

COVENANT RENEWAL

Genesis 1:26-28

Matthew 28:18-20

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THE WHEAT AND THE TARES COVENANT AND PARABLES

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The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field, but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat and went his way. But when the grain had sprouted and produced a crop then the tares also appeared. So the servants of the owner came and said to him, "Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?" He said to them, "An enemy has done this." The servants said to him, "Do you want us then to go and gather them up?" But he said, "No, lest while you gather up the tares you also uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, 'First gather together the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them, but gather the wheat into my barn'" . . . He who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, the good seeds are the sons of the kingdom, but the tares are the sons of the wicked one. The enemy who sowed them is the devil, the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are the angels. Therefore as the tares are gathered and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of this age. The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father (Matthew 13:24-30, 37-43).

There they were on Sunday morning in a foreign country. A friend of mine and his family had decided to spend a month in the United Kingdom, Scotland to be exact. They came to their first Sunday in the country with a bit of anxious anticipation because they were going to visit a real, ancient reformed church. They turned to the church section in the newspapers and found a parish that seemed to be geographically and theologically close.

As they approached the church, the place looked deserted. All of the lights were out. Darkness filled the great sanctuary. The vestibule doors were locked. Not to be defeated, they pounded on the door to see if anyone were really there. In one last effort, they pressed their faces next to the stained glass windows to peer in. They saw that one light dimly shown at the back of the building. So, they hurriedly moved around back to determine if anyone was home.

At the rear of the building, they walked up some stairs and banged a few times on the door. Eventually they heard footsteps. The sound of shoes tapping on the floor, as though one foot was dragging behind the other, moved closer and closer. The steps halted on the other side of the door. The doorknob began to turn slowly. Finally, an old wrinkled man who looked like the great grandson of Ebenezer Scrooge stuck out his head and grumped, "What do you want?" in a quick and impatient tone.

My friend and his family were stunned. They almost did not know what to say. Quickly they gained their composure as the father took the lead by saying, "We would like to go to church here today." The old man blurted out, "Why would you want to do that?" After a pause the father said, "We are of the same denominational faith and would like to attend." At that, the old man turned and mumbled, "Very well, follow me." After walking down a dark corridor, the group arrived at the place of worship where they joined a small body of faithful who were carefully and slowly singing the Psalms.

When asked after the service why there was so much care in keeping visitors out, the elders indicated that they only wanted true believers in their midst.

Exaggerated situation, granted. True reflection of what goes on among many churches, agreed. Sad to say, this is often the case with reformed congregations. It's no secret that the descendants of Calvinism are often so concerned to guard the faith that they shrink the faithful to a handful of dwindling few.

Our Lord addressed this kind of thinking in His little known parable of the wheat and the tares, one often lost in all the attention paid to the great parable of the soils that precedes it. Before considering it in some detail, a few comments about parables in general are in order.

The Covenantal Nature of Parables

And the disciples came and said to Him, "Why do you speak to them in parables?" He answered and said to them, "Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. For whoever has, to him more will be given, and he will have abundance; but whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken away from him. Therefore I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand. . . . But blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear; for assuredly, I say to you that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it" (Matthew 13:10-17).

There are many approaches to the parables around today. They could be categorized into the grammatical, the symbolical, the psychological, and the doctrinal, to name only a few. Undoubtedly the best interpreter of the parables is Robert Farrar Capon's studies.¹ Most disconcert-

1. Robert Farrar Capon, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985). He is an Episcopal priest who writes this introductory volume as the first step in a series of parabolic studies. Since its publication, others have been written on different kinds of parables: judgment parables, grace parables, and so forth. His insights are extremely helpful. It makes an attempt at a more Biblical theological hermeneutic that is refreshing.

ing about these studies, although they each have a contribution to make, is that very little if any is ever noted about the **covenantal** nature of the parables. Since the Bible is set up as a covenant document and man's relationship with God is a covenant, it is important never to neglect the covenant in any study, especially the parables. This is perhaps the significant hermeneutical point that should be considered, apart from context itself; indeed, the covenant is the context of the parables! How so?

