

COVENANT RENEWAL

Genesis 1:26-28

Matthew 28:18-20

Vol. 1, No. 12

© Ray Sutton, 1987

Dec., 1987

LET ME SPEAK TO THE AUTHOR

by Ray R. Sutton

Several years ago, a local TV station in the Dallas/Ft. Worth area aired a weekly program called, *Let Me Speak To The Manager*. They wanted "to let the viewing audience have an opportunity to speak to the manager, and they did it an interesting way. They allowed people to write or call in questions and concerns during the week. Then they put the station manager on the air for thirty minutes once a week to answer as many of the queries as possible. As I recall, they got a terrific response, because the program ran for years.

I like that approach. I like it so much that I periodically want to "air" some of your responses to my writing. I know that all of you don't agree with everything, and I'm pretty sure that you have lots of questions. I also understand that I can't possibly write on every topic that some of you want me to address. And yet, I perceive that many of your concerns need to be addressed. So, in this newsletter, I want to give you my responses to some of the questions that you're asking. I hope you like it.

Mr. Convinced, But Not Quite

Dear Rev. Sutton:

I've just finished reading *That You May Prosper*. It was a very helpful book, summarizing a lot of what's been going on with you all for the last several years. In fact, I think it summarizes a lot of what reconstructionists have been saying since the earliest of days. I think you're right that Kline leads right to reconstruction. What a coup! Your chapters on covenant institutions were stimulating. Also, your appendixes on the sacraments were very helpful. For these things, I give you hearty congratulations and thanks.

But, I must admit that I remain unconvinced by your central thesis, namely, that these are the five points of covenantalism and that this is the structure of Scripture. . . . As I think more about the book, I'm beginning to see the value of this way of organizing things. But, my reservations remain. Please accept the following as constructive criticisms. I hope you will find them of some use.

1. My main concern is methodological. You argue, if I am reading you correctly, that Deuteronomy claims to be a covenant. Also, Deuteronomy has this particular structure. Therefore, a covenant has this particular structure. Added to this is Kline's evidence from other ANE (Ancient Near Eastern) treaties. AH of this makes a pretty impressive case, I must admit.

Your conclusion seems a bit hasty to me, however. Even Deuteronomy is a covenant and Deuteronomy has a particular structure, it does not necessarily follow that all covenants have this particular structure. . . .

Perhaps a more basic issue is the way you seem to leap (I see it as a leap, anyway) from literary structure to covenantal content. What Kline has discovered about ANE

suzerainty treaties is a literary structure. It seems to be a category 'mistake to go from this fact to the theory that all covenants involve a particular theological content. Maybe you could make a case for moving from structure to content. But you seem to make the leap without defending how you can do it.

2. It appears that one of your strongest arguments is that the Deuteronomy structure is found everywhere in Scripture. Actually, I think this is your central argument. You could establish that the covenant involves these five points without having to say that every book has the same structure. But, I have two comments about this.

First, a Poythressian comment.¹ Yes, you can make a lot of Scripture fit into this structure. You can discover a lot of new and interesting things by searching for this structure. But that doesn't mean it's the structure. You could take another model and do the same thing. And a lot would fit. Poythress would argue that each model is a perspective from which the whole can be viewed. But none of the models is exclusively the model. I think that this is an implication of the C-C distinction: all of our models are finite and "functional." They are never fully definitive. Perhaps I'm reacting more to Dr. North's claims about your book than to your claims. Still, I hear you saying that you have found the model. Am I hearing correctly?

Second, I don't think that your appendixes bear out your thesis. True, you can explain a lot using your model. You can uncover a lot of interesting things. But some of your outlines seem forced, imposed on the text rather than implied by the texts themselves. I'm thinking particularly of the Remans outline. I don't think that your division of chapter 16 will bear up. I don't see how the commendation of Phoebe differs substantially from Paul's greetings to the other saints. Chapter 16 is a unit. If chapter 16 is a cohesive unit, then Remans lacks a sanctions section, and your model fails here. (Of course, my reservations about your outline of Remans may be due to the fact that I have my own theory about the structure of Remans.)

