

# COVENANT RENEWAL

Genesis 1:26-28

Matthew 28:18-20

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## OATH AND SYMBOL

### (Transcendence)

If any man's wife goes astray and is unfaithful to him, and a man has intercourse with her and it is hidden from the eyes of her husband and she is undetected, although she has defiled herself, and there is no witness against her and she has not been caught in the act, if a spirit of jealousy comes over him and he is jealous of his wife when she has not defiled herself,

### (Hierarchy)

The man shall then bring his wife to the priest, and shall bring as an offering for her one-tenth of an ephah of barley meal; he shall not pour oil on it, nor put frankincense on it, for it is a grain offering of memorial, a reminder of iniquity.

### (Ethics)

Then the priest shall bring her near and have her stand before the Lord, and the priest shall take holy water in an earthenware vessel; and he shall take some dust that is on the floor of the tabernacle and put it into the water. The priest shall then have the woman stand before the Lord and let the hair of the woman's head go loose, and place the grain offering of jealousy, and in the hand of the priest is to be the water of bitterness that brings a curse.

### (Oath)

And the priest shall have her take an oath and shall say to the woman,

"If you, however, have gone astray, being under the authority of your husband, and if you have defiled yourself and a man other than your husband has had intercourse with you" "the Lord make you a curse and an oath among your people by the Lord's making your thigh waste away and your abdomen swell; and this water that brings a curse shall go into your stomach, and make your abdomen swell and your thigh waste away."

And the woman shall say, "Amen, Amen."

### (Succession)

The priest shall then write these curses on a scroll, and he shall wash them off into the water of bitterness. When he has made her drink the water, then shall come about, if she has defiled herself and has been unfaithful to her husband, that the water which brings a curse shall go into her and cause bitterness, and her abdomen will swell and her thigh will waste away, and the woman will become a curse among her people. But if the woman has not defiled herself and is clean, she will then be free and conceive children.

This is the law of jealousy (Nu. 5:12-31).

ratify commitment because they combine word and sign. They marry the verbal and visual. They fuse voice and action. They join message and art. They merge speech and ritual.

When combined, powerful worldviews appear. Put images with words and words then stick in the mind. Symbols provoke confession, and individuals as well as groups are captured.<sup>1</sup> The hold of the two together is truly gripping. But why is the combination of oath and symbol so effective?

The power of oath and symbol can only really be understood through the Biblical covenant. They bring a person under **covenantal judgment**. The passage above is a striking example. It falls in the fourth section of the Pentateuch, itself the foundational covenant of the Bible. Genesis emphasizes the transcendence of God by recording the creation of the world from nothing. Exodus recounts the passage from one hierarchy (Egyptian) to the new Mosaic structure (Exodus 18). Leviticus describes the ethical boundary to be maintained between Israel and Gentile. Numbers presents Israel's preparation for conquest of the Promised Land through a series of judgments by oath: numberings of the nation. Deuteronomy tells of Moses' transfer (succession) of power to the new captain, Joshua.

Numbers unquestionably says more about the process of covenant ratification and renewal than any other book. Unique situations describe how **judgment** comes by oath and symbol. Even the central passage on vows, a form of oath-taking, is placed in this book (Numbers 30). The passage at the beginning of this newsletter, however, is an important example of how oath and symbol bring a person into a process of covenantal judgment.

### The Ordeal of Jealousy

Numbers 5 begins with the standard introductory covenant formula: "Then the Lord spoke to Moses" (Numbers 5:1). Then, the text continues by stating the problem. A man becomes jealous, suspecting his wife of the covenant-breaking act of adultery. He displays an immanent attribute of God, jealousy. As a representative of the Lord, he reflects a characteristic of God that points to a problem that effects the camp of Israel. If his wife is guilty and she is not punished, the whole nation can become corrupt. The ordeal of jealousy is therefore a process of oath and symbol to protect God's image.

