition, from marriage to business, and most definitely, church union.

I believe that I am safe in saying that we appear far too late on the pages of history, and the history of the theology that has made our reformed forefathers so successful, to fail to be self-conscious about the covenant. Faithfulness to the covenant will be the key to our success, and its rejection will be the key to our failure.

No other passage to my knowledge more clearly speaks to a covenantal process of church union than 1 Chronicles 12-16. After being scattered and disoriented, after years of dissension and conflict, warriors from the various tribes re-

unite into one body to crown David, but more importantly, to re-establish the Kingship of the Lord in their own land. Shortly after the first reunion, they fail because of one man, whose untimely execution halts the journey of the ark. Then, after another brief time of reunion, they continue with their journey. Finally they succeed in bringing the ark to Jerusalem. This redemptive saga presents a very critical message for us. Three significant observations should be made about this great series of events.

(1)

This gathering of the tribes was focused in the act of covenant renewal. The tribes came together to make a covenant over a meal. How do we know a covenant was made? Throughout Scripture, the meal is the place of covenant renewal. God began communion with Adam and Eve by giving them the privilege of eating and having communion with Him (Gen. 2). Instead, they disobeyed and turned His privilege into covenant rejection. From this point forward, the meal is part of the way back to God for two reasons. It had been the first act of communion, as well as the first act of rebellion for Adam and Eve. It had been the source of blessing as well as cursing. It had been intended to be the means of inclusion, but it had become the means of exclusion. Thus, the sacred meal accomplishes both purposes, especially in the New Covenant (1 Cor. 11:29). And thus, the meal is consistently found to be the normal, Biblical place of renewal: the feasts of the Old Covenant, and the feast of the New Covenant, the Lord's Supper, where final covenant renewal was definitively re-established by Christ.¹

This gathering of the tribes around a meal made it possible to bring the throne of God to a location of greater influence. Their assembly was not for the assembly's sake; it was for the re-placement of the name of God over Israel; it was replaced by being carried to a better vantage point in their civilization. They were not establishing the rule of God; He already ruled heaven and earth. They were moving His throne to Jerusalem, which was analogous to recognizing with greater commitment His rule over them.

Yet, the tribes had to assemble before the ark returned; and the ark was a throne on which the True King sat, as indicated in the sixth verse of 1 Chronicles 13. The rule of God was at stake in what they did. They were not just crowning David, They were restoring God to the throne of their country! I suggest to you today that this is precisely the business

1. The "new" of the New Covenant is like the "new" of the new commandment (1 John 27). "New" does not mean novel, rather; it means "re-newed." The New Covenant is the transformed Old Covenant, explaining continuity and discontinuity. As Jeremiah says, "I will make a new covenant not like the covenant which I made with their fathers. I will put my *torah* within them" (Jer. 31:31-33). Hence, Jeremiah's covenant is the New Covenant instituted by Jesus, but it consists of _____ in the heart.

that you are about. You are attempting to re-establish a recognition of the Lordship of Jesus Christ in your land. You have taken the first step. You have begun to blow the trumpet to draw together the tribes of God, as Professor Macleod declared at the end of his message during the last conference, "So that there will be one empire for Christ? But you must beware of a second aspect of what happened at Hebron.

(2)

There is a fall. Immediately after the gathering of the tribes, the meal, and the pilgrimage of the throne of God to a new place, Uzza commits a fatal mistake. He tries to steady the falling ark, which we now know was the throne of God. And yet, Uzza jeopardizes the very thing that he is trying to steady, often a problem in the Church. Somehow he undoes those things which had just been done. Like the first creation, the covenant that they had made experiences a fall after its inception. Like the first creation, one man caused the collective purposes of the people of God to come to a halt. It took a second covenant to bring the ark all the way home.

