

COVENANT RENEWAL

Genesis 1:26-28

Matthew 28:18-20

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THE COVENANTAL ORDER: WORD AND HISTORY BEFORE **SACRAMENT**¹

The order of the covenant's structure has significant implications for any study of the sacraments. The covenant begins with the Word of God: "Moses spoke all that the Lord **had commanded**" (Deuteronomy 1 :3). It then rehearses the history of Israel's wanderings in what is customarily called the **historical prologue** in suzerainty treaty covenants (Deuteronomy 1 :5-4:49). It does not refer to man's response to the Word until the oath section, where man responds to God with words as well as symbolic actions (Deuteronomy 27:1-26). These symbolic actions become sacraments because they represent God's commitment to man that if broken results in judgment. They are more than symbols; they are seals of a spiritual reality. The covenant order, however, is precise: **Word and history before sacrament**. The focus of this newsletter is to explore the ramifications of this covenantal principle.

Word Before Reason and Experience

Some years ago I knew a man who edited a religious newspaper. I'll call him Balthasar. We became friends and started discussing a variety of subjects. There was agreement on many points, but major differences over the sacraments of baptism and communion.² At first, we carefully avoided these subjects, but through our conversations I thought he was becoming more and more open to my viewpoint. Then, one day he suddenly reversed his direction, closed himself to further discussion, and retreated back to his initial position.

Thinking back over his original openness to my theology, Balthasar's interest started with the application of the Ten Commandments to society. He began reading the Puritans because they were an example of a people who tried to create a new world under God's Law. Besides, Balthasar was somewhat conservative in his political views, and this enabled him to take a hard line on capital punishment. Nevertheless, from law and politics he made his way to the sacraments.

The Puritans, for the most part however, believed in infant baptism. Here is where he abruptly halted his study.³

1. I was scheduled to write on Romans 11 for this issue. I'll continue the study of Israel's future in the next issue.

2. Balthasar was a Calvinistic Baptist. Calvinistic Baptists hold to Calvin's high view of the sovereignty of God, but differ with him on the sacraments. Calvin believed that baptism was actual "incorporation" into Christ through a sprinkling or pouring mode, and was to be applied to infants of believers as well as those professing faith. Calvinistic Baptists, however, view baptism as "identification" through immersion, and only to be given to "adults," or those who can make a "credible" profession of faith.

3. My friend became a radical Anabaptist. Anabaptism has historically avoided "political" concerns because of a "separatist" view of society. Poli-

tics was as though he saw a connection between believing the Ten Commandments were applicable in the life of a New Testament believer, and the place of children in the community of the saints. In his mind, he could not consider the one without embracing the other. I was rather perplexed until, not too long after Balthasar's change, a friend told me exactly what had happened.

I was right in my assessment that Balthasar had discovered where his study was taking him. But I had missed a more basic issue. Balthasar had faced a battle over Word before his own human reason. How? My friend told me that Balthasar had become committed, through his study of the Law of God, to a different approach to the Bible. He had picked up on the Puritan approach of following the order of Revelation itself. He had arrived at a Biblical hermeneutic: what is in the Old Testament should be continued except where the New Testament explicitly says to stop the practice. In other words, if a person begins interpreting any subject by starting with Genesis, he is allowing the Word to take primacy over his own reason.

Balthasar, however, wanted to interpret by means of a method based on **reason before the Word**: what is in the Old Testament is completely done away with and only to be practiced where the New Testament explicitly **re-states**. Why do I believe this principle of interpretation is based on reason and not the Word? Nowhere in the Bible can this requirement of **re-statement** be found! So, Balthasar's new method of interpretation (hermeneutic), the Puritan one, was leading him contrary to his old one and right into infant baptism. But when he realized that, he would not budge. Commitment to a particular point of view of baptism controlled his whole approach to the Bible.

