

# COVENANT RENEWAL

Genesis 1:26-28

Matthew 28:18-20

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## AN OBJECTIVE THEOLOGY OF THE COVENANT

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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 (Rem. 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.17:18;9:9). The Covenant with Abraham also involved his household — not merely his children, but his slaves as well (Gen.14:9-13). As Meredith Kline has conclusively demonstrated in *By* (Eerdmans, 1968), the biblical idea of **Cove-**

**nant** is an 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. 3:4, 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 to believe everything I've said up to now. For if you believe in the Ten Commandments, you must believe in 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 showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me; and keep my commandments" (Ex. 20:5-6). This passage teaches that **covenantally**

**from** If you believe the Ten Commandments, Covenant theology is inescapable. (And, by the way, if you believe that much, then you must also be-

ing 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:

If not, what is the condition? *Covenantal* Look at it like this. Let's say an alien desired to join the Covenant in the 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

practices, and to worship and obey the true God. Regardless of their personal attitudes, they were – objectively/ 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 husband, parent, 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** 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 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 **realistic**, really) sees oneness and unity as being basic to all reality. It is the view that names, symbols and rituals are **real** which completely determine the particular things that they define. on the other hand, holds that symbols are just not realities. **Nominalists** see diversity and individuality as being most basic.

But the biblical answer is to be found in **Trinitarianism**. God is and all reality is structured in terms of Him. A brief definition of the Trinity might be this: One **God**

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 (Oneness) and (threeness, individuality) are **equally ultimate**. God is “basically” One “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 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 however, am a Trinitarian; and when my wife kisses me, I recognize it as a 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. The Realist school, holding that unity is fundamental, maintains an **episcopal**<sup>1</sup> 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 pattern in which power is exercised democratically, from below. Realism tends toward totalitarianism; Nominalism tends toward anarchy. The biblical form of government is in which there is a balance of power with a structure of **authority**.<sup>2</sup>

2. 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 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 a means of grace, and signifies the subjective experience of the recipient, but the objective imposition of covenantal authority over him.

3. 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. 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 necessarily mean damnation. It is, in fact, a last-ditch effort to bring the offender back to the faith. The judgment 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. For a Realist, eternal salvation

1. I slightly differ with Chilton on this point. I think he should have said, “bureaucratic episcopacy” is realist. Episcopacy, meaning some form of hierarchy where there are “captains” over tens, fifties, and hundreds, is Biblical (Deuteronomy 1:13-15).

2. Note that this balance of power can also be expressed in a Biblical episcopacy. For example: a king and a parliament and a president and a congress. As a matter of fact, our political system is more directly modelled after the Episcopal system in this regard.

is guaranteed by membership in the visible church – baptized children are unquestionably regarded as 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 (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 basis on which to regard them 'as Christians. Note: I am saying a non-member is necessarily unregenerate; just that there is no that he is. Nor am I saying that communion may be served only to members of my congregation or denomination; but that communicants must belong to a visible structure. 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 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

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 writing of the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament apostles – do you find them speaking to the church as heathen? Never; not even in 1 Corinthians, and the congregation in Corinth was really a mess. Church members, even erring ones, are addressed as (the same expression 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,<sup>3</sup> because there is no need for it:

3. There is, however, a confirmation process tied to inheritance in the covenant. It seems to me that the historic wisdom of the Church has been to require covenant renewal or reaffirmation of covenant vows in this sense. I personally don't think, however, that communion should be tied to confir-

You will never find a distinction in the Bible between "communicant" and "non-communicant" membership, because 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 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

and such an experience had to conform to specific canons produced by the scholars of New England. If your expedience 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, Whitfield 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 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 a 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. Objectively, they 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 Stu-Theology*, ed. by John H. Skilton [Presbyterian and Reformed, 1976], Jim Jordan's "God's Hospitality and Holistic Evangelism" [*Journal*

mation. See Ray R. Sutton, *That You*

(Tyler, Texas: I. C. E., 1987), pp. 105ff. See also an excellent presentation of confirmation in Masssey Shepherd,

Seabury, 1953), pp. 177-179,

(Greenwich, Connecticut:

Vol. VII, No. 2]; Jordan's "Theses on Paedo-Communion," available from Geneva Divinity School; Edmund Morgan's *Visible a Puritan Idea* [Cornell University Press, 1963]; and Terrill Elniff's, *The of Graceless Heart* [Ross House, 1981 ].)

### Authoritative Nature of the Covenant

Mr. Chilton's insightful article has been reprinted here because he surfaces a key element in the covenant: authority, which has to do with the second point of the covenant, **hierarchy**. It is not the **only** element, mind you, for there are four other aspects.