What did Uzza do wrong? Why such a severe punishment, for the punishment does not appear to be commensurate with the crime? Wasn't Uzza doing what any normal God-fearing man would have done? Wasn't he trying to help at a time when help was needed? Furthermore, why doesn't the text stop to elaborate on Uzza's error, seeing the passage quickly moves on without any editorial comment? Or, does the passage really fail to tell us the answers to these questions? Could it be that the answers are so endemic to the Biblical message that the reader is supposed to know?

the key to understanding Uzza's sin is found in the fact that he received the death penalty. On the basis that Uzza was put to death, we should conclude that he had violated the covenant, because covenant-breaking is always the rationale for the death penalty. How do we know?

The principle originates in the garden. God created man and He created a relationship with him. Then God said, "From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day you eat from it you shall surely die" (Gen. 2:16-17). God dictated the terms and the penalty of the covenant. He in turn received a test from man on both counts. Man challenged the terms of the covenant by eating the forbidden fruit, and he challenged the penalty of the covenant by doing what he had been told not to do. Hence, man received the death penalty. He learned for the first time that the terms and penalty of the covenant cannot be escaped. Paul says, "Through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin" (Rom. 5:12). A fundamental covenantal principle was established: covenant-breaking receives the death penalty.

The real value of understanding this covenantal principle is that it provides an understanding of why certain individuals are executed in the Bible. On the basis of what we have just discovered in Genesis, we can conclude that the reception of the death penalty involves covenant-breaking.

There are numerous examples. Sodom was destroyed because of its culture-wide practice of homosexuality. Korah, Dathan and Abiram are put to death for rebellion. Moses selectively executes numbers of Israelites who worshipped Aaron's golden calf. Absalom is hung on a tree by his own hair because of rebellion.

In the New Testament we discover that the covenantal principle continues. Jesus is put to death for the covenant-breaking of Adam and all mankind. Ananias and Sapphira are thrown to their death by God for lying to the Holy Spirit. And Paul lists several of the capital offense crimes of the Old Testament and says that anyone who "practices such things

is worthy of death" (Rom. 1:18-32); the last phrase in particular being a key Mosaic formula for the death penalty (Deut. 17:6, 22:26). Therefore, we can conclude that Uzza was put to death because he broke the covenant in some fundamental way.

Of course, there is another important covenantal reality born in the Garden: the death penalty can be received by a substitute, the principle of redemption. This principle is the very essence of the Gospel. Christ was a perfect covenant-keeper, yet He was put to death for those who were total covenant-breakers, and who justly deserved the eternal death penalty. His substitution enables all those for whom He died to go free and to have eternal life. Even the principle of redemption, however, works on the basis of the death penalty, because death was established in the Garden as the payment for sin.

So we should conclude that death is in the world because of the Fall, and death came to Uzza because in some way he fell. His death was not a normal death. He died because he violated the covenant, just as Adam died because he broke the covenant. How did he break the covenant? To answer this question we should understand the covenant itself.

The clearest statement of the covenant is the Book of Deuteronomy. The book is called a covenant when Moses says, "So keep the words of this covenant to do them, that you may prosper in all that you do" (Deut. 29:9). But Moses' statement means that the book is actually a second statement of the first covenant given at Sinai, because he says, "So He [God] declared to you His covenant which He commanded you to perform, that is, the ten commandments [words]; and He wrote them on two tablets of stones" (Deut. 4:13). Thus, Deuteronomy is a "new" covenant, and because it is a second covenant given to the people of God, it is a prototype of the New Covenant, providing us with an excellent definition of the covenant. There are five parts.

The first point of the covenant is called true transcendence. Biblical transcendence is based on the fundamental reality that God created man out of nothing (*ex nihilo*). It is a distinction between the Being of God and the being of man. It demarcates the essence of both. It means that God can be transcendent in this sense, yet be near, present and immanent at one and the same time. It presents the God of the Bible as absolutely Sovereign and infinitely personal.

Paganism, on the other hand, coalesces the two essences into one essence, creating a continuity, or chain of being, like the totem pole of the American Indians, and like every major symbol of every major pagan religion, because they all agree on this fundamental point. For the pagan, transcendence is distance, as opposed to distinction of being. For the pagan, there is no way God can be transcendent and personal at the same time. For the pagan, all of his religion is by definition impersonal. For the pagan, even a pantheistic view of God reduces Him to an impersonal inanimate object. For the pagan, he is forever trapped, because his god is too far away, or his god is not God at all because his deity is coalesced with creation.

