

Genesis 1:26-28

# COVENANT RENEWAL

Matthew 28:18-20

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## A TRACT ON THE COVENANT

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For several months I've received a gentle nudge from many of you to write a **tract** on the covenant. One lady even said to me on the phone, "I'm really interested in the covenant but I don't have time for a **study**." Don't you have something on the covenant at a **K-4** level [Four-year-old kindergarten]."

So, this **Covenant Renewal** is designed to show you how to present the covenant at an introductory level. **Warning: This tract is not simply a rehash; it uniquely shows how each point of the covenant develops a truth about the Holy Trinity.** Feel free to copy it and pass it around to friends. Then don't feel so free and make a donation to I.C.E. Maybe I.C.E. will turn it into a small book-let some day.

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### The Covenant

The Biblical concept of **covenant** touches all of our lives in one form or another, whether we realize it or not. When people marry, they take vows before witnesses and formalize their relationship; and they usually even exchange rings as a sign or "token" of their union. These acts are all part of a covenant arrangement.

When countries end wars with each other, they draw up **treaties**, documents specifying the terms of their future relationship. In fact, virtually all the countries of the world are no longer ruled by kings and queens, the only real exception being England. Most nations are run by **constitutions**, written documents usually stipulating the nature of the relationship among the people. The origin of both of these documents goes all the way back to the Biblical covenant.

When we salute the national flag or say the "Pledge of Allegiance," we are taking an oath. And when we go to church and take communion, say a creed or sing a hymn, we are also engaging in some form of oath-renewal, another feature of the Biblical covenant.

Then we also find scaled-down-forms of covenants called **contracts**. Man can hardly do anything without some kind of contract, whether it involves buying a house, a car, or signing a professional athlete to a **multi-year**-contract.

We can even discover the influence of the Biblical covenant every time we charge something at the store. We sign a little card with **double and triple copies**, forming a double and triple **witness** to the charge. This is a principle consistent with the Biblical injunction never to prosecute against someone unless there are "two or more witnesses."

No matter where we look, **covenant** is all around us. It appears in business, government, marriage and church. Actually, one would be hard pressed to avoid the covenant. and its various forms, in any **phase** of life. This is

why it is so **important** to understand the covenant; there's **hardly anything** we do or don't do that is not in some sense covenantal. You might say that the **covenant** is central to **life**. **Yet, the covenant is central to life because it is central to the Bible.**

### The Covenant and the Bible

Look at it this way. Every book has major themes. In the Bible, **covenant** is the most central theme apart from God Himself. Yet, even God divides Scripture into **Old** (First) covenant and New covenant, making **covenant** the one common denominator between the beginning and end of Holy Writ (Hebrews 8:13; Luke 22:20).

More importantly, however, God uses the word **covenant** to describe all the relationships of Scripture: His relationship to Himself, His creation, and relationships among His creation: Family, Church and State. Since a covenant is broadly speaking a **relationship, or bond, as we** shall see in greater detail, this explains why covenant is so central to our lives. What is there inside or outside of Scripture that does not involve one of these major relationships? If you said life is a series of relationships, you would actually be saying that life is a series of covenants. And, if you said the Bible is a book about relationships you would really be saying it is a book about covenants. Let's prove the point in the Bible though. Let's establish that the Bible dwells on the covenantal nature of all relationships.

### Biblical Relationships

First, the Godhead – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – functions in a covenant relationship. God the Father **covenants** with God the Son to accomplish His plan of redemption. Isaiah the prophet speaks of God the Father's conversation with the Son, "I am the Lord . . . I will appoint you as a **covenant** to the people, as a light to the nations" (Isaiah 42:6). In the New Testament, Luke tells us about the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. As a prophet of Israel held the baby Jesus, he referred to Christ as a "Light to lighten the Gentiles" (Luke 2:32). This prophecy was fulfilled on the basis of a **covenant** between God the Father and God the Son. The Godhead is covenantal.