The Key **Covenantal** Word: Blessed

Parabolic language is the means that Christ uses to reveal **blessing**. His followers are **blessed** because they have been given the ability to understand, to "see and hear." This word blessed is a sanctioning term of the covenant used by Moses in Deuteronomy. In this context, sight comes up as a blessing, or the lack thereof as a cursing. He says, "Then the Lord will scatter you among all peoples, . . . but there the Lord will give you a trembling heart, failing eyes, and anguish of soul" (Deuteronomy 28:64-65). Blindness, physical and especially spiritual, is a mark of the sanction of cursing. The giving of **sight**, is a sign of blessing. The ability to understand the **parables** of Christ, therefore, tells us about a covenantal process that has occurred in the lives of the disciples. **How?**

The sanctions of blessing and cursing accompanied proper ratification or renewal of the covenant. They were indicators attached to the vows and oaths of ratification to measure faithfulness. Israel was to know for sure if they were carrying out their covenant commitment. Blessing resulted when they did, cursing when they didn't. The fact that the people of Israel could not understand parables in Christ's day was one more sign that they were covenant breakers. When the disciples queried Jesus about the use of parables, Jesus was precise in His use of covenantal language. Yet, He did not stop to say the word covenant. He used the sanction language of the covenant. He expected them just as He expects us to make the connection.

The point is simple. The key to the parables is Christ. By receiving Him as Messiah, these dark sayings can only be understood. If He is embraced, if one has Him, then the Solomonic like proverbs become clear. The assumption is that the followers comprehend the relationship between Christ and the renewal of the covenant. Jesus is the means of ratifying the covenant of old to make the new. He is the only one who can restore the broken covenantal relationship between God and His people. Apart from Him is cursing and spiritual blindness. Union with Him brings spiritual sight.

This is the meaning of the statement, "Whoever has, to him more will be given, and he will have abundance" (Matthew 13:12). What is it that a person must have to receive more? The answer is simple: the proper covenant relationship which would be measured in terms of **the blessings**. If one has the blessings then he has the covenant bond. One of those blessings is spiritual sight.

The greatest blessing of the covenant is Christ Himself. He is the embodiment of all that covenant **faithfulness** rewards. If one has Christ, he will receive the "more" to which our Lord refers. Among other things, this is an understanding of the parables. His answer to the disciples could be paraphrased, "I'm speaking in parables so that you **will** know if you have truly become my disciples. if you have, then you will be able to interpret the parables because you will **try** to understand them in terms of Me. if **you** have not, then you will never be able to fathom these simple-yet-profound stories. if you don't renew your covenant **through** Me, even what you have will be taken away." Thus, the proper hermeneutic of the parables is **specif**i-

cally Christ and His fulfillment of the covenant.

So, the parables are filled with covenantal language. Of particular note is the appearance of sanctions terminology. A quick reading of Deuteronomy 27-26 reveals agrarian discourse such as seed, fields, cities, landlord and so forth. Christ is not simply telling quaint little tales in the agrarian language of the day. He utilizes a powerful covenantal literary tool to force them to turn to Him to see their own destiny.

For example, He begins His parables with one about four different kinds of soils. Deuteronomy 27-28 provides the background. Blessing and cursing were marked by fruitfulness. One of the specific curses was, "You shall carry much seed out to the field but gather little in" (Deuteronomy 28:38). When Jesus describes different soils that were unfruitful, He refers to different kinds of soil that do not receive the seed, even one that does but does not bear fruit. Given the Deuteronomical background, these soils are cursed. When He goes on to say that only the good soil bears fruit because it holds on to the Word of God, He indicates that Israel is like the soils that do not bear fruit. It has become bad ground for the Word of God. If the people of God will hold on to Christ, they will once again become fruitful. Specifically, if they will be receptive to the Incarnate Word, Christ Himself, the blessings of the covenant will result. Thus, the way to become good soil is to receive the Word of God, Jesus Christ.

