

# COVENANT RENEWAL

Genesis 1:26-28

Matthew 28:18-20

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## GOD'S CURE FOR HOT TUB RELIGION (The Covenantal Structure of I Corinthians: Part I)

The other day I made a trip to our nearest Christian bookstore. I know the owner quite well. He's been a good friend over the years and he's a very dedicated Christian. He also happens to run a classy, successful store. It's a model one, so I'm told: one third books, one third records (roughly but not quite one third), and one third cards and other Christian trinkets: you know, crosses, all kinds of porcelain and glass items with verses on them, as well as various other assorted protestant iconography.

I periodically like to go the bookstore to keep up with "what's happen'n" in the Evangelical world. I also like to stay in touch with the latest books.

While I was yawning through some of the more recently published titles, to my utter surprise, I came across the perfect description of the **Modern Church** and its First Century counterpart, the Church at Corinth. I found it in one of my favorite author's newest books: by J. I. Packer. I'll let him speak for himself because I can't say it any better. Besides, I've never experienced a hot tub. Sorry folks, I never had a shot at this insight!

### A VIEW FROM A HOT TUB

The other day I was one of a crowd who spent much of a wet Saturday afternoon in a hot tub. My student advisees, who formed the crowd, had advised me to try it; you'll like it, they said. Previously I had thought of hot tubs as reserved for hedonists in Hollywood and sybarites in San Francisco, but now I know that under certain circumstances members of Regent College's teaching faculty may also use them. Every day, it seems, one learns something new.

As I sat there savoring hot tubness, cracking small jokes and adjusting to the feel of being bubbled over from all angles, it struck me that the hot tub is the perfect symbol of the modern route in religion. The hot tub experience is sensuous, relaxing, floppy, laid-back: not in any way demanding, whether intellectually or otherwise, but very, very nice, even to the point of being great fun (especially with an advisee group like mine). Many today want Christianity to be like that, and labor to make it so. The ultimate step, of course, would be to clear church auditoriums of seats and install hot tubs in their place; then there would never be any attendance problems. Meantime, many churches, evangelists, and electronic religionists are ready offering occasions which we are meant to feel are the next best thing to a hot tub - namely, happy gatherings free from care, real fun times for all. Happiness has been defined as a warm puppy; this kind of religion projects happiness in the form of a warm welcome to all who tune or drop in; a warm choir with a schmaltzy swing; a warm, back-scratching use of words in prayer and preaching; and a warm, cheerful afterglow (another hot tub touch). To the question,

where is God? the answer which these occasions actually project, never mind what is said, is: in the preacher's pocket. Soothing for sure, but is it faith? Worship? Service of God? Is godliness the real name of this game?<sup>1</sup>

To answer the previous questions: there is no faith involved in hot tub religion; there is no true worship; there is no real service; there is no godliness; so, the name of the game is not godliness; it is experience, a totally sense-oriented-culture. It is a world concerned with nothing more than feelings. It is a century described in the words of Cornelius Van Til as the age of irrationalism.<sup>2</sup>

How did we get here? Darwin destroyed natural law, the basis of eighteenth century rationalism. How did he undermine natural law? He revised an ancient Greek idea about origins, essentially saying that life is in constant flux, which is another way of saying that life evolves. When he made flux the absolute law of the universe, he killed any notion of constants known as natural laws: there cannot be a law as such, if everything known as law is subject to being changed.

Out went real science. Out went moral absolutes. Out went anything that represented a constant, unchanging guide to our society: the Bible, the U.S. Constitution, and the very natural law system given to the Western world by the Scottish (Presbyterian) rationalists.

Enter a world and life view based on change. Enter a religion of revolution, Marxism, founded on the premises of Darwinism. Enter upheaval in the legal world because neither precedent nor principle any longer controls the interpretation of law. Enter Barthianism into the field of theology where the Word of God does not become the Word of God until it enters a person's experience. Enter the drug culture from the East.

In every discipline and in every category of thought, change and experience reign supreme. Packer is right. The best metaphor for our time is the hot tub. It perfectly captures the self-centered, me-absorbed world of the twentieth century.

