

# COVENANT RENEWAL

Genesis 1:26-28

Matthew 28:18-20

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## DAGER IN THE BACK: PART 1

Albert James Dager has recently written a book, in which he devotes an entire chapter to my writing on covenant theology, He joins the ranks of those who want to criticize and charge as opposed to critique. There's a big difference among these approaches.

A critique is generally an evaluation from someone close to the position, such as the recent book by Westminster Seminary's faculty, *Theonomy*:

With the exception of a few out of sixteen or so articles, the book essentially agrees with the theonomic position. There are no articles by Meredith Kline, the most antagonistic among Westminster professors of the theonomic view. The single fact that he is not represented within the critique says perhaps more than the critique itself. Certainly these professors do not agree with everything in the theonomic camp but they must concede that this is a viable and historic position within the reformed community.

If a critique comes from someone close, a charge is often (though not always) levelled by someone quite distant from one's position. It is basically an attempt to discredit or censure. Since the reformed side of the Christian Reconstructionist movement stands on the historic creeds, no one has been able to substantiate heresy. What few charges there have been have come from those quite removed from reformed theology. The anabaptist and socialist,

did a hatchet job a few years ago, making outlandish and unsubstantiated statements. But most of the attempts to discredit Christian Reconstructionism have not taken this approach. Absurd charges and wild accusations just won't work against a group of theologically conservative and established Presbyterians and Episcopalians.

A criticism is another way of disagreeing with a fellow Christian. It usually does not "dechristianize" the opponent even though it may be quite disagreeable. It can be at one or all of three levels.

A criticism can be aimed at the **presuppositional** level. A presupposition is a certain given that a person assumes for a variety of reasons. A critic may reach the conclusion of faulty presuppositions after considering the arguments put forth.

A criticism can take issue with the arguments and development of a work. It may not be against the presuppositions. As a matter of fact, it may agree with the presuppositions but be critical of the way the presuppositions are applied.

A criticism can disagree with the conclusions of a work. It may agree with presuppositions and arguments but not with the conclusions, or shall I say, "applications."

Mr. Dager's book falls in the criticism category. He doesn't write with a view to critique, an evaluation as a friend within the reformed camp; he is clearly not reformed in his theology. And, he doesn't actually bring charges of

such a nature as to "dechristianize" Christian Reconstructionism. He brings criticisms.

Mr. Dager's criticisms are difficult to follow because of their uneven and unclear presentation. In a way, I think Mr. Dager is extremely sympathetic to covenant theology, at least what he perceives as covenantal. On the other hand, I'm not sure. For example, consider the following laudatory comments at the beginning of his chapter, "Covenantalism."

Sutton's book is a brilliant exegesis of the covenant model. And though Sutton's covenant concept is not new, he has built upon the works of earlier writers in presenting formidable arguments for the dominionist view of God's covenants. Further, he has broadened the covenant model to include a "five-point structure" for what the dominionists believe are "all three of God's covenants": church, family, and civil government.

Granting that most of what Sutton says is true in regard to the covenant model and that Christians are indeed under covenant with God, our concern is not with the true statements found in his book, but with the errors upon which the dominionist mandate rest.<sup>1</sup>

How does one respond to such statements. Mr. Dager says, "Most of what Sutton says is true." He doesn't like specific comments leading to a "dominion mandate." This is hard to take. Most of what I say is right but comments about the dominion mandate are wrong. I can only understand this analysis to mean my conclusions or **applications** are bad while everything else is basically right, according to Mr. Dager. I think his objections run much deeper. I believe that he has a fundamentally different conception of the covenant.

Thus, in the next newsletters I will respond to Mr. Dager's criticisms of the Biblical covenant. In this newsletter, I discuss general covenantal differences. In the next issue, I will talk about his specific objections regarding the dominion mandate in the political area; he makes some inaccurate statements as well as draws some inaccurate conclusions about my writings. Then, I will speak to his concerns about covenant lawsuits and the church. After this, I hope to return to my study on *Covenantal* with an analysis of I Thessalonians 4-5.

