

COVENANT RENEWAL

Genesis 1:26-28

Matthew 28:18-20

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COVENANT AND SPIRITUALITY

And I will dwell among the sons of Israel and will be their God and they shall know that I am the Lord their God who brought them out of the land of Egypt, that I might dwell among them; I am the Lord their God (Exodus 29:45-46).

I will also walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people (Leviticus 26:12).

I will dwell in them and walk among them; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people (2 Corinthians 6:16).

Covenant and spirituality should go together. Yet, they are not normally associated with each other. Covenant is judicial and spiritual is mystical. Covenant comprehends that great judicial body of truth from the Protestant Reformation. Spirituality is thought of as part of those pietistic, mystical and catholic branches of Christendom that are consistently viewed as quite foreign to the forensic truths of the Reformation.

As the two systems have often been theologically framed, they are in conflict. But with proper Biblical and covenantal corrections, do they need to be? I believe that precise modification according to the Law, the Prophets, and the Gospel enable both to work together as part of theology and life. And well they should. But how? The Biblical covenant involves both.

The opening verses of this newsletter state the most profound summary of the covenant, what could be called, "THE COVENANT FORMULA OF THE BIBLE." There you have it in one simple statement. God is God and never ceases to be God. But this transcendent God is with and in His people. He is immanent. Anyone who has read me for any period of time knows that this is the first part of the Biblical covenant. It forms the parameters of all of theology and life, even the rest of the covenant for that matter. Nothing about the covenant ceases to be rigorously legal and personal. The problem in theology has been to build entire systems on one or the other aspect to the exclusion of the other, especially in the area of spirituality.

Covenant theology is known for its objective and judicial emphases. As such, it has tended to be overly rational, intellectual, and litigious. It has often conveyed the idea that life's problems can be solved by reading a book or by prosecuting one's brother. I once knew a man who actually said to me, "Every problem in the church can be eradicated by a church court." Covenant theology has no doubt honestly come by its reputation of being cold and mechanical.

Spirituality, on the other hand, has equally created its own set of theological problems. It has been known for its subjective and mystical emphases. By definition, it has not been usually too concerned with theology; perhaps that is why it has consistently produced such bad theology! It has fallen prey to pantheism and many other doctrinal ills. It

has tended out of reaction to the objective in the direction of the emotional, effusive and fanatic. It has even produced a type of warm, mystical escapism that has been "No earthly good," or I might add, "No heavenly good either," because good feelings do not get one to heaven; only Christ can take a person to Eternal Life.

The theological polarity is unfortunate. It has been devastating to the church, which has been witnessed by this author throughout his entire Christian experience. I have known many warm-hearted Christians who have a relationship with Christ but who are resistant to doctrine and theology. I have also been all too familiar with a kind of cold-hearted Calvinism that seems to do quite well without any kind of personal walk with Christ! This terrifies me. Indeed, this sort of deistic Calvinism recoils from any discussion about the indwelling of Christ and the love of God.

Now, I say that the conflict between these two systems is unfortunate because they really both need each other, although they will rarely, if ever, admit it. The judicial should not exclude the personal. If it does, then justification stands without sanctification. People can say they are declared right with God and live comfortably as though they are the just who live by faith and do not need any fruitful works. Looking at it from the other side, the personal without the judicial loses all objectivity; it too leads to a warm-feeling kind of immorality.

The solution to this theological and moral dilemma is the correct understanding of the Biblical covenant, a covenantal kind of spirituality. In this newsletter, I propose to show how the first point of the Biblical covenant lays the foundation for a correct spirituality. I have called this point true transcendence because Biblical transcendence involves immanence. God is transcendent in that He is distinct in His Being, which enables Him to be near, or present, at the same time. This is why the covenant is a relationship. It involves the judicial, declarative and propositional. It should also include the personal because the Word of God is to be internalized by the covenant man or woman. Covenant encompasses both.

Loving God

The love God has for His people and they are to have for Him best describes the spirituality of the covenant. The first point of the covenant speaks of a dynamic relationship with the Living God. True transcendence is spiritual without violating the person of God. This spirituality is expressed in the Mosaic words,

Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one!
And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart
and with all your soul and with all your might (Deuteronomy 6:4-5).