As we move from the Godhead to the relationship between God and His creation, therefore, we see the same basis for union. **What is true of the higher is true of the lower.**

Second, Scripture refers to man's relationships as **covenants** because man is made in the **image** of God (Genesis 1:27; cf. Genesis 5:1). He is created by a covenantal God; he must inescapably **image** his Creator, especially in his relationships. If God relates to Himself and man according to a covenant, so man must do the same with his fellow man. Again, **what is true of the Higher must also be true of the lower**, and in this case, **among the lower.**

There are three basic human institutions, all referred to as covenants. The family is formed when a man and woman enter into a sacred covenant (Malachi 2:14). The relationship between civil magistrates and the people is a covenant (2 Samuel 5:3). The church relationship is also a covenant arrangement (Luke 22:20).

So, **covenant** dominates the themes of Scripture. Neither God nor man operate in any other way, making the message of the Bible clear: God creates the world to live in a **covenantal** relationship with Him so as to bring Him glory. Nothing in Scripture can be accurately understood without the covenant. Yet, with an elementary knowledge of this powerful truth, everything takes focus. The thought of Scripture can even be summarized as covenant theology. We have briefly seen why this is so. But now we should ask, "What is a covenant?" Let's be specific. Let's actually define a covenant.

### Definition

**A covenant is a (1) sacred union involving: (2) two representative parties, (3) set boundaries, (4) a solemn oath under the penalty of death, and (5) transfer of some kind of inheritance by adoption.**

We will find these five elements any time the covenant is presented in Scripture. There are many places but perhaps the clearest is the Book of Deuteronomy, being called by Moses the author, a **covenant** (Deuteronomy 29:1, 9). Remarkably, contemporary archaeology has discovered that ancient Near Eastern treaties from the areas around the Biblical world have the same structure as Deuteronomy.

These treaties are called **suzerain** treaties because the head was a great suzerain or lord. He brought lesser nobility, vassals, under his authority by means of a special document, a treaty. He would impose the treaty on the vassal, since to oppose him would have meant **certain** destruction. If resisted, the suzerain would simply send his army and engage in war, enforcing the treaty by legal arrangement or power. Even in the event of armed combat, a treaty document was still drawn up. In either case, the treaty became the basis of the relationship between suzerain and vassal.

The treaty document always began with a preamble, a description of the suzerain. Second, a historical **prologue** provided a history of how the suzerain entered this treaty with the representatives, the vassals. Third, stipulations of the treaty were laid out. Fourth, rewards and punishments were set down for keeping and breaking the treaty. Finally, the treaty outlined the process of its transfer from the suzerain to the next generation in the dynasty; the legitimate heirs were specified.

The Biblical covenant has five similar parts: Transcendence, Hierarchy, Ethics, Oath and Succession. They can easily be remembered. The first letters of each segment form an acrostic: THEOS, the New Testament Greek name for God. These designations are titles for the various parts of the definition of the covenant mentioned above. Since we have such a clear statement of the covenant in Deuteronomy, let's use it as our guide to define it.

### *Transcendence (Deuteronomy 1:1-5)*

The Biblical covenant begins with a brief introduction. In Deuteronomy, Moses specifically notes that "He spoke all that the **Lord** had commanded him" (Deuteronomy 1:3). To do so, he actually uses two Hebrew Names for God, Yahweh **Elohim**, normally translated simply Lord. These two names for God establish the first principle of the covenant.

### *Distinctness*

The Name **Elohim** conveys the transcendence of the

Lord. It refers back to God's Creator Name, His Name used in the first verse of Scripture: "In the beginning God [**Elohim**] created the heavens and earth" (Genesis 1:1). The Name means He is **distinct** in His being from the creature because He existed prior to creation; in other words, matter is not eternal as the Greeks liked to believe, making the created world "God."

In Scripture, the **Creator/creature** distinction means that creation was derived from nothing and not from God. Man is not an extension of God nor is God an extension of man. Man is not called to participate in God, nor God in man. Rather, God **communicates** with man through revelation and man is commanded to **communicate** back to God through prayer. You could say that the conflict between paganism and Biblical religion is one of **participation versus communication**. The nature of the covenant bond relies therefore on communion and communication between two distinct beings. It is not a matter of altering man's nature to mix it with God's, nor is it a question of manipulating God to make Him into something He is not. Man must communicate with God because he is distinct.

