

# A Covenant People

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## **Forgive us that with the Cross as starting point we have made of Christian faith a bland and easy going way of life. [1]**

This bonding of the early Christian communities was the result of something stronger than a set of common beliefs – they were joined by covenant together. The biblical concept and reality of covenant defies dictionary definition, all are too small to convey what is contained. For example, Webster's dictionary defines covenant as 'a formal, solemn, and binding agreement voluntarily entered by two or more parties who share a common purpose'; a clear but inadequate explanation. Covenant goes deeper than the definition suggests, and is certainly wider in its implications than people first realise.

Covenant extends beyond Scripture and Christianity; it permeates the whole of life. It is the bonding power in marriage, business transactions, holiday agreements, insurance policies, government or personal pensions, club memberships, international defence agreements, peace agreements, trading agreements, extradition treaties between countries, citizenship, residency agreements – the list is virtually endless. The truth is covenant is pervasive to the whole of life, and its understanding and practice affects all people, whether they are aware of it or not. This is why its violation and the consequences that follow its violation are far more widespread than commonly realised. Millions of people are experiencing the painful consequences of broken covenant without ever knowing that this is the root cause of what is happening to them.

Unfortunately, those who lack understanding concerning covenant and its violation includes those who most need to grasp its significance – i.e., those who have entered the New Covenant in Christ. Covenant affects our relationships with all that surrounds us and it determines the quality of our fellowship with God, family, other believers, society. Any breach of covenant with - God – means heaven becomes as brass to us. God said if we regard iniquity in our heart the Lord will not hear us. [Ps 66:18]

**Our Family** – hinders our prayers. Where we do not walk in the good of the covenant in the marriage and we leave ourselves open to other ills. [1Pe 3:7]

**The Church** – the hypocrisy of claiming to be one body while remaining divided from each other violates the reality of the New Covenant, and opens us to all kinds of sickness, and even premature death. (1Co 11:30)

**Society** – is a violation of our purpose in this world. This world is affected for the good when confronted by our integrity and good works. We are meant to communicate Christ through our good works to the wider society around us. (1 Peter 2:12).

**The Environment** – makes us destroyers rather than guardians of the earth. Adam was created to protect and serve his environment; instead, he chose to pursue his self-interest at the expense of all else. His progeny – in pursuing the same self-interest – continue to poison the earth's atmosphere as well as its land and seas. As a result, the world's population is now subjected to a wide range of respiratory ailments, sicknesses, skin disorders, and an escalating development of new horrific diseases. . . . (Roms.8:19-21)

God has never dealt with man on any basis other than covenant, from Adam right up to the present time. Various specific covenants are described in Scripture, each of them revealing more of God's nature and purpose for man. Outside of Christ, we were strangers to these 'covenants of promise', but now we are participants in these same covenants through our relationship with him. [Eph 2:12-13] The various biblical covenants should not to be understood as dispensational, that is each lasting a fixed period only then to be cast aside as new ones were made.

The revelation of God is continuous, and the continuing revelation of his person and purpose for man is accompanied by a calling to a new depth of covenant commitment. Biblical covenants prior to Jesus were 'swallowed' into the New Covenant, like a river reaching the sea. All the covenants prior to Christ were focused toward him, and in him - the New Covenant - they all find their fulfilment. The early Christians' never considered life outside covenant. The commitment to Christ, to one another, and to God's ultimate purpose for all things was rooted in their radical commitment to live covenantally, and generated a readiness to be radical in this, no matter what the cost. Whatever their circumstances or condition, they knew it was tied to their keeping or breaking of covenant.

Restoration of our understanding of this challenges us to new levels of commitment and – causes us to progress to higher levels of living, all the way to the fullness of Christ described by Paul in his letter to the Ephesians. [Eph. 3:13?] Lateral Covenant

Jesus taught covenant to the disciples in a variety of ways, the strongest impact being made by his own life on them. His utter giving of himself to the Father's will, their welfare and the peoples needs - almost without consideration of his own challenged them. He signified the depth of covenant when he spoke of their 'abiding' in him. [John 15:4-10] This phrase expresses the union between Christ and his church, which is meant to be inseparable in life. Whereas the phrase 'abide in me' means 'to have no consciousness of unrighteousness separating your fellowship with Christ. Equally this means that you are not to be engaged in any activity that he cannot be a part of. On the positive hand it is descriptive of our union with him in life and all its activities, our dependence on him in every matter that requires wisdom, decision, direction or action. It is being careful in our

commitment and at all times maintain uninhibited fellowship with Christ and his people.

