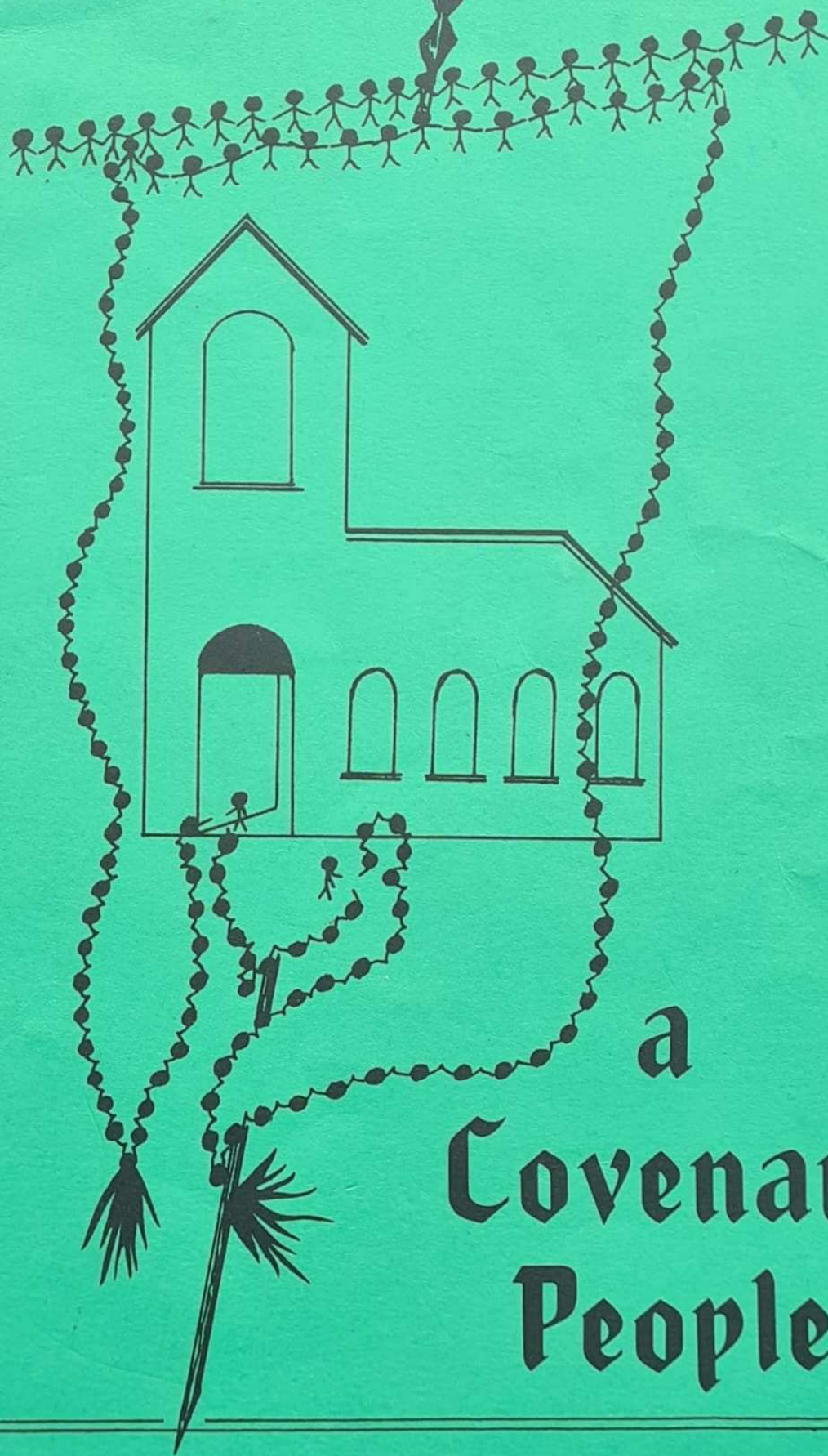

Christ's Church



Foreword

This booklet contains the papers presented at a Convention organized by the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Ireland and held in Co. Donegal in August 1982.

The Convention was attended by members of the Church from Australia, Canada, Cyprus, the United States of America, Scotland and Ireland.

The chosen theme was, "Christ's Church — a Covenant People." We believe this is a vital and timely theme.

It speaks with assurance of the Church's future. Many in our day question the survival of the Church. This is never in doubt, for Christ is building His Church and the gates of hell cannot prevail against it. The Church's future is certain because it rests on the Covenant promise of God.

It reminds us of the Church's life. We live in an age of selfish individualism. Christians, however, are not isolated individuals who live only for themselves. They are united in the closest possible bonds as brethren in Christ and seek both to enjoy the privileges and fulfil the obligations which this brings.

It directs us to the Church's Head. The Church belongs to Christ. He gave Himself for it and its great purpose is to bring honour to His Name.

We trust that this booklet will give encouragement to the members of Christ's Church and that it will strengthen our desire "that in all things He might have the pre-eminence."

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There Is Another King, One Called Jesus

The theme of our convention — “Christ’s Church — a Covenant People” — is, of course, of fundamental importance for Covenanters. But we must never forget that the covenant is a royal one. It has value because it is an overture of grace from a sovereign to His guilty subjects. The motto of the blue banner — “For Christ’s Crown and Covenant” — reminds us that kingship is even more basic than covenant, and it is to the kingship of Jesus Christ that I would direct your attention. We go back nearly two thousand years to the city of Thessalonica, to a group of young converts in trouble. The preaching of two travelling evangelists, Paul and Silas, has stirred up a hornet’s nest of opposition. The enemies of the gospel have provoked a riot and have dragged some of the new believers before the city authorities, accusing them of supporting those who say “that there is another king, one called Jesus” (Acts 17 : 7). These Christians are our brothers. Their message is our message, its implications are the same now as they were then, and the reaction against them is very similar to the one which we are bound to meet.

THE CONTENT OF THE MESSAGE

The words of our text are spoken in accusation by the enemies of the Christians, and so we must ask ourselves if their statement is true or false. Is their summary of the Christian message a fair one? Is this an accurate representation or a malicious distortion of the apostolic preaching? The evidence of the book of Acts shows clearly that the preaching of the early church was centred around the kingdom and the king. Christ Himself, after His resurrection, “appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God” (Acts 1 : 3). Paul and Barnabas encouraged the disciples in Lystra, Iconium and Antioch by reminding them that : “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14 : 22). At Ephesus, Paul “spoke boldly . . . for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God” (Acts 19 : 8). Stress was laid, moreover, not merely upon the kingdom in general but upon the place of Jesus Christ in that kingdom. We read of some in Samaria that “they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the

kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ" (Acts 8 : 12). An account is given of Paul's ministry in Rome : "From morning till evening he explained and declared to them the kingdom of God and tried to convince them about Jesus" (Acts 28 : 23). The words with which the book of Acts closes sum up the preaching of the early church : "He preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 28 : 31).

He was, however, a king very different from any other. "There is ANOTHER king." There are two Greek words for "other" — "allos" and "heteros" — and, although they are sometimes interchangeable, there are occasions where their meanings differ. "Allos" means "another of the same", something which is numerically distinct, but similar in every other way — just as one pea in a pod is "other" from its companion but almost identical with it. So this word is used when Jesus spoke "another parable" (Matt. 13 : 24), stressing the similarity with the previous one, and when He promised "another Counsellor" (John 14 : 16) — the Holy Spirit, so very like Himself. "Heteros" however can stress the difference between two persons or objects. It often means "another of a very different kind." So we read that when Jesus was on His way to the cross "two other men, both criminals, were also led out with him" (Luke 23 : 32). Paul says "I see another law at work in the members of my body" (Rom. 7 : 23), meaning that this law is quite distinct from that of which He had been speaking. It is the second word which is used here. "There is another king", "a different king" (Lenski), someone utterly unlike all earthly rulers, distinct from them, superior to them, King of kings and Lord of lords. These Christians preached a divine, a unique, a transcendent and reigning king.

The emphasis which our churches lay upon the kingship of Christ is not an unbalanced stress on something trivial and peripheral. It is not a case of concentrating on a minor distinctive just for the sake of being different. We are standing in the mainstream of apostolic tradition, pointing to the neglected core of the gospel revelation. When the Christians of the New Testament preached Christ, they preached Him in a kingdom context. For them, as for us, He was "King Jesus."

THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE MESSAGE

The Jews, filled with jealousy at the success of the Christian evangelists (5), accused them of being political revolutionaries, aiming at stirring up civil unrest against Roman rule. "These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here . . . They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus" (6, 7). Their charge was designed to cause the maximum trouble for the believers. But it was too

absurd to be taken seriously. Christians, following their Master's example, avoided political agitation. They were careful to render to Caesar what was his. The local authorities, despite a natural concern, seem to have realised that no real threat was being presented to the empire, for they dealt very leniently with Jason and the other believers (9).

Yet the Jews spoke truer than they knew. This message would turn the world upside down. It would produce men and women who would defy Caesar to the death. The gospel would sweep across the Mediterranean world, transforming society on a vast scale, until a great Caesar, Constantine, himself placed the sign of Christ on his battle-standard and acknowledged the supreme authority of Jesus of Nazareth. The implications of this message were truly revolutionary. The preaching of the kingship of Jesus was nothing less than the most explosive political, social and cultural dynamite. In the hearts of these accusers was the knowledge that their charge was a lie. They could not realize that, in the ultimate sense, they were speaking the truth.

We may compare human society with a game of musical chairs, in which each chair represents power. There are many different chairs — personal, political, economic, cultural, etc. — and fierce arguments are waged as to who should sit on them. Everyone wants a chair of his own. Various systems of chair-arrangement are suggested for each sphere of human life. Some, called "revolutionaries", come up with new schemes and patterns. Then a Christian appears. He isn't interested in chair-arranging. He doesn't want to capture anyone else's chair. And so the players don't worry about him. He represents no threat and can be safely ignored. Wrong! For that Christian, if he understands his faith, is not disinterested in the game because of apathy or cowardice. He wants to abolish the game altogether! He wants to show the players the great white throne and the King of kings — so that they stop their foolish posturing and fall down in worship before the true and only King.

Communism is far too conservative for us! We find the drop-outs and flower-children stiflingly conformist. The anarchists are timid reactionaries. For, in spite of their differences and apparent radicalism, all have agreed to play the game — and the basic ground-rule is that there are chairs — positions of authority — for men to occupy — that man is king. Christians are the only people who attack the validity of the game itself. Man is not king. He does not exercise autonomous power. "There is another king, one called Jesus."

To believe and to preach the kingship of Christ means that we challenge men to submit every aspect of their lives to His authority. We start from a different presupposition, we place reality in a different framework. God, not man, is at the centre of all. The implications of this message are staggering. Christians are the true revolutionaries.

THE REACTION TO THE MESSAGE

This message is not being discussed by philosophers in shady academic groves. It is not expressed in elegant hexameters for consideration by the literati. It is spoken by a few weak men in the middle of a riot, a situation of turmoil, with the threat of jail, beatings or even death. And thus the pattern, set at Calvary, was to be continued into the future. The kingship of Jesus was preached in the teeth of bitter opposition. Rome, when she began to understand the revolutionary implications of the message, determined to sweep it from the earth by fire and sword, and the full weight of world-empire was exerted against it. The gospel pulpit was often the wild-beast arena or the place of torture. But still the message went forth, whatever the cost — “There is another king.” Polycarp, that gallant old man, was stabbed and burnt for the kingship of Jesus, and when his small congregation was recording the event, they wrote — and the words leap from the page in resolute and defiant triumph — “The blessed Polycarp was martyred . . . in the proconsulship of Statius Quadratus, **BUT IN THE EVERLASTING REIGN OF JESUS CHRIST.**” As Kirsopp Lake remarks : “The phrase is pointedly inserted instead of a reference to the reigning Emperor.”

This hostile reaction is inevitable, for the message of King Jesus attacks the very core of sin and Satan will fight it with all His power, inciting such hatred and opposition as to force God’s people to seal the gospel with their blood. The world gnashes its teeth, cries “we will not have this man to reign over us”, and tries to silence — somehow — those who speak of His rule.

Which presents us with a dilemma. We believe in and teach the kingship of Christ — but in what way? Does it simply provide us with a link to a glorious past, a kind of “Roots” in which we see Cameron or Renwick as a spiritual Kunta Kinte or Chicken George? Do we believe that our doctrine of the kingship of Christ makes us a spiritual delicatessen, a place where unusual teachings may be found by theological gourmets who are tired of the staple grocery fare of less enlightened churches? God forbid! This message is not to be murmured in seminars, refined in denominational magazines which no-one else reads or kept within the walls of Covenanting meeting houses. It is to be shouted by word and life in market-place, university and factory, to politicians, trade-union officials and broadcasters. It is to sound forth amid the clamour of threats and abuse. We will speak it sometimes in fear or exhaustion, in embarrassment or deep discouragement. We are called to teach it to ourselves, saying no to our desires, giving up what is clear to us, taking up the daily cross of self-denial, because “there is another king.” It will lead us to witness at work, to knock on doors, to preach in the streets, to teach Sabbath-school. We will be compelled to wrestle with our life-style, readjusting our view of the world and paying the price of bringing all under His authority. Our calling is to stand

in a hostile world and to proclaim by what we say and what we are that Jesus is king.

It isn't easy and there will be times when we wonder what we are achieving. There was a dark hour when Christ hung on the cross, ridiculed and forsaken. But even there one broken, gasping voice spoke for the king's honour. As priests sneered and soldiers laughed a dying man prayed "Remember me when you come into your kingdom." What a preposterous statement! The crowd may well have laughed as the fool who made it died. But his prayer was answered, his king was glorified and his words ring deathless through the ages until their ultimate vindication. I'll settle for that.



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A Covenant Community

The word “community” may be used with a number of connotations. Perhaps we associate “community” with a group of people who have withdrawn from the “rat-race” to form their own alternative society. Or, we may use the term to designate elements in a society which share a common ethnic, religious, or even irreligious background. Men speak of the Protestant and Catholic communities in N. Ireland. Or major cities consist of “White” and “Black” communities, Asian or Hispanic communities, to mention only a few of the labels. Moreover, we are distressed when we hear of the increasing number of cities where there are now aggressive “gay” communities. Most commonly, however, we describe our own village, town, or neighbourhood as a “community”. To be part of a local community is to share (willingly or unwillingly) a common political, social, and economic life with others. In these days of the “global village” such sharing is not only a local phenomenon, but an international one, with the emergence of such institutions as the European Economic Community (E.E.C.).