So, by using the name **Elohim** Moses declares the origin of the covenant. The Biblical covenant always starts with a declaration of Divine Authorship. It announces the Living God as the Suzerain. Why? He transcends man. He **initiates** the covenant out of His own grace. In the ancient suzerainty covenants, the suzerain would come to a lesser nation and impose his covenant on it. The God of the Bible does no less. He sovereignly draws man into a relationship with Himself apart from any prior work of man; even faith itself is a gift from God (Ephesians 2:8-9). The Biblical covenant is not man-centered. God does not wait for man to respond, nor is the relationship "fifty/fifty" in some **equalitarian** sense. God is not limited by man. The very Name of God used by Moses means, **Lord**.

### *Immanence*

The other Name **Yahweh**, normally describes Him in His covenant **relationship** to man, referring to God as **Personal** and **near**. Because He is distinct (transcendent) in His Being, He can be near in His Person. If He is transcendent in the sense of **distance**, as pagan religion argues, He can never be near and still be transcendent. This is the dilemma of the pagan: How can he have a god who is god, distant, and still have a god who is personal, near? Under paganism, man can't. His false god must give up transcendence, distance, to be near; or, it must give up being personal to be distant. The Biblical God does not have this problem. He is transcendent and personal at the same time. He does not give up His sovereignty to enter a relationship with man!

Furthermore, the Name **Yahweh** means the Person and attributes of God are the basis of the covenant. As one theologian has said, "The that precedes the what." In other words, God does not begin His covenant with a list of things to do. Rather, He starts with a statement about Himself. Methodology is not the focus of the covenant. God is. The way to Him is not a rite of passage. Instead, it is always through His Person and not some other! If the way to Him were through another, then God would be inherently impersonal. The way to Him would be through nature (pantheism), or heaven forbid, there would be no way to Him at all (**Deism**).

So, the covenant begins with God, as the Transcendent, Personal Lord of the covenant. Everything else in the covenant builds on and extends the view of God presented in the first point.

### *Hierarchy (Deuteronomy 1:6-4:49)*

The Biblical covenant follows transcendence with a **sec-**

tion on the **covenantal** principle of representation, what I am calling hierarchy. Moses describes a system of organization within the covenant whereby God manifested His sovereignty. He explains the need for **representatives**, Godly men selected by the people and ordained by Moses. They represented God and man, and therefore had to be approved by both groups. They could not be self-appointed (tyranny), nor could they be appointed by mere popular consent (anarchy). They could not initiate action from the top (bureaucracy). They could only respond to issues and concerns originating from the bottom (representation). In short, everyone in a **covenantal** society was to have a check and balance in the process of expediting the rule of the Lord.

Because these representatives represented the people, they functioned as an appellate system, assuring a plurality system of government; in the government of the covenant, no one group or individual rules. Yet, because these representatives represented God, their decisions were to be taken as from the Lord. To oppose the Lord's anointed (ordained) representatives was to oppose God!

### **The One and the Many**

This principle of representation is a development of something even more basic to the covenant. The first point teaches God's Lordship. The covenant is built on God, specifically, Who He is. The Biblical God is **Triune**, Three Persons yet One God. This is called the doctrine of the **One and the Many**. So the covenant reflects the **One and the Many** doctrine in the second point of the covenant.

God manifests His Lordship, His One and Manyness, in the covenant by working through **representatives**. He does not simply deal with the masses or individuals. To do so would violate His own character. Instead, He perfectly reflects Himself through a **covenantal** representative, one who represents the Lord and the people, and the group as well as the individual.

For example, there are two Adams in the Bible: first and second Adam (Jesus Christ); they are both representatives. God makes a covenant with the first Adam, and through him He enters a covenant with the entire human race (Romans 5:11). Also, God made covenant with Adam's **family** through Adam. From the beginning, the Lord never preferred to work with man as an individual alone, for to be alone is expressly stated as not good (Genesis 2:19).

After creating Adam, the Scripture tells us why. The Lord covenanted with the first Adam and **family** to carry out His will with the world and culture around them. Adam and family were given a mandate to be fruitful and subdue the earth (Genesis 1:26-28). They were given the obvious message that they could not obey God alone; they were to function as a family. God communicated this message through Adam as the representative of the larger unit.

