

What Is the New Testament Warrant for National Covenanting?

2 Corinthians 8:5; 2 Chronicles 30:8

March 15, 2009

Rev. Greg L. Price

Over many sermons now, we have considered both a Scriptural and historical defense of National Covenanting and particularly the descending obligation of the *Solemn League and Covenant* to all of the national, ecclesiastical, and familial posterity in succeeding generations. We continue this Lord's Day with a question that should be addressed as we draw near to the conclusion of this series.

I. **Most of the evidence gleaned from Scripture to defend National Covenanting has come from the Old Testament. Is the New Testament completely silent on this subject or is there also evidence that might be presented in defense of National Covenanting from the New Testament?**

A. Let me first state that we must always be careful that we do not erect some false dichotomy between the Moral Law of God revealed in the Old Testament and the continuation of the Moral Law of God into the New Testament era (even if there is no explicit reiteration of a particular Moral Law in the New Testament). The moral nature and universal application of the Ten Commandments to all people (Jews and Gentiles alike) at all times is surely taught by Christ and the Apostles in the New Testament. If a commandment is moral, we do not have to find it repeated in the New Testament in order to find warrant for its continued obligation upon the moral person of individuals, families, churches, and nations. For just as the moral nature of God is one and cannot be divided, or just as one aspect of God's moral nature cannot contradict another aspect of God's moral nature, or just as one aspect of God's moral nature cannot be abolished while another aspect of God's moral nature continues in unabated continuity, so likewise all of God's Moral Law (as summarized in the Ten Commandments) is one and cannot be divided, cannot contradict itself, and none of it (as summarized in the Ten Commandments) can be abolished—the Moral Law of God continues in unabated continuity from the Old Testament into the New Testament. The Moral Law of God cannot cease anymore than the moral nature of God can cease. Just because bestiality is not specifically condemned in the New Testament as it is in the Old Testament (in Leviticus 18:23) is no warrant for its lawful practice in the New Testament.

1. The Lord Jesus makes it very clear that He did not come to destroy the Moral Law, but rather came to fulfill it (that is make it full) by His own perfect obedience (on behalf of His people) and by undergirding it through His own authoritative instruction (Matthew 5:17-19; Matthew 15:3-6,9).

2. The apostles of Christ likewise clearly teach the abiding obligation of God's Moral Law (as summarized in the Ten Commandments) upon Jews and Gentiles in the New Testament era (Romans 3:19,31; James 1:25; James 2:8-12).

3. Covenanting with God (whether by an individual, family, church, or nation) is a **solemn religious act**. As such, it is not a part of the **Judicial Law** which related in a peculiar way to the civil law of Israel as distinct from Gentile nations. Nor is covenanting with God a part of the **Ceremonial Law**, for covenanting with God is summarized under the Third Commandment of the Moral Law of God ("Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain [in other words, don't covenant with God or use His name in an oath falsely by refusing to fulfill what has been covenanted—GLP]: for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain" Exodus 20:7). Thus, even if national covenanting with God has no explicit mention in the New Testament, we cannot and must not conclude on that basis that it is merely for Israel in the Old Testament. For if covenanting with God (whether individual, familial, ecclesiastical, or national) is a part of the Moral Law of God as revealed in the Old Testament, it must necessarily continue with obligatory continuity into the New Testament era (even if no specific mention is made of it in the New Testament).

B. A second reason why national covenanting is warranted in the New Testament era is because it is prophesied (by divine inspiration) to occur with God's clear approbation and approval (during the millennial reign of Christ from His throne in heaven over all the earth), as we see will be the case when Egypt will engage in a National Covenant with God and Assyria will do so as well (Isaiah 19:18-25). Other Old Testament passages likewise prophesy of this same national reformation that Christ will bring to pass in that millennial period that is yet to come in all of the earth in which nations and their national representatives will own God (by way of covenant) to be their God (Zechariah 2:11). Although these prophecies are found in the Old Testament, they clearly relate to what Christ shall accomplish upon the earth in the future during His glorious millennial reign from heaven; for without controversy, we have never seen "many nations" of the earth swear as nations (through their national representatives and by national covenants) to be God's people (cp. Isaiah 2:2-4). But that is prophesied to occur in the New Testament era, and it will come to pass by the promise and power of Christ.

C. A third reason why national covenanting is warranted in the New Testament era is because it is assumed by New Testament passages that condemn covenant-breaking as an abominable sin committed against God (Romans 1:31; 1 Timothy 1:10). If it is an abominable sin for one individual (as a moral person) to refuse to keep covenant with God, how much more aggravated is this sin when a whole nation (as a moral person) refuses to keep covenant with God. Likewise we might say, if it is an abominable sin for one individual (as a moral person) to commit murder, how much more aggravated is this sin when a whole nation (as a moral person) commits murder against another nation by way of an unjust war, slaughtering hundreds of thousands of people. Covenant-breaking is only magnified and aggravated when a whole nation of individuals and their national representatives commit this heinous sin.

