

The Nature of Covenant

A covenant is a contract, a binding agreement between two parties, in which each party derives a benefit, and incurs an obligation. It also carries a penalty clause, which specifies the means of reparation in case of violation. In the Bible, when God establishes a covenant with his chosen people, it isn't clear what benefit he derives from it (because God has no needs), or what obligation he might owe (because he owns everything). The Bible seems pretty clear that whatever God does, he does for his own glory. Doing things for his glory is both the benefit he derives and the obligation he owes. No matter what we offer him, or what he offers us, he derives glory from each "transaction."

We cannot obligate God to anything. An inferior can never bind a superior contractually. Human inferiors can bind their superiors only because the Law is considered superior to everyone: rich and poor, powerful and weak, ruler and ruled. No one is above the law. But there is no law superior to God. If God is bound to an inferior, then the obligation exists only because the superior has obligated *himself*.

If a father promises his son a fishing pole for his son's birthday, he has obligated himself to provide it. There was no obligation prior to his promise. And there is no way for the son to force his father to provide it. The father provides it because it is his pleasure and delight to satisfy his son's desires, and because the father is self-compelled to fulfill his word. He has bound himself to his son, willingly and freely.

The Covenant Theme in Scripture

This benevolent, unilateral promise of a loving Father to his beloved child, is the nature of the covenant that God has established with his people. Covenant relationships begin very early in the Bible, with the first man and the first woman. As long as they did not eat of the Tree of Good and Evil, Adam and Eve might eat of any tree in the Garden, including the Tree of Life. But on the day they ate of the forbidden fruit, they would surely die.¹ There were benefits, obligations, and a penalty clause. That's a covenant. After the Fall, God established a system of altar and sacrifice. That too was done under a covenant. God repeated his covenant with Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. When God gave the Ten Commandments to Moses on two stone tablets, Moses wrote them down in a book called the Book of the *Covenant*.² And so the Ten Commandments arose under a covenant as well.³ To all the promises of this Mosaic covenant, God added or carried forward the covenants he previously established with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Thus, a single covenant covered all the generations of God's people.

Ex 6:3-8 I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty, but by My name LORD I was not known to them. I have also established My covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land of their pilgrimage, in which they were

¹ Gen. 2:16-17

² Ex. 24:7

³ Deut 4:13 So He declared to you His covenant which He commanded you to perform, the Ten Commandments; and He wrote them on two tablets of stone.

strangers. And I have also heard the groaning of the children of Israel whom the Egyptians keep in bondage, and I have remembered My covenant. Therefore say to the children of Israel: 'I am the LORD; I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, I will rescue you from their bondage, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments. I will take you as My people, and I will be your God. Then you shall know that I am the LORD your God who brings you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. And I will bring you into the land which I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and I will give it to you as a heritage: I am the LORD.'"

The Importance of Covenants

Why study covenants? What does a covenant have to do with the Christian disciplines? Or the Gospel? Or knowing God? Or being in Christ? Or fellowshiping in the Spirit? I'm going to suggest that it has *everything* to do with these; that it *is* these things. ***The only communion we may enjoy with God or with each other, is the communion that takes place under a covenant.*** That's a pretty broad, all-encompassing statement. But I believe it is the only conclusion we can draw from the Bible. Our relationship with God and with each other is not one-sided. It is not offering obedience to God by worshipping, evangelizing, and discipling just because God's word tells us to. That makes for a pretty dry relationship. It isn't loving one another just because we are commanded to love one another; it's not even loving one another because God first loved us. We do these things for the reasons I've given; but the *joy* of doing them, the richness, pleasure, and comfort that we derive from them, comes from the fact that we have a pre-established relationship with God, and with each other. We have an eternal identity and relationship through Jesus Christ. We were chosen by God for this very purpose. We are God's precious possession and his portion,⁴ just as he is our portion, and his kingdom is our inheritance.⁵ That relationship is defined, bound, and expressed by the covenant that exists between us.

