

Genesis 1:26-28

COVENANT RENEWAL

Matthew 28:18-20

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THE DYNAMIC FAMILY COVENANT

One day a friend of mine walked out of church and saw his little girl standing on the tips of her toes. She stretched and stretched her arms up into the air as high as they could go. My friend said to his little girl, "Betsy, what on earth are you doing?" Betsy said, "I'm grow'n, Daddy, I'm **grow'n**."

Children do grow so fast that they feel like they are growing by the moment. Perhaps growth was so startling to little Betsy that she thought she was actually growing when she stuck her hands in the air. Or, maybe she thought she needed to grow, and the best way was to stretch out those arms and pull herself up. We'll probably never know what was going on in Betsy's mind. But little Betsy was struggling with something that makes life very interesting, to say the least. Betsy was concerned with **growth**.

Why do I say growth makes life interesting? Growth makes life constantly **change**! Take a simple example. A few years ago, my family decided to grow a garden. We prepared the ground, and planted the seed. The moment the seed hit the ground, it never remained the same. The seedlings either decomposed and never took root, or they grew into something productive.

Consider the different stages that seed went through, however, before it produced any fruit. First, it broke out of its hull and established some sort of root. Second, the seed started to push up through the soil. Then, the plant broke out into a little more elaborate root system. As the plant grew, a stem and leaves developed. When the plant was strong enough, little buds broke open and became pretty little flowers. Finally, the places, where those little flowers had once been, turned into the beginnings of fruit.

The first-fruit started the battle of the bugs. Eventually, after months of nurturing, watering, and fighting off insects, the fruit was ready to be picked. From seed to fruit, therefore, life had radically changed. At no one point did life ever stay the same. That's the nature of growth. **Growth brings change.**

The analogy applies to the family covenant. From the moment a couple is married, life will constantly change. It will change for the better or for the worse, but **it will change**. That is, the family covenant is dynamic.

Marriage begins when two people leave their families and form a new union. No longer can they live as two. Adjustment begins. About the time this couple is learning to live as one, a third party comes along. With each new child greater demands are made. The children pass through stages. The parents are constantly called upon to reevaluate and regroup.

As the children grow older and leave the nest, Mom and Dad must reorient the relationship. They were once many. Now they are few again. That is, until the grandchildren come into the world. Once again, role adjustment and

redefinition must take place.

This is just a brief outline of the many changes of life. We did not mention deaths, failures, catastrophes, or any of the other unexpected surprises which alter a family's lifestyle. All of these changes have to do with the dynamic aspect of the covenant. Let's develop this from the Scriptures.

The Dynamic: Multiplication

The **dynamic** feature of the marriage covenant appears in the statement, "And God blessed them; and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and **multiply**, and fill the earth, and subdue it'" (Gen. 1:28). The covenant with God and the family covenant were not expected to remain the same. Changes were to result from growth. The word which God uses to describe this change is **multiply**. Among other things, we see that God's covenant with man is inextricably bound up in the family covenant. Although these covenants are not the same, they are connected at the point of growth, or **multiplication**. For our purpose, we are concerned to explore the ramifications of multiplication.

What is multiplication? God supplies the meaning by the parallel phrases in the passage above, "and fill the earth, and subdue it" (Gen. 2:28). Two foundational ideas are involved. First, to fill the earth means multiplication of numbers (Gen. 8:17, 47:27). Israel grew in size under Abraham. Courville leads us to understand that Abraham's band of 70 was much more, all things considered. According to his calculations, there were **thousands**.¹

There is strength in numbers. As one Baptist minister once said, "If God wasn't interested in numbers, He wouldn't have named a book in the Bible, Numbers." Although this wasn't entirely the actual reason for naming the Book of Numbers, the principle is sound. When God told Abraham how many descendants he would have, the analogy God used was "stars" and "sand" (Gen. 22:17, Ex. 32:13). Thus, multiplication involves numbers. Here is where many Christian parents fail to see the potential in their own family. For example, if a Christian family had more-than-the-standard-two children, and each of their descendants had more-than-the-standard-two children, within six generations this family would have thousands of descendants. If those parents in each generation were effective in disciplining their children, imagine the impact one Christian family could have on the world. It wouldn't be too long, at this rate, before Christians totally dominated by simply having **lots of Godly children**.