Your outline of Matthew also seems forced to me. You include the Sermon on the Mount in the "transcendence" section. But the Sermon is clearly ethical in character. You're able to include it under "transcendence" by saying that it is an example of transcendence manifested in revelation. But, then, how does the transcendence section differ from the ethical section? It appears that you have extended your idea of transcendence so that it can incorporate the material in the first chapters of Matthew, which are on the surface more ethical in character. I don't think there's anything at all wrong with doing this, My only question is whether you can use this

1. Vern Poythress teaches hermeneutics at Westminster Theological seminary (east).

to prove that the structure of Matthew is from Deuteronomy.

The Matthew example makes me suspect that any one of your five points could be used as the organizing principle of the doctrine of the covenant. All of them involve one another, as you admit yourself. Your book seems thus to be an exercise in perspectival theology. Perhaps an illustration will help make my point. In his hermeneutics classes, Poythress spends a lecture showing how the entire Bible can be viewed from the starting point of “plants.” I’m sure you can imagine how he does this. It works. It helps you see a lot of interesting details about the Bible that you wouldn’t see otherwise. But no one, not even Poythress, would for a moment say that plants are the main theme of the Bible.

3. I don’t think you’ve really defined covenant itself. You seem to recognize this, because you back off from saying these are the five elements of the covenant. Instead, you tend to call them the five points of covenantalism, which is something rather different. I think all five points are involved in some way in the covenant. But they don’t seem to me to define the covenant. At bottom, the covenant is a relationship and a structure. I don’t think you explain adequately how these five elements relate to the covenant itself.

Perhaps I’m confused because I’m not sure whether you would define the covenant as a document or as a relationship (or a set of relationships). Your method, inferring the points of covenantalism from the structure of a document, would imply the former. But you can’t avoid speaking about the covenant as a relationship of some kind. I don’t suppose you can separate the covenantal document from the relationship established. But I would have benefitted from a discussion of the relationship between the two.

I’d appreciate your response to any or all of this, if you think it’s of any value. I really don’t disagree with any significant content in the book. What I disagree with is that you have discovered the model of the covenant. I think you’ve articulated very well a model.

In Christ,
Mr. L.P.

Dear Mr. L.P.

Thanks for your letter. I really appreciated your comments . . . and I probably should have written sooner to let you know. Oh well, better late than never, and your letter gives me an opportunity to say this.

I am glad the book has been of some value to you. As I said in the *Acknowledgments*, that’s all I can hope for. I hope you will discover the structure I propose to be more and more helpful as you continue to work with it. If not, then perhaps there will be some things of value in the book.

As to your constructive criticisms, keep in mind that my book is not written for a hardcore academic audience. I think I could clear up many of your particular concerns with more extended development, especially in the appendixes where I just overview whole sections of the Bible that I think fit the Deuteronomic pattern. And I will have to expand these appendixes in future editions.

But, keep in mind that Chilton’s whole commentary is an extensive development of my thesis. He proves conclusively, I believe, that Revelation is the story of the destruction of the Old Covenant and the establishment of the New in heaven and on earth. I hate to think that that kind of commentary will have to be produced on every Biblical section to which I refer to prove my point, but who knows, maybe that’s what I’ll end up having to do. Anyway, here is my response, even though you may disagree.

First, you seem to be most bothered by Gary’s language, “the structure.” I can appreciate your concern, seeing that I’m [sometimes] nervous about the language too. But in a purely Poythressian sense, isn’t there a “sense” (good

Poythressian well-used word) that it is the structure, just as other constructs could be said to be the structure, depending on what perspective one is taking? Ah, isn’t multi-perspectivism fun? One can prove anything he wants with it!

It seems to me, and perhaps I need to make this clearer, that covenant is the central organizing theological construct when it comes to relationships. The family model is too narrow (Can’t be family because the Holy Spirit doesn’t fit the kinsman model, while the other Persons of the Trinity do, Father and Son, and this I wish some of my Roman Catholic friends could see). Also, the contract model won’t work.

But let’s face it, both aspects of Biblical Revelation are called covenants, Old and New Covenant. So as Leon Morris has observed, covenant has to be some kind of common denominator. I agree with your Poythressian point about being able to organize the Bible around plants, or other metaphors in the Bible. But, I don’t think you’re comparing “apples with apples.” Covenant is not a **metaphor**; it is a theological construct. God didn’t call the two phases of Scripture Old and New “Apple,” or “rocks,” etc. If anything, the symbols of the Bible could be viewed in terms of the covenant, seeing they all in some sense point to God and His relationship to the creation. By the way, symbols can be very dangerous if they’re interpreted metaphysically and not covenantally. Even so, we should be careful to distinguish metaphor from an explicitly mentioned theological concept.