### The Corinthian Church

The problem of experientialism (irrationalism) is nothing new. It is at least as old as the Corinthian Church of the first century, which was the polar opposite of the city of Athens. In these two cities, both extremes of error are found. The Corinthians represented the radical and irrational side of sin, whereas the Athenians were the intellectual, philosophical side. Fallen man sins with his brain as

1. J. I. Packer, *Hot Religion* (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House, 1987), pp. 66-69.

2. I don't think Van Til actually has this phrase in print. But I've heard him use it on one of his taped lectures.

well as his brawn: emotion, passion and will. At Corinth, however, we have a clear example of a totally sense-oriented world and life view, what Packer has called hot tub religion.

Consider the history of the city to see how this sense-oriented worldview developed. Located on an isthmus between mainland Greece and a little island that sticks out like a hand, Corinth was called the "eye of Greece." Militarily, if it fell, the whole nation could have been easily conquered. This was not necessarily true from an ideological point of view for Athens was the center of philosophy. Yet, God in His providence forced Paul from the city of intellectual influence, Athens, to the city of political and moral influence, Corinth. As a result, the spiritual direction of Corinth did set the moral tone for the nation later in church history.

Initially, however, Corinth as a city had a history of political rebellion. Because of continued rebellion, and its autonomous view of government, Rome completely destroyed the city in 146 B.C. Corinth lay desolate for one century until Julius Caesar rebuilt the structures, and started civilization moving again. But the democratic mindset of Plato could not be driven away simply by removing the physical structures of Corinth. The Corinthians needed spiritual and moral change.

Corinth quickly regained its strength after the Roman destruction, and by the time of Paul's second visit the city (500,000) was the Vanity Fair of the Roman Empire. It had become as morally autonomous as its politics. To "corinthisize" was a term of debauchery.

Behind Corinth stood a large hill, 1800 feet, on which was built the Acrocorinth, a temple to the goddess Aphrodite (Venus). It was nothing more than a house of prostitution, a place where men could feel religious in their immorality. Juvenal called this city of ill repute, "Perfumed Corinth," and Chrysostom referred to it as "The most licentious city of all that are or ever have been."

What a place to start a church, but this is where the Holy Spirit moved. This is where God called the Apostle Paul. Having overviewed the history of the city, consider the problems that he faced, where the sense-oriented worldview of the city appears in the church. The Corinthians were essentially too man-centered. They were divided over their leaders. They wouldn't discipline their immoral members. They misused their money and wouldn't provide for their workers (ministers). They frequented the Acrocorinth to eat meat that had been offered to idols. They turned Holy Communion into a drunken brawl. They were confused about the role of women. They were too focused on the leadership, spiritual gifts and not on the servant, spiritual gifts. They were so concerned about the Second Coming that they were failing to work properly.

The Corinthians' problems were numerous, but all in all they were fleshly. What was Paul's solution?

### Covenantal Structure of I Corinthians<sup>1</sup>

Paul applied the Biblical covenant. How do I know? He wrote his first letter to the Church at Corinth as a covenant document, utilizing the format of the Deuteronomic covenant. The overall letter follows the pattern:

1. Transcendence (1:1-3): Identification of the suzerain (Lord) via his messenger, in this case the Apostle Paul.
2. Hierarchy (1:4-9): Paul customarily offers prayer after the preamble of his letters. But he does not just offer any kind of prayer; he prays a thanksgiving or Eucharistic prayer. Significantly, this kind of prayer easily falls within the scope of the second section of the covenant. It presents Jesus as the true Mediator of the covenant, the hierarchy and head of the Church,

Also, failure to offer Eucharistic prayer results in idolatry (Remans 1:21), which is another hierarchical theme (Deuteronomy 4:15-24).

3. Ethics (1:10-15:58): Paul addresses the Corinthian problems by following the Ten Commandments.
4. Oath/Sanctions (16:1-9): Paul addresses "first day" of the week activities, clearly falling within the scope of the sabbath (Leviticus 23:35), but in this case a New Covenant sabbath (Hebrews 4:9). The sabbath Day/Judgment activities of tithing and giving money were covenant renewing functions. Specifically, tithing could only be performed if the blessing sanction had been fulfilled in the life of the believer, a sanction addressed in the fourth section of the Deuteronomic covenant (Deuteronomy 28). Also, witnesses of the covenant are sanctioned for use as messengers.
5. Succession (16:10-24): Witnesses of the covenant are greeted, instructed in their commission and blessed just as Joshua was commissioned in the final section of Deuteronomy (Deuteronomy 31-34).