I call it **sacramental bias**. Let me hasten to say that Balthasar is no different from many in this regard. It is easy to have sacramental bias because the sacraments have such a total impact on one's life. In Balthasar's case, when a new interpretation of Scripture met the old interpretation of baptism, the latter won out. The pull of his knowledge of the sacraments was stronger than his knowledge of the Scriptures.

I don't think the interplay between sacraments and Scripture should surprise us. The sacraments are the **Word made visible**. But the sacraments are the **administration of the Word**, not the **Word** itself. Now, I know a Christian

tics is one of those worldly contagions that should be avoided. So, any concern for the application of law to society was not on the agenda of historical Anabaptism. On the other hand, some forms of Anabaptism have wanted radically to expurgate society of all sin. These Anabaptists have often been quite radical. My friend was moving toward the former.

normally learns about the sacraments from the Bible, but sometimes the process of interpretation goes from sacrament to Scripture, like the case of **Balthasar**. Why?

What we experience in the sacrament has great influence over how the Bible is understood. I mean that one encounters everything about a doctrinal view – meaning, mode, recipients – at his own baptism or the baptism of others. Thus, an interpretation of the Bible is imported to the baptismal candidate through the experience of baptism. Is this bad? Not necessarily. God designed the Word made visible to reinforce His Word made verbal. The problem comes, however, when what we see and experience in baptism, or anything for that matter, is not consistent with Scripture. Then a person is forced to work upstream against his experiences.

Word Before Any Other Words: Ancient or Modern

The Bible is the final authority on any subject and particularly the subject of baptism. Scripture sets its own standards and ought not be subjected to humanistic **canons of persuasion**. It may be as simple as requiring chapter and verse before we will consider a matter Scriptural. Or, the canon may be as sophisticated as laws of human logic so that a matter is not Biblical unless it complies with Aristotle. In either case, however, these canons are guidelines **outside** the Bible to which it is forced to conform before we believe a certain doctrine is correct.

For example, some studies of baptism are notorious for going to **non-canonical** uses of the Greek word for “baptize” to try to establish that the word is used to mean immerse. Yet, the Bible is below no other book, and is its own interpreter. In the case of mode, the Bible must show the proper mode from its own internal use of the term, “baptize,” if one wants to maintain Scripture as the final authority.

Another example of humanistic canons of persuasion concerns the origin of the early Anabaptists. The original Anabaptists began to question whether the New Testament commanded and showed the practice of infant baptism. Concluding that the New Testament never commanded or practiced infant baptism, second baptism, so-called “believer’s” baptism was received.

Notice that implicit in this approach is the subjection of the Bible to canons of persuasion. The early Anabaptists, whether self-conscious of their approach or not, required the Bible to conform to their presupposition that the New Testament must explicitly command or mention as a practice something before it becomes binding.

But where does the Bible teach that we should only do what is explicitly commanded or mentioned in the New Testament? This kind of approach quickly runs the interpreter into trouble. Sometimes the Bible commands something like footwashing, but the practice is limited to the Apostles because of the absence of continued practice in the Church. At other times, practices that are not commanded but consistently observed, like worship on Sunday, the first day of the week, are viewed as binding.

But a clear example of the fallacy of only requiring what the New Testament commands or mentions as practiced is the New Testament’s failure to state that **women can take communion**. The New Testament nowhere commands or explicitly describes female participation in the Lord’s Supper. Here is an important point. Regarding the food-sacrament of Scripture we find only general designation of who can take the sacrament. God expects us to reason from the food-sacrament of the Old Testament which clearly admitted the whole family to the table of the peace offering and the table of Passover. The whole Bible is required, therefore, to determine the recipients of the

Lord’s Supper.

Anabaptist theology subtly extends the mind set of the food-sacrament of the Old Testament to the women of the New Testament. To my knowledge, no Anabaptists denied the Lord’s Supper to their wives on the same basis they refused the first sacrament to their children. Why the inconsistency? I am not sure I can answer that question to anyone’s satisfaction, but I think the Church must reason from Old to New Testament in determining the recipients if it wants to allow women to the Table.