D. A fourth reason why national covenanting is warranted in the New Testament era is because it is likewise assumed in 2 Corinthians 8:5, which directly deals with ecclesiastical covenanting among several churches in the Roman Province of Macedonia. Let us read the text once again from 2 Corinthians 8:5. The question naturally arises at this point as to how any form of covenanting can be derived from the words of our text. Where does it clearly say in this text that these churches covenanted with the Lord? Well let us look closely at the words we find here for the answer to this question.

1. First, note the context in which this verse occurs.

- a. Paul labored to emphasize in the various Gentile Churches in which he ministered their duty of love and gratitude which they not only owed to God for His gracious redemption, but also the duty and gratitude these Gentile Churches owed to the Jewish Churches in Judea who had suffered much trial and tribulation for the faith, but who nevertheless commissioned apostles and ministers to take the gospel to the Gentiles. Thus, trial, tribulations, and persecution are not reasons to forego sending and supporting faithful ministers. Even when these Churches of Judea and Jerusalem suffered, they did not forget the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ that was to be proclaimed by His ministers to the ends of the earth. So, likewise, let not our own financial trials or persecution for the cause of Christ, lead us to conclude that we can do nothing at all to promote the gospel and crown rights of Jesus Christ. We may not be able to give what we would like to give to the support of the ministry, but we can, and like the Judean Churches, we must continue to promote the Kingdom of Christ. In fact, our love for Christ and for His truth is manifested by our desire and willingness to support (with our prayers and gifts) the faithful ministry of Jesus Christ (even when we can only give a very small portion to the work of the Lord). Paul clearly teaches that those Churches in Macedonia and elsewhere throughout the Roman Empire that had benefited **spiritually** from the Churches in Jerusalem were indebted to benefit **financially** these same Churches in Jerusalem ("For if the Gentiles have been made partakers of their [the Jews' —GLP] spiritual things, their [the Gentiles' —GLP] duty is also to minister unto them in carnal things" Romans 15:27).

b. Thus, Paul had enjoined this duty of gathering collections for the poor saints in Jerusalem in his First Letter to the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 16:1-2). It would appear the Church of Corinth had neglected this duty, and so Paul repeats this injunction in his Second Letter to the Corinthians (and even spends two chapters addressing this issue—chapters 8 and 9). In order to exercise and stretch the Corinthians to greater diligence and liberality in this matter of giving, Paul appeals to the example of the Macedonian Churches (which included at least the Churches in Philippi, Thessalonica, and Berea). Note the words of Paul as found in 2 Corinthians 8:1-4. Even in spite of their own trials the Macedonian Churches were so thankful at having received the grace of God through the sending forth of faithful ministers to them that they pleaded with Paul to allow them to send their gifts to the poor saints in Jerusalem. Dear ones, we truly test the quality of our giving when we give not from our abundance, but rather from our poverty, affliction, and trial—not out of our strength, but out of our weakness; not when it is easy to give, but when it is difficult to give.

2. Second, as we move from a consideration of the context in which our text occurs, note the reasons why the words of Paul should be understood to refer to ecclesiastical covenanting in 2 Corinthians 8:5 (“And this they did not as we hoped, but first gave their own selves to the Lord, and unto us by the will of God”).

a. **The first reason** why the words of Paul should be understood to refer to ecclesiastical covenanting is because this giving of themselves to the Lord was not a giving as Paul and his associates had expected. In other words, this giving of themselves to the Lord was **not** an ordinary duty, but an extraordinary duty. An ordinary duty of giving themselves to the Lord would have been accomplished through the ordinary ordinances of submitting to Christ whether in prayer or hearing the Word preached, or by giving themselves to God in their public professions of faith, in their Baptisms, or in the Lord’s Supper. All these expressions of giving oneself to the Lord (that I just mentioned) would certainly have been ordinary duties Paul would have expected the Churches in Macedonia to perform. But Paul declares that these Churches of Macedonia gave themselves to the Lord in a manner that he had not expected—by means of an extraordinary ordinance rather than an ordinary ordinance. That is certainly true of voluntary covenanting with God at particular times in God’s providence when the occasion calls for it. Thus, I would submit that the only ordinance that is both extraordinary and is one in which we voluntarily give ourselves to the Lord as His people because of His gracious gift of Christ to us is that of covenanting with God. Ecclesiastical covenanting is also the only extraordinary ordinance in which the Churches of Macedonia could collectively as one moral person give themselves not only to God but unto the apostles as well.