God is one, transcendence, but this God is to be loved.

There is to be a relationship with Him, immanence. Love describes the mystical union of God with and in His people.

This covenantal love is legal and relational. It involves obedience, "Love is the fulfillment of the law" (Romans 13:10). But love is also presence, relationship, "Love is the fulfillment of the law," which implies more than a mechanical sort of compliance with the commandments. It is love from the heart! Covenantal spirituality does not neglect either the legal or the personal, especially the relational side.

An unsuspecting man made this statement, "I think love is simply keeping the ten commandments toward God and people." I thought I knew what he meant but apparently he didn't. At one time he lived a profound Christian life. He attended church. He believed the right theology (Reformed). He put his children in Christian schools. He picketed abortion clinics. He was even politically incorrect; he belonged to the Republican Party. Yet, he still left his God. He fell out of love with his maker. He shackled up with other gods. Today, he lives far away from God's people, his family, and God Himself. God willing, he will return to the covenant claim on his life. At present, however, he has lost the spiritual side of being physical.

It seems that many conservatives have fallen out of love with God lately. One man claimed several years ago, "The New Christian Right: We're Ready to Lead." How wrong he was. A little adultery, a little voyeurism, a little fraud, a little homosexuality, a little bit of everything but the kitchen sink was in the Conservative Christian's bedroom. As they say, "People who live in glass conservative houses should not throw conservative stones." They did and they got shattered.

The new Christian Right was not ready to lead. Money, sex and power slit their spiritual aortas virtually before the first gasp of political progress could be made. A little power corrupted the spiritually weak. Absolute power absolutely corrupted the strong, some of the conservative leadership inside the "Beltway."

Now the political power is gone. I have seen this on many levels, national and ecclesiastical. Good Christian people have fallen away from their love for Christ. The political losses have been bad enough. The spiritual defections are even more alarming. Why? The spiritual side of being physical has disappeared from many a well-intentioned Christian conservative lately. Let's hope they get their spirituality back before taking another swipe at the political arena.

Why pick on the conservative Christians? After all they did try to do something to change the country. Well they did and well they should be commended. But woe be unto them for many of them had the ultimate solutions. And woe is woe because all too often the spiritual was lost in the hustle and bustle of good attempts to change this troubled world. Trying to change the world was not enough. Living out great moral and political ideals was short of the mark. Winning by moral intimidation did not win. For one, the "New Right" never had enough morality or intimidation. Besides, effecting political structures is never enough; this is exactly the unbeliever's way of cultural victory. This is why he invests everything in the political. In the words of Leo Tolstoy,

Men are so accustomed to establish and defend their existence by violence, by bayonets, bullets, prisons, and gallows, that it seems to them as if such an arrangement of life were not only normal, but were the only one possible.¹

1. Leo Tolstoy, *The Kingdom of God is Within You*, Trans. Aylmer Maude (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), p. 130. While I don't agree with all of Tolstoy's theology, I think he understates what many of us have

Many conservative Christians know better. They did not live better. Living is not as simple as knowing. Real living is more than knowing. Many became accustomed too quickly to the accustomed way of establishing and defending their existence. They lost their first love. They forgot that real living is first loving God. They lost their real power.

It reminds me of the time St. Thomas Aquinas was walking with a friend in Rome. As they stood in front of the great Cathedral, the friend pointed to the massive, looming structure and said, "We Christians certainly no longer have to say to the world, 'Silver and gold have we none.'" To this Thomas replied, "But neither can we say to the lame man, 'In the Name of Jesus of Nazareth rise up and walk.'" The church of Thomas' day could dispense forgiveness but it could not offer true healing. The church of our day has put presidents into office but it has lost its spiritual edge. It walks the low road. It no longer takes the high one. In the words of one little poem,

With thoughtless and impatient hands

We tangle up

The plans

The Lord hath wrought. - - - - -

And when we cry

In pain, He saith,

"Be quiet, dear,

While I untie the knot."