Moses declares God to be the True Transcendent Lord when he speaks, "to the children of Israel according to all that the Lord had commanded him" (1:3). How does this statement present transcendence in the sense of distinction? By this statement, Moses' words are distinguished from God's. His words are from God and therefore not his own. His words are divine because they came from God. His words are Holy Scripture because they originated with a Holy God. Thus, by such a distinction, God is Lord and Creator of the covenant.

Uzza's sin now becomes clear. He violated the True Tran-

scendence of God. When he reached out and touched the throne of God, he implied some sort of continuity of being, and yet this was an impossibility for he was of a different essence; he challenged God as the Creator and he had to be killed. When he touched the Holy seat of God, he came into contact with a Holy God, and without a Mediator to cover his sin, he had to be immediately judged to death. When he came into contact with the ark of the covenant, he crowded a seat on which God alone could dwell; Uzza had to die because God alone claimed exclusive rights to His throne; no one else in heaven or on earth can sit on it.

Uzza was a man of the covenant. He should have realized how careful he had to be; he was allowed a proximity to the presence of God that few had had up to that point in redemptive history. He should have known better.

Any church attempting to effect church union should learn from Uzza. How? It should gather under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. It should advocate that God alone sits on the throne: not the Church, not the State, not the Family. It should proclaim a clear message about the Trinity. It should come to its senses about the doctrine of creation, realizing that all of its battles for the last 150 years have stemmed from an attack on the doctrine of creation.

It is no accident that every major creed of the Early Church opens with a statement about creation; God and God alone is the Lord and Giver of Life. It is no mistake that one can mark the sharp decline of Christianity in the West with the beginning of Darwinism. It is no coincidence that the pagan ideologies of Marxism and Fascism, that have bitterly persecuted the Church wherever they have had influence, are philosophically rooted in Darwinism. It is not surprising that there is hardly an evangelical seminary (I only know of one), and certainly not a liberal institution, that teaches a course on creationism. Ironically, the neglect of the doctrine that begins the creeds begins the downfall of Christianity.

Yes, any church that wants to live must begin with the truly transcendent Lordship of King Jesus; it must begin with the Holy Trinity; it must build on the foundational doctrine of creation, unless it wants to meet with certain and immediate death. And its death will be as inevitable as the death of Uzza should it reject Biblical creationism.

The second point of the covenant is hierarchy (Deut. 1:6-4:49). Moses proceeds in the second section of Deuteronomy to outline the court system of Israel in the context of a historical review of their wilderness wanderings (Deut. 1:8ff). He describes a pyramid structure with captains over smaller groups at the bottom, progressing upward with captains over larger groups at the top. He was at the top, and any problem is to be shuttled up the hierarchy for a resolution. The hierarchy is not top-down.

Moses places a discussion of the hierarchical structure of Israel at the beginning of a historical section for a very important reason. He wants Israel to see the relationship between history and hierarchy, between how they respond to their authority structure and what happens to them, and between how they handle their problems and how the world outside the covenant handles them. His message is, "Violate God's hierarchy and you'll be destroyed just like those in the wilderness."

Uzza violated a fundamental hierarchy in Israel. He may not have been a Levite, and he was certainly not the High Priest. Only the High Priest could have possibly done what Uzza attempted to do. He tried to steady the ark by violating its appointed role. When he did, he was killed, just as the older generation of the wilderness was destroyed for not obeying the Lord's hierarchy of command. David realized some kind of hierarchy had been jeopardized. After Israel regrouped, he made certain that only Levites managed the ark. He said, "No one is to carry the ark but the Levites"

(1 Chron. 15:2). He recognized that they were given the responsibility, and that only certain people could handle the ark. Anyone else, for whatever reason, would die.