b. **The second reason** why the words of Paul should be understood to refer to ecclesiastical covenanting is because this giving of themselves cannot refer to merely devoting their financial gifts to God or Paul for the ministry to the poor saints in Jerusalem. For the giving of themselves to the Lord is clearly distinguished from the giving of their financial gifts to the Lord in this passage. Paul states in 2 Corinthians 8:4 that the Churches of Macedonia pleaded with Paul to allow them to give their financial gifts to the Lord, and 2 Corinthians 8:5 begins with “and this they did” (i.e. the Macedonian Churches actually did give their financial gifts to Paul for the Jerusalem brethren). However, the Macedonian Churches gave in an unexpected way (“not as we hoped”): “but first gave themselves to the Lord.” In other words, before they gave their financial gift to the Lord, they first gave themselves to the Lord. And what could such a giving to the Lord be but a covenanting with God to be His faithful people in seeking to minister to the needs of the poor saints in Jerusalem. These Churches of Macedonia did not simply want to empty their pockets for the poor saints in Jerusalem, they wanted their financial giving in their moment of extreme trial and persecution to be an outward expression of their faith, love, and gratitude in first giving themselves by way of covenant to God who in Christ became utterly poor in order to make them eternally rich (2 Corinthians 8:9). Thus, I would submit that the only extraordinary ordinance that might be distinguished from financial giving in this context and may be described as giving themselves to the Lord is that of ecclesiastical covenanting with God.

c. **The third reason** why the words of Paul should be understood to refer to

ecclesiastical covenanting is because Paul states that this giving of themselves to God was “by the will of God” (2 Corinthians 8:5). That is simply to say that these Churches of Macedonia found this giving of themselves to God to be according to the revealed will of God as found in Scripture. Now where do we find it revealed in Scripture that churches (as well as nations) should voluntarily engage themselves at various times in God’s providence to be His covenanted people in trusting Him, loving Him, and obeying Him for the wonders of the Covenant of Grace bestowed upon such unworthy and undeserving sinners? Clearly, ecclesiastical and national covenanting were revealed in the Old Testament Scriptures as we have demonstrated in previous sermons (the Church and Nation of Israel in Deuteronomy 29:10-15; and likewise the Church and Nation of Judah covenanted by Jehoiada the high priest in 2 Kings 11:17-20, by Josiah king of Judah in 2 Chronicles 34:29-32, and by Nehemiah in Nehemiah 9:38 etc.). Consider also the fact that the Church of Berea (which was one of the Churches of Macedonia that gave themselves to the Lord in 2 Corinthians 8:5) is especially noted by the Holy Spirit to have been a church filled with those who diligently searched the Old Testament Scriptures (according to Acts 17:11) and is highly commended for doing so. No doubt in their diligent search of the Old Testament Scriptures they were led by the Holy Spirit to see the duty of giving themselves to the Lord by way of national and ecclesiastical covenanting as an expression of their faith, love, and new obedience to Christ. Thus, these Churches of Macedonia were simply following the revealed will of God from the Old Testament Scriptures in their ecclesiastical covenanting.

d. **The fourth reason** why the words of Paul should be understood to refer to ecclesiastical covenanting is because this giving of themselves to God is not that of a few people in the Churches of Macedonia making personal covenants to God, but rather of all of the Churches of Macedonia together engaging themselves collectively as one moral person in giving themselves by way of covenant to the Lord. To whom do the words, “but first gave **their own selves**” (in 2 Corinthians 8:5) refer? The answer is that these words, “their own selves” refer to the Churches of Macedonia. For we read in 2 Corinthians 8:1: “Moreover, brethren, we do you to wit of the grace of God bestowed on **the Churches of Macedonia**.” In 2 Corinthians 8:2, it was likewise to these same Churches of Macedonia that Paul refers when he mentions “**their joy**”, “**their deep poverty**”, and “**their liberality**”. In 2 Corinthians 8:3, Paul declares concerning these same Churches of Macedonia that they were “willing of **themselves**” to give beyond their own power. In 2 Corinthians 8:4, it was these same Churches of Macedonia that prayed that Paul and company would receive their financial gift for the saints in Jerusalem. Thus, there can be no doubt whatsoever that it was these same several Churches of Macedonia that “first gave **their own selves** to the Lord” collectively in an ecclesiastical covenant to the Lord. And it should be noted that these Churches of Macedonia were filled with Gentiles as well as with Jews and lived in a Roman Province and a Gentile Nation. Thus, the extraordinary duty of ecclesiastical covenanting pertains not only to the Jewish Church of the Old Testament, but also to the Gentile Church of the New Testament. Why? Because covenanting with God (whether it be individual, familial, ecclesiastical, or national) is a part of the Moral Law of God (as summarized in the Third Commandment) and not a Judicial or Ceremonial Law that pertains to Israel alone.