### Old Covenant Confusion

As is often the case, Dager indicates much confusion in his own mind about the Old Covenant. This misunderstanding lies behind many of his other problems. He says,

As Christians we are aware of God's covenants that He established in both the Old and New Testaments.

1. Arthur Dager, *Vengeance Is Ours* (Redmond, WA: Sword Publications, 1990), p. 207.

Before we examine the dominionists' covenant mandate, we should briefly review the major covenants expressly implemented by God, and consider the extent to which they may or may not apply to us today. . The covenants of God with man are many, but all of His covenants fall under the three major covenants that have continued throughout history and affect God's people today: the Adamic Covenant, the Old Covenant, and the New Covenant.<sup>2</sup>

Dager's statement contradicts the plain sense of Scripture, which speaks of only two covenants. The Apostle Paul says to the Hebrews,

But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, by as much as He is also the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted on better promises. For if the first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion sought for a second. For finding fault with them, He says, "Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will effect a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. Not like the covenant which I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; for they did not continue in My covenant, and I did not care for them," says the Lord. "For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days," says the Lord. "I will put My laws into their minds, and I will write them upon their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be My people. And they shall not teach everyone his fellow citizen, and everyone his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for all shall know Me, from the least to the greatest of them. For I will be merciful to their iniquities and I will remember their sins no more." When He said, "A new covenant," He has made the first obsolete. But whatever is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to disappear (Hebrews 8:6-13).

First, this passage refutes Dager's understanding of three covenants, clearly teaching two. There is a first covenant and a second covenant. Even the grammar implies only two covenants by using the word "better" to set up a comparison, obviously indicating that two covenants are being compared. On this basis, I said in my book on the covenant,

As to the number of covenants, the Bible only speaks of two. Some students of the covenant have tried to specify more because covenants are made with specific individuals such as Noah, Abraham, and David. But these are merely the **re-establishment** of the first covenant made with Adam, the Old Covenant. For example, God says to Noah according to the New American Standard Version, "I will establish My covenant with you" (Gen. 6:18). But the Hebrew ("heqim" not "karath") should be properly translated, confirm. So God "confirmed" an already existing covenant. This means that covenants exist in the Bible where the literal word "covenant" is not used.

More importantly, the original covenant made with Adam is repeatedly "confirmed" with replacement "Adams" (Noah, Abraham, etc.) so that there is essentially one covenant (the Old Covenant) until true different and New Adam (Jesus) arrives. Some of the confusion results from the fact that each of these newly confirmed covenants anticipates with greater clarity the New Covenant. They are progressive in nature. Although the covenantal head (i.e. David, etc.) has a fall and dies like Adam, each one progressively reveals more about Christ to come. So, David was still part of the Old Covenant because he fell and died, but he was also the culmination of the greatest type of Christ. Every time God

confirms the first covenant with" "an individual, He adds more revelation until the final Revelation comes and transforms the Old Covenant into the New.<sup>3</sup>

God only speaks of two covenants. In the Old Testament, there was what Vos called an "organic union" of the covenants. They always emerged from a previous covenant. They did not spring up completely new. They were connected to what went before and what went after. Their union was in terms of a covenant head, who spanned the time before he established another covenant as well as the time after he created some sort of second covenant. In his person was the organic union.

The organic union can also be seen in the covenant structure itself, meaning it was verbal as well as personal. I have spent considerable space in the appendices of my covenant book and in four years of news-letters showing the covenant structure from one end of Scripture to the other. The fivefold Deuteronomic pattern runs from Genesis to Revelation. I have also pointed out that I am not the only person who has seen the suzerain treaty pattern. Scholars within and without the reformed camp have made similar observations.