Second, as to whether or not the structure I have developed is the structure of the covenant, you will have to decide whether I have done justice to the concept or not. I believe that it is the structure and that it is the covenant. But you appeared to have had several sub-criticisms under this heading.

1. Your comments about literary structure and content surprised me. To fail to see the relationship between structure (literary or otherwise) and content is nominalism. But in defense of connecting literary structure and content, especially Biblical literary structure and content, I turn to the Ten Commandments. If anything points to the relationship between content and structure, it has to be the summary of the Law itself! As you know, my appeal is significant to my argument because I believe the *Ten Commandments* to be a double five-fold covenant witness. But if they are not, there is still a relationship between literary structure and content: law one comes before law ten for important theological reasons.

Even if you don’t agree, however, there is good Biblical precedent for seeing the relationship between content and literary structure. I know that some views of hermeneutics like to over-work structure, but I don’t see any need for over-reacting. Besides, when it comes to Holy Scripture, which is not the same as coming to Melville’s *Moby Dick* (ah, but isn’t it interesting that most students of hermeneutics would not quibble over the structure/content debate on an artistic work like *Moby Dick*?), nothing is neutral, not even literary structure. (Also, ancient literature is especially self-conscious about structure and its relationship to the ideas of the work. Jim has done some work in this area I think.)

Hence, I believe that all of the literary structures of the Bible have theological meaning—creation week, sacrificial system, human body, temple (the “house” structure is a variation of this, which by the way, the Greeks were fond of using to organize their speeches), the tree and a few more, because nothing is “neutral” in Scripture. But furthermore, I believe that all of the literary structures of the Bible ultimately tie into the covenant, because again, the covenant is the central construct describing our relationship to God. If I had time, I think that I could show you that the literary structures of the Bible are **covenantal**. So I believe that the whole point of a theistic view of the world (in a Vantillian sense) is that every “structure” in the Bible is theological, and that only a non-theistic presupposition would try to sep-

arate literary structure and content.

On a much broader note, the relationship between literary structure and content has to be best illustrated in architecture, since literary structure is nothing but architecture on paper. You see, we cannot communicate our ideas apart from "house," with its prototype in God's house, which means to say we are "revelational" in spite of ourselves.

On structure and content, on point 3, you say, "I don't think you explain adequately how these five elements relate to the covenant itself." That's because I believe the five points to be the covenant. They are like fingers to the hand. No one talks about a hand without the fingers because there essentially is no hand without fingers. (It is interesting that the Bible uses the "hand" as a primary metaphor for the covenant.) But if you can think of a sixth or a seventh point, let me know.

You also say, "the covenant is a relationship and a structure"—In the words of Elmer Fudd, "You wascally wabbit, you really do believe there is a connection between content and structure"! — but is that all there is? Maybe you would include law under structure and run it together with hierarchy, which is where I put structure. But how about sanctions? Are they not endemic to the covenant? And how about a mechanism of transfer, for after all, we do believe in covenant, and we don't just believe in a relationship of individuals. The covenant is extended. Oh no, this pushes us closer and closer to five points of the covenant. So, I think that if you consider the elements, like fingers on a hand (probably designed to count the points of the covenant), you will come close to five essential elements, at least close enough to say that I'm close. I hope!

Third, perhaps I could have made the "covenant is a relationship" point much clearer. But I guess I assumed that that would come through in the first point: transcendence/immanence, meaning that the covenant is personal. I know what you mean when you say, "Is the covenant a document or a relationship but I say it is both, just as the "Word" is both: written and a person.

Fourth, I agree with you on point 2, "It appears that one of your strongest arguments is that the Deuteronomy structure is found everywhere in Scripture." That's why all the appendixes! But you'll be interested to know that the book originally had the appendixes after the "five points" section. I decided, however, that given the audience I was trying to reach that I had better put this material in a shortened form in appendixes. I did so knowing that I would not satisfy all my readers with my summary exegesis, but that's about all I thought that I could do. And as I've already said, I will probably expand significantly those appendixes in the next edition just because of the kind of criticisms you're raising.