The Impact of Broken Covenants

Without a covenant to define our relationship, it is like a man and a woman living together without the bonds of matrimony. The marriage covenant is what lends the relationship legitimacy, security, purpose, and satisfaction. It produces Godly offspring. Without the covenant, the relationship is purely mechanical and selfish in its desires; its children are illegitimate. The covenant is also what establishes trust in the relationship by specifying our rights and responsibilities. It documents them. It is legally enforceable by the community. If there is no signature, there is no marriage. If there are no witnesses, there is no marriage. These are legal requirements. Marriage protects the man from the charge of rape, and the woman from the charge of prostitution. Between rape and prostitution, there is consensual sex outside of marriage; the Bible calls that fornication. When a married person has sex with someone other than the spouse, it is called adultery. The covenant, therefore, establishes the legal rights and obligations of the marriage, and the crimes that occur when the rights and privileges of marriage are pursued outside of marital bonds.

⁴ Dt. 32:9; Jer. 12:10;

⁵ Ps. 119:57; 142:5; Lam. 3:24; Ps. 2:8; Gal. 4:7; Eph. 1:14; Heb. 10:34

In the 1970's the flower children began to say that a marriage certificate wasn't necessary. If the underlying trust wasn't there, the marriage wouldn't work anyway. Yet, without the signed covenant, marriages began to dissolve at a far greater rate than in the past. If there was no covenant, then there was no obligation – no legal or moral commitment to one another. Free love degenerated into willful and selfish abandonment. When there was a legal marriage, the idea arose that the responsibilities of the marriage were temporary, or optional. If marriage could begin with a signature, then it could end with a signature. The community began to accept divorce as readily as it did marriage, without considering the broader ramifications of ignoring covenants. The result was ever-expanding hurt, anger, bitterness, and resentment. Estranged partners were infuriatingly indifferent toward one another, or sometimes violent. Custody battles forced children to endure the separation that the spouses had to endure; but the children were not able to choose the situation for themselves as their parents had done. Many children of broken marriages grew up distrusting others, rejecting promises, and ignoring contractual obligations. If a basic contract like marriage was not going to be binding, then why should other contracts be binding? If it wasn't going to protect them, then why would any other contract protect them? Worse, why should anyone's promises be believed?

On a larger scale, the American Constitution is the foremost social contract. If we undermine the contractual obligations under the Constitution, then we unravel the social fabric – the social contract is the only thing that holds it all together. Judges in the 1970's began to play with the Constitution, using it as an instrument to *create* law instead of using it to *interpret* law. They violated the social contract when they did that. How? They circumvented the voters' right to remove law-makers with whom they disagreed. Supreme Court justices assumed the role of law-makers without any accountability to the voters. They are protected from voter removal by the Constitution, so that they are not swayed by the majority. In return, justices were supposed to forfeit the right to make laws. That is the system of checks and balances. The Constitution, then, is what defines the boundaries of the relationship between the citizens and their government. When the boundary markers shift without a social consensus, and that kind of change is imposed by the unilateral action of a few justices, upheaval results. If the Constitution does not mean today what it meant yesterday, then the beneficiaries of the contract (the citizens) rightfully suspect that they may lose other rights and privileges under the social contract. Instead of protecting and nurturing its beneficiaries, the contract becomes an instrument to control and manipulate them.

That's why God hates those who move boundary markers (Dt. 27:17). If God constantly changed his Bible, by changing his will and his promises, he would be thought untrustworthy and fickle. But God does not change.⁶ As the beneficiaries of his covenant, we are secure in the knowledge that he is steadfast. On the other hand, we are not so steadfast. When we fail to honor and glorify God by our own obedience, we undermine our relationship with him. We abandon our duty to be faithful to him, even though he remains faithful to us. We become an adulterer in the relationship, choosing a relationship with the world over fidelity to him. The children of the marriage, the believers in the church, are hurt by our wantonness. We unilaterally change the covenant by becoming autonomous. Autonomy means "self-law." In effect, we usurp the right

⁶ Num 23:19 "God is not a man , that He should lie, Nor a son of man, that He should repent. Has He said, and will He not do? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good? Heb 13:8 Jesus Christ is the same yesterday , today, and forever.

that belongs to God alone. We assume the role of law-maker without any authority to make laws under the covenant. You can see how marriage and other social contracts reflect the underlying nature of covenant itself. We in the church are called to be a covenant-abiding people. We are not to be adulterers or usurpers. We are not autonomous. We are servants of God.