To untie the knot, I suggest a reconsideration of the spiritual life in terms of the Biblical covenant. This involves the spiritual and personal, a loving relationship with God. The covenantal language of the Bible gives us three aspects to this.

Romance With God

Spirituality is a romance with God. It is simple. In the words of the Apostle John, "God is Love" (1 John 5:16-19). Man's relationship with God can only be based on the love of this loving God. The same passage says the Church loves because Christ first loved. This is romance, albeit not in any sexual sense of course. Nevertheless, love has a definite romantic element to it.

But we're too big for love because romance is childish. Right? Wrong! Yet, you know that this is the way some "knowledgeable" Christians think. They know too much for things such as love or romance. When was the last time you talked about your walk with God as a loving relationship? When was the last time you heard a sermon on love? When was the last time you simply meditated on loving God? Maybe it's because we spend too much time denying the romance of the union between God and man.

Love means romance. It works like this. The covenantal language of the Bible describes God as a groom. There is an entire book that uses this metaphor, the *Song of Solomon*. Granted, the book speaks of human marriage, but it is simultaneously describing the marriage between God and His bride, the Church. In this book, God courts a bride through the symbol of the human bride and groom; the bride responds with love; hence, the Divine romance between God and man.

G.K. Chesterton called this romance, mystery, because it involves the fusion of the familiar with the unfamiliar.²

triad to say for so long: the world cannot be lastingly changed by political means; only the Word and the Sacrament can do this. Unfortunately, this has gotten lost in the discussions about the nature of the kingdom of God. I agree with the title to Tolstoy's book, but, I also think the kingdom of God is without, as in culture and civilization. A better title would be, *The Kingdom of God is Within and Without*.

2. G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Garden City, New York: Image Books, [1924] 1959), p. 10.

The mystery is that the unknown somehow is combined with the known. Romance always involves both. Two lovers risk everything to sneak off to be with one another. They cannot get enough of each other. Yet, the more they know means the more they don't know about each other. The more familiar the more unfamiliar. Their love pulls them into a dark abyss of the unknown. The deeper they go the more they realize that they don't know. This is sometimes the frustration of married love. The longer two people are married, the less they seem to know about each other; husbands and wives surprise you about the time you think you've figured them out.

On the other hand, two people seem to love each other more when they know less. Actually they love less when they know less. Newlyweds, for example, just don't know much about love (yet). Love is a mystery because it mixes the familiar with the unfamiliar. This is why a relationship cannot be based entirely on knowledge. If it is, then it stops loving. A relationship demands knowledge but it must go beyond knowing. Only romantic love can.

Blaise Pascal, the leading mathematician and engineer of his day, discovered the superiority of love in knowing God. In the midst of a personal crisis in 1654, he sought solace in the reading of the Gospels. Meditating on St. Peter's thrice-repeated denial of Jesus, he realized his utter need for God, his own desolation, and through Jesus Christ he found forgiveness. He wrote in his journal entry that night, which was discovered sewn into the lining of his coat only after he had died:

Fire . . . the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, not the God of the philosophers and scholars . . . Certainty, Certainty, emotion, joy, peace, the God of Jesus Christ. Thy God shall be my God. Oblivion of the world and of everything except God. Joy, Joy, Joy, tears of Joy!³

Sounds like someone in love. This is the way two lovers talk. Indeed Pascal was in love. His relationship to God was romantic, mysterious, passionate. He came to emphasize as a result what he called, *esprit de finesse*, or "knowledge of the heart." He said, "The heart has its reasons of which reason knows nothing."

At this point, am I suggesting that knowledge is not important? No, but right theology does not save us. One can believe the right things and go to hell. Knowing catechisms and reading books is not all there is to a relationship with God. Pascal said in his famous *Pensees*,

Knowing God without "knowing our own wretchedness makes for pride. Knowing our own wretchedness without knowing God makes for despair. Knowing Jesus Christ strikes the balance because he shows us both God and our own wretchedness.