Therefore, in coming into Christ you come into covenant with all others in Christ. You do not choose the members of this covenant. Our relationship together is not on a 'pick and choose' basis – to be in relationship with Christ is to be in relationship with the whole family of God in Christ. However, a new question now arises: how do we experientially live out the covenant together with others in Christ? It is at this point restorers are sometimes accused of seeking to introduce a 'different' covenant basis for relationship between Christians, one which is 'outside' the New Covenant in Christ. This is blatantly untrue. What we do seek is to practicalise the New Covenant; we are anxious to make the New Covenant experiential for all believers.

Achieving God's purpose requires the commitment of all parties to a proactive covenant relationship. All other purposes, relationships, or pursuits in life are subservient to the keeping of the New Covenant. This does not preclude the existence of horizontal covenants within the New Covenant. In fact, as pointed out at the beginning of this chapter, horizontal covenants are made every day, and are not the exclusive domain of Christians. Those people afraid of horizontal covenants within the New Covenant community either:

- *Don't understand God's covenant nature.*
- *Are not prepared for the commitment that covenant keeping demands.*

Some Christians looking for an excuse to escape covenant issues, choose to ignore covenant teaching. They feel that if they remain ignorant of covenants they cannot suffer for violating covenant. This is wrong thinking. It is like a man who - knowing he is not in right fellowship with his brother - thinks that as long as he doesn't take the Eucharist (communion) with him, he will not be judged. Or the adulterer who thinks that as long as his wife doesn't know about his illicit affair, no one is hurt. Avoiding the issues of covenant life leads to self-delusion and ultimately self-destruction.

Today everybody wants to assert their rights, be they women's rights, minority rights, children's' rights, human rights, employment rights, democratic rights. This is fine but how about also taking up our responsibilities? The obligations of living in covenant with others are part of God's grand design for transforming us into the likeness of Jesus. One cannot opt out of God's design without experiencing the consequences. There is no possible way of keeping covenant vertically without doing the same horizontally, which is why God provides the means for us to experience covenant on a very practical basis. And this includes commitment and accountability to a specific group of people – the church in the locality.

## Maintaining Covenant

Our relationship in Christ through regeneration is settled and forever intact; it can never be broken. Nevertheless Jesus' statement - 'if you abide in me' - indicates that our fellowship in Christ is subject to constant assault and may at times be broken. The emphasis throughout the New Testament on restoring broken fellowship with other members of the body of Christ is a reminder that even though we cannot 'change our relatives' inside the family of God, we can damage our fellowship within the family.

The Bible says that one hallmark of the end times is that men will be 'covenant breakers' (Rom.1:31). This is in the general society not the Christian community alone. God is concerned as to how society handles covenant just as he is the rest of their lifestyle whether righteous or unrighteous. Great issues are at stake here. Nowhere is this covenant issue at a higher level than in the experience of the people of God. A sobering statement with far-reaching implications.

The highest expression of our commitment to each other in the New Covenant is expressed at the communion table, which is why God is so clear about ridding ourselves of all hypocrisy before we practice this sacrament. To share in the Eucharist - while separated in heart from each other - opens up the dreadful prospect of judgement upon us. Paul says that for this reason 'many are weak, sick and some have died'. [1Co 11:30] That shows how important it is to be in right fellowship in the covenant of the family of God. You can anoint someone with oil repeatedly with fervent prayer for their healing, but if their sickness is a consequence of wrong attitudes or broken fellowship within the family of God, no healing will come until fellowship is restored, and the damaged relationship made whole. The apostle Peter said that judgement begins in the house of God. (1 Peter 4:17)

## Covenant Discipline

Unfortunately, the church as the covenant community has become compromised throughout the centuries by its lack of willingness to deal with wrong and wrongdoers in the covenant community. Under the pretence of 'loving' and 'not being judgmental', we have opened the door to all kinds of evil in the covenant community. The world is not shocked to hear of moral scandals, financial impropriety – even child abuse – in churches. Frequently churches accept people who are under discipline in some other church, and in effect short circuit God's purpose in discipline. Churches fail to challenge ongoing sin, (1 Thes.5:14; 1Tim.5:20) and sometimes serve as 'hideouts' for those on the run from themselves. However, before looking at judgement dealing with offences, let us look at judgement as a positive affirmation of life.

The very first example of judgement was God standing back and looking at each act of his creation and pronouncing it 'good'. This was judgement in a positive way; it was assessing with a view to being satisfied. Sometimes – as in the creation of man – judgement is with a view to adjustment. When he looked at the solitary Adam, God said, 'It is not good for man to be alone'. There was no flaw in God's creation of man, but there was a lack of fullness in that he had no corresponding human relationship with whom to fellowship or with whom he could fulfil God's intention of filling the earth with God's image and likeness. When God completed and made woman he enabled man to be fulfilled in himself and to fulfil God's purpose in the earth.