e. **The fifth reason** why the words of Paul should be understood to refer to ecclesiastical covenanting is because the act and language of giving oneself to God in covenanting (as we read in 2 Corinthians 8:5) is also taught in the Old Testament as an essential part of national and ecclesiastical covenanting . In national and ecclesiastical covenanting with God, we acknowledge that God has first given Himself to us as our God, and we thus take Him to be our God in our covenants with Him. But we also acknowledge when we covenant with God that we give ourselves to Him as His people (Exodus 19:5; Isaiah 19:18-25). In fact, when the Nation and Church of Israel covenanted with God under Hezekiah, we read that the people were commanded: “yield yourselves unto the LORD” (2 Chronicles 30:8). This yielding themselves to the Lord as God’s people was outwardly expressed by giving and extending the hand toward the God whose throne is in heaven, for that is the literal meaning of the word “yield” in 2 Chronicles 30:8 (“to give the hand”). As you have time you may also want to consider other passages of Scripture in the Old Testament that speak

of yielding the hand as an act of submission and covenanting whether in covenant with God or in covenant with man (1 Chronicles 29:24; Ezra 10:19; Psalm 44:17,20-21; Psalm 68:31; Psalm 144:8,11; Lamentations 5:6; Ezekiel 17:18). Thus, the words used by Paul in 2 Corinthians 8:5 perfectly comport with the words and meaning of national and ecclesiastical covenanting as is seen in the Old Testament, which covenants of the Old Testament conveyed by the lifting and stretching out of the hand that one was yielding oneself in covenant to God. Thus, in national and ecclesiastical covenanting we give ourselves or present ourselves or yield ourselves to the Lord as His people to trust Him, love Him, and obey Him in response to His prior covenant love and mercy in Christ Jesus shown to us who deserve His everlasting wrath and condemnation for our many sins committed against Him.

II. Objection: This was no National Covenant in 2 Corinthians 8:5, but was rather an Ecclesiastical Covenant.

A. Yes, that is true, but the very same moral reason that warrants churches collectively as one moral person to give themselves by way of an Ecclesiastical Covenant to the Lord as an act of faith, love, and obedience, likewise warrants nations collectively to do the same. For if the moral warrant for an ecclesiastical covenant with God by the Christian Churches of Macedonia in a Gentile Nation was drawn from the pages of the Old Testament Scriptures, what moral reason would prevent the same moral warrant from the pages of the Old Testament Scriptures from being applied to a National Covenant with God by Gentile Christian Nations? For the warrant in both cases (whether ecclesiastical or national) is moral (the Third Commandment) and not judicial or ceremonial, and the warrant in both cases is drawn from the many moral examples of Israel covenanting, as not only a Church, but as a Nation.

B. I would submit, therefore, that simply because there were no Christian Nations at the time that the New Testament was written but only Christian Churches is no reason at all to conclude that the same moral principles used by the Churches of Macedonia do not apply to Gentile Christian Nations when God in His amazing providence brings His Gospel and reformation to Gentile Nations. In fact, I would be so bold as to declare that to do otherwise is to condemn the very practice of the Churches of Macedonia (whom Paul by inspiration of the Holy Spirit commends in Acts 17:11), for they were simply applying the Moral Law of God as contained in the Old Testament to their own ecclesiastical circumstances. If we would likewise be commended by the Lord, we must as Christian Churches and Christian Nations apply the same Moral Law of God to our ecclesiastical and national circumstances (by way of owning and fulfilling the *Solemn League and Covenant* of our covenanted forefathers).

In conclusion, dear ones, what a blessed joy to give ourselves (by way of covenant) unto the Lord as His people to trust Him, love Him, and obey Him! And that is what our forefathers have done for themselves and for us as their posterity in the *Solemn League and Covenant*. We acknowledge that God has graciously given Himself to unworthy sinners like us in covenant love and grace to be our God and Savior through Jesus Christ our Lord. And we also acknowledge that such a divine act of covenant love and mercy calls for us as a people to give ourselves and to yield ourselves to Him as His people to trust Him, love Him, and obey His good commandments (as churches and nations). May all of us who are the familial, ecclesiastical, and national posterity of England, Ireland, and Scotland take up in faith and love our *Solemn League and Covenant* with the Lord to be the people of God in both word and deed.