I call these Anabaptist presuppositions illustrations of **humanistic** canons because they exist in the mind of man apart from Scripture. They are subtle, but the Bible, and particularly the whole Bible, sets its own rules of interpretation. Whatever we say, we should conclude that the Word comes before all other words, ancient or modern.

History Before Response

Up to this point, I have talked about the ramifications of **word before sacrament**. But **history** also precedes sacrament because historical prologue in the covenant is prior to the reception of the covenant. In other words, **history is before response**.

Failure to comprehend this point results in **Barthianism**. Karl Barth, the early 20th century European Reformed theologian, innovated a system of hermeneutics and the sacraments that revolutionized Reformational thought. He argued that **the Word of God did not become the Word of God until it entered one’s experience**. He placed response before history and the Word of God; he completely reversed the covenantal order. One of the results of this error was the notion that the Old Testament is not applicable because it is culturally irrelevant. It is a matter of experience taking precedence over history. Of course, the New Testament would also be culturally irrelevant on this basis.

I recently spoke to a doctoral student at the leading Dispensationalist graduate school. Dispensationalists believe that the Old Testament is for the Jewish people only. To advocate its relevance for the Gentile violates a fundamental separation between the Jewish and Gentile peoples of God. He was somewhat shocked when I asked him how theo-psychologists⁴ and Barthians would differ from his approach to the Old Testament. I do not think he had ever considered the point.

To clarify, I said, “Let’s assume that you’re a Dispensational pastor asked to preach through the Book of Deuteronomy. How would you apply it to your congregation?” He said, “I personally would tell them this ethic applies in the Millennium, but [he conceded] some of my associates would want to psychologize the text.” I pursued him with the question, “why would your associates tend to do that?” He really did not know.

I explained to him the dynamics of the situation. If you are a Dispensational pastor, daring to preach through the Old Testament, you are faced with a real dilemma. Your theology dictates that the Old Testament has no direct relevance to the New Testament Christian. Yet, something inside of you says your series on the Book of Deuteronomy is not going to be very effective if you have to tell the congregation every week, “Here’s an interesting law, but it doesn’t apply.” So, what does our pastor do?

If he wants to apply the text, he will have to do one or all of the following. He will have to typologize, that is, everything becomes a type (picture) of something to come in the New Testament. Read the early Dispensationalists, – and you will see that this was almost the exclusive approach. The problem: this system works for some parts of

4. This term represents a movement which wants to “psychologize” the Bible.

the Old Testament, but it will not work with the **laws** of the Old Testament. Typologizing still conveniently removes the practical significance of the most relevant part of the Old Testament.

Two, if the pastor does not want to typologize, he can psychologize the text. Reminds me of a series, by a pastor of this persuasion, called, "The Emotional Hang-ups of Moses." The pastor took pop psychology and foisted it on the Bible text to make it relevant.

Three, if these seem unsatisfactory there is one last option. The pastor can spiritualize the text. At its best this approach looks for an abiding principle out of the Old Testament. Sounds good until one asks, "What's the source for determining the abiding principles?" So, spiritualizing ends up being based on what seems relevant to the interpreter. He selects what has taken meaning in his life. And, here one comes dangerously close to Barth's axiom that the Word of God becomes the Word of God when it takes meaning in one's life.

Keep in mind that the pastor is hypothetical, but the doctoral student to whom I was describing the problem was real. His response was just as real when I pointed out to him that the first two approaches to the Old Testament text are not much different from the third. And the third was the approach of Barthianism and neo-orthodoxy.

The New Testamentalism of Dispensationalism, therefore, can easily end up running into the neo-orthodoxy of Barthianism on the question, "how do we apply the Old Testament to the New Testament Christian?"

Creation Before Redemption

There is another important application of history before sacrament. If history precedes sacramental response, then the order of history should control one's approach to the sacraments. The order of history is creation to redemption, Old Testament to New Testament. Here we are once again reminded of one of Barth's main fallacies.