When we think of the word “community” our minds no doubt turn to all of these things. Unfortunately, though, our minds do not turn so quickly to the Church of Jesus Christ in this connection. To be sure, we may talk of the “Protestant Community” or the world’s “Christian Community” as over against other religious communities. But, Christians today do not readily think of their own churches, and of their own congregations in particular, as communities. Sometimes we do not consciously reflect on the community life which actually exists in our own fellowships. All too often, however, there is simply

little or no discernible community life in Christian congregations and, sadly, the people are content to have it that way. This contentment is lamentable in view of the fact that no word better summarizes the Biblical pattern for church life than this word "community". The church is presented in Scripture as a community that is formed, directed and empowered by God's covenant love.

DEFINITION OF "COMMUNITY"

The Christian Church is the only genuine, or truly successful community in the world. That is because true community requires four basic elements. First, a community is composed of people with a common identity. Think, for example, of the E.E.C. The E.E.C. is a community comprised of nations with a common identity, namely, they are European. They have a common geographic and, to a lesser extent, ethnic and cultural background. But, a common geographic identity does not, of itself, create a community. After all, in this century, Europe, where we now have a community, was the theatre of two world wars. A common border does not always define a community. Sometimes it only marks the battle lines.

Therefore, a community not only requires people with a common identity, but people associated to achieve a common purpose. The E.E.C. was obviously formed to achieve the common purpose of economic growth among the member states. Yet, even a common purpose will not serve to create a community unless there is something stronger than a vague consensus to work together. In any successful community, there must be common laws to direct and bind the community together in the attainment of the common purpose. We see such common laws, for example, in the production and pricing regulations agreed by the members of the E.E.C. Rules and regulations are an essential aspect of any successful community, be they written or unwritten, from the U.N. to the smallest neighbourhood association.

But, when we reflect on this matter of common laws, and the success or failure of various communities, one thing is very obvious. Communities break down or disintegrate over the application of common laws. Within the E.E.C., for example, member nations have been known to defy community agreements on agricultural production or fishing quotas, to mention only a few incidents. Departures from the agreed policy disrupt the community and threaten to thwart the common purpose. Herein we see the fundamental weakness of the communities of this world. Why is it that communities don't work as they were intended? Why do some members go their own way and follow their own policies in defiance of the rules of the community? The answer lies in the dynamic or motivation that drives men to seek the common purpose of the community. True community

has as its fourth basic requirement a common concern for the welfare of the whole community.

The E.E.C., for example, didn't come about because some nations wanted to help their less fortunate neighbours out of economic trouble. No, nations carefully considered the possible advantages that might come to them by entering into a trade federation with their neighbours. The basic motivation of the members of the E.E.C., and of any other community of unbelieving sinners, is self-interest, in the final analysis. That is why their communities ultimately fail. Once the laws of the community seem to conflict the self-interest of particular members, then the laws of the community are set aside and the community is disrupted. These communities fail because they lack a proper motivation for seeking what may be, in themselves, worthy ends.

Yet there is a community that will not fail because it alone meets the fourth requirement of true community. It alone is motivated by a common benevolent concern which refuses to place self-interest ahead of community interest. That community is the church, the people brought together through the covenant of grace. The church is governed by the Scripture that combines law and motivation in the saying, "you shall love your neighbour as yourself" (Lev. 19 : 18; Mk. 12 : 31). Moreover, the priority of community interest in the church springs from the fact that the community's interest is the glory of God. The law and motivation to love the neighbour springs from a more basic legal and motivational consideration : "You shall love the Lord your God".

The church consists of people with a common identity, united in a common purpose, governed by common laws, and motivated by a common concern. Each of these aspects of community has its origins in God's covenant of grace.

Note at the outset that the people of God are specifically referred to in Scripture as a community. In Leviticus 19 : 2, for example, Moses is commanded to speak to the whole "congregation" of Israel. Yet this word "congregation" in the AV would be more accurately rendered as "community". We think of a congregation as an assembly, usually gathered for worship. But the expression "congregation of Israel" or "congregation of the Lord" is a technical term in the Exodus and wilderness wandering narratives for the company of people that came out of Egypt under Moses. From the basic idea of "assembly" the Hebrew word rendered "congregation" in the AV really comes to denote a company of people who act in concert, i.e. a community. This is clear in such statements as, "There was no water for the congregation" (Num. 20 : 2), or, "All the congregation of Israel shall keep it" (Ex. 12 : 47), a reference to the Passover, which was observed individually in homes, rather than in an assembly. The words of Leviticus chapter

19 clearly govern more than just the worshipping life of the people. Instead, these words direct the totality of their life together specifically as a community.

COMMON IDENTITY

In the first place, then, consider the common identity of this people addressed as a community. In what did it consist? Was it simply a common ethnic identity in their descent from a man called Jacob, renamed by God as Israel? Not really. After all, one man to whom these words were addressed was named Caleb. We remember him as the faithful spy who represented the tribe of Judah. Yet Caleb was a Kenizzite. The Kenizzites were Edomites who had apparently joined themselves to the tribe of Judah (1 Chron. 1 : 36, 53; 4 : 13—15). We must also remember that a mixed multitude went up with the Israelites from Egypt and that they too became part of the congregation, sometimes to the detriment of community life (Ex. 12 : 38; Num. 11 : 4).

If the common identity of this people was not ethnically based, then in what did it lie? The answer is found in Leviticus chapter 19 in the recurring declaration, "I am the Lord your God." This is their common identity : they look to the Lord, i.e. Jehovah, as their God. Jehovah is God's covenant name. In Leviticus chapter 19 the Lord repeatedly reminds them that He is their covenant God; the One who has sovereignly claimed them to be His unique people. The people of Israel find their common identity, not primarily in their ancestry, but in a common covenant relationship with Jehovah.

The fact that the Lord is their God always sets God's people apart from all other world communities. They have a unique relationship with God. Only they have any right to speak of the Lord as their God. Think of the great summary of the covenant with Abraham in Genesis 17 : 7. The Lord promised "to be God" to Abraham and his descendants. Why did God need to pledge that to Abraham? Was not He already Abraham's God? Is not He everyone's God; the God of the whole earth? Most certainly. But not everyone has the right to call upon God as their God; One with whom they enjoy a relationship of privileged fellowship. Not everyone has the right to look to the Lord as One who will be God to them, as One who will provide for their needs, and save, defend, and comfort them in trouble. God offers that right sovereignly to believers in the covenant of grace (Gen. 15 : 6; Jn. 1 : 12; Eph. 1 : 5). The common identity of the people of God is found in their privileged unique relationship to the God of the whole earth; a relationship which He, not they, initiated. They know, love, and serve the same God.

COMMON PURPOSE

The church has a common purpose. That purpose is also declared in Leviticus 19 : 2. "You shall be holy, for I the Lord

your God am holy.” This is the great purpose of the people of God, His covenant community : to be holy like the Lord their God. Perhaps you will object that the purpose of the church is not just to be holy, but also to glorify God. Yet I submit that they are ultimately one and the same. To glorify God is simply to display the glory of His character to men and angels. It is to set God’s nature before men in the way that we live, so they in turn will confess that God is truly glorious (Matt. 5 : 16). What is the essence of God’s character? “I the Lord your God am holy.” Holiness is the essence of God’s character. How do we display God’s character to men so as to bring glory to God? “You shall be holy.” To state the matter quite simply, we glorify God pre-eminently by living a holy life.

The common purpose then of the covenant community is to be holy, and thereby display the character of their covenant God. This holiness is to be displayed above all in their community life; in the way that they live together. How do we as Christians demonstrate holiness? Is it by practising an intense habit of personal devotions? That may certainly help us to display holiness. Yet the world does not observe us in our closet devotions. God’s holiness is seen when the people of God live together before the world in a particular way. Let this fact burn itself into our minds : man cannot attain his chief end of glorifying God by an individualistic Christianity. God’s glory will only be displayed to the world in all its fulness in the community life of the people of God.

COMMON LAWS

The common purpose of being holy was to be implemented through the observance of common laws. Leviticus chapter 19 is often known as the “Holiness Code.” It lists many of the laws that define holiness in practice. At this point, however, you may object that this “Holiness Code” applies to the church under the old administration of the covenant of grace in that some elements of the code are obviously ceremonial. Is it right then to take the pattern of community life, the correlation between identity, purpose, and laws set forth in Leviticus chapter 19, and apply it unreservedly to life under the new administration of the covenant? While recognising that some aspects of the code have been fulfilled in Christ, I would emphatically affirm that the pattern of community life set forth in Leviticus chapter 19 is still normative for the New Testament community. I do so in this sense, that the identity, purpose, and governing legal principle of the covenant community does not change in the New Testament.

An examination of Ephesians 4 : 17 ff will illustrate the same pattern of community as is seen in Leviticus chapter 19. In verse 17 Paul states that he is addressing them “in the Lord”. He is addressing people who share with him a common identity. He is

“in the Lord” and they are “in the Lord”. They have the same Lord, and are therefore to think and act in a particular way. They are to put off the old, Gentile way of life and put on the new man. In verse 24 Paul says that the new man is created “after God”, i.e., like God, in righteousness and true holiness. Paul calls upon them to put off their former sinful ways because God has recreated them in Christ to be like Himself, holy and righteous. Therefore, in Ephesians 5 : 1 Paul exhorts them to be imitators of God. This is their purpose : to demonstrate God’s true holiness by imitating Him. All of this has a familiar ring. It is the same redemptive purpose declared in Leviticus chapter 19. “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.”

The new covenant community likewise is to display God’s holiness in its community life under the direction of clear ethical precepts. Nowhere is the relationship of community living to displaying God’s character more clearly seen than in Ephesians 4 : 31, 32. “Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamour and slander be put away from you, with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.” How similar this to the injunction of Leviticus 19 : 16–18, where the people are forbidden to slander, hate, or bear grudges against their neighbour but are commanded to love their neighbour as themselves. Indeed, note the substantial agreement between the ethical and moral precepts of Ephesians chapters 4–6 and the Holiness Code of Leviticus chapter 19. Both passages exhort the people to purity of worship (Lev. 19 : 4–8; Eph. 5 : 18–20), respect for parents (Lev. 19 : 3, 32; Eph. 6 : 1–3), honesty with the neighbour (Lev. 19 : 11, 12; Eph. 4 : 25), not stealing (Lev. 19 : 11, 13, 36; Eph. 4 : 28), edifying speech (Lev. 19 : 17; Eph. 4 : 26, 29), to mention only a few. You would be amazed at how far we could extend the list! What distinction shall we draw between the kind of covenant life, and even covenant law, set forth in the Old and New Testaments? What difference is there in these two administrations of the covenants in the declaration of God’s will for the community life of His people? There is none! Indeed, the only distinction that we may speak of is one of responsibility. With the accomplishment of redemption and the full outpouring of God’s spirit on His church, we under the new covenant have a greater responsibility to be a holy people. Yet, like the people of old, holiness is our calling all the same.

COMMON CONCERN

The church is a community with a common identity. We are in the Lord. He is the Lord our God. We have a common purpose. We are to be holy like the Lord our God, not “Holy Willies” or “holy Joes” whose holiness is a “holier-than-thou” mentality towards sinners, but a holiness guided by a conscious imitation of God. Moreover, we are to undertake this striving after holiness with a seriousness that reflects a proper motivation. We have

already stated that the proper motive for community life is a common mutual concern for one another, or to put it more simply, Biblical love.

How does this motivation find expression in Leviticus chapter 19? Look again at the repeated covenantal declaration, "I am the Lord your God". Without a doubt this is repeated as the ground of motivation for holy living. Yet at first glance this repetition sounds a bit ominous, like a threat. Certainly the fear of the Lord is a proper motivation for obedience, but the repetition of this phrase is designed to do more than remind us that there is one who will take note of covenant breaking. There is a progression in the repetition of the phrase "I am the Lord your God." It finds its culmination, not in the idea "I am the Lord, and you'd better watch out", but in the words of Leviticus 19 : 36 : "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt". This is the great motive to be holy like God. This is the great truth that stirs our hearts to love our neighbour as ourselves. The Lord has brought us out of Egypt. He has made us His covenant people by an act of redeeming love. He has set us free. He has broken our chains and the yoke of our bondage to sin and corruption. He has set us free to live as we were created to live, as holy people for the display of His glory. Our great motivation to holiness is the experiential knowledge that our covenant God is a God of steadfast love. This knowledge issues in thankful obedience.

The nature of our motivation is most clearly seen in God's dealings with us. The communities of this world are motivated by the principle of self-interest. Yet God was not so motivated in His dealings with us. He had no need of us. He is eternally blessed without us. Yet He contemplated us in our lost state and had compassion on us. He humbled Himself and delivered us from the pit of our own making. He sent His only begotten Son that those who believe might not perish but have everlasting life. Like any other precept of God's word, loving our neighbour as ourselves is an imitation of how God has dealt with us.

Our identity, purpose, laws, and motivation as a community are directly grounded in God's covenantal dealings with us. It is evident that community life is not an option for those who profess to be Christians, but the very context in which their Christian profession is manifested and validated. It is the God-appointed context in which we glorify and enjoy Him. Yet, how difficult it is to see this in practice! How easy it is to reduce holiness to personal piety and the avoidance of certain taboos. How many Christians there are who think that they are leading holy lives because they avoid certain kinds of establishments and go to church regularly, and yet are nurturing long-standing grudges with many of those with whom they worship. They think that they are holy because they have no desire to go to a bar or dance hall, and do not reflect on the fact that they have equally little desire

for the fellowship of other professing Christians. Is this not a spirit that touches us all? Is it not an abomination to a holy God who regards love for the brethren as the very foundation of holy living? We have reduced holiness to having nothing to do with the ways of the world, perhaps to avoid facing up to the fact that our church life often has little to do with the ways of God.

What may we do to foster a proper spirit of Biblical community within our congregations? There are three words that bring the development of community life within the church down to a very simple and practical level. They are found in Leviticus 19 : 17, 18. They are "brother", "fellow-citizen", and "neighbour". These words, properly understood, should help us to cultivate an attitude towards others in the church that will issue in a more Biblical community life.