As a **covenantal** representative, however, Adam plunged the world into sin. He sinned when he allowed Eve to become the **covenantal** representative, permitting her to lead him to do what God had forbidden. So Adam's failure brought down two **covenantal** units that he represented: the world and his family.

God sent a second **representative**, Jesus Christ. Like the first Adam, He stood in covenant relation with His family and the whole world (John 3:16). So He too had a family, garden and property around His house. His mission was clear. He had to die in the place of the first Adam and come back from the dead not only to demonstrate that He is God but to finish regaining everything that was lost.

This process of bringing the world back to God is **covenantal**, for the Lord continues to use the representative or **covenantal** principle. **He draws His people to Himself by**

**way of representatives and not just individuals.** In the Book of Acts, He begins bringing whole households into the covenant! How do we know? The first converts are numbered by heads of households (Acts 4:4) and everywhere a family is mentioned, it is referred to as being baptized as a **covenant unit**, such as in the cases of Lydia and the Philippians jailer (Acts 16).

To covenant only with individuals would have violated the pattern laid down at the beginning of Scripture where God the Father made covenant with "male and female" together, not separate. Instead, Jesus renews the cultural mandate of Genesis: "Be fruitful, multiply and subdue the earth" (Genesis 1:28). He does so by means of the Great Commission that literally says in the Greek text: "Disciple the **nations**" (Matthew 28:19), a **covenantal unit** and not simply individuals.

So, the second principle of the covenant is that of **representation**. God deals with **covenantal** units in terms of representatives.

### **Ethics (Deuteronomy 5-26)**

In the second point of the covenant, a specific truth about the Person 'of the Triune Suzerain was extended; for remember, the covenant is nothing more than an expression of the **covenantal** relationship of the Godhead. Point two was the reality of the **One and the Many** in the principle of representation. Now, another truth about the Trinity is applied.

The third section of Deuteronomy outlines the next principle: **ethics**. Moses expounds the Ten Commandments in great detail (Deuteronomy 5-26). He directly connects the attributes of God, on which the covenant is based, with the life of the covenant people; he calls them to reflect His character in their lives. In so doing, he describes an **obedient faith**, or the principle of **faithfulness**. He teaches that faithfulness is more than mere assent to the truths of God; it is **obedience** and **holiness**. He begins the section by talking about the need to be circumcised of heart (Deuteronomy 6), and he spends the next twenty chapters describing how a believer is supposed to keep the commandments of God (see also the summary of the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy 5). He therefore argues for the **equal ultimacy** of faith and obedience.

This principle rests on an extremely foundational truth about the Trinity, the **equal ultimacy** of the Members of Godhead. No one member should take precedence over the other. No one member is more God than the others. ~~No one member is derivative of the others. Each Person~~ of the Godhead is equal in power and authority. Each Person is eternal. Each Person has an equally important function in the plan of redemption. They are equally ultimate.

The doctrine of **equal ultimacy** has ethical ramifications, as Moses clearly shows us in the third section of the covenant. He discusses the precise details of obedient faith, details which space does not permit to expound. But his main point is the relationship between **faith and obedience**.

Faith without obedience is not faithfulness. It is internal with no external manifestation. It is subjective without being objective. It is invisible without being visible. Obedience without faith, on the other hand, is just as wrong. It is salvation by works. It is mere externalism, what Jesus called Phariseism. It is hollow.

Instead, Moses argues for a dynamic faith in response to the Great Suzerain's demands. He calls for faithfulness. Is this any different from the New Testament? No, Moses plants the seeds that later surface in the writings of the New Testament. Jesus says, "He who has My commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves Me" (John 14:21); commandments by the way summarized with the

Mosaic formula in Deuteronomy (Matthew 22:36-40, Deuteronomy 6:5). The Apostle John says, "The one who says, 'I have come to know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him" (1 John 2:4). And then James says, "Show me your faith without works, and I will show you my faith by my works" (James 2:18).

So, the New Testament believer is to obey the Ten Commandments as an outworking of his faith. He too is to be faithful. He is to persevere in his dependence on Christ, that is, if Jesus is his Suzerain.