1. Paul Johnson,

York: Harper and Row, 1983),

pp. 112-117. He argues that the German people have been an artistic race. They have always been dominated by a cohesive worldview that puts the

5:15)

The suspecting husband brings his wife to the priest. He cannot test his own wife. **He must take her to a lawfully constituted authority. He carries the meal offering sacrifice.** What is it? The **meal offering** was the fourth sacrifice in the sacrificial process. Offering sacrifices was **covenantal**, a covenant renewing procedure. First, a person brought a compensation or restitution offering. Second, he made a purification offering. Third, he totally dedicated his life by the whole-burnt offering. Fourth, he specifically offered his work through the **meal or grain offering. Finally, he and his family had a meal with the priest, called a peace offering.**

Numbers 5 refers to the **meal offering**. The woman's calling was in question because she was allegedly violating her **marriage** covenant, her status in life. So the meal offering was "brought, but it was without symbols of blessing: oil and frankincense are symbols of ordination for a particular call.

5:16-18)

The priest approaches the accused in a lawful manner. She is innocent until proven guilty. The very fact that he follows through on the process of judgment, however, is compliance with the law of God; it is an ethical means of determining guilt.

Another observation about the ethical nature of this first step is that he takes the woman in question to the tabernacle. She is escorted into the outer court but across the threshold of the door. This is significant. She is suspected of having violated the **covenantal** boundary of marriage. She has allegedly broken the law of God. To test her, she is led across the spatial boundary of God's presence, what the ethical boundary of the law of God is supposed to guard!

Confirmation of this idea is found in the requirement of "letting loose" the woman's hair (Numbers 5:18). Gordon Wenham says in his excellent commentary on Numbers,

The unbinding of the woman's hair is another hint that she was viewed as unclean. "Lepers" had to let their hair hang loose as a mark of their uncleanness (Lv. 13:45) whereas priests, forbidden to contract pollution through touching the dead, had to refrain from untying their hair even in mourning (Lv. 10:6; 21:10-11).<sup>2</sup>

The priest recites an oath and she responds with "amen." This was a typical self-vaedictory form of oath taking. It meant, "May this curse fall on me if I am lying."

5:23-31)

If the woman is guilty, her "Thigh falls." What does this mean? in some sense it means she or her seed are disinherited. The phrase could be translated "loins abort." So, a tempting interpretation is that the guilty woman is actually pregnant by another man. God's judgment kills the seed she carries. The New favors this interpretation. It is safer, however, simply to say that a physical ailment was the manifestation of the curse, and the woman's seed was cut off.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, the **covenantal** process of judgment involved oath and symbol. We can say that oath and symbol together produce a judgment process. We will not always see such a dramatic result, but we will see judgment. This leads to

Gordon Wenham, (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 1981), p.

*Ibid.*, pp. Wenham lists several different ways of interpreting the *that the on the is sh-*

some important applications

### Judgment: An Inescapable Message

Judgment is central to the message of Christianity. Within the last twenty-five years "creation" has been made an issue again. Through the struggle over Creationism, we have seen that non-Christians are sometimes more self-conscious of the issues than Christians. One of those issues is **judgment**. Not only is creation at stake, but the issue of judgment also hangs on this conflict. Reason: **The power to create is the power to destroy.** If God creates then He destroys. Pull down the doctrine of creation, and the doctrine of judgment falls with it. Of course the non-Christian wants to suppress this belief in creation because every time the issue comes up, he is reminded that some day he will meet God as **Judge**.

There is more. If on the other hand, man can deceive himself into thinking that he creates and God is a part of his creation, then **he** has the ultimate power to destroy. Since man's and Satan's initial sin was to try to be God, both liked the thought of having the power to destroy. This has been demonstrated in history time and **again**.

World War II Germany is an example. Nietzsche's philosophy of a "superman" and "super-race" undergirded the horrors committed during this time. Hitler merely tried to implement what Germany had been reading and studying for almost a century. The application of Nietzsche was perverse, and perverted destruction grew out of the Third Reich's assumption of deity. The one who has the power, or assumes the power, to create, also assumes the power to destroy.

One of the great paradox's of Christianity is that it has brought more life to the world than anything else. Why do I say it is a paradox? Christianity's primary message is that of judgment. By preaching death, life results. So, the message of judgment leads to the preservation of life. When men face the fact that they are not God, and do not have the power to destroy at their own choosing, life gets to live. Until they face God's Judgment, they will continue to die and kill everything around them.

