

THE COVENANT DOCTRINE: Foundation of the Scriptures

Scripture references are to the NIV-UK

DEFINED GENERALLY, a covenant is a promise, a contractual arrangement, of a more or less formal nature. The principle of the covenant is found in law and in the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures.

There are two principal categories of covenants.

Firstly, the *conditional*, or *bi-lateral* covenant – a contract made between *two* parties, each of whom agrees to keep certain stipulations of the agreement. Such contracts invariably include sanctions – penalties for failing to keep to the terms.

A commonplace example of this type of contract is a lease or rental of a flat or house, in which continuance of residence is dependent upon making regular payments. In the biblical sphere, the Jewish Law Covenant is probably the best illustration of a conditional covenant. God would do such and such for Israel, *if* Israel adhered to the terms of it. Should they fail to do so, condign punishment would follow. Israel did consent to the arrangement, thus binding itself (Ex. 24: 1-8; v. 3, ‘Everything the LORD has said we will do.’).

Secondly, the *unconditional*, or *uni-lateral* covenant. The unconditional contract is a pledge made by *one* party to another. The first party carries the liabilities of fulfilment; the second party is the recipient of the benefits offered, and may not be required to do much or anything at all to receive the benefits. An example of this type is a simple bequest. An example of the unconditional contract in the biblical context is that in which God vows to bless Abraham and his offspring (Gen. 12: 1-3):

1 The LORD had said to Abram, ‘Go from your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you. **2** ‘I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. **3** I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.’

Later, in Gen. 22: 16-18, God reaffirms His promise to Abraham, prefaced with an affirmation:

16 . . . *I swear by myself*, declares the LORD, that . . . **17** I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies, **18** and through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me. [*emphasis added*]

Because there is no authority higher than Jehovah, the Unfathomable, Inscrutable and Self-Existent One, God swears on *His own nature*, thus rendering the promise immutable (like Himself) – incapable of alteration. In so doing, the Almighty attaches His reputation to the fulfilment of this promise, and in the process demonstrates *His compliance with His own law of fidelity* – a divine humility.

This promise, often referred to as the Oath-Bound Covenant, is the basis on which the New Testament Gospel rests, as explained by the writer of the book of Hebrews (whom we assume is the Apostle Paul). In Chapter 6 we read (with emphases added):

13 When God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself, **14** saying, ‘I will surely bless you and give you many descendants.’ **15** And so after waiting patiently, Abraham received what was promised. **16** People swear by someone greater than themselves, and the oath confirms what is said and puts an end to all argument. **17** Because God wanted to make the *unchanging nature of his purpose* very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath. **18** God did this so that, by two unchangeable things *in which it is impossible for God to lie*, we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged.

The Apostle further elaborates on this argument in Gal. 3:

7 Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham. **8** The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel *in advance* to Abraham: ‘All nations will be blessed through you.’ **9** So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

To define a covenant between God and His people as a ‘contract’ may seem cold and stiff, but in the outworking of it there is nothing lifeless or loveless at all. Underpinned by good will and a glorious object in view, God’s covenant relationship with His people Israel – and ultimately with the whole human family – is a cast-iron *guarantee* to a frail and suspicious humanity that God will be faithful, no matter what. The ultimate demonstration of God’s faithfulness to all of us was His sending Jesus to die for everyone. In due time the covenant-promise made to Abraham will be fulfilled in the blessing and restoration of all humanity in Christ’s kingdom on earth.

Those who follow God’s will and ways now will always be relatively few in number. These include all those – regardless of church affiliation – who approach God through Christ as their Saviour and King, repent for their sins, and ‘take up’ the cross of Christ. In consecration each one pledges to follow the Master through thick and thin. We agree to do the will of God without question.



Marriage

It is generally true that personal relationships fall apart without a serious effort by both parties at sustaining them. This is especially true in Christian marriage, itself a covenant involving both *conditional* – some vow of commitment – and *unconditional* aspects – affection, encouragement, self-abnegation toward the other. The implicit *power* of the covenant – our conscientious awareness that *we are obliged to keep our part of the agreement* – reinforces our our determination to honour our vow.

Christian Consecration

The foregoing principles are especially required when after being justified by our faith we become ‘yoke-fellows’ with Christ. Such a sanctified commitment is not for the faint of heart, and ought not be embarked upon without prayer and deep thought in advance (Luke 9: 62):

No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God.

Fortunately for us, this self-imposed pledge of consecration is not wholly dependent on *our own* ability to perform it perfectly. The obvious implication in our being justified by faith *in the first place* is that we are *not already perfect*, but fallen sinners, and we will often fail to live up to our best intentions. But God promises that we will overcome if we trust Him and apply the teachings and principles of His Word to our lives, following the example of Christ, the Forerunner.

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