I do think, however, that you are missing the mark on your criticisms of Remans and Matthew. You object to point four of the Remans outline because of what I said about Phoebe. But the "commendation" of Phoebe is not like other salutations because of the Greek word "commendation." Notice that it is used earlier in Remans, "But if your unrighteousness demonstrates [same Greek word as in Remans 16:1 translated 'commend.'] the righteousness of God, what shall we say? The God who inflicts wrath is not unrighteous" (Remans 3:5). Paul's point is that "unrighteousness" is a judgmental declaration of God's righteousness because it gets judged by God's wrath; hence unrighteousness is sanctioned. And so Paul is presenting Phoebe with a judgment, shall we say, a "demonstration-sanction." I said in my book that Paul's judgment was a special blessing. She had to have a special sanction because she was the one who delivered the Holy Manuscript! So the manuscript itself was the commendation or special sanction on her. This is why I believe the commendation of Phoebe is distinct from the other greetings. I'm glad you raised this point though,

because I should have done more explanation. I'll include this information in future editions.

As to Matthew, I think you have also missed the fundamental parallel between the Deuteronomic preamble and the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is distinguishing His interpretation of the Law (remember the law given in Deuteronomy) from the Pharisees' interpretation. It is Divine vs. human revelation! And this is precisely the kind of transcendent point made in the transcendent section (the preamble) of Deuteronomy, "Moses spoke all that the Lord commanded" (Deut. 1:3). Yes, the Sermon on the Mount is ethical in character, but that is not the primary point that Jesus is trying to make; His ethical comments are prefaced with, "You have heard," referring to false interpretations. It reflects the same transcendent emphasis that involves the ethical in the Deuteronomic preamble, "That the Lord commanded" (Duet. 1:3). So I still maintain that the emphasis of the first section of Matthew is transcendent in the Deuteronomic covenant sense. Again, thanks for making the point because I'm sure this will help me to beef up my arguments. Your point about all of the sections' including the other points is well taken, but it does not deny a broader context that follows a specific pattern.

Well, thanks for the feedback. You have provoked me to refine my thinking and that's what friends are for. I will take your criticisms to heart when I get to revise the book in future editions. . . . Hope to see you some time.

Sincerely,

Mr. Something's Missing

Dear Ray,

There have been four issues of Covenant Renewal, and there is yet to be any mention of Genesis 12:2-3, 13:15-16, 15:5, 17:4-9, or Galatians 3:15 -19....

Also, at Mt. Sinai God said "if you will obey . . . then you shall be a peculiar treasure"—stating a condition or stipulation but not promising to fulfill or insure that stipulation in them. But where does God state a stipulation or "if you" when talking to Abraham? Does not God instead promise and insure complete fulfillment of the covenant — all conditions, stipulations and results (Genesis 17:7-9)? . . .

As John Owen was led to write concerning the "new" covenant of Jeremiah 31:31-32 and Hebrews 8:9-11:

The condition [or stipulation] of the covenant is not said to be required, but it is absolutely promised: "I will put my fear in their hearts." And this is the main difference between the old covenant of works and the new one of grace, that in that the Lord did only require the fulfilling of the condition [or stipulations] prescribed, but in this he promiseth to effect it in them himself with whom the covenant is made.²

Hence, the "new" covenant is not really new; not only for the reason footnoted in *Covenant Renewal*, No. 4, but also because it is a repeat, with added details, of what God had already promised to Abraham (Genesis 17:4-9) long, long before even the "old covenant" through Moses. . . . This is not true of the covenant described in Exodus and Deuteronomy. . . .

In summary: . . . Was the first covenant given at Sinai? No; but *Covenant Renewal*, No. 4 implies otherwise. . . . The covenant at Sinai was conditional: based on if the people fulfilled the stipulations of the new. . . . Isn't it misleading, therefore, to say or imply that the covenant given at Sinai is the first covenant? . . . And if, as you affirm, the Book of

2. John Owen, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, BK.II, Ch.I.

Deuteronomy is actually a second statement of the covenant given at Sinai, then isn't it misleading to say that "The clearest statement of the covenant is the Book of Deuteronomy" if, by covenant, you mean the covenant in Christ? . . .

Sincerely,
Mr. J. T.

Dear Mr. J. T.

Thanks so much for your letter. . . . I should mention at the outset that a reading of my book, *That You May Prosper*, will obviously provide a much fuller and a much truer picture of my position on the covenant. I believe that many of your comments are answered in the first five chapters and especially in the appendix, "Hebrews 8: Old Covenant/New Covenant Comparison." But so as not to avoid your immediate concerns, let me offer three responses to your comments.