Thus, the book as a whole easily fits the covenant pattern, and the stipulations or ethics section (1:10-15:58) tracks the Ten Commandments. Most of my attention, however, will be on the Ten Commandments section of I Corinthians. This segment virtually comprises the entire book. Besides, it will prove my point since I believe the Decalogue follows the covenant pattern twice. I will not stop to develop the covenantal structure of the Ten Commandments themselves because I have already done so in my larger book on the covenant, *Prosper*.<sup>3</sup>

(1:10-31):

The first commandment of the Decalogue says, "1 am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before Me" (Exodus 20:2-3). Two basic themes appear: calling or redemption out of Egypt, and monotheism. Biblical monotheism guards the transcendence of God. Polytheism destroys the distinctness of God. As Van Til has said, "The belief in a god is denial of the God." The Lord of Scripture is not just a god among many gods; He is the One and Only God. And, any reference to a god necessarily implies that there could be more than one God.

Paul applies the Biblical doctrine of monotheism to divisions within the church (1:10-17). He argues that schism in the church implies polytheism, the division of Christ into many christs. He says,

Now I exhort you brethren by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree, and there be no divisions among you, Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, "1 am of Paul," and "1 of Apollos," and "1 of Cephas," and "1 of Christ." Has Christ been divided? Paul was not crucified for you was he (1:10-13).

Paul weaves a discussion of the crucifixion into his treatment of division. He says that there is only one who died for them and not many, returning to the monotheism theme. He further argues that preaching of the Cross is theistic as opposed to the wisdom of the world, which calls for the preaching of men. By using the mono-crucifixion doctrine, however, he pulls the message of redemption into the argument, an exodus theme. Sound familiar? These doctrines are the language of the Decalogue. One redemption means there is not only One God, but there is an obligation to serve Him and Him alone without division!

3. Ray R. Sutton, *You May* (Tyler, Texas: I.C.E., 1987), pp. 214-224. See especially, however, Gary North, (Tyler, Texas: I. C. E., 1986), pp. xiv-xxii. Dr. North was actually the first one to notice that the Ten Commandments fit the five-fold covenant pattern twice, a five and five structure. His brief treatment is excellent!

(1:18-31):

The second commandment forbids the worship of idols. The two themes, therefore, are worship and prohibition against idolatry.

Paul moves to an emphasis on worship and idolatry by weaving foolishness/wisdom themes into his teaching on the crucifixion. He says,

For the word of the cross is to those who are perishing foolishness . . . For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will set aside" (1 :18-19).

What does this quote from Isaiah have to do with worship? Consider the full context. Isaiah says,

Then the Lord said, "Because this people draws near with their words and honors Me with their lip service, but they remove their hearts far from Me, and their reverence for Me consists of tradition learned, therefore behold, I will once again deal marvelously with this people, wondrously marvelous; and the wisdom of their wise men shall perish, and the discernment of their discerning men shall be concealed (Isaiah 29.13-14).

Isaiah is speaking about worship because he refers to those who "Draw near with their words and honor Me with their lips" (Isaiah 29:13 a). He is condemning Israel for going through the motions of worship while not worshipping in their heart. He concludes that this form of idolatry is judged by the destruction of their wisdom.

Paul applies Isaiah's message to the crucified Christ. The Apostle concludes that since Jesus died for sin, He is God and He alone is to be worshiped. But this New Covenant hierarchy is "foolishness" to the Jewish rabbis and Gentile teachers because they are idolaters; they would rather worship man, the created, instead of God, the Creator and Redeemer. Paul specifically turns the message of Isaiah toward the Corinthian Church. He knows that they are coming to worship to hear man and not God. He also understands that if they continue, they will be judged no less than Israel was judged with a Babylonian captivity. In fact, the Apostle even concludes this section by quoting from Jeremiah who says that only the "wise" understand judgment comes as a result of Baalism (idolatry), and that any boasting should therefore be in the Lord and not man (Jeremiah 9:12, 14, 23-24 quoted in 1 Corinthians 1:31).

### III. (2:1-

The third commandment in Exodus is a prohibition against "Taking the name of the Lord your God in vain" (Exodus 20:7). The Hebrew word for "vain" (shave') means "to speak falsely" about God, or to live in such a way that falsehoods about God's name are perpetrated. In context, God probably is referring to the falsehoods conveyed through idolatry, explaining why this Hebrew word is used specifically of idols (Jonah 2:8). In other words, the prohibition is against false teaching that would lead to any kind of idolatry.