With this simple introduction, we are prepared to approach the parables covenantally. We are Biblically obligated to interpret the parables in terms of the covenant. Certainly the first parable could be considered and should be analyzed from a completely covenantal hermeneutic; it will yield much fruit! But for the remainder of our study, we turn to the parable directly following the parable of the soils.

The **Wheat** and the Tares

The covenantal background to this parable is the promise of the produce of the ground (Deuteronomy 28:4). Israel expected abundant crops as a result of covenant faithfulness. They anticipated successful crops in terms of obedience to the commandments. In the parable of the wheat and the tares, Christ makes an interesting revelation about covenant fruitfulness. He talks about a fruitful crop that produces tares, which raises questions and problems.

This discussion follows on the heels of the parable of the soils. One of the soils was considered good because it bore fruit, abundant fruit. But the lesson of the good soil was not over. There is more. The good soil will produce tares along with the wheat. Is this a reflection on the soil? The seed? The one who sows? The covenant itself? The answer to these questions as well as the message of the parable are resolved as we consider a covenantal understanding of the parable.

Transcendence

The specific transcendence of the covenant is that God always initiates a covenant relationship. This is most often expressed in an introduction by means of the Word, "Thus says the word" and so forth. The point is, however, that God is Sovereign in His formation of a covenant arrangement. Yet, in the Old Covenant, even though God had initiated, Israel consistently failed. The result was time and again the application of curses such as unfruitfulness.

In the parable of the wheat and the tares, a new covenant arrangement is introduced. Good productive seed is sown into the ground. The reason is that the Son of Man is the one who sows (13:37). What He does cannot be unfruitful. Something immediately appears to be different. God had initiated other covenantal relationships in the Old

Covenant, but in this one the Son of Man personally introduced the covenant, that is the seed.

Israel had never known this kind of seed in the Old Covenant. Moses spoke of seed that did not produce fruit because of Israel's disobedience; Israel sowed but did not yield a harvest. He described a time when no matter what Israel did they would not see fruitfulness, or if they did, someone else would eat it. The parable in contrast emphasizes a seed that cannot be uprooted except by the removal of the tares. Moreover, the tares have some effect on the success of the good seed. The workers are commanded not to uproot the tares for this reason. The covenant initiated by the Son of Man is so potent that it thrives in the midst of the presence of evil! This is true transcendence in its fullest sense.

Hierarchy

The hierarchy of the covenant concerns its representation: one for the many. The representative of the Old Covenant was in relationship to the seed. He was the one who spread the seed and in this way the one affected the many. His faithfulness determined the effect of the crop. In Deuteronomy, for example, Israel's obedience to the covenant sowed productive seed. Israel's disobedience issued unfruitful seed.

The seed principle also applied to humans. Going all the way back to the start of Israel, Abraham was the beginning of the seed. He represented the nation. He was faithful and it was accounted to him as righteousness. As a result, the promise extended to his seed. The one affected the many.

In the parable of the wheat and the tares, the Son of Man, Jesus Christ, is the one who sows the seed. He is the covenant representative. He sows the sons of the kingdom. What He does affects the many just as the good and evil seed do in the parable being considered.

A rival representative appears in the parable, the devil. He too sows and represents the many. He sows tares, wicked sons, and thereby attempts to set up a false hierarchy. The Greek word for tare was a real plant in the ancient world. It significantly looked just like the seed of wheat, except that it was a kind of weed. It grew along with the wheat and could not be distinguished until the harvest. The devil creates children who appear to be the true sons, representatives of the Most High God. But in the New Covenant there is superior representation. The Son of Man sows true sons of the kingdom who persevere. He plants seed that bears real fruit, whereas the sons of the wicked one are found out to be weeds, impostors.