First, you say, "the covenant in Deuteronomy, therefore, is not the covenant in Christ." But Jesus said, "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill" (Matthew 5:17). Jesus literally says that the Mosaic law is fulfilled in Him, and if that is the case, then the covenant in Deuteronomy—being part of the "Law"—is part of the covenant in Christ. Furthermore, the Apostle Paul expressly commands New Covenant Christians to keep commandments given at Mt. Sinai (Romans 13:9; Eph. 6:1ff.).

Thus, the Abrahamic promise goes through the Mosaic covenant, not around it. Jesus essentially says, "I did not come to abolish the Law"; He does not say that "He came to abolish all the Law except the Abrahamic part." You appear to want the New Covenant in the Old Covenant, vis-à-vis the Abrahamic covenant, but you don't want to allow the Old Covenant in the New. You have, in my opinion, set up the very hermeneutic that you seem to be criticizing in me. You are mixing the covenants.

Why not let the Bible speak for itself? Everything prior to Christ is the Old Covenant. Everything after is the New Covenant. Everything before the Cross is in Adam and everything after is in Christ. Man was saved before the Cross through the promise that was progressively worked out through the Old Covenant age, and that was finally brought to fulfillment ("To bring to fullest expression") in the New Covenant. But remember: a promise is just that, a promise. It can only proleptically place the New Covenant in force. It can only anticipate the New Covenant. It is not, therefore, the same as the fulfillment of the promise.

This distinction between the promise and the fulfillment of the promise is the precise difference between the Old and New Covenant. You've cited this very point in John Owen. Accordingly, keep in mind that there must be a difference between everything prior to the fulfillment of the promise (the Cross), the Abrahamic covenant included, or we don't have a difference between what comes before and what comes after: a difference between promise and fulfillment of the promise. . . . The solution seems to be in realizing that the New Covenant cannot be in force until Christ comes in

history. It therefore brings salvation to the Old Covenant saints on the basis of a promise, on the basis of an anticipated fulfillment of this promise; nevertheless, it is a promise that is not actually fulfilled until the Cross! . . .

Think about this view of the Bible and turn it over in your mind. I believe that you'll find it a much more refreshing and Biblically consistent approach.

Second, you say that the Abrahamic covenant was the covenant in Christ because it was unconditional, and that the Mosaic covenant couldn't have been the covenant in Christ because it was conditional. But this way of slicing the pie won't work. Why? The Abrahamic covenant was conditional, as well as unconditional.³ God tells Abraham in one of those classic, central passages that you say I fail to mention, "Walk before me and be blameless and I will establish My covenant" (Genesis 17:1-2). If that's not a conditional statement, then what is it? But let's not be speculative. There is a sure-fire way of finding out whether or not the Abrahamic covenant was conditional. We can search Genesis to see if anyone was ever included in the Abrahamic covenant, circumcised, and then cut (no pun intended) out. Was there? Indeed there was: Ishmael and Esau. Point proven: they were part of what you have called the "Abrahamic-promissory-New Covenant," but Esau, at least, failed to abide by the conditions and apostatized!

Not only does the Abrahamic covenant contain an element of conditionality, but the Mosaic covenant is promissory. Moses saw that he was operating on and fulfilling the promises of the Abrahamic covenant. He says, "Listen to the statutes and the judgments which I am teaching you to perform, in order that you may live and go in and take possession of the land which the Lord, the God of your fathers [vis-à-vis Abraham], is giving you" (Deut. 4:1). And where did God promise the land? The promise was originally given to Abraham (Gen. 12:1ff.; 15:1ff.).

Finally, you seem to be bothered by the fact that I called Deuteronomy a "second" covenant, implying that Sinai was the first covenant and that the Abrahamic covenant was not. Remember that I believe in the progressive fulfillment of the promise of Genesis 3:15. From the point of view of redemptive history, every covenant after the covenant with Adam starts out being a "new" covenant. But when that covenant fails it becomes like the first covenant with Adam, until one day when Christ comes as the True second Adam and establishes a True second covenant. Thus, from a redemptive/historical view, Deuteronomy was a second covenant, which by the way proved to be like the first. . . .

I hope you will give my comments some consideration. . . . Thanks again and may God richly bless you in your study of Holy Scripture.

Sincerely,

3. Ray R. Sutton, *That You May Prosper* (Tyler, Texas: I.C.E., 1987), pp. 80ff. I have a full discussion of the problems related to the unconditional/conditional distinctions.