Even so, Chilton has latched on to the **authoritative nature** of covenantal arrangements. He has said that the covenant is an authority **structure**, meaning anyone who enters into covenant with God does not come as an **individual**. Rather, everything that has been **entrusted** to the individual belongs to God. There are no legitimate safety zones by which man can say to God, "Off limits," or "Beyond this point You may not go." No, everything that belongs to the individual automatically belongs to God!

How can Chilton say such a thing? He has based his conclusions on the circumcision of the male members of Abraham's household and the continuation of this principle in New Testament household baptisms at Philippi (Acts 16). As a result, he has clearly taken note of the fact that everyone and everything under the individual's **authority** is also claimed by God. He has based his entire article on the premise that God's covenant establishes a personal authority structure over the person, which in turn places everything under this person in a direct chain-of-command with God.

God saves whole **chains of command**. He does not just save individuals. He demonstrates this point in the account of the centurion, who having a sick servant said, "Lord, I am not worthy for You to come under my roof, but just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I, too, am a man under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to this one, 'Go!' and he goes, and to another, 'Come!' and he comes, and to my slave, 'Do this!' and he does it" (Matthew 8:8-10). Catch the implication of the centurion's language? Jesus came to him and therefore his whole household was under Christ's charge. If Christ was in control of him as an individual, He was also in control of everyone in his sphere of authority. The covenant is authoritative and therefore claims whole authority structures. This is Chilton's great contribution with his article.

Thus, given Chilton's insight about the **authoritative nature** of the covenant, I would like to make a brief application. I should add that these thoughts are not new with me, but they are rooted in the historic practices of the church.

Since God not only claims individuals but those entrusted to their authority, we should begin to see the Great Commission as corporate and not just personal. Jesus says, "Make disciples of all the nations" (Matthew 28:19). In other words, God wants the **nations** of the world brought into His kingdom and not just individuals. He desires to see culture transformed by the Gospel, and moreover, He wants the whole civilization brought to Christ.

It's not a matter of either/or: the individual or the culture. Both are tied to each other and in the words of Henry Van Til, who partially quotes T. S. Eliot,

The church cannot keep on evangelizing the world without changing its culture. It is the duty of the church to struggle for a condition of society which will give the maximum of opportunity for others to become Christians. . . . To confess Christ as Saviour from sin, but to deny his relevance and power in the realm of culture, is a denial of his kingship over the believer and over the world.<sup>4</sup>

Van Til's understanding of the Great Commission, the task of bringing Christianity to the world, is such that the individual cannot truly carry out God's Commission on the earth **unless** the whole society is transformed. He means that **unless** the civilization is effected, it will be so resistant to Christianity that the spread of the Gospel will be hindered. In the words of the Apostle Paul, "I urge that entreaties and prayers, petitions and thanksgivings, be made on behalf of all men, for kings and all who are in **authority**, in order that we may lead a tranquil life in all godliness and dignity. This is good and acceptable in the sight of God **our Saviour, who desires** all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:1-4).

The Apostle understood that more people would be saved in a time of "peace," when there are Christian kings and political leaders, contrary to the popular idea that more people are converted in a time of persecution. History does not bear this out. Certainly many will be converted and the Church will be purged during these times, but it is anti-Biblical to think that the Church does better when the whole civilization is against it. Paul specifically commands the Church to pray for peace in order that the **Church** might get about the Father's total business, which is more than the conversion of individuals.

Van Til, following the thinking of Paul, has actually said that the Great Commission calls for the salvation of whole authority structures on a national scale, regardless of the political system in effect. He has explained that Christ commanded the conversion of the nations whether they are constitutional, monarchical, or tyrannical. The point is that God claims the nations of the world and all under their authority.

Now to the tough question: how do the nations bring their subjects into the kingdom? I have explained in *That*

Jesus says, "Disciple the **nations** [neuter gender], baptizing **them** [masculine gender]" (Matthew 28:19). "Nations" is the antecedent of the personal pronoun "them." Why the discrepancy between the pronoun and its antecedent? The "<nations" are not to be baptized all at once. The "nations" are to be baptized **household by household**. . . . The Gospel begins in the menial households of the Roman Empire, and it spreads to the greatest family, Caesar's household, when Paul is taken captive and converts Caesar's own bodyguards.<sup>5</sup>

So, I conclude on the main theme of Chilton's essay. The covenant is authoritative and it therefore encompasses authoritative units: Family, Church, and State. When Chilton speaks of objective theology, he has laid the proper Biblical groundwork for an authoritative view of the covenant, one that is desperately needed in the Church, Family, and certainly the State.

Henry R. Van Til, *Calvinistic of Culture* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, [1959] 1972), p. 212-213.

5. Ray R. Sutton, *That You* (Tyler, Texas: I.C.E., 1987), p. 134.