A hierarchical structure may be perhaps the most difficult idea for a Presbyterian body to swallow, especially the role of the captain. But keep in mind that Biblical hierarchy prevents the very problems that historic Presbyterianism is concerned to avoid. It prevents bureaucracy because the movement of action flows from the bottom up and from the local to the more central. It circumvents hands-on-government from afar because there are layers built into the system. Finally, it escapes litigiousness, the most serious problem that Presbyterianism has faced; the captains resolve conflicts without flooding the courts with mountains of paper work.

Historically, Presbyterianism has maintained the role of "superintendent." The reformers were not against bishops per se. They were opposed to wicked bishops. Even in Scotland, the *Bulk* says, "That from the whole number of godly and learned men, now presently in this realme, be selected ten or twelve (for in so many provinces we have divided the whole), to whom charge and commandment should be given to plant and erect kirkes, to set, to order, and appoint ministers."

American Presbyterianism has dropped the role of superintendent and the results have been disastrous. Its failure has created chaos in the courts. It has formed bureaucracies of the highest order. It has bogged down the system with problems at the local levels, because problems that go to presbytery take months and sometimes years to resolve, while the local church dies a slow death.

So, I say that hierarchy is part of the covenant. It is unavoidable. Your system will have a good or a bad hierarchy, but it will have a hierarchy. Establish at the beginning a bottom-up system with superintendents over fifties, hundreds, and thousands. If it was good enough for Jethro, it ought to be good enough for you.

The third portion of the covenant is ethics, or ethical stipulations (Deut. 5-26). Moses spends the largest amount of time on this section. He essentially recapitulates the Ten Commandments, beginning with an overview in Deuteronomy 5. Throughout this section there is one resounding emphasis: there is an ethical cause/effect relationship. Moses says, "Oh that they had such a heart in them, that they would fear Me, and keep all My commandments always, that it may be well with them and with their sons forever" (Deut. 5:29). The Biblical logic is simple: obey and there will be blessing; disobey and there will be cursing.

Uzza forgot this principle. He reached out to steady the ark, yet he and everyone else was forbidden to draw near to the Lord on their own recognizance; there had to be atonement and hierarchical representation. When he autonomously grabbed the glory of God, he demonstrated that there is an ethical cause/effect relationship between what man does and what happens in his life.

More than any other Biblical reality, modern man has rejected an ethical cause/effect relationship. He has substituted power for ethics, believing that brute force brings about the blessings of God's covenant. In the words of Shakespeare in *Troilus and Cressida*, "Then right and wrong should lose their names, and so should justice too; then everything includes itself in power, power into will, will into appetite, and appetite, a universal wolf, so doubly seconded with will and power, must make perforce a universal prey, and last eat up itself."

Man has also substituted the scientific method. He has assumed that because something happens one way one day, then it will always happen that way. He has presupposed that there is no God in heaven controlling heaven and earth, the Lord who creates and judges man for his sin, re-

gardless of the scientific method. He has used mathematics, the very creation of God, to deny the creation of God, and more specifically, the relationship between faithfulness and the effects of faithfulness in man and his culture.

Finally, man has substituted magic. E. M. Butler begins her book with this observation: "The fundamental aim of all magic is to impose the human will on nature, on man or on the supernatural world in order to master them." Once again, the issue is cause and effect. Magic is also power oriented. Instead of appealing to God, it seeks the demonic to manipulate God and His world.

All of these substitutes are a challenge for the Modern Church. They call you to teach and preach the Law of God. They should pull you back to the wonderful expositions of the Ten Commandments in the Larger and Shorter Catechisms of the Westminster Confession of Faith. They should motivate the Church not to be ashamed of anything in the Bible. Are we ashamed? Are we embarrassed because of the things in the Bible that point to an ethical cause/effect relationship? Are we intimidated away from the power of God by a powerless power-religion? Let us return to the law and the prophets!

The fourth part of the covenant is sanctions (Deut. 27-30). Moses specifies two sanctions of blessing and cursing. He recounts how the covenant was ratified, actually re-ratified, on Mt. Ebal and Gerizim. He tells how Israel stood on these mountains and received the sanctions of blessing and cursing by ceremonially receiving the curses of the covenant. He reminds Israel that not only are there two sanctions, but that blessing comes through judgment. Yes, life comes through death: sacrifice, atonement, suffering and discipline.