In I Corinthians 2, Paul reminds the Corinthians that he taught nothing that could have led them to worship him. He defends himself against the very essence of any violation of the third commandment by telling them that he spoke the Word of God. He came "Not with superiority of speech or wisdom" (2:1). In the previous chapter, he had defined the wisdom of this world as idolatry; in Corinth this idolatry was manifesting itself through the worship of men, preachers. The implication is that either some of their teachers were not preaching a God-centered message and were invoking man-worship, or the people were not hearing a Christ-centered sermon but only the man. In either

case, the teachers and the people were in danger of taking the Lord's name in vain. They were close to teaching or receiving instruction that would lead to idolatry, specifically the worship of man.

Paul further defends himself from the charge of "taking the name of the Lord in vain." He argues that he has not attempted to remove the mystery from the message of the Gospel (2:7). Biblical mystery is the incomprehensibility of God that is revealed but unable to be understood. For example, the Incarnation is a mystery in that the hypostatic union (God/Man phenomenon) is incomprehensible, but it has occurred in history; it has been revealed to man.

Pagan mystery, on the other hand, is viewed as that which is comprehensible by an elite few, but concealed from the larger group. It is shamanism, and it was the view of mystery prevalent in Greek culture since the days of Plato and Aristotle. It also results in man worship.

Paul has avoided this form of idolatry by preaching the true Biblical mystery of the Cross. How does he know? He argues that his preaching of Christ, the second Person of the Trinity, can only be received by the Spirit, the third Person of the Trinity (2:10-16). Jesus Himself had said that this would be the precise role of the Spirit: "But when He, the Spirit of truth comes He shall glorify Me; for He shall take of Mine and disclose it to you" (John 16:13-14).

### IV.

The fourth commandment teaches work, rest and submission to God's judgment on the sabbath. It also appeals to the creation week for its precedent, establishing the idea of evaluation. How so? The text says the Lord "blessed the sabbath day" (Exodus 20:11). "Blessing" is a sanction word, appearing in the fourth section of the Deuteronomic covenant (Deuteronomy 28). How did the evaluation/judgment process work during the creation week? Adam and Eve named the animals on the sixth day. They were supposed to have rested on the seventh day by eating of the tree of life and not the tree of knowledge of good and evil, in order to receive the blessing of God. Instead they ate of the wrong tree and were judged, cursed of God. Thus, evaluation and judgment are integral to the fourth commandment.

When we turn to I Corinthians 3-4, all of the major sabbath themes begin to appear. Paul starts with the conflict of two foods theme, clearly a sabbath idea, He says that they are not ready for "solid food" because of the divisions referred to in the first chapter (3:3).

As a result, the Corinthians have misjudged the work of the laborers, another sabbath theme. They have not grasped that Apollos, Paul, and other workers are only servants in the vineyard, not the Lord, the "master builder" (3:10). They have failed to see that the Lord is the one who lays the foundation, not the laborers; they only build on what is already there. And anyone who builds on the wrong foundation will be judged by God, not only referring back to the first and initial day of judgment at creation (Genesis 3:1-21), but also pointing forward to the great and final day of judgment, the sabbath day of history (3:12-15).

Paul concludes that the Corinthians should neither worship the laborers, nor "pass judgment on the laborers before the time" (4:5). He reasons against judging the laborers because they are just servants anyway (4:1); they are the Apostles who have been exalted by God; they have become "scum of the world" (4:13). In the words of our Lord, they have become "last that they might become first."

### V.

The fifth commandment of the Decalogue says, "Honor your father and mother" (Exodus 20:12). The thrust of the

commandment centers around the responsibility of children to obey their fathers.

At I Corinthians 4:14 the responsibility of children to fathers is found for the first time in the epistle. Notice carefully Paul's language:

I do not write these things to shame you, but to admonish you as my beloved children. For if you were to have countless tutors in Christ, yet you would not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel. I exhort you therefore, be imitators of me. For this reason I have sent you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, and he will remind you of my ways which are in Christ, just as I teach everywhere in every church. . . Shall I come to you with a rod or with love and a spirit of gentleness (4:14-21).