Perhaps most noteworthy among reformed and especially **covenantal** scholars is Cornelius van der Waal. He went to be with the Lord in 1980. Yet, he was working with the suzerain treaty pattern several years before then. He wrote a book on the subject, which was only recently translated into English: *Covenantal Gospel*.<sup>4</sup> cannot read Dutch, so I obviously did not read him before doing my research on the covenant in the mid 1980s. I am delighted to find that he was coming to some of the same conclusions to which I have come, and all independent of any of my work. Granted, he did not press whether it was five or six points, but he did believe that the Deuteronomic structure was all through the Scriptures, even in the New Testament. To my knowledge, no one has argued that he was forcing some procrustean structure onto the text. Nevertheless, his work confirms mine; perhaps I should say that mine confirms his; it doesn't make any difference for neither of us invented the covenant structure. The covenant framework, however, establishes proof for an organic union in more than simply the redemptive deliverers. It speaks of a documental and written (verbal) connection.

Thus, all of the covenants supposedly being made in the Old Testament are part of one covenant. Dager mistakenly calls the Abrahamic covenant the Old Covenants excluding those covenants that were made before. To be completely faithful to the Hebrew text, the Abrahamic covenant was a covenant renewal of a previous covenant, specifically the Noahic. It was a further specification of the Noahic. For this reason, it is similar and yet it narrows the application of the Noahic covenant to Abraham. In this regard, it was like the other covenants of the Old Testament. They are covenant renewals. They are not the creation of totally new covenants.

In a sense they are. Each time the covenant is renewed a provisional new covenant is being formed on the basis of God's promise in Genesis (3:15). But each time a provisional new covenant is formed, it turns out to go the way of the original covenant with Adam. It ends in death with no resurrection or payment for sins. What started as a provisional new covenant ends up as part of the Old Covenant system. This does not change until Christ comes, taking us to the second way in which the Hebrews cove-

3. Ray R. Sutton, *That You May Prosper* (Tyler, Texas: Institute For Christian Economics, 1967), pp. 266-269.

4. C. van der Waal, *The Covenantal Gospel* (Neerlandia, Alberta: Inheritance Publications, 1990).

5. *Ibid.*, p. 206.

nant passage refutes Dager.

Second, Hebrews eight contradicts Dager when it says, "When He said, 'A new covenant,' He has made the first obsolete. But whatever is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to disappear" (Hebrews 8:13). Dager maintains an Abrahamic beginning of the Old Covenant. Consequently, he argues for the fulfillment of this covenant, "by that remnant [Jewish] during the Millennium. It cannot apply to Christians of all nations, because all nations will dwell throughout the earth. Therefore, it must apply to a believing remnant of Israel."<sup>6</sup> According to this view, the Old Covenant of necessity continues until the millennium. But how can it? The meaning of Paul's statement in Hebrews is simple: When the New Covenant comes, the Old Covenant disappears! The Old Covenant cannot continue beyond the era of the beginning of the New Covenant.

The question is, "When did the New Covenant come?" Jesus precisely tells us. He says on the evening of His betrayal and the night of the Last Supper,

And in the same way He took the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood" (Luke 22:20).

Christ's declaration of the inauguration of the New Covenant with His death, commemorated in the Lord's Supper, brings into effect everything of which Paul speaks in Hebrews. It has to, that is, unless the New Covenant actually has not begun. Thus, the Hebrews and Lukan passages tell of the end of the Old Covenant and the beginning of the New Covenant.

Paul is clear about the things that are to begin when the Old Covenant ends. The law is written more intensely on the heart of God's people. An unprecedented worldwide conversion process will begin. But even more significant for some of Dager's misunderstanding, Paul refers to the New Covenant people as "Judah and Israel" (Hebrews 8:8), which fits with other Pauline comments about the true heirs of Abraham (Galatians 3:29).

Third, the Hebrews eight passage means that there is not a separate "Jewish" covenant apart from the others. Not only does Paul tell us the Old Covenant has ended, making it impossible for an exclusively Jewish group of believers to fulfill it in the millennium, but he specifically says that the Gentiles are the real "sons of Abraham." He says to the Galatians, "If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise" (Galatians 3:29). How could Paul be more clear and specific. Contrary to Dager's notion of exclusively fulfilled Abrahamic promises to "specific natural descendants," the Apostle Paul applies the promises of Abraham to specifically **unnatural** descendants, the Gentiles in Galatia.