The Purpose of Obedience

Christ asked to be judged by his works: John 10:37 “If I do not do the works of My Father, do not believe Me.” Obedience was part of his implied covenant with the Father, the measure of his commitment to the covenantal relationship that he enjoyed with him, and the proof of his commitment to us. Even without a written contract to tell us its provisions, we can discern the provisions by the parties’ performance. As with Christ, our obedience indicates to the world the nature of the covenant we have with God; and it indicates to God that we submit to its provisions.⁷ We are faithful to the covenant because we are faithful to him. If we are not obedient, the world and the church has good cause not to believe anything we say.

That being said, performance is a less reliable indicator of the content of a contract than an actual written record. We cannot discern hypocrisy and wrong-doing if we have no standard by which to judge someone’s actions. A written contract is a de facto witness of the agreement that exists between two parties.⁸ The Bible is the written contract between God and man. It is the witness to his promises. It describes the relationship between God and man, with all of its blessings and curses, promises and fulfillments, boundaries and rights. It is a reminder of what we have pledged ourselves to do. I’m going to repeat myself here:

The relationship we enjoy with God is defined and bound by the covenant he established with us.

God will never break his covenant with us. It is not in his nature. As his children, it must not be in our nature either. We are not of the world. We do not see things as the world sees them. We don’t do things as the world does them. If we don’t understand the nature of our covenant with God, then we don’t understand the desires or the nature of God either. Right understanding leads to a right relationship with him. And what binds us to this covenant? It is a vow. Better not to make a vow in the first place, the Bible says, than to make a vow and break it (Ecc. 5:5). What vow did we make that binds us to this covenant?

Faith vs. Works

A vow is the promise to fulfill our obligations under a covenant. God made a vow to redeem us. But how have we made a vow to him? Specifically, how did we make a vow of obedience when the condition of the covenant is that we shall live by faith alone, and not by

⁷ 1 John 4:17 Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because as He is, so are we in this world.

⁸ Deut 31:26-29 "Take this Book of the Law, and put it beside the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, that it may be there as a witness against you; for I know your rebellion and your stiff neck. If today, while I am yet alive with you, you have been rebellious against the LORD, then how much more after my death? Gather to me all the elders of your tribes, and your officers, that I may speak these words in their hearing and call heaven and earth to witness against them. For I know that after my death you will become utterly corrupt, and turn aside from the way which I have commanded you. And evil will befall you in the latter days, because you will do evil in the sight of the LORD, to provoke Him to anger through the work of your hands."

works?⁹ How did declaring our faith in Christ turn into a vow of obedience? We'll talk more about this when we discuss grace vs. works. But for the moment, let's just say that a declaration of faith is a commitment to trust God, no matter what. "Though he take my life, yet will I trust him" (Job 13:15). And the evidence or sign of that trusting relationship is doing his will.¹⁰ Doing his will doesn't earn, repay, or maintain the salvation he freely gives us. Yet, it is the requisite *sign* of our salvation, even if it is not the *means* to obtain or secure it.¹¹

Signs of the Covenant

As I just suggested, what transpires between two parties is witnessed by the text of the covenant itself. In addition to the text, there must be a pledge of performance. It answers the question, "How do I know that you will fulfill your promises?" We call this earnest, which is a deposit or down-payment. We give something of value to the other party in recognition of our agreement. It seals our good-faith promise to fulfill it. Otherwise the contract is void *ab initio* (from the start). The Holy Spirit is God's pledge to us.¹² Our repentance, signified by baptism, might be considered our pledge to God.¹³ Baptism is a visible reminder of what has been promised. We call this a "sign" or a "seal" of the covenant. This is mentioned many times in the Bible. If we can get a handle on what makes a sign different than the actual performance, it will go a long way towards helping us understand the difference between obedience under grace, and meritorious works.