Paul speaks to them as their spiritual father. He calls for obedience, just as Moses had commanded children to obey their physical fathers. He even says that he will give them the "rod" if they don't obey, meaning church discipline and not a physical rod.

The father theme continues in the next section where Paul says, "It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father's wife" (5:1). This case of incest is a challenge to the "father's" authority in three senses.

First, incest with the father's wife is a challenge to the particular father in question. It undermined his household because the incestuous child took his bride.

Second, incest with the father's wife was a direct attack on the fathers of the church, the Apostles and elders. It was sin with one of the mothers of the church, which is in turn the bride of God. Sin with the family bride in the church was sin against the larger family, over which God had placed spiritual fathers. How? Sin was being committed against the officers of the church who represented the Groom, Jesus Christ Himself.

Third, incest with the father's wife was direct rebellion against God. The church is His bride and He is the Father of us all. Sin with a bride of the church is sin with His bride. Granted, any kind of incest would be just as heinous in the sight of God, but this particular form of incest more graphically illustrates rebellion of the child to the parent.

Paul concludes this section, "Remove the wicked man from among yourselves" (5:13), indicating that he should be excommunicated. The Apostle's choice of an Old Testament verse to support his command is significant. This statement appears in the stipulations section of the Deuteronomic covenant. It even shows up twice in the segment that expounds the fifth commandment of the Decalogue (Deuteronomy 17:7, 12; cf. 13:5, 21:21, 22:21). Moses very carefully expounds the Ten Commandments in detail, when he comes to the third section of Deuteronomy. The following outline of the stipulations portion is provided, so that it will be clear where the phrase under examination falls.<sup>4</sup>

4. This outline is from the class lecture notes of Rev. Henry Krabben-dam.

1. First Covenant Word (6:1-11:32)
  - A. Evaluation (6:1-9)
  - B. Danger to forget God (6:10-10:11)
  - C. Grounds to love God (10:12-11:7)
  - D. Blessing and Cursing (11:8-32)
- II. Second Covenant Word (12:1-13:18)
  - A. Danger of Canaanite Worship (12:1-32)
  - B. Danger from within Israel (13:1-18)
- III. Third Covenant Word (14:1-29)
  - A. God's Presence and Mourning (14:1-2)
  - B. God's Presence and food (14:3-21a)
  - C. God's Presence and tithing (14:21b-29)
- IV. Fourth Covenant Word (15:1-16:17)
  - A. God's rest and His People (15:1-23)
  - B. Delight in God and His People (16:1-17)
- V. Fifth Covenant Word (16:18-18:22)
  - A. Law of Judges (16:18-17:13)
  - B. Law of Kings (17:14-20)
  - C. Law of Levites (18:1-8)
  - D. Law of Prophets (18:9-22)
- VI. Sixth Covenant Word (19:1-22:12)
  - A. Laws for the innocent (19:1-21)
  - B. Laws for war conduct (20:1-20)
  - C. Laws for unsolved murder (21:1-9)
  - D. Laws for family members (21:10-23)
  - E. Laws to promote life (22:1-12)
- VII. Seventh Covenant Word (22:13-23:14)
  - A. Laws of chastity (22:13-30)
  - B. Laws of church membership (23:1-8)
- VIII. Eighth Covenant Word (23:15-24:22)
  - A. Laws of various subjects (23:15-25)
  - B. Laws on various subjects (24:1-3)
  - C. Laws commanding compassion (24:4-22)
- IX. Ninth Covenant Word (24:1-19)
  - A. God's mercy in justice (25:1-6)
  - B. God's holiness in justice (25:7-19)
- X. Tenth Covenant Word (26:1-19)
  - A. Law of the First Fruits (26:1-11)
  - B. Law of the tithes (26:12-15)
  - C. Laws of total service (26:16-19)

Thus, Paul's command "to purge evil" is found twice in the Fifth Covenant Word section, where the "fathers" of Israel are addressed.

#### Summary

I have only been able to complete the first five commandments to the Corinthians. In the next issue, I shall (D. V.) continue this study of its covenantal structure. But if my observation about the Ten Commandments pattern is accurate, the letter opens up some interesting insights for today's church.

One simple closing application will suffice. Paul provides a "key" to unlocking his own counseling approach. He used the Ten Commandments to speak to the problems of the Corinthians. He saw every problem, personal and otherwise, in terms of these commandments. He allowed the law of God to guide him in his counsel.