BROTHER

In verse 17 God says, "You shall not hate your brother in your heart". How do we think of fellow church members? We are to think of one another as brothers. Now this is a word that has been largely emptied of significance in contemporary usage. In theological liberalism it describes a relationship that holds between all men. Whether we are Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, animist, or secular humanist, we are told that God is our Father and we are all "brothers". Brotherhood in this context goes hand in hand with a denial of the unique saving work of Christ, our elder brother, and must be rejected as an unbiblical concept. But, even in the Christian community we sometimes empty this word of significance by using it as a too casual form of address or reference. We may speak of "brother" so-and-so without really being prepared to think of him as a brother in the fullest sense. While there is nothing wrong with this convention, (and much to commend it), it is important not to lose sight of what it is to be a brother and to regard others in the church as brothers. The relationship between brothers is one of caring responsibility. One of the most abominable questions posed in Scripture is found on the lips of Cain. "Am I my brother's keeper?" That should have been a rhetorical question to which the answer is obviously "yes". But Cain is utterly perverse, and his perversion is highlighted by the fact that he regards the answer to be "no". There is nothing in life so basic as the responsibility of brothers to brothers.

The responsibility of brothers to one another is natural and instinctive. If a mere acquaintance is hurt in an accident we may certainly feel sorry for him, but if a brother is hurt we do not simply shake our heads and say, "Too bad!" If it is our brother, we go to him, if at all possible, and give help and comfort. Brothers are interested in what happens to one another. Brothers care about one another. When they do not, we regard it as perverse and unnatural. To put the matter as strongly as possible, brotherhood is not a casual, buddy-buddy relationship, but a

relationship of kinship. Those people who are a part of your congregation should be regarded by you in that sense, as kin in Jesus Christ. With the help of God's Spirit, seek to develop an instinctive concern for others in the congregation that will stir you to offer help spontaneously in times of need and to take an interest in their lives at all times.

FELLOW-CITIZENS

We are not only to think of one another as brothers, but also as fellow-citizens. In verse 17 God says, "you shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason with your neighbour, lest you bear sin because of him." Note that the words "brother" and "neighbour" refer to the same person. Now there are two different Hebrew words translated by the word "neighbour" in verses 17 and 18. The word used in verse 17 refers to one who comes from the same land as yourself, a fellow-countryman or citizen. It denotes the fact that you and your neighbour have a common political identity and are involved in the political processes and enterprises of the same country or locality. In other words, we are reminded here that we share a common purpose with those in our churches. We are citizens of the same heavenly kingdom, and seek the honour of our God and King. As fellow-citizens we have a responsibility to one another in carrying out our task. If I stumble in the way of holiness, the witness of the whole community is at risk. My enjoyment of the benefits of covenant life is also at risk. Therefore, the other members of the community have a responsibility, for the sake of the purpose of the community, to reprove me. If they do not the whole community comes to share my guilt.

Note how serious the issue is. The Christian church, as a community, exists to display God's holiness. When a member sins, the witness to God's holiness within the community is at stake. The very purpose for which the church exists is in jeopardy. There is a community responsibility to reprove the offending brother, because we are fellow-citizens. Yet, in many of our churches, discipline is virtually non-existent. Often it is the fault of a timid session. But, often the session may be trying to do its best, while the congregation simply stands by neutral or even protects the offender. In the Old Testament, the offender was certainly examined and tried by the judge or elders, but the community put him out. Likewise in the New Testament era, we must recognize that as fellow citizens each one of us has a responsibility to maintain the cause of Christ. We have a responsibility to seek the restoration of a sinning brother. If the sinner is unrepentant, we have a responsibility to stand behind the courts of the church in the administration of discipline. Above all, we must always bear in mind that discipline for the sake of the cause can never be divorced from discipline for the sake of the brother. It is because we love him and refuse to hate him, as well as our concern to avoid his guilt, that we reprove our brother.

In fact, the willingness to offer an unwelcome reproof may really be the test of the depth of our love.

NEIGHBOURS

Finally, we are neighbours. In verse 18 we are commanded to “love our neighbour as ourselves”. This word in Hebrew simply means “associate”. It refers to the person with whom you associate day by day. We all know of towns or villages where the people greet one another by name on the streets or in the shops. Everybody knows everybody because they see each other day by day. They are neighbours! Likewise, we should seek to have this kind of relationship with the members of our congregations. They should be well known to us. We should see them often. Our non-Christian neighbours perhaps see more of us than our fellow church members. While we ought to treat non-Christians as neighbours, we should not forget that this word, in the Bible, refers primarily to Christians. In Ephesians 4 : 25 Paul says, “Speak every man truth with his neighbour, for we are members one of another”. While the commands to love our neighbour apply to our conduct towards non-Christians, they apply first and foremost to our treatment of other Christians.

How neighbourly can you be toward someone whom you see for a few moments at a worship service once a week, if that is all you see of him? If your fellow members are your principal neighbours in God’s eyes, how much love can you show them by simply occupying a pew in the same building with them once a week? Where, in this type of church life, will the world discern that we regard one another as neighbours, and that we are Christ’s disciples because we love one another? It is just not possible. It will never happen. Unless we in the church think of one another as neighbours, seeking out one another through the week for fellowship, helping one another in matters great and small, bearing one another’s burdens, and encouraging one another in the Lord, the world will never know what holiness is all about. They will never know what God’s love in Christ is like, until it is too late.

Community, although it may not be found in the theological texts, is one of the marks of the Church of Christ. It is the mark of brotherly love in action, displaying the holiness of God to the world. May God’s love in Christ be that real to our hearts that we cannot help but live as brothers, fellow-citizens, and Christian neighbours.

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The Covenant Family

The term 'family' is an elastic one, because it applies to several different groupings — a childless couple, a bereaved husband or wife with their children, a Christian married to an unbeliever, adult brothers and sisters living together. All these may be considered 'covenant families' and most of the conclusions of our study will be applicable to them. For the purpose of simplicity, however, we shall focus attention upon the basic unit of a believing husband and wife and their children. How different is this family from others with no Christian commitment? In view of the fact that the institution of the family is not only for Christians, what do we mean when we speak of 'the covenant family'? We mean a family whose existence is intimately intertwined with the covenant of grace. We intend to explore the precise nature of the relationship between the family and the covenant and the effects which this relationship has upon the family.

THE FAMILY DERIVES ITS PATTERN FROM THE COVENANT

Today, as perhaps never before, the very institution of the family is being called in question. Some advocates of the theory of evolution believe that, in the words of one writer, 'the family represents only one stage of the evolution of social organization. Once it ceases to be optimal for human survival, it will become extinct like the dinosaur.' Feminist writers see it as a device for the subjugation of women. R. D. Laing, an influential psychologist, regards family life as a seedbed for schizophrenia. Social experiments — in the Russian co-operative, the Israeli kibbutz

and hippie commune — have tried to abolish the ‘nuclear’ family altogether. Even within the accepted structures, traditional roles are being altered radically. Husbands and wives agonize over ‘who does what?’ in the home. Children are encouraged to be on Christian-name terms with their parents. A recent working-party set up by left-wing teachers in England recommended that teachers should not remark on a little girl’s pretty dress or make statements like ‘I want a big strong boy to help me with this heavy box’. Such comments betrayed a ‘sexist’ attitude, forcing children into stereotyped roles. While much of this current reassessment is absurd, some of it is legitimate, for there are traditional assumptions about the family which need to be changed. But the net result of such questioning is a widespread confusion and uncertainty. People do not know any longer what is expected of them in the family situation.

Christians, however, are in an entirely different position. We are not groping for guidance. We are not left in doubt as to how we should live as husbands and wives, parents and children. The Word of God sets out guiding principles and detailed instructions for family life. It provides us with our pattern. And this pattern is not arbitrary. It is based upon the very being of God Himself — upon the covenant relationship of the three persons in the Godhead — and upon the covenant relationship which God sustains toward His people. The covenant of grace tells us of a loving God — Father, Son and Spirit — working in harmony for the redemption of a people. The covenant reveals God’s attitude towards us and prescribes what our’s should be to Him. Family life, in every aspect, is to be based on that covenant revelation. The family is to be a mirror, reflecting to the world the beauty of the covenant relationship.

What does it mean to be a father? We look to our heavenly Father, to His authority, His wisdom, His justice and strength, His love, patience and tenderness. We consider the way in which He deals with us, and from our knowledge of Him we pattern our own fatherhood. How should we behave as children towards our parents? The covenant is again our pattern. We ask what God our Father expects of His children and then try to exhibit something of that honour, obedience and love to our earthly parents. How do husband and wife relate to each other? Here the covenant pattern is found in the relationship of Jesus Christ with His church. ‘Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her . . . As the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything’ (Eph. 5 : 25, 24). In his experience of the Saviour’s sacrificial love the Christian finds his guidance and motivation as a husband. His wife, as she submits to her Lord in glad obedience, understands the fulfilment to be found in living for someone other than herself.

The fact that the covenant of grace provides the pattern for family living means that the deeper our Christian experience

becomes the better equipped we are to fulfil our family responsibilities. As we learn more and more of what God is as a father and Christ as a husband our conception of these human relationships is enriched and deepened. Heavenly realities teach us about earthly duties.

But the reverse is also true. The family is part of the created order and, although marred by sin, creation speaks to us of God. 'For since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities — his eternal power and divine nature — have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made' (Rom. 1 : 20). This means that, while we can learn about the family from God, we can also learn about God from the family. God is described, for example, as our father and the Bible urges us to look at our earthly fathers and to deduce from them what God must be like. 'Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake? If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!' (Matt. 7 : 9—11). 'We have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live!' (Heb. 12 : 9). The steadfast love of a human mother teaches us of God's love for us — 'Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!' (Isa. 49 : 15).

Think what a solemn responsibility this places upon us and how it clothes with dignity our family relationships! Parents have the weighty privilege of filling with meaning for their children the words 'father' and 'mother', so that when a child prays 'Our Father in heaven' he understands that word in the light of his own home. If we fail as fathers we distort our children's conception of God. This is the tragedy of the breakdown in family life in society at large. A generation is growing up which thinks of 'father' as an ineffective absentee or a capricious tyrant. For many children 'husband' and 'wife' are people who fight, criticize each other and eventually separate in festering hatred. 'Home' is a place of tension and insecurity. How will they be able to understand the gospel which speaks to them of a divine Father, a heavenly home, a husband and His bride who love each other with enduring faithfulness?

There is a marvellous interchange here. The more we know of God, the better equipped we are to live in families. The stronger and more loving our family life, the easier we find it to understand the covenant love of God. Grace and nature meet and enrich each other in a God-ordained unity.

THE FAMILY DISCOVERS ITS PURPOSE IN THE COVENANT

What is the Christian family for? It is to produce and train covenant-keepers. In the covenant of grace God calls out a people

to Himself, and, as the term implies, He does this on the basis of grace. We cannot predict who will be saved. God often chooses people from the most unpromising backgrounds. But His normal method of working is through the family. This is and always has been the main channel of His covenant blessing. He saves parents, children, grandchildren and so on down through the generations. He said to Abraham : 'I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you' (Gen. 17 : 7). King David wrote : 'From everlasting to everlasting the Lord's love is with those who fear him, and his righteousness with their children's children — with those who keep his covenant and remember to obey his precepts' (Ps. 103 : 17, 18). On the day of Pentecost Peter reaffirmed this great covenant principle when he assured his repentant audience : 'The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off — for all whom the Lord our God will call' (Acts 2 : 39). Our practice of baptising the children of believers is based on this realization that they are born within the covenant frame-work and on God's command to treat them as covenant members.

There are Christians who do not believe these promises of the Word, but they are true none the less — and many of us here are living evidences of their reality. In the work of redemption God uses the family. We must see it clearly in the light of its unique place in His plan. The purpose of the family is to produce and train a new generation of God's people.

And how admirably suited it is for this glorious purpose! For in the home a child can be brought up in an environment which is totally God-centred. This is indeed what God wants. Deut. 6 : 6—9 is a key passage : 'These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the door-frames of your houses and on your gates.' Our children are to be raised in an atmosphere which is permeated with Christianity. From conception they are to be surrounded by prayer. The covenant infant will lie at the breast of a Christlike mother and be cradled in the arms of a Christlike father. God wants our children to see Christ in their parents' faces, to hear Him in the tones of their speech. Before they can talk or understand, children are learning, observing, imbibing — attitudes, atmosphere, context. They are being trained — in the most profound and permanent way.

Christian education is a total process, embracing all reality. In the family Scripture is taught — but it is also lived, and it is this combination of instruction in the truth and incarnation of the truth which is so effective. Children learn by imitating, and we are to live in such a way that in imitating us they are imitating Christ.

They are to learn love, communication, obedience and forgiveness from seeing them practised in the home and being shown how they are taught in Scripture. They are to learn in the family how to worship, how to evangelize, how to make decisions. In the family God has ordained a unique structure for providing His people with a broad and deep training in His truth. No other system can replace or equal it.

It is also unique in that our motivation for obedience is greater than in any other relationship. Above all else we desire the salvation of our children, our own flesh and blood. So God entrusts to us the delightful task of training for Him those very individuals whom we most desire to train, with whom we have the greatest natural rapport, who are in all the world most open to our influence. In His gracious mercy He gives parents as their main life-work the very task which they would have asked for had they been free to choose.

For it is the main life-work of parents, their prime Christian duty. Whatever else may or may not be done, we dare not neglect this. No other responsibility is weighty enough to relieve us of that of training our covenant children. Jesus Christ had stern words to say about those who pleaded religious obligations as an excuse for neglecting their family (Mark 7 : 9ff). The great purpose of the family is to provide a training-ground in godliness and if this is not done the family is a failure, no matter how much other pious activity may take place.

It sometimes happens that the church can weaken the very family structure which it is meant to strengthen. We must be careful lest we so multiply church activities as to keep men from their wives and children. By teaching and by practice the family must be given its proper place in the Christian life. Believers must be trained for family responsibilities and encouraged to fulfil them. If, as we have seen, the family has such a vital purpose in the plan of God, it must be set free to achieve that purpose and everything which would hinder it must be removed.

THE FAMILY DEPENDS FOR ITS EFFECTIVENESS UPON THE COVENANT

The Covenant is 'of grace' — that is to say, all its blessings come to us through God's sovereign mercy, not because we have earned them or deserve them. We need to remember this, and it should keep us prayerful. For one of the great dangers in a home where Christian training is conscientious and thorough is that reliance can be placed on the training itself. The parents are so busy nurturing their children for God that — paradoxically — they may leave God out. An 'ex opere operato' mentality develops — keep to the rules, follow the manuals and nothing can go wrong — Christians will come off the end of the family production line like clockwork. But this is the core of sin. As soon as man believes that he alone controls any process, he has departed from faith.