Ethical Stipulation

The third aspect of the covenant concerns ethical stipulations. The Old Covenant was quite specific about the treatment of those who manifested themselves to be false sons. They were to be executed or excommunicated from society. The Old Covenant also addressed those who would not enter or comply with the terms of the covenant, the ten commandments. One could be a stranger in the land but he (she) had to live under the terms and obey the law of God. If he practiced other religions in the land, however, he was to be prosecuted. Idolatry was not allowed. It was to be rooted out with the sword. This was to be distinguished from false sons, those who had been at one time members of the covenant. Examples would be Ammon and Moab in the Old Covenant, neither of which had a place in the land because they descended from an incestuous relationship of Lot with his daughters (Genesis 19:36).

The message of the parable of the wheat and tares implies a New Covenant change. The tares are not to be rooted out. The question is, "Who are the tares?" More

than likely the tares are rival sons, false or apostate churches. They spring up in conjunction with the planting of the good seed. As the parable indicates, the good seed do not produce these bad seed. It is wrong to think that the quality of the good seed will prevent the emergence of bad seed. As a matter of fact, the bad seed will come forth whenever good seed is sown. It is inevitable. The clearest example is Christ's own ministry. He certainly sowed good seed but the Pharisees thrived on His ministry. They probably experienced a great surge of membership as a result of Christ's work. They did so as rivals to the covenant. So did Judas his own disciple.

Christ says that the false sons are not to be rooted out from society by force. In the modern world, these would be cults or perhaps other religions. Certainly Christ would not condone the use of the sword or the death penalty in either case. He would allow them to continue to exist side by side with the church no matter how Christian the society became. If this had been practiced throughout the history of the Church a number of horrible atrocities could have been avoided. But this does raise the issue of sanctions on the wicked seed. How would the rival sons be dealt with in a Christian or even a non-Christian culture?

Sanctions

As has already been pointed out, the sanctions of the covenant are blessing and cursing. They are the positive and negative feedback to covenant faithfulness or unfaithfulness. The analogy of the tares in the parable is important here. In agriculture, weeds hold a certain amount of moisture in the soil. They have a certain positive sanctioning effect. They are a threat and benefit to the wheat.

The field should be properly defined for a correct interpretation of the parable. The field is not the Church, as some have mistakenly claimed, but the world. If the field is the Church, then discipline or excommunication could not be allowed. Jesus and Paul most definitely advocate the removal of unrepentant sinners from the congregation (cf. Matthew 18:15ff. and 1 Corinthians 5).

So, the field is the **world** according to Jesus' own interpretation, which means that there are two kingdoms living simultaneously in the world as Calvin and Luther said even though they had different views on the two kingdoms. Calvin believed that both were to be under the authority of Scripture, whereas Luther advocated only the Church; according to him the State belonged to the devil. Importantly, Jesus does not speak this way. He does not put the State or the Church for that matter in one sphere or the other. Instead, He refers to the sons of the kingdom and the sons of the wicked one, but the latter is not even described as having a kingdom! Thus, the issue is the relationship between the people of God and the tares in the **world**, meaning the tares are rival churches, cults, and religions.

The tares are not to be uprooted (destroyed), however, which leads to some interesting application. Rival churches and cults have a positive and negative benefit. Negatively, they are a threat to the very existence of the true Church. Positively, they force the Church constantly to check itself. They call for adherence to the Scripture and the historic creeds as well as obedience. But at no time is the Church allowed to go on a witch hunt by attempting to extinguish all the "heretics."

How is the Church to deal with false sons? If anything, the false sons will be near the Church until Judgment Day. They will not nor can they be extinguished. Nevertheless, from the parable it seems that there is only one way to overcome the rival seed, **OUTGROW THEM**. Returning to the agrarian model again. The best way to overcome weeds is with good plants. When putting in a lawn, the

good grass will outgrow the weeds if the lawn is properly cultivated. The good drives out the bad.