Judgment is very much a part of the message of Christianity. Alexander Schmemmann points out another way we can see the centrality of judgment. He contrasts the "help" approach of all other religions to the "death" approach of Christianity.

Secularism is a religion because it has a faith, it has its own eschatology and its own ethics. And it "works" and it "helps." Quite frankly, if "help" were the criterion, one would have to admit that life-centered secularism "helps" actually more than religion.

To compete with it, religion has to present itself as "adjustment to life," "counseling," "enrichment," it has to be publicized in subways and buses as a valuable addition to "your friendly bank" and all other "friendly dealers": try it, it "helps"! And the religious success of secularism is so great that it leads some Christian theologians to "give up" the very category of "transcendence," or in much simpler words, the very idea of "God."

This is the price we must pay if we want to be "understood" and "accepted" by modern man, proclaim the Gnostics of the twentieth century.

But it is here that we reach the heart of the matter, For Christianity, "help" is not the criterion. Truth is the criterion. The purpose of Christianity is not to help people by reconciling them with death, but to reveal the Truth about life and death in order that people may be saved by this Truth.<sup>4</sup>

And what does Christianity proclaim **death to be?** **Death** is meeting God's judgment. In our day and time, we see that certain ministers are very self-conscious about getting away from this message. Robert Schuller has argued in a recent book that the Reformation's message was sin and death. But he believes that he has begun a "new" reformation. Its message is the **wonder** of man. It is positive, a message of "help."<sup>5</sup> Is it any wonder he so easily fills his Church? But this message is just cheap psychological "dope" that is not really culture transforming. Indeed, it is the worst kind of Novocain that deadens man to the pain of his own spiritual death.

### Judgment to Life

Life comes through judgment, not around it, in the Bible. One of the main symbols that conveys this message is water. From the very beginning, God uses water to destroy His own covenant land and people. Through this death, however, comes new life, a new people, and a new land.

The Flood. God was so angry with the world that He was going to destroy it. Noah intervened (Gen. 6:8), and persuaded God to cleanse the earth and start all over with a new creation. Water was used. It ran over and mixed with the land to purify it. Since the land is the covenant, mixing water and the land is the same as mixing water and the covenant.

Mt. Sinai. The Flood is not the only place we can see this mixing of water and covenant. After the newly organized nation of Israel left Egypt, rebellion broke out. Aaron helped the people to build a golden calf to worship God. It happened while Moses was receiving the law. God became extremely "jealous" because His people were adulterating. Moses intervened, but his solution was rather curious.

And it came about, as soon as Moses came near the camp, that he saw the calf and the dancing; and Moses' anger burned, and he threw the tablets from his hands and shattered them at the foot of the mountain.

And he took the calf which they had made and burned it with fire, and ground it to powder, and scattered it over the surface of the water, and made the sons of Israel drink it (Ex. 32:19-20).

The process is similar to what we saw above. The law was the covenant. The "powder" (dust) to which the golden calf was reduced was a symbol of the people's sin. Both were ~~thrown in a brook of water that ran at the base of the~~ mountain (Deut. 9:21 cf. Ex. 32:19). God's covenant met judgment in the water.

This judgment by water gives background to the meaning of baptism. We should remember that Christ was the embodiment of the Covenant. He said His blood was the covenant itself (Matt. 26:28). So, when, Christ died, the covenant died with Him, and His death was baptism (Mk. 10:38). The covenant was swallowed up by water judgment, not a real but symbolic kind of water. Nevertheless, the death was real. So, baptism is a judgement-to-life process. One has to die before he can be made alive.

10 emphasize this point, one minister baptizes with the phrase, "I kill you in the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit." His emphasis is dramatic and well-taken. Baptism is a killing process because the one who is baptized legally dies, and officially receives a new name, Christian, since he has been resurrected.

How can he be declared dead when he has not physically died? Remember, law determines reality. Even in our

society, a person must be "pronounced" dead by a coroner before anything can be done with the body. Again we see that the legal is the basis of the physical. So it is in baptism. The candidate legally and officially dies.