God can bring a saint from the most wicked and hopeless background, from a cesspool of vileness. Apart from His grace, the godliest home on earth will produce a devil. It is all of grace. We are never in control. There is nothing automatic about the salvation of our children. Many modern tragedies can teach us that. We must go to our knees and stay there, praying humbly and earnestly for the Lord to work in our homes. If our families are to be effective in achieving their purpose, if our children are to grow up to glorify God, it will not be because of what we have done, but because God has been gracious.

This predominance of grace, however, should make us hopeful as well as prayerful. It would be very easy for parents to become intimidated and over-anxious. The responsibilities are so immense, the issues involved so momentous. And we are all too painfully aware of our own weakness and areas of ignorance. So we need to remember that the covenant is 'of grace'. It speaks to us of a God who is rich in mercy, Who loved us when we were dead in sins, Who is willing and able to do far more for us than we can even imagine. He has not cast us off because of our sins and He will not condemn our children because we make mistakes. He is able to overrule our failures for good. He has given us promises concerning our children — let us believe them, cling to them, plead them before His throne! God wants us to expect His blessing upon our homes. We are meant to know freedom, joy and hope in our family lives. This will not make us careless. An awareness of His grace and love will lead us to train our children with diligence — but also with glad confidence. We are to bring them up in faith, not fear.

It is true that many covenant children go astray. The reasons are many — some of them hidden from us. What can be said to parents in such cases? We can only remind them of the grace of God. Christians should never give up hope for their children, should never stop praying and loving. It may be that the good God will be pleased to bring back the covenant-breaker in answer to his parents' prayers. The father of the prodigal son saw him 'while he was still a long way off' (Luke 15 : 20). He had been gazing at the horizon, looking for any sign that his son, so far away, was coming back again. Since God's mercy is everlasting we need never despair of those who are living far from Him.

The gracious nature of the covenant should also remind us of the need for balance when considering the family. Because it is attacked from so many quarters there is always the danger of over-reacting and going to the other extreme of idolizing the family. This is often done — both by Christians and non-Christians. The impression is given that sexual satisfaction is the supreme good or that children are the only thing which gives true purpose to living. The unmarried are sneered at, pitied, regarded as failures in one of life's most important activities. A self-centred culture is developing where people lavish attention on themselves, their children and their homes, and close their eyes and hearts to the

world outside. The technological revolution which is bringing an ever-greater range of entertainment and information into the home is contributing to this trend. Sadly, the glorification of the family is often represented as something distinctively Christian.

But it is not. God is the chief good, not the family. He uses the family. It is a vitally important means of blessing. But God is not restricted by any of His instruments or means. He can and does work without them. Nothing, however, good, is to be over-valued. The family can become an idol, keeping people from following Jesus, as in the case of the man who excused himself from commitment with the words 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father' (Matt. 8 : 21). Christ himself warned that He might bring division into family life : 'A man's enemies will be the members of his own household' (Matt. 10 : 36). Love for family must never come before love for Christ : 'Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me' (Matt. 10 : 37).

We must never think that Christians 'lose out' if they do not have a close natural family. The Lord's promise forbids such a view : 'Everyone who has left . . . brothers or sisters, or father or mother, or children . . . for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life' (Matt. 19 : 29). In any case, every Christian does have a family, for in the kingdom of God natural relationships are transformed and extended to include as our brothers and sisters all those who do His will (Matt. 12 : 48ff).

The family is never an end — it is always a means. And every means of God is devoted to the same end — that we may glorify and enjoy Him for ever. Whatever means He chooses to provide for us, we will find that, as we use it faithfully, we will be given complete and lasting satisfaction.

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The Covenant Life

Those who believe in Christ are His Covenant People. Their position and conduct is briefly described in Psalm 100 : 3, 4, "Know ye that the Lord is God : it is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves; we are his people and the sheep of his pasture. Enter into his gates with thanksgiving, and into his courts with praise; be thankful unto him, and bless his name." Covenant Life is the term to describe the kind of life believers enjoy and the conduct of God's people in response to His mercies to them. Covenant Life is that human existence and experience which God gives to and directs in the follower of Christ to bring glory to Himself and eternal blessing to the believer.

A LIFE OF PRIVILEGE

It is a life experienced only by the elect. The Covenant Life is a Life of Privilege. The elect are those chosen by God from all eternity to have eternal life. They have done nothing to merit or earn this ultimate blessing. Jesus said, "Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you . . ." (John 15 : 16). We are privileged to live this blessed life now and forever because of God's grace and mercy. Grace is receiving good that we do not deserve; mercy is not receiving the punishment that we do deserve. To be one of God's children is the greatest privilege known. For His children, God initiates, prescribes and establishes the Covenant Life. He said to the Israelites, "For thou art an holy people unto the Lord thy God; the Lord thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto himself, above all people that are upon the face of the earth . . . because the Lord loved you and because he would keep the oath which he had sworn unto your fathers . . ." (Deut. 7 :

6—9). God said to the New Testament Christians, “But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should show forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light” (I Pet. 2 : 9).

A LIFE OF RESPONSIBILITY

The Covenant Life is a Life of Responsibility. As a result of His grace and mercy, God has built into mankind the ability to respond to Him. As God gave man the ability to respond, or response-ability, so He also taught His chosen ones how to respond, so that it would be acceptable to Him. After all, He is the One to be pleased. He gives instruction as to how man is to respond, or how to live the Covenant Life. God’s Word is replete in this way. A few examples are, “Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace and pursue it” (Psalm 34 : 14); “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost; Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you . . . ” (Matt. 28 : 19, 20); “Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer : behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days : be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches; He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death” (Rev. 2 : 10, 11). These and the whole of Romans chapter 12 cite only a few of His commands and instructions.

Every believer must guard against the temptation to minimize his individual responsibility. We are not liable, however, to take it as seriously as Daniel Webster, an American statesman who when asked, “What is the most sobering, searching thought that ever entered your mind?” replied without hesitation, “My personal accountability to God”. It is tempting to want to be free from responsibility, to lose ourselves in the crowd and comfort ourselves with the thought that God is merciful and that others will do what needs to be done. It is told that an Arab sheik once gave a banquet for his son and invited many friends to share in it. There was, however, one request. Each guest was to bring a small skin of wine as his contribution to the feast. On the day of the feast when the skins were emptied it was found, to the embarrassment of everyone, that all contained water. Each guest reasoned that since everyone else would bring wine, he might be able to make a substitution without being detected. One living the Covenant Life can never allow himself this kind of reasoning.

A LIFE OF REGULATION

The Covenant Life is the Life of Regulation. The foes of Christ might call it a life of regimentation or a life of legalism. A regulated or regimented life may be good and pleasant, or it may

be evil and intolerable, depending on who makes the regulations or who exercises the controls.

The Covenant Life is regulated by the Sovereign of the universe, the righteous and loving Father in heaven. He regulates life for His people so that it has purpose, organization, programme and control. Its purpose is to exalt and honour God. Its programme is revealed in the Word of God. Its control is exercised by the decrees and judgments of God.

Regulations are often resisted by people because they want to regulate their own lives, so that they can make it easy for themselves. But intelligent man realizes that laws are needed if mankind is to live peaceably with God and other people. So our all-wise God has made regulations for us to live by if we are to fulfil our purpose before our Creator. God has given His Word to be the only infallible rule of faith and life. For those who love Him, such regulations are not intolerable. The Lord said, "my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matt. 11 : 30); "The law of the Lord is perfect" (Ps. 19 : 7). The Christian living the Covenant Life will say, "O, how I love thy law, it is my study all the day. It makes me wiser than my foes, its precepts with me stay" (Ps. 119 : 97, 98).

A LIFE OF ASSOCIATION

The Covenant Life is a Life of Association. The essence of this life is fellowship. It is an interlocking, interwoven life with God and with His people, the Church. Truly, it is a separated life from the world and evil, but certainly it is not an independent life.

The involved life of humanity in general resembles a tangled mass of string that has been wadded together without design or purpose. The involved Covenant Life resembles the interwoven threads of a fabric or the beauty of a tapestry done with design and skill. Or it can be compared to a chain that is flexible yet the links are not independent but interlocked. Each link is most valuable when interlocked with others of like kind. The individual living the Covenant Life cannot avoid being interwoven and interlocked with others. No man is an island. "For in him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17 : 28); "For none of us liveth to himself, and no man dieth to himself" (Rom. 14 : 7).

FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD

- (a) Fellowship requires belief.
Fellowship with God requires a belief that God exists, that He is real, that He is sovereign, that He is righteous, that He saves, and that He is love.
There are no atheists living the Covenant Life.
- (b) Fellowship requires submission.
Submission to God will mean obedience to His law. When

Moses announced God's law to the Israelites, he took the book of the covenant and read it in the audience of the people. They answered, "All that the Lord hath said will we do and be obedient". Submission to God will mean submitting to His will, as Paul enjoins the Romans, "Yield yourselves unto God as those that are alive from the dead and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God" (Rom. 6 : 13). And James reiterates, "Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw nigh to God and he will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands ye sinners and purify your hearts, ye double minded" (James 4 : 7, 8). Togetherness with God cannot exist without submission and repentance and cleansing. There are no devils living the Covenant Life. While they believe in His sovereignty, they do not submit to it and repent.

(c) Fellowship requires commitment.

A prisoner is one who is forced to yield to his captors, but he hates it and would throw off the restraint if he could. The believer freely yields to God and willingly commits his life to God's service. To be committed to God is to take a deliberate stand such as was called for by Joshua when he challenged Israel with "Choose you this day whom you will serve." He said, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." And the people committed themselves by saying, "God forbid that we should forsake the Lord to serve other gods . . ." (Joshua 24 : 15, 16). Commitment is willingly taking a stand in favour of a certain cause.

The call for commitment to God is made by the Psalm writer of the Old Testament : "Commit thy way unto the Lord; trust also in him . . ." (Ps. 37 : 5), and by the epistle writer of the New Testament, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service" (Rom. 12 : 1).

Commitment to the Lord, I believe, will include a love of His person. He gave us that first commandment quoted from the Old Testament by Jesus in Mark 12 : 30 : "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength : this is the first commandment."

Also commitment to the Lord will include loyalty to His cause and steadfastness in the faith as called for in I Corinthians 15 : 58 : "Therefore my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord."

- (d) Fellowship requires communication.
Did you ever go on a trip with someone and never talked together? If so, it was probably a pretty dull affair and you could hardly say that you were together. If the Covenant Life is a walk with God, there will inevitably be communication. When we read the Bible, God is talking to us. When we pray, we are talking to Him. I cannot conceive of a believer walking with God without Bible reading and prayer as a regular and frequent communication. I do not mean that communication with God is to be limited to Bible reading and prayer any more than communication between people is to be limited to conversation.
- (e) Fellowship requires service.
This will mean promotion of His truth especially called for in the Great Commission : “Go ye therefore and teach all nations . . . ”; “Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature.”

Service to Him will mean ministry to His people, for as Jesus said, “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me” (Matt. 25 : 40).

Fellowship with God requires belief which is a matter of the heart, and submission which is a matter of the will, and commitment which is a matter of the spirit, and communication which is a matter of the mind, and service which is a matter of the body.

FELLOWSHIP WITH PEOPLE

Covenant Life is fellowship with God and with His people. We are created as social beings, not meant to be alone or to live a hermit life. It was God who said, “It is not good for man to be alone”; He established the institution of marriage. He designed it so that man would have companionship. It was God who established mankind in families and gave instructions for people to live in larger groups and nations. “Consequently you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household” (Eph. 2 : 19); “So in Christ, we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others” (Rom. 12 : 5).

Though the Covenant Life is being with God’s people, at the same time we are not to avoid unbelievers. Paul instructs the Colossians, “Walk in wisdom toward them that are without, redeeming the time. Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt, that ye may know how ye ought to answer every man” (Col. 4 : 5, 6). And he said to the Thessalonians, “. . . walk honestly toward them that are without . . . ” (I Thess. 4 : 12).

A LIFE OF ACTIVITY

The Covenant Life is a Life of Activity. It is a life of movement, of development and of progress. In the Covenant Life we never reach the point where we can say that we 'have arrived', that we now 'have it made'. There is always more to come and more to do. The Apostle Paul said, "I count not myself to have apprehended : but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. Let us therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded . . . " (Phil. 3 : 13—15).

A LIFE OF SERVICE

The Covenant Life of activity is a life of service for God, others and ourselves. "Be ye stedfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord" (I Cor. 15 : 58).

A LIFE OF GROWTH

The Covenant Life of activity is also a life of growth. It is tragic when a baby stops growing. Since none of us reaches perfection or knows everything in this life it is distressing to think of our not growing in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ as long as we live.

A LIFE OF GIVING

The Covenant Life of activity is a life of giving. Investing what we have with the expectations of self enrichment is not giving. True giving is the yielding up of our resources for the purpose of helping a cause without the objective of personal gain. A life without giving could never be called a Covenant Life. Jesus said, "If ye lend to them of whom ye hope to receive, what thank have ye? for sinners also lend to sinners to receive as much again. . . . lend, hoping for nothing again; and your reward shall be great and ye shall be the children of the Highest . . . " (Lk. 6 : 34, 35).

Covenant Life begins in the gracious and merciful heart of God. Covenant Life is lived and cultivated in the heart of believing man. Covenant Life is climaxed and perpetuated in God's eternal kingdom. HALLELUJAH!

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A Covenant Witness

As a covenant people, a people who, by grace, live in covenant response to God's Covenant of Grace, and who are thus related to God in a bond of loving loyalty, we have a distinct witness and testimony to bear for God and His truth in the world.

We shall now briefly consider some of the salient features of this witness and note their significance and relevance at the present time, and, indeed, for all time. More particularly, we shall consider our witness as it relates to the Authority of Scripture, the Sovereignty of God, the Lordship of Christ and Salvation by Grace.

THE AUTHORITY OF SCRIPTURE

The Christian message has come to us through a book, the Bible. That is our sole source of information about Christ and His teaching and work. References to Christ, outside Scripture, by Jewish historians like Josephus, are scant. It follows, then, that our attitude to Scripture is of crucial importance.