Even worse for Dager, Paul applies the Abrahamic covenant to the Gentiles through Jesus Himself. He is the true and ultimate fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant. There cannot be any greater fulfillment. He was natural but He was an unnatural descendant of Israel. As a natural and unnatural descendant, He fulfilled the Abrahamic covenant. Through Him, the covenant of Abraham comes to Jew and Gentile, but not to the exclusion of one or the other. Nor is it proper to view the Abrahamic covenant as a natural process of fulfillment.

Fourth, the Hebrews eight passage refutes Dager's strange use of three covenants to remove the unbeliever from accountability to the New Covenant. He says,

Those who do not enter the New Covenant cannot be held accountable to it; they are already held accountable under the terms of the Adamic covenant that con-

demns them both physically and 'spiritually.'<sup>7</sup>

He makes the point that post resurrection man is not accountable to the New Covenant. Granted, only believers are under the New Covenant in the technical and full sense of the word, "under" meaning member of. The unbeliever is not under the covenant in this sense but this does not remove him from responsibility to it, as we shall see.

And yes, the unbeliever is under the Adamic covenant, which places him under the curse. The unbeliever is under the curse of the Adamic covenant and in this sense is still living in the first Adam. But there is more. The covenantal world is more complex.

The whole world is accountable to the New Covenant even though it may not be under the sign of the New Covenant. Why? Because Christ died for the whole world! The universe has passed into the New Covenant Age with the Death, Resurrection, and Ascension of Christ. With Christ's great redemptive event, it passes from a cosmic state of wrath to one of grace because the Death of Christ has cosmic implications. Salvation is formore than the individual, or even nations. It encompasses the whole universe, the cosmos. It is not localized only in people. It extends to the physical universe. Perhaps the most familiar verse of Scripture makes this clear.

For God so loved the world, that he gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world should be saved through Him (John 3:16-17).

The Greek word for "world" is kosmos from which we derive the English word, cosmos. Other words such as "cosmetic," "cosmopolitan," "cosmic," and "cosmological" are further derived from it. The original Greek word, however, means universe. Thus, God literally loves the universe which He created. He sends His Son to save the universe along with His people who live in it. The effect is analogous to the relation of the unbeliever, in the land to the Old Covenant.

If the reader thinks about the Old Testament, he will remember a similar situation with the stranger in the land. He will recall accountability to two covenants on the part of the foreigner. The stranger in the land was of course in Adam and therefore under the Edenic covenant. But he was under another covenant as well, even conceding Dager's view of the Abrahamic Covenant's being the Old Covenant. According to the concept of a provisional new covenant that I mentioned above, however, the stranger was also accountable to this second covenant pertaining to the land. He was responsible to live according to the non-Edenic covenant. But how is the post resurrection unbeliever under the New Covenant analogous to the stranger in the land? The Apostle Paul makes clear the extension of the Promised Land to the four corners of the earth, the whole world. When he quotes the fifth commandment to Gentiles at the Church of Ephesus, he says, "Honor your father and mother (which is the first commandments with a promise), that it may be well with you, and that you may live long on the earth" (Ephesians 6:2-3). The original Old Testament statement of the promise says "land," a much smaller designation. In Paul's mind, the land has been extended to the rest of the world. The entire world is the land in the New Covenant era. Thus, the unbeliever is a stranger in the world.

The Hebrews eight passage supports the universal land view. Let's return to the very simple observation that the Old Covenant ends when the New Covenant begins, meaning the specific promises of the New Covenant begin to

6. *Ibid.*, p. 209.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 215.

come into effect. One of the aspects of the New Covenant is found in the statement, “And they shall not teach everyone his fellow citizen, and everyone his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for all shall know Me, from the least to the greatest of them” (Hebrews 8:11). This unquestionably speaks of a time when the Gospel is applied all over the world. True, the completion of this promise has not been realized. But it has been begun. Just as a stranger in the land in the Old Testament could live in the land and yet not be in the covenant because he was not circumcised, so in the New Covenant the unbeliever can be in the world and accountable to the New Covenant as well. Dager tries to escape covenantal responsibilities by arguing that the unbeliever is only under the Adamic and thus somehow not responsible to the New Covenant. This matter will be discussed in greater detail in the next newsletter.

