



Biblical Covenanters

Read Nehemiah 10

Jeremiah foresaw the day when the people of God would return, weeping and seeking the Lord. *"Come, and let us join ourselves to the LORD in a perpetual covenant that shall not be forgotten"* (Jer. 50:4-5). In the previous chapter of Nehemiah, we saw the weeping (Neh. 9); now we see the covenanting (Neh. 10). Covenanting is not a familiar term among all branches of the Christian church. However, it was common among the Puritans and their heirs. Joseph Alleine, Jonathan Edwards, David Brainerd, and Ebenezer Erskine are some names from the long list of individuals who expressly formulated a covenant, or resolutions, before God. Of course, covenanting was not only for individuals. In Scotland, there was the well-known National Covenant (1638) as well as the Solemn League and Covenant (1643).

The Bible has much to say about covenants, yet it refers most often to a covenant that God undertakes from His side. For example, we read in Scripture about God establishing His covenant with Noah (Gen. 6:18). God then takes the nation of Israel into covenant, and there are many such references. These all pertain to the great covenant of grace, which underlies the whole gospel of grace through Jesus Christ.

The biblical and historical practice of covenanting is not unrelated to this great covenant of grace. In fact, the practice of covenanting grows out of man's believing response to God's gracious covenant undertakings. On the other hand, any covenant that seeks to bargain with God, acting as if He were an equal, is misplaced; in fact, it is offensive to the great and holy God.

Yet, there is such a thing as a proper, believing answer to God's covenant engagements. This is called "covenanting." The author of Psalm 116 covenanted with God when he said: *"O Lord, truly I am thy servant"* (v. 16). Paul called Christians to covenant when he wrote: *"I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice..."* (Rom. 12:1).

Nehemiah 10 also gives us a great example of biblical covenanting. Here we have an original solemn league and covenant, a model for the Scottish Reformation, and any Reformation.

The Covenanters

It all started with God's Word. Ezra read the Torah to the people, and Levite helpers explained and applied the Word of God to the people (Neh. 8). The Word pierced through their ears into their hearts. Their lips were opened, and they began to cry and plead (Neh. 9). In chapter 10, we see their hands take up an ancient writing instrument and sign or seal their name. What starts in the hidden recesses of the heart must boil over into actions.

This covenant was not something vague and unspecific; it was not hidden or hands-off. Those who signed it made a public, personal, and permanent commitment to abide by this covenant. Verse 1 (as well as 9:38) uses the word "seal." They officially and legally signed their names, assenting entirely to this document.

The leaders of the people led in the act of covenanting. The name of Nehemiah himself heads the list. Then follow the priests (1b-8), among whom is Seraiah (perhaps the full name of Ezra) followed by the Levites (vv. 9-13). Then the leaders of the people (vv. 14-27) signed the document,

while the people took the oaths along with them. We are told that the people did so with the full understanding of what was involved (v. 28b).

What more can we say about these people? Not much, other than that they were wholly taken up with this covenant. You could call them “covenanters” — their very identity was linked to it. They wished to be known, not as rich or poor, learned or unlearned, but by their relationship to this solemn league and covenant.

The Covenanting

This brings us to examine what exactly it meant to enter into this covenant. What was the substance of it? The text tells us two main things:

- 1) They separated themselves from the people around them, and
- 2) they took upon them the vow of following God’s precepts (vv. 28-29).

They separated themselves *from* something and *to* something. We cannot leave one allegiance without owning another. The Puritan Joseph Caryl wrote: *“Every man must look to it, that he takes this covenant with a heart emptied of all covenants which are inconsistent with this ... Every man by nature is a covenanter with hell, and with every sin he is at agreement: be sure you revoke and cancel that covenant, before you subscribe this.”* The people separated *from* the people of the lands and separated **“unto the law of God”** (v. 28).

If we had been born in a state acceptable to God, we would not need to separate from the world and unto God. If the world were an unfallen place, and its inhabitants in an amiable relationship with God, there would be no separation from it. However, as Paul says, we are all by nature walking according to the course of this world (Eph. 2:1-3). The course of this world has its own rules and regulations, and they are in opposition to God’s. We need grace that separates us from this world — not merely externally, though that is important. We need God to take hold of us and separate our affections and wills from their unholy alliance with sin and sinful living.

Parents must lead their families in lives of separation from the world (see 10:28b). Vows taken at baptism and confession of faith certainly oblige to this. But we need grace in order to do this as well. Sadly, many today are forsaking a lifestyle of separation, favoring instead a life of accommodation and adaptation. May God revive among us a sense of the need to live lives in accordance with God’s statutes and commandments.

The Covenant

What specifically did these covenanters covenant to do? Note well that they didn’t subscribe to some novel code of ethics, unheard of until that time. They engaged to abide by the ancient Word of God and, specifically, God’s precepts as they were delivered by Moses (v. 29). They did specify, however, some particulars, which others around them were not willing to maintain. The points they detailed in verses 30-39 were all practices that would set them apart from what was commonly practiced by their neighbors. This teaches us that separation from the world means no compromise, even in areas where it is unpopular to be different.

When we look closely at these areas, we notice an interesting pattern: they correspond to the ordinances of creation: marriage (v. 30), Sabbath (v. 31), and divine service (vv. 32-39). God instituted these things from creation. However, since his fall, man consistently assaults these very things. Look at the attack on the institution of marriage today, the trampling underfoot of the Sabbath, and the neglect of God’s Name and cause. Man the rebel sets up his own institutions — pleasure, convenience, and self-service. He is covenanted to love by these principles. Unless and until God brings him under His own reign and rule, he is committed to these things. How we need Christ’s covenant obedience! Let us look to the only One who could truly say, *“I delight to do thy will, O my God; yea, thy law is within my heart”* (Ps. 40:8). Let us seek from Him and His Spirit the grace of covenant fulfillment.

Questions:

1. What does the word “covenanting” mean, and how does it relate to grace? Trace this relationship in Nehemiah 8-10.
2. What makes a good leader?
3. What is the importance of knowledge? How can we and our families acquire good knowledge?
4. Why do *separation from* and *separation to* go hand-in-hand? Is it possible for people to *separate from*, but not *separate to* something?
5. Why does Satan attack the creation ordinances, also in the church? What things might a covenant specify today?
6. How are baptism and confession of faith instances of covenanting? How should we engage in *personal or group covenanting* today?

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