The Scriptures claim to contain a revelation from God to man, and it is implied that this revelation is found nowhere else. It is recognized in Scripture that God is revealed in creation and in the conscience of man; but because of man's sin and its results, the Bible contains a revelation which is new and which is addressed to man in his sin and need. It is primarily concerned with the glory of God in the redemption of sinners. It is the history of great redemptive events, the mighty deeds of God in saving His people; particularly the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The doctrine of Scripture cannot be isolated from these events. They stand or fall together. We just cannot

abstract a system of truth from the Biblical history and then discard that history. Even if we could do that, it would bring us no comfort. It would only add to our despair because of our sin, a point well made by Professor J. G. Machen many years ago. "There can", says Machen, "be no salvation by the discovery of eternal truth, for eternal truth brings naught but despair, because of sin. But a new face has been put upon life by the blessed thing that God did when He offered up His only begotten Son."

So the question of the reliability, the trustworthiness of the Bible is all-important. If that be called in question, the authority of the Bible is immediately undermined. And it has been called in question. There are those, for example, who make experience decisive. Why bother, we are asked, about questions of history and fact, about the inerrancy or otherwise of Scripture? Is not our present experience of Christ all that matters? This sounds plausible, but it is false. If our religious experience is to be Christian, it must depend upon the redemptive events recorded in Scripture and it must relate to the Christ of Scripture and not the Christ of human reconstruction, a Jesus who in fact never lived.

It is striking to note how the two extremes of modern Protestantism have a common ground in experience at the expense of Scripture. On the one hand we see certain pietistic and pentecostalist groupings where the emphasis falls on experience and extra-Biblical revelations and where there is a tendency to devalue preaching and doctrine. On the other hand we have the liberal theologians since the days of Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) and Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), who made experience our guide. For Schleiermacher, feeling was the basis of religion. That was the corner-stone of his theology. He has been called "the father of modern theology" and not without justification, for his method in theology, as Professor R. A. Finlayson reminds us, was to inquire "not what God said from without, but what the Christian consciousness said from within." And so belief in God was approached from the standpoint of man's inner experience and not from the standpoint of an authoritative, divine revelation set forth in Scripture.

Kierkegaard took this position to its logical conclusion and denied the possibility of an objective system of doctrinal truths : in practice that means that we may debunk the historic creeds and confessions as having no permanent validity. Propositional truth goes overboard. And so it has been with the liberals ever since : the starting-point is always found in man's experience. This is true of Barth, Brunner, Tillich and the rest.

The current controversy over inerrancy and infallibility, involving an alleged distinction between them, a controversy which has been particularly acute in America, is not so far removed, if at all, from this same issue. There are professed conservatives who say that the Bible is infallible but not inerrant, or as they put it, "infallible in what it intends to teach!" So who decides what it intends to teach? And who decides what parts are

fallible? The answer in each case is “man” and so the unique and absolute authority of Scripture is undermined. That position leaves room for errors in the Bible, especially in the areas of science and history.

Let us pause for a moment to stress that we are not denying or overlooking the place and importance of Christian experience. We can make trial of the Biblical account of redemption — the message of the cross — and prove it to be true. We can “taste and see that the LORD is good.” That is experience. This Christian experience confirms the gospel message; it does not establish it. What we believe is based on Scripture and confirmed in our experience. Scripture remains the sole norm or standard — Scripture and Scripture alone! This was a principle firmly established at the Reformation (*sola scriptura*), a principle taught in Scripture itself (comp. Acts 17 : 11; Gal. 1 : 8).

As a covenant people we submit our minds and hearts unreservedly to the authority of God’s Word. It is our only rule of faith and practice. Our sole concern must be to seek to know its teaching and to accept that teaching whether we understand it or not, whether we like it or not. In our worship, for example, we will seek to be governed by God’s Word and not by popular taste or demand. The same will be true of our church government, our family and personal life, our attitude to the State, education, medical ethics and so on. No area of our life is exempt from the authority of Scripture. The total truth of the Bible demands total obedience on our part.

THE SOVEREIGNTY OF GOD

It is probably correct to state that all Christians would profess to believe in the sovereignty of God. But all Christians would not agree on what is meant by this term. As Professor John Murray comments, “It is possible for us to profess the sovereignty of God and deny it in the particulars in which this sovereignty is expressed, to assert a universal but evade the particularities.” In other words, it is possible to assert belief in the sovereignty of God and at the same time deny that sovereignty in certain areas of human experience.

The Scriptures confront us at the very outset with a sovereign Creator. We see the Kingdom of God firmly established in the first two chapters of Genesis. The whole creation was subject to God’s rule. Man, God’s image-bearer, stood in a covenant relationship to God; that is, he was related to God in a bond of loving loyalty. He was governed in his total experience by the Word, the Law, of his Creator-King. God’s will was done on earth as it is in heaven.

In the third chapter of Genesis we see the reign of God challenged. The black flag of rebellion was raised. Man defected to God’s enemy, transferred his allegiance to Satan and rejected

the Word of God, taking in its place the lie of Satan. At this moment God did not have a loyal subject on earth. The Satanic revolt against God's reign now involved the human race.

The same chapter of Genesis shows how God maintained His sovereign reign by means of the Cross. The mother-promise of Genesis 3 : 15 finds fulfilment in the cross of Christ. God's sovereignty remained undiminished. Throughout the Old Testament, the sovereignty of God is clearly asserted and equally clearly demonstrated in His providential dealings, whether it be with Job, Pharaoh, Joseph or Daniel. God makes the wrath of man to praise Him and over-rules all the activities of Satan. In no sense is Satan sovereign. He is a fallen, deposed creature, completely within the power and purpose of God.

So in His plan and in the execution of that plan, God is sovereign. As Calvin puts it, "No wind ever arises or increases except by God's express command. Otherwise it would not be true that He makes the clouds His chariots and rides upon the wings of the wind (Ps. 104 : 3,—4; cf Ps. 103 : 3, 4)."

Our witness to the absolute sovereignty of God is totally relevant in our day, not only in view of hazy notions which many Christians entertain in this area, but also because of the prevailing humanism which denies the very existence of God and posits chance and fortune in His place. Our whole world and life view, our understanding of history, our evaluation of man, and so on, depend entirely on whether or not we believe in God and in the God of Scripture. If not, then we will see no purpose, no plan, no predestination at work in the universe; no sovereign and wise control, but simply and terribly, there will be nothing but blind, meaningless chance. And what on earth is chance? What a cold, terrifying view that is! You cannot pray to chance, or trust in chance, or look to chance for guidance or comfort. On this view, as someone once described it, we are like so many blind children making mud pies in the dark! It is a wholly irrational position and it is a position often reflected in modern books and plays and various forms of art. The message is clear : there is no meaning, no purpose in anything. Or, if there is meaning, it is the meaning which you choose to give to this or that. Man, on this view, is just an intelligent (!) animal, the product of mindless evolution, which is nothing more (when all is said and done) than a long, painful struggle from nowhere to nowhere. On this view, too, it is man who gives to things whatever meaning he wishes and it is man who decides what is right and what is wrong. There are no absolutes. Everything is relative. Fundamental to all this is the dogma that man is sovereign. In the words of W. E. Henley, he is "master of his fate and captain of his soul." You may recall his lines :

*It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishment the scroll,
I am the master of my fate :
I am the captain of my soul.*

Dr. B. B. Warfield terms this "sheer heathenism." We can go further and call it sheer humanism : the heathen would know better!

The practical outworkings of this godless, man-centred view of things are serious. A few days ago, a doctor who serves on the ethical committee of the British Medical Association was questioned in a television interview about "test-tube babies" and especially about spare embryos. Should these embryos be cultured and developed for experimental purposes? In five years time, he said, it may well be that such embryos could be developed into "little human beings." The interviewer pressed him. Should these embryos be kept in "banks?" Should they be used for purposes of experiment? Were they simply spare tissue or were they alive? The doctor replied that this ethical decision must be taken by the people, not by the scientists. There should, he suggested, be widespread discussion of the problem at every level so that the mind of the people might be known. There was no awareness of God or of His law in this discussion.

When we have a God-centred view of things our position will be radically opposed at every point to humanism. We will proclaim the reign of a sovereign God and the supremacy of His law and we will confront man with his sin and rebellion. We will not seek for common ground with the unbeliever, nor will we imagine that a world-order which is built on Satan's lie and which is the expression of man's revolt against God, can be reformed. Instead we will see the Kingdom of God victorious over the Satanic revolt and by the Cross smashing and destroying all the works of the devil. The city of God will never incorporate the city of man : it will overthrow it and destroy it. And that is not defeatism. That is victory, a victory which we see so clearly and dramatically outlined in the book of Revelation. The word, "victory", sums up the whole message and thrust of that great book of the Bible.

THE LORDSHIP OF CHRIST

The Old Testament Scriptures predicted a Messiah Who would be a king and Who would reign in righteousness. His Mediatorial reign is described in terms of peace and righteousness and justice. The New Testament also presents a Christ Who is King of kings and Lord of lords. His redeemed people acknowledge His lordship in all of life. Christ demands our total allegiance. In all things He must have the pre-eminence. This means that we must acknowledge His lordship in the Church, in the home, in the State, and in every sphere of human activity — business, economics, art, science, education, etc.

We cannot accept the doctrine which says that we come to know Jesus as Saviour and then, at some later time, we come to acknowledge Him as Lord. We bow before Him as Saviour and Lord at the time of our conversion. In genuine conversion the

whole life is laid in glad submission at the Saviour's feet. The covenant relationship broken by sin is thus restored by the Cross as a man or woman is brought to submit to the Lord in a bond of loving loyalty.

The Church as a whole stands in covenant with her Lord and she must witness to His Lordship. She must speak prophetically to the State and warn the State when it spurns God's law and so becomes apostate. The people of God cannot be indifferent when confronted by humanistic programmes in education, by degraded art, by pseudo-science and by ruthless commercial exploitation. They cannot live easily in a world where there is much social injustice, tension and mistrust between management and men, and an appalling devaluation of human life as is evidenced not only by international terrorism, but also by such practices as the wholesale slaughter of innocents under the name of "abortion." If Hitler massacred six million Jews, the Western World has now matched that number by the murder of unborn children, and only God knows what impoverishment that has meant for the human race.

When we see the Lordship of Christ against this sombre background, we realize that our salvation is not merely individual and that we are not saved in a vacuum. If we are to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world, we must endeavour first of all to submit our own life to Christ our King and then witness to others concerning their revolt against Christ's law in these various spheres of human activity.

We must challenge the humanistic dogma of "the rights of man" and declare the Crown Rights of our Saviour. This can be done as opportunity arises. Sometimes, alas! opportunity is missed. Take the current case in Northern Ireland of bringing legislation on homosexuality into line with that in Britain, so that it will no longer be a crime for consenting adults to practice homosexuality in private. The vast majority of the people, regardless of creed, do not want this new legislation which the Government has endeavoured to force upon them. Now, repeatedly, in radio and television interviews we have heard opponents of the proposed new legislation being asked the question, "Do not people have the right in private to express their sexuality in whatever way they please?" It is known as "the behind closed doors question." Usually the opponent of the proposed change in the law answers something like this : "Well, you see, it cannot be kept behind closed doors. The practice spreads through society. More and more people can be caught up in this evil, and so on." That may well be so, but that is not the answer which should be given. The answer is this : "People do not have the right to break God's law in private any more than in public. Homosexuality is strongly condemned in God's Word and is regarded as an abomination. It is no less an abomination when practised in private."

So we, as a covenant people, must be concerned to relate the Lordship of Christ to our whole society at every level. When we detect areas where our Lord is denied, it will be necessary for us to act in a manner consistent with our devotion to Christ as Lord and King. To do otherwise would be to deny Him and to be disloyal to our Sovereign Redeemer. In saying this we do not overlook the primacy of evangelism in our over-all witness to society; for the Gospel when believed and obeyed not only brings individual conversion, but also is found to be social dynamite.

As Covenanters we have been mindful of Christ's lordship in our attitude to the State, to secret oath-bound societies and to a false ecumenism which calls Jesus "Lord" even as it denies His truth and so, like Judas, betrays Him with a kiss. The great principle which motivates us to act as we do in such matters, to stand alone at times and even incur a considerable amount of displeasure and unpopularity, is that of the Lordship of Christ our Saviour.

SALVATION BY GRACE

There is a connection between the authority of Scripture, the sovereignty of God, the Lordship of Christ and salvation by grace. The Word of a sovereign God is authoritative and it in turn proclaims the sovereignty of its Divine Author. The sovereignty of God as it relates to our actual redemption finds expression and comes into focus in the Lordship of Christ. Salvation in this context can only come about by the sovereign grace of God. The Biblical doctrine of sin and its dire consequences makes it clear that if there is to be salvation, it must be by grace alone — sola gratia. Sinful man has no rights, no claims upon God, and because he is "dead in trespasses and sins" he has neither the desire nor the ability to turn to God. If he is saved it is entirely because of God's sovereign grace and mercy. If he is delivered from the power and tyranny of Satan, it is solely because of the infinite power of God. Man cannot earn his salvation. He cannot contribute to his salvation. He cannot in any way effect his salvation. "Salvation is of the Lord" (Jonah 2 : 9). So the principle of Sola gratia is of crucial importance in our witness to the truth of God.

Needless to say, the fallen heart of man resents such a doctrine. Human pride is offended by it. Even true believers, at times, have difficulty in confessing man's total inability in the matter of his salvation. Sinful man clings desperately to his professed autonomy, the belief that he determines his own destiny, that he is captain of his soul. Satan introduced our first parents to this philosophy when he said, "Ye shall be as gods." This Satanic falsehood is dear to the hearts of unregenerate men. It is sadly out of place in the mind of a believer. Yet it is obviously present when it is taught and preached that the sinner has the ability to take the initial step towards God and that when the sinner takes that step, God will then save him. That is just another way

of asserting the doctrine of human autonomy. It is clearly contradicted by Scripture.

The doctrine of sola gratia means that all is of grace, including conviction of sin, repentance and faith. This position is well stated in the Westminster Confession of Faith as follows:

“All those whom God hath predestinated unto life, and those only, He is pleased, in His appointed and accepted time, effectually to call, by His Word and Spirit, out of that state of sin and death, in which they are by nature to grace and salvation, by Jesus Christ; enlightening their minds spiritually and savingly to understand the things of God, taking away their heart of stone, and giving them an heart of flesh; renewing their will, and, by His almighty power, determining them to that which is good, and effectually drawing them to Jesus Christ : yet so, as they come most freely, being made willing by His grace.”