No, knowledge is not enough. The key is love. True love is not without knowledge; it requires knowing. Yet, love is more than knowing because a relationship requires more. It demands love for it to exist. And this love comes through Jesus Christ. From the 13th century comes the words of Mechthild of Helfde (A.D. 1277),

Twixt God and thee but love shall be;
Twixt earth and thee distrust and fear,
Twixt sin and thee shall be hate and war;

And hope shall be twixt heaven and thee till night is o'er.

Yes, love is more than knowledge. And only love can bind two into one, which brings me to the next point of covenantal spirituality.

Oneness with' God

Covenantal spirituality involves oneness with God. The verses at the beginning of this newsletter speak of God being with and in His people. In the Old Covenant, perhaps the emphasis is more on His being with His people, even though the in is not to be excluded; individuals were indwelt by the Holy Spirit. By the time of the New Covenant, however, the impact of the Incarnation and the Indwelling Holy Spirit results in a shift from with to in.

According to John Calvin, this concept is the center of the sacraments and the entire spiritual life. He called it, "Mystical oneness," or "incorporation." This concept certainly played as big a role in his theology as predestination. Unfortunately only those who read and understand Calvin realize this. He built his case of mystical incorporation on the famous "into" prepositions in Paul. The critical passage for him was Romans 6 where baptism and the spiritual life are tied together: "As you are baptized so walk in him."⁴

Biblically and theologically Calvin was right of course. Beginning at the beginning, the Word is propositional and internal (Genesis 1). Man's relationship with God is juridical and personal; it is incarnational. Both elements should be held together in the proper tension. The personal should stand on the juridical but not be neglected in the name of legal fiction. And, by the time of the New Covenant, an ontology is established with the humanity of Jesus, even though it is not with His Deity. John Calvin believed that through participation in the Lord's Supper, man becomes one with the Humanity of Christ.⁵ Through oneness with God, man becomes truly Human, not Divine. This is the difference between the pagan doctrine of ontology and the Christian.

Nevertheless, man was made to live in union with God. This is why Jesus could speak of union with Himself in organic language. In John 15, Christ describes His relationship to His bride as that of a branch to a vine. He calls for the disciples to, "Abide in Him" (John 15). This is oneness. This is a loving relationship with God. This is a covenantally organic relationship. Certainly, paganism has perverted what Christianity promises. Pagan organicism is wrong and dangerous. But this is no reason to avoid the plain sense of Scripture such as John 15 and the Christian doctrine of mystical oneness. In fact, the pagan emphasis on the organic merely confirms an inescapable longing in man. The answer is not the abandonment of Christian metaphor and reality but the reclamation of what truly belongs to the people of God.

Throughout the history of the church, oneness with God has been at the heart of true spirituality. Perhaps nowhere does this appear more obviously than in the classic, *The Cloud of Unknowing*. The unknown author of the 14th century, an English monk, says that oneness with God is achieved by piercing the cloud of unknowing. He says,

Lift up thine heart unto God with a meek stirring of love; and mean Himself, and none of His goods. . . At the first time when thou dost it, thou findest but a darkness; and as it were a cloud of unknowing, thou knowest not what, saving that thou feelist in thy will a naked intent unto God. This darkness and this cloud is, howsoever thou dost, betwixt thee and thy God, and letteth thee that thou mayest neither see Him clearly by light of understanding in thy reason, nor feel Him in sweetness of love in thine affection. And therefore shape thee to bide in this darkness as long as thou mayest, evermore crying after Him that thou lovest.

4. See Calvin's commentary on Remans 6.

5. See especially Ronald S. Wallace, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament* (Tyler, Texas: Geneva Divinity School Press, 1982), pp. 203-211.

3. Quoted in Kenneth Swanson, *Uncommon Prayer* (New York: Ballantine, 1987), pp. 67-68.

For when I say darkness, I mean a lacking of knowing: as all that thing that thou knowest not, or else that thou hast forgotten, it is dark to thee; for thou seest it not with thy ghostly eye. And for this reason it is not called a cloud of the air, but a cloud of unknowing, that is betwixt thee and thy God.