Once Barth was asked if he believed in creation. He assured the questioner that he did indeed. The interrogator pressed another question. This time he asked Barth when he thought the creation occurred. Barth immediately responded that the creation took place in **A.D. 33**. Seems rather strange, but Barth knew precisely what he was saying and the implications of his statement.

As Van Til, the greatest critic of Barth, properly analyzed, **Barth put redemption before creation**. This theological twist meant that the Word became the Word when it came to man (the Incarnation), or was experienced by man. This meant that prior to the incarnation there was no historical Word from God. The written Word was not authoritative until it became flesh and blood. Barth extended this concept to modern man by saying **experience** made the Bible authoritative, and this made the question of inerrancy irrelevant – historically and personally. Thus, for the Western Church, Barth rang the death bell on the doctrine of the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture.

Barth also knew the significance of his hermeneutic – redemption before creation, New Testament before Old Testament – for the sacrament of baptism. Although Barth came from a reformed, covenantal background, he was extremely critical of infant baptism – to the point of writing a very influential work on the subject. Why was Barth so antagonistic to infant baptism?

verting

By placing redemption prior to creation, the New Testament became the foundation of the Old Testament. Without the Old Testament as a backdrop to the New, it was natural for Barth to do away with any concept of historical and generational continuity. This destroyed the concept of

covenant. In the Old Testament, God saved by family units. Without the Old Testament backdrop, however, Barth could read some type of hyper-individualism into the text of the New Testament. No longer did God deal with the **covenantal unit**; the movement of the Bible was from the corporate to the individual. The place of infants in the covenant disappeared through a doctrine of radical dynamism – inverting conversion experience over the covenant – which was no different from that espoused by the original Anabaptists.

If we begin with the Bible, we must let all of the Word of God speak to man. What right do we have to determine how God must express Himself before we obey? All of God's Word is commandment. Regardless of the hermeneutical problems we think this creates for us, we must begin here. Besides, as one old minister once said, "if you think there is a contradiction in the Bible, just keep reading. The problem will work itself out." Taken in its continuity, the Bible does not contradict itself. Whatever is perceived to be internally conflicting is only perception not reality.

Barth, however, sought to resolve all of the apparent conflicts of Revelation with his infamous system. By making the New Testament normative, the Old Testament became practically irrelevant. Certainly those original Anabaptists and many of their successors were better than this delinquent theology. But the practical bottom line was a primacy of the New Testament doctrine which wrecked the Christian Faith's doctrines of Scripture and ethics. The fact is that four-fifths of the Bible is in the Old Testament. It seems clear that if the New Covenant were a new, New Covenant and not just a New-Old-Covenant, then God would have needed to reveal much more in Scripture. The doing away of the Old Testament, as the Baptist hermeneutic dictates, creates insufferable ethical issues. For starters, what does one do about sins such as bestiality and the laws of consanguinity?⁵

The relationship between the doctrine of Scripture and ethics was driven home to me early in my Seminary career. I was taking an introductory course to the Old Testament. The professor, probably the most brilliant ever to have graduated from and to have taught at this seminary, was completing a series of lectures which defended the integrity of the text. He was attempting to argue internally from the Bible to establish that every jot and title were inspired.

The passage he chose to make his point was Matthew 5:17ff., which reads, "Do not think that I came to abolish the law or the prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill. For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law, until all is accomplished." After reading the passage, there was a pause. Then he said, "this passage actually proves something else which causes Dispensationalists some difficulty.⁶ But that subject is not within the scope of this course. At the moment, we only want to note that every jot and tittle of Scripture are inspired."

What did he mean? I did not see the significance of what he was saying until two years later. First of all, to be consistent, the Baptist/Dispensational hermeneutic, New Testament before Old, actually does away with more than the Old Testament. Much of the relevancy of the New Testament disappears with the Old. The Gospels come before the Cross and at the close of the Old Testament, so they

⁵ It should be kept in mind that, strictly speaking, incest was the problem at Corinth (1 Cor. 5). The violation of the Old Testament laws of consanguinity is not referred to.