The Confession continues : “This effectual call is of God’s free and special grace alone, not from any thing at all foreseen in man, who is altogether passive therein, until being quickened and renewed by the Holy Spirit, he is thereby enabled to answer this call, and to embrace the grace offered and conveyed in it.”

Here we are confronted with a deep mystery, but we believe that this is a correct and balanced statement of Biblical truth. It safeguards God’s sovereignty and human responsibility. It respects the personality which God has made, and emphasises that in conversion the sinner willingly and freely obeys the Gospel. Yet he does so solely by the grace of God and he cannot take credit to himself for the initial step. All the glory must be given to God. His obedience to the Gospel is wholehearted. He “asks”, “seeks”, “knocks”, “takes” and “drinks”. With great earnestness he does all those things which the Gospel commands him to do. He must do these things if he is to experience forgiveness of sins and peace with God; and we must urge him to do so. More than that, we must pray that God, by His Spirit and in His grace, will enable him to do so.

We must, then, proclaim the grace of God in such a way as to safeguard human responsibility without implying human autonomy. Divine sovereignty and human sovereignty are incompatible at every level. When we discuss the grace of God Biblically, we avoid the imbalance and distortion that often occur in this field of study. On the one hand we must declare that the salvation of believers is “not of works, but of Him that calleth . . . that he might make known the riches of his glory upon vessels of mercy, which he afore prepared unto glory, even us, whom he also calleth . . .” (Rom. 9 : 11, 23, 24). On the other hand we will insist that God’s grace and the efficacious calling of His Spirit in no way abrogate or lessen human responsibility. The Apostle Paul wrote. “Lay hold on the life eternal whereunto thou wast

called . . . ”, and our Lord said, “Enter ye in by the narrow gate” (1 Tim. 6 : 12; Matt. 7 : 13). Dr. J. N. Geldenhuys puts it neatly when he says, “Scripture teaches that the effectual calling is the sovereign, free and irresistible act of God in Christ, through His Spirit, by which guilty, lost sinners without merit of their own are brought into living and saving fellowship with Jesus Christ, our Lord. It proclaims equally clearly our grave, inescapable, personal responsibility to cling to and to obey Him, Who alone is the Author of our salvation.”

There is nothing in our Reformed Faith to diminish the urgency of the Gospel, to lessen our burden for the lost or stifle the passion of our entreaty. On the contrary, we are impelled by our Lord’s commission to go “into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16 : 15), and to do so in the spirit of the Apostle Paul who cried, “We pray you in Christ’s stead, be ye reconciled to God” (2 Cor. 5 : 20).

When C. H. Spurgeon was asked how he reconciled the doctrines of sovereign grace and human responsibility, he answered that he had not been required to reconcile them, but to preach them. Our Lord did not reconcile these truths for us; He simply stated them thus : “All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out” (John 6 : 37). These words of the Saviour have been likened to an inscription on a gateway. From the outside the sinner reads, “Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.” He believes and enters. Then, from the inside he reads, “All that the Father giveth me shall come to me.”

We have briefly reviewed just a few of the salient features of our witness to God’s truth as His covenant people : the authority of Scripture, the sovereignty of God, the Lordship of Christ and salvation by grace. What we term our “distinctive principles” are inherent in such truths and are the consistent application and logical outworking of the teachings of Scripture. In no sense are they optional extras. As a covenant people our task, in obedience to Christ’s commission, is to teach ALL THINGS whatsoever He has commanded us (Matt. 28 : 20) — there are no exceptions. As we obey, we have His assurance that He is with us all the days.



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Our Covenant Separateness

Throughout the 20th century two voices have been heard in the ecclesiastical world with varying degrees of response. One voice has been that of the Ecumenical Movement, emphasising the importance of fellowship, of togetherness, and the practice of dialogue among people of all religions.

The other voice is that of Fundamentalism, calling for separation from apostasy and practices that appear to be contrary to Biblical standards.

The words fellowship, togetherness, and similar terms make a strong appeal, while the thought of separation is not so attractive. However in the covenant relationship between God and His people both concepts are presented. There is fellowship, the communion of saints and at the same time there is separation and specific nonconformity that must distinguish the covenant people in every age.

According to some fashions of modern thought separation is an undesirable word and is regarded with contempt. According to others separation is made to appear so enchanting that the important positive elements of the Christian faith become neglected and misunderstood. Much confusion has been created by the advocates of separatism. This mentality, which is almost the equivalent of schismatic, thrives in the realm of unrest that prevails in the ecclesiastical world. It promotes suspicion and ignores what Scripture says about the unity that should be characteristic of the body of Christ.

It is imperative for the Church to ask the question : What do we mean by separation and what are the practical implications

for the Church and her witness in the closing decades of the twentieth century?

THE PRINCIPLE OF SEPARATION AS REVEALED IN SCRIPTURE

OLD TESTAMENT EVIDENCE

In the Old Testament, God's people, the covenant people, are often described as a separated people. "I am the Lord your God, which have separated you from other people" (Lev. 20 : 24). Solomon in his prayer at the dedication of the Temple acknowledged that the Lord had separated His people from among all the people of the earth to be His own inheritance (1 Kings 8 : 53).

To distinguish the Israelites as a separated body two ordinances were appointed, circumcision and the observance of the passover (Exodus 12 : 48). These distinctive marks were again in evidence when the Israelites had crossed the Jordan and had entered the promised land. "The Lord said unto Joshua . . . circumcise again the children of Israel . . . And the children of Israel encamped in Gilgal, and kept the passover" (Joshua 5 : 2, 10).

The land of Canaan, though the land of promise, had very great cultural and spiritual peril for the Israelites. The Canaanites had abilities in city construction, pottery manufacture and methods of farming that were good, but their religion was degenerate. The most significant deity was Baal, the god who controlled rain and storm. Linked to this god were other deities such as Ashtaroth, goddess of fertility, love and war. Prescribed worship of these deities involved religious prostitution, child sacrifice, snake worship and many other heathen practices.

The Israelites were warned to keep themselves separated from these practices. "When thou art come into the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee, thou shalt not learn to do after the abominations of those nations" (Deut. 18 : 9). Failure to give heed to these warnings proved to be the downfall of Israel time and again. Their involvement in heathen religious activities was condemned by the prophets as spiritual adultery and brought them under the judgment of God.

According to the Old Testament it is clearly seen that God's covenant people must practise separation in two important areas of life — first of all, in worship and, secondly, in standards of living. This is seen from the ten commandments which lie at the very heart of God's requirements for His covenant people. The first four commandments deal with worship and the remaining six with standards for living. More details are given in the book of Leviticus where theological grounds for separation are set forth. God is a holy God and must be worshipped in the manner He

prescribes. Sin is an abomination in God's sight and His covenant people are commanded to be holy even as the Lord God is holy.

NEW TESTAMENT EVIDENCE

When we turn to the New Testament we find that the same demand is made for separation as in the Old Testament and on the same grounds. One passage in particular bears out this relationship. In 2 Corinthians 6 : 14—18 we read : "Be not unequally yoked together with unbelievers : for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? And what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for we are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty."

For many years this passage has been the centre of controversy among some New Testament scholars. Some have gone so far as to reject it as being a non-Pauline interpolation. Suffice to say that every known text of the N.T. has this paragraph where it is. The style and contents are Pauline and it fits properly into the context. As Lenski says it is 'a paragraph that is beautifully wrought in detail and exactly in place.'

In this paragraph Paul focuses attention on God's covenant relationship with His people and argues from the Old Testament that such are separated from idolatry and all unwholesome relationships that open the way to idolatry. Christians should come out in the most decided manner from the whole sphere of heathenish worldly life, should separate themselves in spirit from their heathen neighbours, should avoid all heathenish practices which might defile men consecrated to God, and especially abstain from all idolatrous festivals. In a series of rhetorical questions there is made abundantly clear the impossibility of compromise in the practice of the Christian faith in a world of unbelief and lawlessness. Paul is not speaking about separation from the church. Just as in the history of Israel so in the Christian church, the very essence of God's demand is separation from idolatrous practices in worship and separation from the pollution of the world. The same instruction is given by Peter when he writes, "But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should show forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light" (1 Peter 3 : 9).

For Christians in the New Testament times their loyalty to the Lord Jesus meant many separations. Christians were not to be drunk with wine but rather be filled with the Holy Spirit. They

are not to spend their time "in revelling and drunkenness, nor in chambering and wantonness, nor in strife and jealousy." They are not to emulate those "whose god is the belly." Contrary to the costly styles of clothing affected by the well-to-do pagans, Christian wives were instructed to see that their standards of hair styles, jewellery and clothes were not to be those of pagan society. If a person belonged to a trade guild that demanded heathen religious associations it meant giving up his trade. F. W. Charrington was the heir to a fortune made by brewing. He was passing a tavern one night and noticed a woman waiting at the door. Her husband came out and she was trying to keep him from going back in. With one blow of his fist the man left her senseless on the ground. Charrington started forward and then looked up. The name above the tavern was his own name and Charrington said, "With that one blow that man did not only knock his wife out, he also knocked me clean out of the business for ever." He gave up the fortune he might have had rather than touch money in such a way.

In his own affectionate style the Apostle John at the end of his first letter says, "Little children keep yourselves from idols." Leading up to this statement John shows in his letter that the Christian life is not one of barren renunciation. The believer is separated from the world in order that he may enjoy the friendship of God in the fellowship of God's family. "Behold what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God : therefore the world knoweth us not, because it knew Him not" (1 John 3 : 1). God says, "I will receive you and will be a Father unto you and ye shall be my sons and daughters."

THE PATTERN OF SEPARATION AS IT DEVELOPED IN THE HISTORY OF THE CHURCH

THE POST APOSTOLIC ERA

The Christians in the post apostolic era had to face the hostility of the State. In the Roman Empire the worship of the Emperor was a requisite for all loyal citizens. For the Christians it was lord Caesar or the Lord Jesus Christ. The principle of the Kingship of Christ meant that there was a clear cut line of demarcation between the citizens of the Kingdom of God and the citizens of the State. At first, persecution took place in local outbursts. Then it appeared in some provincial areas and ultimately it became more widespread and was an affair of the government. This state of affairs lasted until the end of the third century. Christianity was an illegal religion. According to the epistle to Diognetus, Christians in the post apostolic days "are distinguished from the rest of men neither by country nor by language nor by customs While they dwell in both Greek and barbarian cities, each as his lot was cast, they follow the custom of the land in dress and food and other matters of living." If this statement were taken out of

context it would suggest that the pattern of separation set forth in the New Testament had ceased to exist. But these words came from an apologist who was anxious to win the goodwill of a pagan audience. As you continue reading you will find the following statement, "They exist in the flesh, but they live not after the flesh." The author actually proceeds to contrast the moral conduct of the faithful with that of the pagan society in which they lived. From other documents of the period it is abundantly clear that the Christians refused to participate in pagan festivals. They rejected public banquets, gladiatorial combats and the theatre. The reason was that many of these entertainments were bound up with idolatry, adulteries and debaucheries.

With the freedom accorded the church under the Emperor Constantine there was widespread growth. Worship became corrupted and pagan practices pervaded the whole body of the church. Separation became less discernible. Augustine, Jerome and Chrysostom all complain bitterly of the capitulation to worldly caprice. Towards the theatre itself the Fathers continued to manifest the utmost scorn. To Chrysostom it was the seat of pestilence, the gymnasium of incontinence and a school of luxury, Satan being the author and architect of it. Professor James Heron, in his volume, "The Evolution of Latin Christianity", shows clearly how pagan influences entered the church and corrupted the worship and moral standards of the members. He states, "It was not, therefore, till the pure and elevated sentiment of the early Christians, with its high-toned spirituality, became tainted and debased by habitual contact with and subjection to pagan influences, that image-worship became possible in the church."

THE REFORMATION PERIOD

The failure of the church to maintain the Biblical standards for separation from idolatry and pagan social practices brought about a situation in the 16th century where a Reformation of the church was imperative. The Reformation was a movement where the keyword was rediscovery. There was a rediscovery of the authority of the Bible and of the great doctrines of sovereignty of grace, for example, justification by faith in Christ alone. There was also a rediscovery of covenant theology and as a result the Reformers found themselves confronted with a new problem — separation from a church which had become corrupt.

Luther believed himself to occupy a position within the Roman Catholic Church which had been continuous from ancient times. He felt called to purify the Church by setting it free from the errors which had accumulated. In his heart Luther always thought that there was only one church. Separation was not contemplated and even when forced to break with Rome he was anxious to keep the door open for reconciliation. Calvin more than Luther made his position clear regarding separation. He specified the marks of the church to be the true preaching of the Word of God and the administration of the sacraments in the manner of Christ's

appointment. Then he points out that a church with these marks, however defective, is not to be forsaken. In his Institutes he writes, "For the Lord esteems the communion of His Church so highly that He counts as a traitor and apostate from Christianity anyone who arrogantly leaves any Christian society, provided it cherishes the true ministry of the Word and sacraments." Later in the same section he continues, "It is also no common praise to say that Christ has chosen and set apart the church as His bride 'without spot or wrinkle' (Eph. 5 : 27) From this it follows that separation from the Church is the denial of God and Christ."

Despite these strong views on what he called 'capricious separation' Calvin also presented another side of the question. He had no hesitation in separating from the Church of Rome which he described as follows : "Instead of the ministry of the Word, a perverse government compounded of lies rules there, which partly extinguishes the pure light, partly chokes it. The foulest sacrilege has been introduced in place of the Lord's Supper. The worship of God has been deformed by a diverse and unbearable mass of superstitions. Doctrine (apart from which Christianity cannot stand) has been entirely buried and driven out. Public assemblies have been schools of idolatry and ungodliness. In withdrawing from deadly participation in so many misdeeds, there is accordingly no danger that we be snatched away from the Church of Christ."