#### **Oath (Deuteronomy 27-30)**

The fourth segment of the covenant continues to apply the first, the principle of transcendence. It applies the **trinitarian** reality of distinction but no separation. Each member of the Trinity is distinct in function but there is no separation of the Members. They carry out these functions without destroying Their essential unity or Oneness. For example, Jesus becomes man, yet He remains God. He is distinct in function from God the Father, but He is One with the Father, no separation.

The **distinction but no separation principle** is applied in the fourth section of the covenant in the relation between **symbol** and **sanctions**. **Moses describes how the covenant is actually received, or in the case of Israel at this point in their history, how it is renewed. Whether reception or renewal**, however, the basic principle is the same. The members of the covenant take an **oath to God**. **They enter or renew the covenant relationship by publicly receiving God's promise** of blessing and cursing, dual **sanctions**. They pledge loyalty to Yahweh, knowing the consequences of faithfulness as well as unfaithfulness. They verbally take an oath by saying "Amen" to these sanctions of blessing and cursing (Deuteronomy 27).

In addition, the people of God erect a symbol of their oath. They set up a large white stone and write the terms of the covenant on both sides, the Ten Commandments. They are told by Moses that this stone is a covenantal reminder that the sanctions are real. In some sense, God is with this stone. Here is the **distinction but no separation principle**. **God is not the stone, yet He covenantally enforces what the stone symbolizes. Should Israel break the commandments, God will apply the negative sanctions of judgment spelled out in Deuteronomy 28.**

In the New Testament, this principle continues. The covenant is publicly received at baptism and renewed at communion. Jesus is covenantally present at the Lord's Supper. This meal is not simply a memorial in that it is **only** symbolic, for the Apostle Paul says members of the covenant can become ill and die if they unlawfully receive the bread and wine (1 Corinthians 11:30). There is no **separation** between the covenant act and the presence of the Lord. Yet, the meal is not magic for it is not the **physical body of Christ**. **There is distinction between Creator and creature.**

So, the covenant is ratified by an oath on the basis of the great transcendent principle of **distinction but no**

**separation**. In continuation of the third part of the covenant, this segment shows the relationship between faithfulness and positive feedback: blessing.

#### **Succession (Deuteronomy 31-34)**

The final section of the covenant carries forward another important principle of the Suzerain/Godhead: **continuity and discontinuity**. **Among the members of the Trinity, there is basic continuity**. They all have the same attributes; They are all One God. Yet, each Person of the Godhead is unique; there is discontinuity. God the Son is "Eternally generated" (Hebrews 1), and God the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son.

In the last part of the covenant, Moses applies the **continuity/discontinuity** aspect of the Suzerain Lord's character. He speaks of the succession or transfer of the covenant from one generation to another. Those who receive the covenant have continuity; those who don't are in discontinuity.

The basis for succession, continuity, is **covenantal**. Neither blood, power, status or wealth determine who inherits the covenant and all its promises. Adoption is the mechanism of transfer. As a man about to die and as one destined not to enter the Promised Land, Moses calls Joshua to receive the transfer of power. He does not call his own blood son. He beckons Joshua to his side to receive the laying on of hands, the symbol of adoption as well as the sign of transfer. He does not physically or magically infuse Joshua with something; he makes a simple, symbolic, yet real, gesture of laying on of hands. It is real in that Joshua, and Israel under his representation, actually inherits the land, the inheritance. Joshua had proven himself through covenantal faithfulness.

In the New Testament this principle of succession by adoption continues. John records, "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become the children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:12-13). Jesus is our Joshua who has been given the world (the new **land**) **on the basis** of His faithfulness at the Cross. Yet, we too cross into the land with Him as we are united to Him through adoption. If we have **continuity** with Him, we inherit. If not, we are disinherited and have **discontinuity**.

#### **Conclusion**

This is the Biblical covenant and these are its principles. They apply in all of life: in business, in the home, in the church, and in the state. **Time** does not permit an application at this point, but the reader should try to think through how the five points of the covenant, nothing more than five truths about the Holy Trinity, should impact his own family and society. Covenant, however, is inescapable. These principles are already in effect. They are either being violated or followed. Hopefully, the reader of this tract will be a little more **self conscious** about his covenantal world.