⁶ This professor has since become a covenant theologian. It was a great loss to the seminary I am referring to.

are not relevant. The Book of Acts is considered transitional unless the miraculous gifts are considered normative, and most Baptists and Dispensationalists do not want this, so the Book of Acts is out. The Book of Revelation concerns the future. Finally, some of the Epistles were written to the Jews, and this leaves us with only a few of the Epistles, Pauline, Pastoral, and Johanne, being truly normative for gentile Christians.

This brings us back to the discussion of Barth. In the early 1960s, Cornelius Van Til was asked to come and lecture on Barthianism at one of the leading Dispensational seminaries. The seminary was having a very difficult time combating the teachings of Barth. Consequently, many of the students were running head long into neo-orthodoxy. Why should this fundamentalist seminary be forced to call in a covenant theologian to halt a heresy which attacks the integrity of Scripture – the very thing this fundamentalist seminary was created for? The answer is fairly simple, and it is found in my professor's comments. One cannot use a passage which establishes the continuity of Old Testament Law to prove the plenary inspiration of Scripture without simultaneously arguing both. In other words, throw out the Law of the Old Testament and the inspiration of the Old and/or New Testaments will not stand.

Another way of looking at this point appears in an objection I raised to one of my professors. If one appeals to the Words of Jesus to create a hermeneutic, and these words are not normative for a Church age Christian, how do we maintain a doctrine of inerrancy? Evidently, many other Dispensationalists have found that question difficult to answer, judging by the number of them who have fled into the neo-orthodoxy of Barth. It is the very point we have been attempting to make. Barth inverted the Old and New Testaments, and began creation at Redemption. Using the Anabaptists' presupposition of New Testamentalism, he put New Testament before Old Testament in priority.

Inverting the Testaments of Scripture leads to an even more basic problem concerning creation. If one places priority on the New Testament, how does he argue with integrity for Biblical creation? After all, his hermeneutical concerns have removed, as ethically normative, the very Old Testament which teaches the creation account. Most fun-

of the sacrament believe in creation. But Barth and the neo-orthodox would criticize them for being inconsistent on this point. For, Barth used the same primacy of the New Testament to argue for a **chaos to creation** view of history. Let us return to the conversation where Barth said creation happened at the Incarnation.

When Barth put creation on top of redemption, he created a paradigm that accommodated evolutionary presuppositions. The Church had been waiting for this for one hundred years. The mind of Western man was convinced of evolution, but the Church had not come up with a system which was logically consistent with Darwinism. What was it about Barth's system that resolved the tension? And how was it evolutionary to make creation run on the model of redemption?

Redemption is a **death-to-life** concept. By interpreting creation as death-to-life, matter becomes **pre-existent**; chaos is necessary to life; original creation is not created good; primitive (chaotic) is pure; and **life originates in the chaotic**. All of these points feed the basic revolutionary theology of the 20th century, and all need to be addressed. But only the last development of Barth's death-to-life view of creation – **life originates in the chaotic** – touches on our concerns.

Evolution believes that life comes from chaos. Specifically, chaos is the **sea**. Evolutionists speak of one-celled life spontaneously irrupting in time, and evolving into lower life forms – all, in the sea. Thus, the pre-eminent symbol for the origin of life and chaos is the sea. And among the religions of the world this symbol usually appears somewhere,

Christianity, however, is unique. Man, strictly speaking, did not come from the sea, nor did he evolve from a lower life-form from the sea. Although land rises out of the water (Gen. 1), man was made out of dust. After the fall of man, dust as well as the sea become definite images of death. Those being covered over by the sea are considered under the judgment of God. But creation does not come before **Word**. Thus, we conclude where we began. The order of the covenant should inform our theology of sacraments. Word and history come before man's response in the sacrament of baptism, or communion for that matter. But the latter is a subject for another newsletter.