In this Reformation atmosphere separation took on a new dimension which had not received much attention in the history of the church. That was the necessity of separating from a church which has been corrupted both in worship and doctrine. This course was imperative in order to preserve the purity of the Church as the covenant body of Christ. Calvin applied the covenant principle of separation not only to the church but also to the school. Although Calvin nowhere expresses his ideas on education in a systematic theoretical way he emphasised the importance of schooling and indicated the aim and significance of a proper education. Calvin accepted the fundamental authority of the Bible in every sphere of human life and this included the education of the covenant children. For him the true aim of education was to lead the child to the Christian life. Parents were called upon to do two things : to teach their children the first principles of the Christian religion according to the Catechism, and to send without objection or neglect their children to school. For this purpose schools were provided in the Geneva Academy, known as the public school, and the College or Gymnasium, also known as the private school. The private school was preparatory to the public school. The Academy served as a model for the establishment of similar institutions in all countries where Calvinism found adherents. In this approach to education Calvin indicated a direction that meant separation from the humanist approach that failed to glorify God in the cultural development of the child.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CHURCH IN THE ECUMENICAL AGE

The churches that came into existence as a result of the separation that took place at the time of the Reformation also separated into four main streams — Lutheran, Reformed or Presbyterian, Anglican and Anabaptist. This separation largely arose from the interpretation of the doctrine of the sacraments.

SEPARATION FROM FALSE DOCTRINE

A new development soon appeared which was to create even greater problems. The age of the Enlightenment dawned towards the end of the 17th century and continued to spread its influence throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. Men declared their emancipation from the authorities and traditions of the past in the name of reason. They desired to accomplish rational autonomy in all cultural endeavours. In the American and French Revolutions these tendencies came to a dramatic expression. Under the influence of modern philosophy and science theologians began to criticize the norms by which the truth of Christianity had been affirmed. The authority of the Bible was questioned and its teaching was declared incompatible with human reason. Abandoning the historic creeds and confessions of the Reformation, liberal theology interpreted and restated the Christian religion in terms of modern civilization. With each turn of modern culture new theological schools came to the fore. The church became the movement of those who dedicated themselves to the principles and ideals involved in the religion of a good man named Jesus of Nazareth. While there has been in more recent times, a movement away from the older liberal views which were basically humanistic, the modern Christological battle does not give much ground for assurance. The influence of Bultmann is widespread. For him Jesus was a man only and no more. While the Bible speaks about Christ being supernatural and coming to earth in a miraculous fashion, suffering for the sins of the world, rising on the third day, it is only using mythological expressions in order to express the significance of this historical figure. But in Himself, according to Bultmann, Jesus was just a mere man.

SEPARATION FROM FALSE ECUMENISM

In this worldwide theological milieu there has been the development of the ecumenical movement with its creation of the World Council of Churches (W.C.C.). This organisation claims to be a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the Scriptures and therefore seek to fulfil together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. While this basis sounds attractive there is no compulsion on any member church to alter its theological position. In the churches affiliated with the WCC

heresy is tolerated and those who teach it have positions of leadership. The WCC claims a unity which God has given to His people in Jesus Christ but there is no place given to the Biblical concept of unity in the truth. Instead of unity in the faith according to the Scriptures we have a modern ecclesiastical Babel where there is confusion regarding worship, doctrine and the Biblical teaching as to the true nature of the church. The missionary programme is dominated by syncretism and the gospel of God's grace in Christ is rejected. When we consider the so called Festivals of Faith that have been patronised by leaders of the ecumenical movement the questions raised by Paul in 2 Cor. 6 : 14 are pertinent : "What communion hath light with darkness? What agreement hath the temple of God with idols?"

SEPARATION FROM THE WORLD

The Covenant people of God are also given a clear mandate in Scripture to be separated from the world and all its sinful pollution. In the book of Revelation, Babylon symbolises the concentration of the luxury, vice and glamour of the world. It represents the world as the centre of antichristian seduction at any moment of history. The call is clear, "Come out of her, my people, that ye be not partakers of her sins, and that ye receive not of her plagues" (Rev. 18 : 4). This symbolism of Babylon includes not only the corrupt society of our age but atheistic political philosophies such as communism.

SEPARATION AS A WITNESS

There is great danger that when separation takes place in the ecclesiastical sphere it is seen as a purely negative action. In fact separation can be regarded as something meritorious. There can develop a Pharisaic boastfulness that is not good. Indeed some of the separations that have taken place on doctrinal issues have been marred by hatred and bitterness. Friendships have been broken and even families have been torn asunder. We must not forget that there are those in churches, which have ceased to be faithful in doctrine, who have not bowed the knee to Baal. They need our love and our prayers. A mere negative resistance of idolatry will not avail however dutiful it be; there must be the positive delight in God. The church that is truly separated from the world and false teaching must give earnest attention to the study of the Scriptures and in particular covenant theology.

Like the covenant people entering the land of Canaan we have two great sacraments appointed by Christ — Baptism and the Lord's Supper. The theology of the sacraments is clearly set forth in the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms. It is possible to organise a company of people on the basis of separation but if the theology of the covenant is not taught you have confusion and the dynamite for the formation of successive splinter groups. If our separation is going to mean anything in

the world then we, like the covenant people in the land of Canaan, must have our theology of the sacraments clearly understood.

(a) BAPTISM

To some Baptism does not seem to be of much importance. There are separatist groups in existence who think that both infant baptism and believers' baptism can be maintained. In such a situation there is no theology of baptism and certainly no covenant theology. If we neglect to study this doctrine and apply it, can we be surprised if young people get carried away by the repetitious and superficial platitudes of the revivalist sects?

'b) LORD'S SUPPER

When we consider the Lord's Supper there is the danger we surround it with fences that cast shadows over its true significance. The observance of the Lord's Supper can become almost a fetish instead of a means of grace provided by our covenant Lord.

In this ordinance we are confronted with Christ in all the glory of His redemptive work. The atonement and intercession of Christ lie at the foundation of the sinner's hope of acceptance and enjoyment of the favour of God. In the words of Dr. Hugh Martin, "The doctrine of the Covenant of Grace is an impregnable wall of defence round the scriptural theory of the Atonement."

The preaching of the Word of God, the right administration of the sacraments and the maintenance of discipline are the marks of the Church as the separated body of Christ in the world.

God's covenanted and redeemed people who have been separated according to the teaching of Scripture have a great heritage. John Cunningham in his volume, "The Ordinance of Covenanting", writes, "The Church is distinct from the world. By the ordinances given to her by the Lord Jesus, she is distinguished from civil society." Francis Schaeffer in his writings and lectures reminds us of the tremendous task that the Church is called to face at the end of the twentieth century. "We must practise and exhibit the holiness of God and the love of God, for without this we grieve the Holy Spirit."

We have all the promises of our Covenant and Sovereign Lord. We have the gifts of the Holy Spirit sovereignly distributed according to promise. Let us capture something of the zeal of the Psalmist when he wrote : "Walk about Zion, go around her, count her towers, consider well her ramparts, view her citadels, that you may tell of them to the next generation. For this God is our God for ever and ever; he will be our guide even to the end" (Ps. 48 : 12-14 N.I.V.).

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Our Covenant Mission

Would you like to be a channel through which God can bring His covenant blessing to others? Would you like to be in the succession of those through whom God's blessing is transmitted from one generation to another? Would you like to be a link in the chain by which God's salvation is brought to the world?

These are the questions that challenge us as we come to think of our covenant mission. The whole theme of the Convention has centred on the fact that God's people are His covenant people — His because of His eternal covenant of grace. If we are His people we are called to share His blessing with others. Psalm 67 opens with a prayer for God's blessing on His people — "God be merciful unto us, and bless us." For what purpose? "That Thy way may be known upon earth, Thy saving health among all nations."

The truth is that one of the evidences that we have received God's blessing ourselves is that we should want to share that blessing with others. James Denney once heard a distinguished missionary say, "Some people do not believe in missions. They have no right to believe in missions : they do not believe in Christ." If we have been brought into covenant with God through Christ, we will want others to share in that blessing, too.

From the very beginning God has linked covenant and mission together. When God made His covenant with Abraham, and renewed that covenant again and again in the Book of Genesis, He made it abundantly clear that the purpose of that covenant was blessing for the world.

Five times in Genesis God links His covenant promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob with the promise that Abraham and

his seed will be a blessing to the world : “In thee and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed.” We find that promise in five different contexts, and because I believe that the basic principles of covenant mission are implicit in that original linking of covenant with mission, I want you to look with me at these five contexts to find the kind of people — God’s covenant people — whom He will use to bring His blessing to the world. What are the marks of the covenant relationship that is worked out in mission?

SEPARATION (Genesis 12 : 1–3)

When God called Abraham, He called him to separate himself from the idolatrous worship practised in Ur of the Chaldees. Mission required separation from sin.

Further, mission for Abraham meant separation from home and kindred. “Get thee out . . . from thy kindred, and from thy father’s house.” That may still be the literal cost of being a missionary. For some it may be the separation from home and friends that does not involve going to another country, when your home and friends do not understand or share your Christian commitment.

Abraham found that mission, too, involved separation from an ordered existence. That was the feature of his going forth which the writer to the Hebrews underlined : “he went out, not knowing whither he went.” Are we prepared for that kind of separation — the separation from fancied security and a regularly-ordered life? That may be the cost of mission.

PERSONAL COMMUNION WITH GOD AND FAMILY COMMITMENT TO THE LORD (Genesis 18 : 17–19)

Two further marks of the covenant relationship that are linked with the bringing of God’s blessing to the world — mission — personal communion with God and family commitment to the Lord.

This passage in Genesis shows us a man in such communion with God that God could share with him what He was going to do to Sodom : a man in such an intimate relationship with God that he could plead with God for mercy on Sodom. If we are going to be used as channels of God’s blessing to others, it will be as we are on such intimate terms with God. Abraham was known as the Friend of God. We need to be in that relationship if we are to be used to bring His blessing to others. The apostles were equipped for their missionary task by being with Jesus : it was after that that He sent them forth. First there must be communion, then commission.

Genesis 18 : 19 links the promise that blessing to the nations will come through Abraham with Abraham’s dedication of his

home to the Lord : “I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord . . . ” God knew the dedication of Abraham’s home : that, in effect, was the first area where the blessing that was to come to the nations would reach. Similarly, Christ’s strategy for world mission was simple and practical — beginning at Jerusalem. The starting place for mission for all of us is where we are, where we are known.

COMPLETE COMMITMENT TO THE LORD (Genesis 22 : 15—18)

Blessing for the world through God’s covenant people demands complete commitment to the Lord. Genesis 22 : 15—18 links the promise of blessing to the world through Abraham with his willingness to sacrifice his only son, Isaac : “Because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son : that in blessing I will bless thee . . . and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed.”

Here was the ultimate test of obedience. What God wanted was not the sacrifice of Isaac, but the personal total surrender of Abraham. Was there anyone or anything dearer to him than God? Covenant mission demands the commitment of Psalm 73 : 25 “Whom have I in heaven but Thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside Thee.”

How amazingly Abraham’s faith grew under such testing. The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews sees it as nothing less than faith in the resurrection : “By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac . . . accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead; from whence also he received him in a figure.” The spiritual enrichment that comes from full commitment is immeasurable, and in turn leads to richer blessing for the world.

FAITH AND OBEDIENCE (Genesis 26 : 1—5)

The fourth renewal of God’s promise of blessing to the world through His covenant people was given to Isaac. Again there are two essentials of mission — faith and obedience.

There was a famine in the land, and Isaac was tempted to do as his father had done before him and go down to Egypt. But God’s command came : “Go not down into Egypt . . . Sojourn in this land, and I will be with thee, and will bless thee . . . and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed.”

If blessing was to come to the world through Isaac, he had to learn to trust the Lord alone : when natural resources failed, he had to rely on supernatural resources. And God did not fail him. “Then Isaac sowed in that land, and received in the same year

an hundredfold : and the Lord blessed him" (v. 12). Covenant mission demands that kind of dependence on God's provision.

God further reminded Isaac of the need for implicit obedience by linking the promise of blessing for the world with the obedience of Abraham his father : "in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because that Abraham obeyed my voice, and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws." God asked the same of Isaac. And He asks the same of us. A basic requirement in our covenant mission is this : Are we prepared to do not what we want to do, but what God wants us to do? We will never be left without guidance : are we willing to obey?

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF THE PRESENCE OF GOD (Genesis 28 : 10—15)

The fifth renewal of the promise of blessing for the world through God's covenant people came to Jacob. At the heart of his vision at Bethel was a personal experience of the presence of God. Alongside God's promise of blessing for the world was this personal promise to Jacob (v. 15) : "And, behold, I am with thee, and will keep thee in all places whither thou goest, and will bring thee again into this land; for I will not leave thee, until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of." Jacob claimed that promise for himself. Sometimes he has been criticised for making a bargain with God, when he said, "If God will be with me, and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat, and raiment to put on, so that I come again to my father's house in peace; then shall the Lord be my God" But Jacob was not making a bargain with God : he was reiterating and claiming for himself the promise that God had made. His response might be better translated, "Since God will be with me" Such a personal experience of the presence of God is essential for mission. There is a story of an old Scottish preacher who had not come into the pulpit at the beginning of the service. Someone was sent to see what was keeping him, and came back to report that the minister was speaking to Someone in his room, and insisting that he could not go to preach until that Someone came with him.

Moses knew his need of that Presence when he prayed, "If Thou goest not with us, carry us not up hence." Paul knew it in Corinth when he received reassurance from his Lord : "Be not afraid, but speak, and hold not thy peace; for I am with thee." And in a darker hour, when all his friends had forsaken him, "notwithstanding the Lord stood with me, and strengthened me." That is the ultimate essential for mission — a continual personal experience of the presence of God.

Perhaps these essential qualifications for mission might deter u^s. A. J. Gossip tells in his Warrack Lectures on Preaching — a

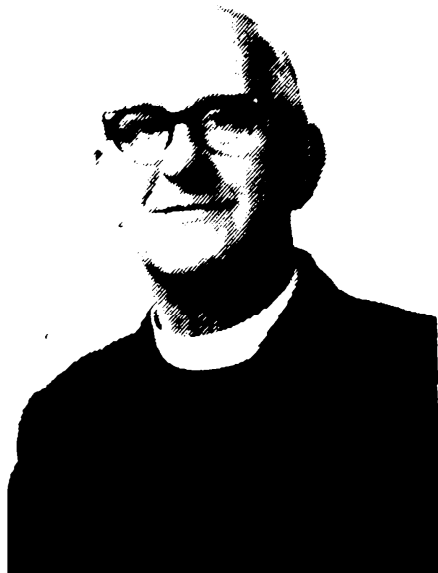
book on preaching with the splendid title, "In Christ's Stead" — that a distinguished preacher came once to speak to Divinity students at New College, Edinburgh, and set such a high standard for the ministry that three students, feeling that this was far beyond them, decided that they must pull out altogether — a decision that, happily, they later reversed. There is a danger that some, confronted with these essential qualifications for mission, might decide that it is not for them. We might be deterred, if it were not for two things. One is that over against the demands are the promises of God. See how often in these passages we have God saying, "I will . . ." God said to Abraham, "Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred . . . and I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee." The place where Abraham proved his full commitment by his willingness to offer Isaac was named by him, Jehovah-jireh, "The Lord will provide." God said to Jacob, "Sojourn in this land, and I will be with thee, and bless thee." And to Jacob, "I will not leave thee, until I have done that which I have spoken to thee of." "I will . . . I will . . . I will." We are not asked to face the task alone. When Christ called His disciples, He did not say to them, "You must be fishers of men." He said, "I will make you fishers of men." That is our only hope.