The Jews have always understood this. It is interesting to compare the approach of Jewish Rabbis and Priests in the Catholic Church. Rabbis, for the last several hundred

1. Donovan A. Courville, *The Exodus Problem* (Loma Linda, California: challenge Books, 1971).

years, have proliferated their seed. Yet, the largest branch of the Church has held the doctrine of celibacy. Consequently, the best and the brightest ministers in the Catholic Church have been unable to reproduce families. Homosexuality and immorality have entered as a result of this doctrine of celibacy, and the potential children of the world's largest Christian denomination have been cut off. As powerful as numbers are, however, numbers alone are not enough.

Second, **multiplication** involves quality. Returning to the initial statement in Genesis, God adds an additional qualifier. He says, "and subdue" (Gen. 2:28). To "subdue" means to dominate. Thus, parents should not just breed like rabbits. They ought to multiply with quality. It takes time to disciple the child. It takes money. If a parent wants to send his children to a Christian school, he will have to make a **sizeable** worthwhile investment. Even if he wants to **homeschool**, he will have to put aside money for each child. It would not make sense to price one's self out of the Christian education because of too many children. Nevertheless, each family has to work out the tension between quantity and quality as God has uniquely equipped them. I have seen some parents who are more suited for a fewer number of children, and I've met parents who handle fine a larger number.

The original family was designed to grow in numbers and quality. But sin entered the world, and complicated this process.

One, some families distorted the multiplication process and attempted to replace God's covenant with dynasties. Cain and his lineage are examples (Genesis 4).

Two, no longer did family members grow spiritually at the same rate. In some cases, the mother grew to be spiritually stronger and wiser than the father. In others, the children grew up with a greater knowledge of the Bible than the parents.

Three, some family members even apostatized. Fathers left the faith. Brother turned against brother. One left and the other stayed. Even though the unfaithful one was raised in the same good Biblical environment, he chose to revolt against spirituality.

These are just a few of the problems created by growth in a sinful world. Nevertheless, redemption restored the original mandate of "multiplication." Under redemption, Biblical families were blessed with growth. But, they continued to struggle with several **dynamic factors**. Some of these are positive, while others are negative. For the remainder, I want to develop the dynamic factors that come to bear on the family covenant. These are factors that force change.

Covenantal Expansion

When parents begin to have children, and particularly more than one child, potential conflict enters the family. It's the conflict of the firstborn and second born. Sometimes the crises stem from the first child's being viewed as more special; not only the second born, but all of the other children resent this. At other times the crises result from the family simply being more complex when there are more than two children. Whatever, these are all problems related to the **expansion of the marriage covenant**.

Firstborn Expansion Problems

Often, however, there is the problem of giving preference to the firstborn **son**. I've seen some fathers who believe that there is special blessing in the birth of a son. It may be simply a matter carrying on the family name. It may be ego. Or, it may involve a religious view, such as is in the Old Testament. Here is where the firstborn issue can become confused. The firstborn concept needs to be developed in detail.

First, the primary idea associated with the Hebrew word for firstborn (**bekor**) is "elder." "Elder" implies age, so, the original design was for the older man to lead the younger one. We must understand, however, that God never intended for age to be separated from "elder" in an ethical sense and that means wisdom.

Although the Bible assumes that the oldest ought to be the wisest, Scripture also explains why that is not always the case. Sin disrupted the natural process of things and created a gap between "wisdom" and "age." Old men, like Saul, did not necessarily become wise. And young men, like Timothy and David (1 Tim. 4:12), were sometimes wiser than their elders, bringing us to a secondary definition of the firstborn that is connected to redemption.