Uzza challenged the sanctions of the covenant. He approached the throne of God without atonement. By so doing, he entered the place of blessing without the means of cursing. Even though his intentions may have been high-minded, he threatened the entire way of redemption. He challenged the judgment of God.

The Modern Church should come back to the dual sanctions of the covenant because they teach the true way of salvation. It should return to fundamental preaching of eternal judgment and consequences for rejecting the Lord and Giver of Life. It should restore in the minds of modern men that life comes through judgment and specifically the judgment of Jesus Christ. It should recall man to the truth that the covenant engages him in discipline and sacrifice, and that these associates of judgment are the way to life and the transformation of the world: the rearing of better children, better employees, better leaders, better everything, because every occupation and calling involves some sort of judgment and discipline. The Church should bring the message of judgment to the world, because this is the way of life for the world.

The fifth segment of the covenant is continuity (Deut. 31-34). In the last part of Deuteronomy, Moses gathers Joshua and the people to transfer his leadership to Joshua. He lays hands on Joshua and he creates an important historic succession, explaining the succession in terms of the Word (Deut. 31:10), the sacraments of circumcision and passover (Josh. 5), and the conquest of the land (Deut. 31:7).

Uzza challenged the covenantal principle of succession. He reached to steady the ark, but he was actually reaching for the reigns of power without the ordination to do so. He

sought to do something without the proper transfer of authority. He broke historical and Biblical continuity, not just because he had not been ordained by any individual to do so, but because he had not received permission from the Word of God.

The Modern Church lives in a world where everything but the Word of God is allowed to define succession. Genetics, race (blood), social contracts, magic, education, and immorality are the mechanisms for transferring power in today's world. The Church finds itself in the position of having to remind mankind that Word, sacrament and discipline are the only true bases for succession. Continuity in this world and the next is by continuity with the Word of God; discontinuity results from disobedience to Holy Scripture; the righteous inherit the earth (Matthew 5:5), and the wicked are disinherited. So the power of the Biblical message is that the believer and unbeliever receive their just reward not on the basis of blood, power, and magic, but they receive it on the basis of faithfulness or unfaithfulness.

These are the five points of the covenant. They clarify why Uzza received the death penalty, and they define true covenant renewal and union for the Church. As Uzza fell, so with any church attempting union without all five points of the covenant.

(3)

Finally, in I Chronicles 12-16 a "new" covenant is formed by David, commonly called the Davidic Covenant. After the fall of Uzza, Israel defeats the Philistine and re-groups before its new king. He is the one who leads them into Israel, and He is the one who leads the ark home. His covenant faithfulness places the throne of God back where it should have been all the time. His covenant loyalty leads to the formation of a "new" covenant, as stated in the song of Asaph (I Chron. 16:7-36). How do we know it is a new covenant, prefiguring the New Covenant?

This new covenant is second to the first covenant made at Hebron, the one that failed to bring the throne of God to its rightful position. It is the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant (1 Chron. 16:15-17). It is established at a great feast. It places the Messianic king on the throne, bringing the throne of God to rest on Mt. Jebus, and pushing covenant fulfillment to heights that it had never gone before. The Davidic Covenant becomes successful in a way that the first covenant at Hebron wasn't. It becomes the clearest example of a new covenant before the actual fulfillment of the New Covenant.

So the reunion of the tribes and the return of the throne of God recapitulates the entire redemptive drama: first covenant, second fall, and then new covenant. The assembly concretely establishes that true covenant renewal is the only way to true union; moreover, it is the only way to return the throne of God to its rightful position in the center of this and any civilization.

May God give the London Presbyterian Conference, and the denomination that grows out of it, the grace to come under the New Covenant of the King of Kings. May God send His "chariots of fire" once again, helping you to overcome those "dark Satanic mills." May God answer the immortal prayer of G. K. Chesterton, expressed in the last stanza of his great hymn, "Tie in a living tether the prince and priest and thrall, bind all our lives together, smite us and save us all; in ire and exultation, aflame with faith, and free, lift up a living nation, a single sword to thee. Amen!"