The second answer to our shrinking from the task of mission is more wonderful still. The New Testament makes it clear that the promise of blessing to the world in Abraham's seed found its ultimate fulfilment in Christ. He is the Seed through Whom covenant blessing comes to the world. But, in an incredible way, that fulfilment is shared by all who are His. Listen! "If ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3 : 29). "You are Abraham's seed." Then, in you, in so far as you are in Christ, "all the nations of the earth shall be blessed." You see, mission is not something tacked on to our personal experience of Christ, which we can take or leave as we like. It is something that is part of our Christian experience. It is impossible to be Christ's and not to be part of Christ's mission in the world. Christ Himself has told us, "He that abideth in Me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit". That is the secret of mission — to be so linked with Christ by faith that He works in us and through us, to bring forth fruit, in our own lives and in the lives of others, to His glory.

The call is not primarily to mission. It is first and foremost a call to a renewed commitment to Christ and to a new abiding in Christ. "If you are Christ's, then are you Abraham's seed" — the channel of blessing for the world, beginning where we are, and reaching out wherever He sends us. "If you are Christ's . . ."

*"Lord, I am thine; O save thou me :
Thy precepts I have sought."*

"By faith Abraham, when he was called . . . obeyed." God asks nothing more, and nothing less.



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Our Covenant Heritage

In the dark days of persecution in Scotland, as the situation worsened for the faithful followers of Christ, it was a crime punishable by death to hear the Word preached in the fields or on the moors.

On one occasion a young girl on her way to a conventicle was accosted by the dreaded dragoons and questioned about where she was going. She answered in a language that godless men could not understand. "My elder brother has died", she said, "and I am going to hear the terms of His will and discover the details of the legacy I have inherited from Him." She was sent on her way and went to join her brethren at the Lord's Supper. It was her delight to be a partaker of the benefits of the Covenant of grace. That is our privileged position here today.

Covenanters are often criticised for living in the past. There is such a demand today for what is new and original and progressive that we are sometimes looked on as an interesting but out-dated relic from the 17th century. Perhaps we deserve that criticism and need to take a fresh look at our history, using it not as a stifling shackle but as a springboard to progress and forward movement.

When we speak of our Covenant Heritage we are recognising the benefits and blessings we inherit as partakers of the Covenant of Grace. For a heritage is an inherited blessing. It cannot be earned or achieved by effort. It can only be accepted and enjoyed. It is dependent, not on anything we do, but on what others have done before us. In Reformation days, faithful men, inspired by God's Spirit, recognised the great things the Lord had done for

His people and made a positive response in faith and obedience. In the acceptance and renewal of this response we are the recipients of a covenant heritage that they cherished so deeply and passed on to us with such confidence.

THE GROUND ON WHICH OUR COVENANT HERITAGE RESTS

RESTS ON DIVINE MERCY

Our Covenant Heritage rests on what God in His mercy has done for His people, and is the response of faith and obedience to that gracious work.

The Scriptures principally teach what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man. Man is to believe that God is a God of grace, the author and administrator of the Covenant of Grace to bring redemption and everlasting life to His people.

The duty that God requires of man is obedience to His revealed will, and that obedience is the response of faith to the Covenant He has made. A covenant God provides covenant mercy for sinners and demands from them a covenant response. Covenanting, then, is a spirited and spiritual response to God's grace, freely offered to us in Christ.

BASED ON A DESIRE TO HONOUR CHRIST

Further, our Covenant Heritage is based on a desire to honour Christ, as the Lord of all. This is a very proper aim. Dr. J. King Hewison in his monumental work, *The Covenanters*, states that the advancement of Christ's Kingdom was much in the minds of those who prepared the various Covenants in the 16th and 17th centuries. And Dr. J. D. Douglas in his *Light in the North*, sums it up very well when he contrasts the two reformations in Scotland: "When the 16th century Reformers, following Luther, took as their watchword "None but Christ saves", those of the 17th century were forced by political developments to add a further word, "None but Christ reigns". Johnston of Wariston, with Alexander Henderson, drafted the Covenant. His relative, Burnet, comments on his public reading of the document at Greyfriars in the words — "He looked at the Covenant as the setting of Christ on His throne, and so was out of measure zealous in it." And Henderson wrote of that great occasion — "This was the day of the Lord's power — the day of the Redeemer's strength on which the princes of the people assembled to swear their allegiance to the king of Kings." They testified to a godless world that there is another King, one called Jesus.

RESTS IN A COMMITMENT TO THE PRINCIPLES OF THE REFORMATION

The National Covenant of Scotland in 1638 exposed the errors of the unreformed Roman Catholic Church, protested against every unscriptural innovation that threatened to mar the reformation church and declared that the motivation for Covenanting stemmed “from the unfeigned desire to maintain the true worship of God, the majesty of the King and the peace of the Kingdom, for the common happiness of ourselves and our posterity.” When the Solemn League and Covenant was drafted five years later, its aims were to preserve what had been achieved in the reformation under Knox, to resist the pressures suffered at the hands of the Stuart kings, to bring the Church back to its norms in doctrine, worship and government “according to the Word of God and the example of the best reformed churches.” To achieve this goal, every form of superstition, heresy and schism had to be rooted out.

There was a deep concern for the promotion of righteousness, both at personal and national levels, and our fathers were concerned that this only could be achieved by stemming the tide of godlessness and by the profession and practice of true religion. On such a solid foundation our Covenant Heritage rests.

THE COST BY WHICH OUR COVENANT HERITAGE HAS BEEN SECURED

The cost was borne first by our fathers in the 17th century and shared by each succeeding generation.

THE COST OF DEFENCE

There was the high cost of defending it as the Church endured horrific persecution. No sooner had Charles II taken the throne than he spurned the covenant pledges he had taken and encouraged his minions to root out and destroy all who maintained the scripturalness and the continuity of the Covenants. For many the cost was in terms of blood, and we dare not forget the sacrifice made by James Guthrie and the Marquis of Argyle,

by Hugh McKail and Andrew Hislop,
by Richard Cameron and Donald Cargill,
by Margaret Wilson and Margaret McLauchlin,
by Isobel Alison and Marion Harvey,
by John Brown and James Renwick,

and by countless unnamed and unsung heroes of the faith, of whom the world was not worthy. The dying testimony of the Marquis of Argyle in 1661 sounded the note to be echoed by all who later suffered. “God hath laid engagements upon Scotland — we are tied by Covenants to religion and reformation. Those that were then unborn are yet engaged; and it passeth the power of all the magistrates under heaven, to absolve from the oath of

God.” From the highest peerage to the lowest peasantry the price was paid unquestioningly.

THE COST OF PRESERVATION

There was the bitter cost of preserving our Covenant heritage as the Church wavered and compromised at the end of the trying years. The Cameronian remnant, deserted by their friends and most sadly of all, by their ministers, held firmly to their Covenant obligations. The stalwart John MacMillan was tried by the Presbytery of Kirkcudbright and sentenced to deposition from the ministry for no other crime than that of pleading for the obligation of Scotland’s Covenants. The remnant, encouraged by the accession of MacMillan to their ranks (a covenanter of the Covenanters) renewed their Covenants, with fasting and humiliation, on the 23rd July, 1712, at Auchensaugh, near Hamilton. It was a vital step in displaying an ongoing commitment to covenant obligations.

THE COST OF SHARING

There was the noble cost of **sharing** our Covenant heritage, as the Church reached out to other lands.

As early as 1644 the people of Ulster had given an unhesitating acceptance to the Solemn League and Covenant. They were encouraged to stand fast by the mystical Alexander Peden and enjoyed the rugged leadership of David Houston, when, from 1690—1696, he was the only remaining Covenanting minister. They had regular visits from John MacMillan and the cause was kept alive by the ministry of his colleagues, John Cameron and John Fairlie, until their own William Martin was ordained in 1757. From that date the testimony has been regularly maintained.

The witness “For Christ’s Crown and Covenant” was carried to the western world. Banished from home or choosing to escape the tyranny of a foolish British government, the emigrant Covenanters sought and found in America a haven of rest and freedom. They were widely scattered from Nova Scotia to the Carolinas, and families within reasonable distance joined together to form Societies for social worship of God. They had no minister until 1742 when Alexander Craighead joined them. From 1751 John Cuthbertson from Scotland was their only minister for 20 years. His faithfulness established the cause in America and led to the formation of the first Presbytery at Paxtang, Pennsylvania, in 1774 when a number of ministers came from Ireland. It was a sharing of the Covenant Heritage and in 1798 the Church was sufficiently strong and well organised to become independent of the Irish and Scottish Churches.

But the Covenant bond was forged at the outset, and the Church freely accepted covenant obligations in her fourth Term of

Communion by making “an acknowledgment of public covenanting as an ordinance of God to be observed by churches and nations; and of the perpetual obligation of public covenants; and of the obligation of this Church of the Covenant entered into in 1871, in which are embodied the engagements of the National Covenant of Scotland and of the Solemn League and Covenant, so far as applicable in this land.”

The swelling tides of emigration in the 19th century carried the Church's witness to Canada in 1831 and to Australia in 1857. While there were ties of kinship with the home Churches, the true bond of union was a common Covenant Heritage. From Canada, in 1857, came these rousing words in a report to Synod :

“The Covenanted Church cannot afford to conduct a small, cramped and dwarfish Colonial Mission. We must go forward, or we will go back. The principles of the Covenanted Reformation are capable of universal extension. Over the wide domains of Europe, Asia, Africa, Oceania and America shall the doctrines of Christ's universal headship, the supreme and ultimate authority of the divine Word, and the duty of men to submit to the sceptre of King Jesus, spread from pole to pole, till they cover the whole world.”

The same vision and courage in promoting the covenanting testimony was displayed in Australia by Alexander McIlwaine Moore, who laboured alone for forty years. What a price to pay for the privilege of sharing the heritage with others! The Melbourne “Southern Cross” paid tribute to his life and work and stated, “Publicly and privately, with voice and pen, he preached the common truths of Christianity, and emphasised the distinctive doctrines of the Covenanting Church.” That has been faithfully done in Australia ever since.

THE COST OF MAINTENANCE

There was the ever recurring cost of maintaining our Covenant Heritage as strife and division rent the Church across the world. The mother church in Scotland had renewed the Covenants and enriched our heritage in 1712, 1745 and 1761. But liberalising tendencies began to show in the 19th century and the nature of our obligations to the historic covenants was called in question. The Church, which had survived in days when ministers were either few or non-existent, began to grow restless and agitated in days of prosperity. Division appeared first in the American Church in 1833. The heritage was threatened by those who attacked the position of dissent against a non-Christian government. They withdrew from the parent body and formed a General (or New Light) Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church. The faithful bore the cost of rebuilding a weakened cause.

The disease laid hold of the Church in Ireland. The struggle lasted ten years from 1830—1840. In 1831 as steps were taken to renew the Covenants, a controversy arose with reference to the

powers of the civil magistrate in spiritual things. Bitterness led to schism and in 1840 the Eastern Presbytery withdrew from the jurisdiction of Synod and later was constituted as the Eastern Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Ireland. This breach was healed toward the end of the Century when many of the congregations reunited with the Synod.

The Scottish Church was the last of the main branches of the Reformed Presbyterian Church to be unhappily divided. In 1863 the majority of the Synod decided to abandon the position of political dissent. Its life as a separate Synod was of short duration and it united with the Free Church of Scotland in 1876. The minority maintained its ordinances and organisation in spite of difficulties and survives till the present as the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland.

We honour those in every land who were prepared to pay the price of maintaining and promoting our Covenant Heritage.

THE CHALLENGE OF OUR COVENANT HERITAGE

We are heirs to a great inheritance -- What are our obligations? As Covenanters we can say with the Psalmist 'I have a goodly heritage', What must we do to preserve it and to pass it on? Our Church is what our fathers meant it to be — a worldwide church with a worldwide message, witnessing in different lands to different cultures that Christ is King. Without misunderstanding, or criticism or any sense of superiority we can rejoice in the fellowship that our Covenant Heritage affords us and accept the privilege of witnessing together for our Head and Lord.

We must be careful lest we lose or devalue our heritage and dishonour those who, at such a cost, secured it for us. Israel was a covenant people. But Israel was often guilty of the sin of departing from covenant obligations. God warned them frequently and His warning in Joel 2 is particularly relevant to us. God called them to repentance in verses 12--14. He called them to meet in solemn assembly, and in their meeting to plead with Him for mercy. He actually directed them to offer a specific prayer. "Let them say, Spare thy people, O Lord, and give not thine heritage to reproach."

That should be our concern today — that God's heritage should not be defiled or dishonoured, lest we become a reproach to the enemies of truth. To a people who repent of the sin of covenant breaking God has gracious promises of restoration and revival, and this is crowned by the assurance, "My people shall never be ashamed." Let us therefore see in our Covenant Heritage, a platform for progress in achieving national righteousness, and a picture of the universal nature of the kingdom of Christ.

Let us give ourselves fearlessly and unitedly to the maintenance and advancement of our heritage, lifting up our Covenants as a

standard for the defence and confirmation of the gospel. And let us be encouraged by the stirring words of James Guthrie, praying that the Covenants may yet be the reviving, not only of Scotland, but wherever Christ is preached as Saviour and Lord.

*“Patriots have toiled, and in their country’s cause
Bled nobly; and their deeds, as they deserve
Receive proud recompense.
But fairer wreaths are due, though never paid
To those who, posted at the shrine of truth,
Have fallen in her defence. Their blood is shed
In confirmation of the noblest claim,
Our claim to feed upon immortal truth,
To walk with God, to be divinely free.”*