In the OT, a pile of rocks served as the sign or witness of the covenant, or as a marker commemorating the fulfillment of a covenantal promise.¹⁴ We still place statues and obelisks in our public parks to remind us of major events and personalities, to honor the sacrifices made on our behalf, and our indebtedness to those who came before us. A pledge might be signified by a handshake, or by a hand placed under the thigh.¹⁵ Circumcision is the sign and seal of God's grace in the OT; baptism is the sign and seal in the NT. Communion is the sign and seal of our being ingrafted into Christ, into the New Covenant of his blood. "Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood, you have no life in you." (Jn. 6:53) Now it is clear here, unless you're Roman Catholic or Lutheran, that we don't mean physically eating his flesh and drinking his blood. At

⁹ Rom 1:17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "The just shall live by faith ." Gal 2:20 the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God; Gal 3:11 But that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God is evident, for "the just shall live by faith ." Heb 10:36-38 For you have need of endurance, so that **after you have done the will of God**, you may receive the promise: "For yet a little while, And He who is coming will come and will not tarry. Now the just shall live by faith ; But if anyone draws back, My soul has no pleasure in him."

¹⁰ John 13:35 By this all will know that you are My disciples , if you have love for one another."

¹¹ John 13:15-17 For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you. Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them. John 15:14 You are My friends if you do whatever I command you. 2 Peter 1:10 Therefore, brethren, be even more diligent to make your call and election sure, for if you do these things you will never stumble;

¹² 2 Cor 1:21-22; 5:5 Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit , guaranteeing what is to come. NIV Eph 1:13-14 Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession-to the praise of his glory. NIV

¹³ Matt 3:8 Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. NIV

¹⁴ Gen. 21:30 (ewe lambs); Gen. 28:18 (stone); Gen. 31:46-52 (pillar); Ex. 28:12 (twelve stones); Dt. 27:4 (altar); Dt. 31:19 (song); Josh. 4:3 (twelve stones); Josh. 22:27 (altar); Josh. 24:27 (stone);

¹⁵ Gen. 24:2 Abraham's servant pledges to get a bride for Isaac; 47:29 Israel pledges to return Joseph's body to the land of his fathers.

the Last Supper we are given the proper meaning of the sign. Communion is done “in remembrance” of Christ (Lk. 22:19; 1Cor. 11:24). Thus, the communion table is a sign. It is a remembrance that he promised to redeem us, and that we trust him to do just that.

I’m suggesting that our obedience is likewise a sign of that New Covenant. It is not a sacrament, but it is the visible sign, the tangible representation of that underlying relationship. It is how we “abide” in Christ.¹⁶ It is our ongoing acknowledgement of the covenant, as if walking past the pile of twelve stones by the River Jordan.¹⁷ It is a witness and a testimony of who we are in Christ. It is the reason why James warns us that faith without works is dead.¹⁸ Unless there are works to accompany the verbal declaration, there is no sign or seal of our faith. That is why James is telling us that our faith is void without them. By inference, so is the covenant that we hoped to receive through faith. Without repentance and obedience, the covenant is void *ab initio*. There is no earnest to seal it.

The Paradox

This is where it begins to unravel in the minds of many believers. The distinctive of the Christian faith is that our salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. Our works cannot and will not save us (Eph. 2:8,9; Rom. 11:6). And yet, if we have no works, then we have no faith, and we are not saved. **How then are works done to prove our faith any different from works done to obtain salvation?** Moreover, how many works would be enough to prove our faith? Ten? Ten million? Can we ever be sure we are saved if our faith is always in doubt? Is this the Christianity of the Bible? Is this the *Good News* that Christ has done it all, and we may enter into his rest (Heb. 4:3)? Is this “faith alone,” or has it become “faith plus works”?

Memorize this: **we are saved through faith alone, but not through faith which is alone.** Works *accompany* faith (Jm. 2:24); they are not the foundation, source, or object of our faith.

Preview of Things to Come

Over the next three lessons, we will examine the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace. We will chew over the seeming paradox between faith and works, and its implications for our communion with God. Then comes the Redemptive Covenant in which Christ fulfills our obligations under the Covenant of Works. We will be looking very carefully at what role the system of altar and sacrifice played in the OT. Was that system under works or grace? Why was it necessary? Why was it inadequate? Why did Christ have to come?

These form the basic framework within which to understand the Bible. Every other area of theology flows from this framework, as does our ability to distinguish heresy from orthodoxy, and Christianity from other belief systems. At the end of this series, we will begin to learn and practice the Christian disciplines as a way to draw near to God.

¹⁶ John 6:56 He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me , and I in him. John 15:10 If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father’s commandments and abide in His love.

¹⁷ Joshua 4:3

¹⁸ Jams. 2:20, 26