Second, it is redemption that corrects the tension between age and wisdom. The "wise" men of Israel became "Elders" who sat between the gates and rendered judgment. Through generational extension of the covenant, the gap between "wisdom" and "age" can be closed. Wisdom makes a man qualified for the true sense of "elder." The New Testament builds on this concept of "elder" for the designation of "Elder" as an office (1 Tim. 3). Significantly, like the **firstborn** of the Old Testament (Deut. 21 :17), the faithful Elder ought to receive double honor (1 Tim. 5:17), thereby making him a firstborn son in the congregation.

God intended wisdom to accompany age so that the oldest would normally be the wisest. Due to sin in the human race, this was not always the case, as we have said. But, man attempts to substitute power, or strength, for obedience. This is why the Hebrew word for firstborn (**bekor**) is also wrongly connected with the idea of **strength**. The supposition was that the first child was the **strongest**,² and all of the others would become progressively weaker. The future belonged to the strongest not the wisest, an evolutionary concept of "survival of the fittest." Thus, the "elder-is-the-strongest" idea is a pagan concept which is commonly found in the ancient religions of the world.

The more redemptive view of the firstborn appears when the firstborn son brought salvation. This began when Eve was told that her seed, masculine, would save the world. Her response to Cain's birth, "I have gotten a **man-child** with the help of the Lord" (Gen. 4:1), confirms that she looked for salvation in a son.

The Old Testament teaches that the firstborn son is a sacrifice to the Lord. We see this first in Exodus 13 where God says He will spare the firstborn son on whose house the blood of the sacrificial lamb has been placed. Why? God demanded the future, the firstborn son, for passing over him with the Angel of Death. By redeeming the future in the present, the present and the future were saved. The opposite is true. When the future is not given over to the Lord, past, present, and future are lost.

Old Testament Law explicitly says that the firstborn is to be offered to God (Deut. 12:6, 17). Does this refer to child sacrifice? No. The clean firstborn animals were to be put to death (Nu. 18:17-18), whereas, the unclean animals were to be claimed by a redemption price (Nu. 18:15).

Significantly, as long as the Hebrews saw their children as born in uncleanness, they redeemed them. But when they rejected total depravity and followed the pagan gods, child sacrifice begins (Ezekiel 20:25, 26; Micah 6:7).

Therefore, the firstborn, and particularly the firstborn son was redemption for the rest of the household. It had to be a son because only the Son of God could redeem man from his sin. Israel was waiting and looking for the true firstborn sacrifice. The New Testament speaks of Christ as the Firstborn (Col. 1 :15ff.). He was the Firstborn in primary and secondary senses. He was the wisest (Prov-

2. One sees this particularly in the case of Esau (Gen. 27). He was the "hunter." Hence, he was the strongest.

erbs 8) and oldest (From before creation), as well as the sacrificial son who died for the rest of His family.

Having given these primary and secondary definitions of the firstborn idea, we now see why the New Testament does not strictly continue the firstborn son priority in the family. For one, the Old Testament even allowed for daughters to inherit in the case of no male heir (Numbers 36:23). For another, after Christ, there is no need to look for a male heir. The original meaning of firstborn returns in glorified form. It is the oldest in age and wisdom who normally receives the firstborn rights. Therefore, the firstborn structure in the New Testament does not change in that the inheritance goes to those who are wise, or ethically older. The structure does change in that no longer is the firstborn son (Hebrews 12:23) automatically given a double inheritance.³

Given this Scriptural background, we are prepared to consider the practical ramifications of some of the conflicts that arise in the family when it begins to expand with children. Also, we will see an explanation for firstborn/second-born conflicts between siblings.

Practical Considerations of Family Expansion

First, the conflict of the firstborn grows out of the effect of the fall on the family. Genesis says that a man is to leave and cleave (2:24). The parents are to push, and the children are to pull away. When man falls, however, the push/pull pattern is reversed. The push/pull pattern is true of all children, but especially manifests itself in the firstborn. He (or she) carries more authority because he is older. At the same time he wants to leave and prove himself, however, he wants to stay. He wants to become his own authority, but he does not want to leave to do it. So, he tends to struggle with authority.

Therefore the firstborn has conflict with the authority figure of the home, and there is the tendency for him to call the parent into question and/or resist the parent/authority figure. Perhaps you remember thinking as a child that you knew better than your parents. You wanted to teach them. After a few years away from home, however, you felt foolish for ever thinking that. Therefore, the firstborn tends to have more serious authority struggles.