The way to life is through judgment. As a matter of fact, there is no way to have any kind of life apart from death and judgment. This is a dominant theme in the Christian faith. It is called a "judicial" system of theology or worldview.

It manifests itself in every aspect of judgment: discipline, punishment, self-denial, etc. So, the Christian knows that the way to bring his children to life is through a process of continual judgment and discipline. He must spank his children and punish them for wrong doing. A Christian believes that criminals must be punished and pay appropriate restitution. If they don't, then the innocent are punished, justice is perverted, and society dies. The Christian also knows that there must be discipline in his Church. Like Paul, he understands that "a little leaven leavens a whole lump" (1 Cor. 5). If the unrepentant remain in the Church, she will die and become a synagogue of Satan.

And these **points are** merely implications of the principle that life comes, and can only come through a judgment process. A Christian ultimately knows this way to life because Christ established it at the Cross. If Christ had to die to save the world, one must join in His death if he wants to have life. The way to join Christ in this death is baptism, and a Christian begins his whole life on this principle.

Here is why Christians, given the fact they believe this judicial kind of theology, make the best soldiers, parents, farmers, rulers and any successful calling. All of these positions, any successful position, demand the exercise of judgment and discipline. Look at anyone who is successful and these abilities will be found. Christians are not afraid of them because they know that life can come no other way. They know how to pay the price, suffer, and even die because they entered the Christian life on the basis of Christ's suffering and death.

Baptism covenantally kills and it can also resurrect. But it seems from a study of Scripture, that both sacraments are tied together by the oath and symbol point of the covenant. In the ordeal of jealousy, the accused woman drank the covenant: the mixture of water and food.

### The Christian Ordeal of Jealousy

The Apostle Paul says the death of Christ "blots out our sins" (Col. 2:13-14). The LXX (Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament) uses the same Greek word for "blotting out" in Numbers 5:23. The ordeal of jealousy exonerated an innocent woman. The Cross of Christ forgives the guilty. But the connection pulls the ordeal of jealousy concept into the New Covenant. And, since the sacraments are part of one's participation in Christ's death, the connections are obvious.

Christian baptism introduces one into an ordeal of jealousy. The water of the covenant is placed on the recipient. This water expresses Christ's death which is called a baptism (Mk. 10:38). Like the Old Covenant believer, he receives purification and the covenant in one act. Unlike the Old Covenant believer, he finds true and complete redemption. The New Covenant is with Christ, and not just the land, since Christ replaces the "ground."

The second sacrament of communion completes the picture. The Lord's Supper symbolizes eating Christ's body. One ingests what he has been baptized with. If he eats Jesus in an unlawful manner, the sacraments become an ordeal of jealousy. God is jealous because He is not being communed with. And, He begins a process of immediate

judgment that results in sickness and even death (1 Cor.11:33-34).

### Organic Unity of the Sacraments

**Water** is a means of judgment. As we have seen, water baptism extends this idea. It involves the second sacrament of communion. Water judges, but it does so through an ordeal of jealousy that includes communion, the actual ingestion of the covenantal waters of Christ's death. So, God is still a jealous God (1 Cor.10:22). In fact, He is more jealous than ever before because His only Begotten Son passed through the waters of judgment. Any act against His baptism into and communion with death brings down God's judgment.

The two sacraments are inseparable. They are not to be divided. This unity means baptism is a process of judgment, not necessarily unto death, nevertheless it is a judgment. No specific judgment statement is attached to baptism the way it is to communion (1 Cor. 11 :23ff.). There doesn't have to be. Baptism is so essentially judgment that nothing else needs to be said. Any denial of Christ brings down judgment, the judgment that Christ's ordeal of jealousy turned away.

Too often, baptism is treated lightly. Communion is the important sacrament, and baptism is secondary. The Bible does not convey such an idea. Baptism is also called a baptism of fire (Matt. 3:11). When one violates what baptism signifies and seals, God lights the water (Dan. 7:10ff.). It becomes a river of fire that consumes the dead branch (Jn.15:6). Baptism carries just as much weight as communion because it is supposed to be in continuity with it.