Dager’s comments about the Old Testament covenants are false. His criticisms of my statements are therefore false. He has committed obvious Scriptural and logical fallacies. He has failed to determine the correct number of covenants as well as the nature and recipients of those covenants. He even at one point argues that one was a member of the Abrahamic covenant by birth. Nothing could be further from the truth. In the Old Testament, a person became a member of the covenant by circumcision and not by blood. And, the girls who could not be circumcised, except in the case of the war bride who symbolically was circumcised by the shaving of her head, were granted admission into the covenant on the basis of the male representation through circumcision. Dager has failed to grasp the most basic covenantal concepts. As we move away from the general, his covenantal confusion becomes even more apparent as we consider some particular covenantal errors in his thinking.

### Covenantal Confusion Over Consent

One final comment needs to be made about Dager’s general covenantal misconceptions. It has to do with his **non-covenantal** statements about the principle of consent.

Even though they are instituted by a transcendent, personal God, His covenants always rest upon acceptance and promise of obedience through faith by those with whom He makes them. This is faithfulness on His part to the legal requirements of the covenant principle: consent of all parties.

Although Sutton stresses the legal implications of a covenant, he neglects that very important legal technicality: by definition, a covenant involves the consent of all parties. Thus, he addresses the roles of both God and those who enter into His covenant, but he fails to adequately address a third category: those outside the covenant. If someone is not party to a covenant or agreement he cannot be held to its terms.

I can draw up all the agreements and legal contracts I want between myself and another party. But until a contract is ratified by that other party it has no legal basis for implementation. Throughout his writing Sutton violates his own principles of covenant, specifically the third: “The covenant implemented a system of sanctions based on an oath.”<sup>8</sup>

8. *Ibid.*, p. 214.

No, I don’t violate my own covenantal principles. For one, the principle of sanctions based on an oath is not the third covenantal point but the fourth!

For another, these sanctions by oath or consent are **covenantally** and corporately applied to the individual. They are ratified through covenant representation. It is quite clear that on the day the Biblical covenant was ratified in Deuteronomy that all the people brought their families and **children**. For certain not all of those children were of an age to speak or even to reason. Yet, the little ones were brought into the covenant and were made accountable to obey.

As a matter of fact, in the Old Covenant the men answered for the whole family. Moses says, “The Levites shall then answer and say to all the men of Israel with a loud voice, “Cursed is the man who makes an idol or molten image, . . . And all the people shall say, ‘Amen’” (Deuteronomy 27:15). The men were probably speaking for the family. And even if everyone who could respond answered, “Amen,” certainly the little babies could not. Thus, consent is necessary but it is consent by representation.

Dager’s hyper-individualized view of the covenant is the same argument that liberals have used to break teenagers away from the authority of the parents. They argue in the case of a pregnant teenager that she should have the right to avoid parental consent. She doesn’t need their approval. She as an individual is responsible. All she needs according to the **liberals** is her own personal consent.

The parental consent laws, however, are **covenantal**. Whether the teenager consents to get an abortion or not is not the issue. What her **covenantal** representatives consent to is. Thus, parental consent is a valid covenantal principle because it is based on this representative and corporate principle of the covenant: representatives obligate individuals.

Dager fails to see the covenant in a covenantal sense. He understands it in a **purely** individualistic and **believe** anarchistic manner. If the covenant is only valid in the case of individual consent, then society will break down. I have already pointed out the problems of pushing individual consent to the exclusion of the parental authorities. But what about the more basic problem of the family itself. A child is born into a family. He (she) did not give consent to be conceived, to be born, or to be born to his (her) given family. Does this mean the lack of his consent nullifies the family covenant? According to Dager’s reasoning it would and the family would break down as it has in those countries where radical individualism has been stressed.

Thus, Mr. Dager’s criticisms of *That* are misrepresentative at best and erroneous at their worst. He does not have a covenantal view of the covenant. Consequently, he does not understand the covenant of the Word of God. His covenant is the covenant of Rousseau and Voltaire. This is not the covenant of Christ! In the next newsletter, this will become even more apparent.