Second, we also see that the younger has a tendency to teach the older. Through the Old Testament, the Jacobs are placed above the Esaus. Even in the New Testament, Paul must remind Timothy not to let someone look down on his youth.

The problem is that although the “younger” ends up getting the upper hand, he is usually not prepared to be over the “older.” With this, God continually drives the younger out into a situation where he is humbled and prepared to become the leader/father of Israel.

Take Jacob as an example. Jacob should have been learning from his older brother. Moreover, he should have been learning from his father. But Jacob rebelled against both. Even though he rebelled for the right reasons, he had to be taught patience and obedience. God took him to someone who was older in the person of Laban. I find that God still does this today. If a man has not learned to submit the proper way, God will take him to a Laban. Often, he will be much more demanding and stricter than the firstborn against whom he is rebelling.

Therefore, the second-born children were often called upon to become examples for the older because the firstborn bears so many of the mistakes of the parents. Every-

one learns humility. The parents must face up to the fact that the firstborn is failing because of their failure. The firstborn must not despise the second-born and end up hating or even killing him, as Cain killed Abel. What's the solution?

When the secondborn is weaker, the father will have to call in other “brothers.” Laban was an uncle to Jacob. So the principle is that God calls in other brothers to help the second-born see his weaknesses. That is, a father will have to depend upon the brothers of the faith to help him with the second-born. Maybe they will have to become like Laban. Why? When a second-born excels beyond the firstborn, he tends to lack necessary humility.

What about the firstborn who is outshined by the second-born? The parents will have to put him in contexts where he can prove himself. Hopefully, he will not have to wander around as Esau did, but the parents should not be surprised if their firstborn spends some time in the “desert.”

Third, a premium is placed on older children being true elders. They must learn that their age does not automatically qualify them as firstborn. They will have to earn the right to be firstborn. There are two tests. One, he will have to become a faithful disciple of his father. Two, he must faithfully disciple the other children. One day, the father will be gone and the family will be left to the firstborn.

Fourth, there can be more than “one firstborn. Since the New Testament pulls the firstborn concept up into a redemptive scheme, wisdom becomes the test. “Wisdom” was the original qualification for being firstborn. The wise child should be treated as firstborn. And, the wisdom test opens up the possibility that more than one child can become a true “wise man.” All the children should strive for this honor. The father may even want to have firstborn classes, and teach his children how to become wise.

Fifth, the firstborn child(ren) ought to be rewarded in a special way. The Bible's way of reward for the firstborn is to give double inheritance (Deut. 21 :17). Double inheritance will vary from family to family according to its level of blessing. Needless to say, double inheritance will vary from home to home. But the family that does not give double inheritance to the firstborn fails to reward the faithful. Parents ought not to be compelled to give the children equal portions of the inheritance unless the children have been equally faithful. An equalitarian approach is one of the surest ways of losing the next generation. The children will subtly be taught that “God is not a rewarder of those who faithfully persevere in righteousness.” So, why should they stick with the covenant if it doesn't make any difference?

Sixth, since ethical faithfulness and wisdom are the qualifications for becoming the firstborn, girls can be firstborn. Deborah ought to be their model. She was able to lead, as well as raise up Baraks. Also, a firstborn girl knows how to find a firstborn son in another family for a marriage candidate. The father would want to include some sessions in the firstborn classes on “the characteristics to look for in a firstborn marriage partner.”

Seventh, Christian parents should watch for unBiblical favoritism. We have already said that the firstborn ought to be rewarded. But unBiblical favoritism is founded on “natural” abilities – beauty, athletic ability, intelligence. “Natural” favoritism can also disrupt the balance of the entire household. Most often, however, God takes the “average” child who seems to be slower of mind and speech and uses him in mighty ways. By a parent's “natural” emphasis, he might overlook God's choice. On the other hand, parents should not despise the child who is exceptionally gifted. His gifts should be harnessed for the Lord's Kingdom.