And if ever thou shalt come to this cloud and dwell and work therein as I bid thee, thee behoveth as this cloud of unknowing is above thee, betwixt thee and thy God, right so put a cloud of forgetting beneath thee; betwixt thee and all the creatures that ever be made. Thee thinketh, peradventure, that thou art full far from God because that this cloud of unknowing is betwixt thee and thy God: but surely, and it be well conceived, thou art well further from Him when thou hast no cloud of forgetting betwixt thee and all the creatures that ever be made.⁶

For this 14th Century monk, oneness with God was in the cloud of unknowing. It was an abandonment of everything else, the cloud of forgetting, and entrance into a relationship with the "naked being of God." This oneness is dark and even somewhat foreboding, symbolized in the webbed ceilings of great cathedrals. But oneness with God is the heart of a true knowledge of Him. For, the Biblical covenant calls man to be with and in Him.

The Presence of God

Covenantal spirituality involves God's presence with us. Man can only know in a very limited sense what is not present with him. What is not present can only be a second best type of loving relationship. A person cannot be truly one with something that is not present; it is that simple. Two people can love at a distance but their presence can only be known through pictures and memories. God promises more in His relationship with man. He does provide His Word and the Sacrament. Both convey His presence in a special sense. By responding in faith to both, God promises that He will be near and even in man.

Scripturally, the presence of God is the key to faithfulness. Consider Joseph (Genesis 39). The chapter begins and ends with a simple statement of Emmanuel, God with us. Joseph resisted temptation because of the presence of the Loving God whom he knew. Frances de Sales used the analogy of a blind man experiencing the presence of a prince in his famous, *to the Devout*. He observed that a blind man can know the presence of his king when the prince is near, talks to him, and the blind man speaks back to him. Once the discussion stops, however, the presence is lost. For De Sales, therefore, prayer was the means to practicing the presence of God.

In addition to prayer, the sacraments present the presence of God. If Christ is really present in some sense, al-

beit spiritual, the nearness of God can be experienced. Brother Lawrence, the 17th Century soldier-turned-cook in the Carmelite Order wrote a book called, *the*

of This monk believed that all things, especially food, in some sense mediated the presence of God, if only we could see it. Dr. Van Til referred to this as the revelational character of creation. So important was the practice of the presence of God to Brother Lawrence that he said,

Were I a preacher, I should preach above all other things, the practice of the presence of God; were I a teacher, I should advise all the world to it; so necessary do I think it, and so easy.⁷

Evelyn Underhill, the 20th century friend and mentor of some of the famous *Inklings* (Charles Williams especially), spoke of this mediated presence of God as true sacramentalism. She said,

By sacramentalism I mean the humble acceptance of grace through the medium of things - God coming into our souls by means of humblest accidents - their intermingling of spirit and sense.⁸

I take issue with Underhill's use of the word, "intermingling." Her point about the use of physical things to convey grace is to the point, however, even though technically and theologically the two are not mixed. God uses the physical world to convey common grace. He uses physical elements such as bread and wine as means of special grace. These elements are part of a covenant ratification process. The fact that they convey grace means they are a covenantally spiritual act. There is the legal and the spiritual.

Covenantal spirituality involves the transcendent and the immanent. I have focused on the immanent relationship as one of loving God. There is no finer summary of the elements of romance, oneness, and presence, than the famous *Collect of Purity* found in the Book of Common Prayer. Penned in 800 A.D. by the famous Alcuin, the English scholar whom Charlemagne employed in Gaul to educate and Christianize his subjects, it has survived to this day as perhaps the finest summary of all that I have tried to say about covenantal spirituality up to this point.

Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open, all desires fully known, and from whom no secrets are hid; cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of thy Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love thee, and worthily magnify thy holy name; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

7. Selected Writings of Brother Lawrence, *Practicing the Presence of God*, ed. (Nashville: Upper Room, 1967), p. 10.

8. Selected Writings of Evelyn Underhill, ad. (Nashville: Upper Room, 1967), p. 25.

6. Selected Writings, *Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. (Nashville: Upper Room, 1967), p. 23.