The Bible never conceives of a situation where one sacrament is received to the exclusion of the other. Once declared pure at baptism, one is to sit down at God's Table and eat with Him. Communion is not optional. Moses commanded the children of Israel to drink the waters (Ex. 32:20). Paul makes a similar commandment to the Corinthians. So, abstinence from either sacrament is sinful.

### Paedocommunion

This discussion about organic unity suggests an ancient practice, infant (*paedo*) or young child communion. One of the issues the ancient Church, East and West, agreed upon even when it differed over the Trinity, was the issue of infant communion. There is no question that both agreed that infants and young children should be allowed to commune after being baptized.<sup>6</sup> To this day, the Orthodox (Eastern) Church still practices infant communion.

The doctrine of transubstantiation in the West drove out infant communion. If the sacrament really changes into the body and blood of Jesus, it is possible to "spill" Him on the floor. Children are quite prone to commit such an unpardonable sin if transubstantiation is true. So, superstition drove out the practice.

It is interesting that most of the Reformers did not want to return to the paedocommunion. Instead, they sided with the Roman Catholic position formulated at Trent.<sup>7</sup> Although

there is much debate over the ones who wanted to reinstitute the practice (John Calvin etc.), some, like the **Hussites** and Jeremy Taylor in England wanted to reform all the way back. The **Hussites** did restore the practice. And the father of Presbyterianism, Thomas Cartwright, argued on the basis of organic unity that paedocommunion was the correct Biblical view.

Organic unity is the key. I believe it was so clear to the ancient Church that the issue of paedocommunion was virtually undisputed until the "transubstantiation" controversies of the 11th and 12th centuries. Paul makes the point in one passage.

Our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea;

and all drank from the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; the rock was Christ (1 Cor. 10:1-3).

They were baptized, and *all* ate the Old Testament sacrament. The Apostle John joins with Paul in saying that the manna was Christ (Jn.6:31ff.). *All* would have to include infants and young children. To deny paedocommunion is to deny that infants and young children can have Christ. And, I must also add that to deny all ate, also denies that all Here has been the "Achilles" heel of Reformed theology.

But it might be noted that Paul seems to place certain restrictions on children. He says that "self-examination" and "discernment of the body" should precede any participation (1 Cor. 11 :28-29). Infants and young children clearly cannot perform these duties. So, some would argue that they should not be permitted to commune until they can do them. But this chapter is not addressed to the question of children communing. It concerns the avoidance of the sacrament because of drunkenness. If baptized children are having a problem with drunkenness, then this passage has more direct bearing on their situation.

Furthermore, the commands "examine" and "discern" should be understood in terms. Paul uses the word "examine" to "mean "demonstrate" or "prove" covenantal faithfulness (1 Cor.3:13; II Cor.8:8; Gal.6:4). The obvious place one begins to prove covenantal loyalty is Communion ought to be the privilege of anyone who has not denied his baptism. Certainly infants and young children who are baptized have "demonstrated" themselves.

As to the command to "discern" the body, it too falls into the same **judicial context** of language. The word actually means to "distinguish" (1 Cor. 4:7). The body is definitively distinguished at baptism. Furthermore, the "body" to be distinguished is the *politic*, not the mystical body of the Lord. In either case, baptism is the definitive place where political or mystical discernment is declared.

Too often, the Church has opted for rational (knowledge) or irrational (experience) standards. A person cannot commune until he knows a catechism or has had a conversion experience. But what about the young child, claimed by God at baptism, and who likes Bible stories and prayer? Should he not be allowed to "eat of the same spiritual rock?" On the basis of the organic unity of the sacraments, I think the answer is "**yes**."<sup>8</sup>

Walker, History *the Christian*  
p. 274, Joseph Bingham,  
IV, Parag.7.

York: Scribners, 1919),  
*Church*, Book XV, Chap.

7. History of *and* History *the*  
Trent York: Washington Square Press, 1957), p. 220.

8. For a much more elaborate discussion of this important subject, see two papers by James Jordan, Theses of *Paedocommunion*, and one by me, *Paedocommunion*.