Concluding this section we have found that expansion of the family is part of the dynamic aspect of the covenant. Changes result from adding children to the family. This kind

3. Notice that this text places the “and to the spirits of righteous men” in parallel to “the first-born.” This does not mean that only males are in heaven. Rather, the Bible considers everyone, male and female, as a first-born son.

of change is designed to be positive, for it is the way of dominating the earth. But there are certain built in problems that can result. We have analyzed them in terms of the firstborn concept. This issue is a watershed for sibling conflict. To deal adequately with sibling rivalries, a parent must begin here. Let us now turn to another one of the **dynamic factors** of the covenant.

Covenantal Mobility

Mobility refers to movement. This movement is first expressed in the command to "leave and cleave." The Biblical covenant guarantees movement. The children are to **move** away from home to establish new households.

A unique example of the need to allow mobility is the story of Sudbury, Massachusetts in Puritan American history.⁴ It seems that the first generation prospered quite well in the community of Sudbury. Then the second generation of men came along. They wanted to have their own land to settle. A dispute broke out. Finally, the younger men were able to rally the town to their side. The second generation was awarded more land, and established the town of Marlborough a short distance away.

Why was this situation unique? For the first time, these Englishman experienced the reality that disputes in America would be settled by moving down the road. The exiting group would just create their own "new" town. This was the kind of rapid mobility which expanded the colonies.

Was this kind of expansion bad? Not necessarily. Although wrongful departure from any circumstance can cause lasting moral defects, we must remember that the covenant is designed with a dynamic factor that allows for movement away from the original family. Thus, movement is a blessing of God. Without it, the family stagnates, and unhealthy intermarriage results.⁵

Any structure that arrests movement, therefore, is contrary to the covenant. Governments which do not allow free traffic are explicitly statist. The society is non-progressive and moves at a much slower rate of development. This is not a characteristic of grace. God liberates man so that

he can freely traffic. **Covenantal mobility** makes for growth and change.

Covenantal Drift

Read the Book of Genesis to note the number of children which fall away. The Bible never promises that **all** of the children will persevere. The Bible promises that God will give His people believing seed, but that is different from all of the children being believers.

This falling away is called **covenantal drift**. It is a **dynamic factor** which brings change. Earlier, I mentioned that not all the changes would be positive. Here is a change that is negative. There are two kinds of covenantal drift. One is total and we shall call this apostasy. In this case, the child totally revolts and is disinherited. The other is not a complete falling away, but a drift. The classic example in Scripture is the account of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11). Keep in mind that the passage is not talking about a little child, but probably an older teenage young man. Nevertheless, the prodigal asks for an early inheritance. The father obliges, and the son goes out and squanders all that the father has given him. When the son returns, the father greets him with open arms, and puts on a feast.

So often, the child of a believer is not completely rebellious, but does not have the intensity of zeal which the parents expect. Maybe the child is drifting. Maybe the child wants to stretch his wings. In the case of the prodigal, he left his father's house **pre-maturely**, and this may be what the "drifter" desires.

When this kind of drift occurs, the parent must be wise. Notice that the father let his son go. Second, the father let his son leave with the inheritance which means he showed a level of trust in him. This is wisdom.

Sometimes, when a child is pulling against responsibility, it is best to let him go. The child might need to fall on his face before he realizes that he needs his father's leadership. The rule of thumb is "give the older child, ready to stretch his wings, but rebelliously trying to stretch them, plenty of room."

When this situation occurs in the family, unrest comes to the home. No parent likes to see his child go through the prodigal process. But covenantal drift will happen in the best of families. There is no such thing as a perfect household. Man is depraved. Our children are depraved. We can be assured, however, that regardless of the type of **covenantal drift** that occurs, God will work it together for His good (Rem. 8:28).

4. Sumner Chilton Powell, *Puritan Wage* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1963), pp. 171-177.

5. The Mormons had to found an university, Brigham Young, to send their children to. Why? The families were intermarrying and their gene pools were being destroyed. With a university, the children were forced to leave home and find spouses - it's logical to assume that young people will more than likely find a spouse at college - outside of the family gene pool.