A friend of mine who is a pastor in the inner city recently dealt with some Jehovah's Witnesses in an interesting way. He is new to his parish and lives close to the church that he pastors. One day he looked out of his window to discover that evangelists from the cult were going door to door and even trying to proselytize some of his own members. My friend Willie put on his baseball cap and ran out to catch the cult members. He said, "You mind if I walk along with you?" They eagerly said, "No, you're welcome to join us," not knowing who he was. Well, they came to the first house and went through their pitch. Willie quietly stood there. He didn't say a word until they finished. When they did, he spoke up and said, "Now, let me tell you where these people are wrong." He then pulled out his Bible and presented the orthodox Gospel.

This continued from house to house for about five visits. The cult members finally got the picture and the trainer said to the others, "Come on, let's get out of here. We'll just go to other neighborhoods as long as this man is around. There is no use wasting our time here." My friend Willie tells me they have not been back since!

This wise faithful pastor was not rude or angry toward the people in the cult. He simply out evangelized them. And, they left. This is one way how the rival sons of Christianity can be outgrown!

Continuity

The final point of the covenant always concerns its transferal. More than this, there can only be true succession with continuity. This is why sanctions are so important. Negative sanctions break down continuity, even complete loss of inheritance. Famine, blindness, barrenness all disrupt continuous extension of the covenant people. Positive sanctions, blessings, facilitate proper succession.

According to Moses, however, continuity could in the final analysis only be maintained by death. The head of the covenant had to die for the next generation to inherit. In Moses' case, he had to pass away outside the land. He anticipated Christ, who would be the last covenant head to die. Even so, our Lord did not remain dead. More than death was required to establish covenantal continuity. The Resurrection overcame death so that the disciples could receive an imperishable inheritance.

The relationship between death and life to the formation of continuity provides the background to the succession theme of the parable of the wheat and the tares. The main concern of the servants in the story was to deal with the tares. They asked, "Do you want us then to go and gather them up?" (13:28). Their point is quite obvious. By destroying the tares, they thought to preserve the wheat.

Continuity of the covenant, in other words, could only be maintained if the tares were removed. Prior to the Cross, this would have been the case. In the Old covenant theocracy, the sword was used to maintain continuity. In the New Covenant, because Christ has fulfilled the Old and because the Spirit has come in fullness, death is no longer the primary means of continuity. The conquest of death through Christ and His Resurrection is the means. Theologically, this forms the rationale for why the tares are not pulled out. So, how is the continuity of the covenant maintained?

If continuity does not come by simply pulling out the tares it must be seen in terms of two points in the parable. One, the good seed, the sons of the kingdom, grow and are sustained. As has already been mentioned, their development holds in check and eventually overcomes the tares. It is clear from the parable that the tares are never completely eradicated. It is equally clear that the tares do not overrun the wheat. The wheat comes to harvest and the good kingdom is not destroyed before the end. Aside from the eschatological ramifications of the parable, positive growth forms continuity.

Two, the other important point about the parable is that final judgment creates the ultimate continuity for the righteous. Death is not merely extermination. It is the Great and Final Judgment Day of the Lord. How does this create continuity? The sons of the kingdom find their continuity in that the tares are removed forever. The harvest continues world without end! The tares on the other hand find the final and ultimate outworking of discontinuity. They are removed to perdition where they live in perfect continuity with evil and the justly deserved judgment of eternal torment, hell.

Thus, covenantal continuity is maintained after the Cross not in the death of the covenant head as was the case of Moses. Jesus has died and death is to have no more victory. Instead, covenantal continuity is extended positively through the expansion of the sons of the kingdom, good seed.

Conclusion

As someone has said, the best defense is a good offense. The Church cannot make advance in the world by focusing on the destruction of the tares. This is not to say that the people of God should not be taught about doctrinal error and heresy, or that the antagonistic rivals of Christianity should not be addressed. Rather, the parable of the wheat and the tares should be a reminder that the best way to deal with the enemy is to outgrow him. We are not to beat him by joining him. We are to beat him by converting his followers, by leading them to join us with new hearts!