Throughout the history of God's covenant people, Israel, God's judgement was in continuous action. Wherever God was pleased with Israel, blessing flowed abundantly; where God was displeased, curses came. Both experiences were the consequence of judgement. The purpose of judgement was to keep the people of God pure, productive and progressing towards fullness.

Likewise today, we need to recover the place and practice of righteous judgement in the church. People often say 'you should not judge'. This is contrary to what God has commanded us to do. We are told 'to prove all things'[2] and to 'judge with righteous judgement' (Jn 7:24). The parable Jesus gave about trying to remove a mote from your brother's eye when you have a beam in your own was to emphasise where judgement was to begin, not that there was to be no judgement. We first judge ourselves and – where necessary – repent and adjust; then we can help others. (Mat.7:5)

People's lack of commitment to building according to the word of God has produced a confusing mixture in terms of what is permitted or tolerated in the lifestyle of the covenant community. The apostle Paul was clear and firm in resisting the intrusion of external heresy and in purging and purifying the church of internal corruption. The immorality that arose in the Corinthian church (where a man was having sexual relations with his stepmother) was inexplicably tolerated. An incensed Paul addressed the church apostolically and brought godly judgement. It is interesting to note the end result that the apostle was seeking to achieve; that is, 'that we might be what we really are'.[3] What we really are is a righteous people before God. Permitting wrongdoing to remain unjudged is to sin against both our nature and calling in Christ. God's intention in discipline is to restore us experientially to our proper state and standing, and even in this extreme case at Corinth the goal of the judgement was to restore the offender. Failure to judge wrongdoing in a covenant community sends out the wrong message. We must be wise, firm, and compassionate in any judgement and discipline process, maintaining the focus of its purpose. Judgement is not for destruction; it is for restoration.

Someone once sadly remarked that the Christian army is the only army that shoots its wounded. There are many thousands of Christians who have made bad mistakes, fallen into sin, and damaged themselves and others. In coming to repentance, these same people have found mercy, forgiveness and grace with God,

but rejection from his people. Today thousands of quality people have no effective place of ministry within the church because the church has refused to restore them, even though God has forgiven them. To the people who feel rejected, I say 'Wake up! Don't sit at home sucking your thumb holding a private pity party. If the covenant community lacks the grace to make room for your input, give yourself as Christ to be the servant of all people. Be a faithful servant of God, and pursue a place of influence in the wider world around you, where you can compassionately bring Christ to those in need. Be strong and work for social and legislative change, human justice, and a better society, and do it knowing this: you are not serving in some inferior capacity in God's eyes, you will one day hear 'well done, good and faithful servant'. (Mat.25:23)

Some say when God forgives he forgets. This is not strictly accurate, since to forget is a human weakness. The Bible says God chooses 'to remember no more' (Jer 31:34; He 10:17). This is very different. God is saying that he accepts our repentance and has determined not to recall our fault in any further fellowship with us. It is dealt with. Neither will he determine our future by our past mistakes now that they are forgiven, for that would require he remember our wrongs. Our approach to discipline within the covenant community must be Christ-like. We are not to be weak and afraid to deal with sin, but neither must we be cruel in our discipline crush the penitent. We must be firm in our call for repentance, yet as generous in our mercy as God is to forgive the penitent. Although restoration to fellowship does not necessarily or automatically mean reinstatement to the same place or role in ministry, it does mean that we will look for every possible way to encourage and help the repentant person rediscover a meaningful place of service whereby they can please God, be fulfilled themselves and where we can all benefit again from their grace gift amongst us. (Gal.6:1)

## Covenant Continuity

God's covenants in every generation were all made as covenants of continuity with a line of faith. This line of faith provided God with this entry in every generation. God never allowed the spiritual state of his people to deteriorate to the point where everything of the line of faith that had gone ahead, their testimony and commitment to his purpose was lost. God always spoke to and through a heart of faith that acted as the bridge to the incoming generation.

His covenant therefore was perpetual. One example of this was the prophet Samuel who served in the closing years of Eli ready for a new generation. Each generation must serve God's purpose in the freshness of its own word and vision from God, but the hallmark of any generation's authenticity of faith in God's purpose is that their witness and testimony is a continuation of what has gone before through the thin line of faith. There's a continuity of covenant in the generations.

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[1] Ernest T. Campbell (b.1915) a former Minister of Riverside Church, New York City

[2] 1 Thes.5:21

[3] 1 Cor.5:7