

ORDINANCE OF COVENANTING.

(Manner of Covenanting)

“[P]ublic, social covenanting, is an ordinance of God, obligatory on churches and nations under the New Testament.”—Fourth Term of Communion.

Question 1.—*What is God’s procedure towards His people while performing the service of covenanting?*

Answer.—God, being an infinite, glorious Spirit, does not perform the deeds of men clothed with flesh and blood, Ps. 90:2, 16; yet, being the upholder of all things, and the glorious fountain of all the means of operation which men employ, with them He can and does hold communication, Heb. 1:2, 3. Though not possessed of bodily organs, He spake to men, Gen. 8:15; though not material, He hears and sees them, Heb. 4:13; and He testifies to their deeds and thoughts, 2 Kings 17:13. Thus, when His people, in vowing or swearing to Him, take hold on Him, He covenants with Him, Ezek. 16:59-62. Receiving their various services offered to Him, He acknowledges them as covenant children, Ex. 4:22; Ezek. 16:8. They vow unto Him; He made promises to them, Gen. 28:13, 20. They swear unto Him; He has sworn unto them, Gen. 22:16. They avouch Him to be their God; He avouches them to be His people, Deut. 26:17, 18.

For this reason, on occasions of covenanting, God has actually made promises, and sworn to men, Mic. 7:20. Thus, we read of the promise to establish His covenant with Noah, Gen. 6:18; and the enlargement of that covenant, Gen. 9:11-16. Later, the prophet makes it clear that God Himself swore this covenant to Noah, Isa. 54:9. Likewise, we are told that God swore to Abraham, making a covenant with him, when He made promise to him, Heb. 6:13, 14. So, too, the oath of God was made to Isaac, Ps. 105:9. When the LORD brought Israel out of Egypt, at Sinai, He is said to have sworn to them by the lifting of His hand, Ezek. 20:5. Moreover, the very giving of the law was an expression of His covenanting with them, Deut. 33:2. With David also, in making a covenant with him, the LORD swore, Ps. 132:11.

In the earlier part of the history of mankind, God often addressed their bodily senses, Heb. 1:1; in all time their souls, by the inhabitation of the Holy Spirit, experienced the goodness of His grace, Ps. 34:8; 91:16. Yet, even in those ordinary cases in which, on covenanting, communion with God is enjoyed, He covenants with them, 1 Kings 8:21, 23. So, although we have no reason to believe that there were manifestations of God and His presence when Israel covenanted in the land of Moab as vouchsafed at Sinai, He nevertheless did covenant with them in that transaction, Deut. 29:12. It is of this that it is said, He avouched them to be His people, Deut. 26:17, 18. Indeed, though there may be no account given in the historic record of God making an oath, and thereby having covenanted, to those who have been said to covenant with Him, such as Jacob, we can be certain that He did covenant with them, Deut. 29:13. So, even though, as under the law, when Aaron’s sons took vows to fulfil the duties of the priesthood upon entering the office, God did not make a new oath with them, the vows and oaths of His people came before Him taking hold of the oaths which He had formerly sworn to their fathers, Deut. 29:12-15. Upon this principle, those who succeed them were encouraged to draw near to God, Isa. 56:6, 7.

Question 2.—*How ought men to engage in the exercise of covenanting?*

Answer.—In performing the service of covenanting, the action must be undertaken with several things in mind:

First, covenanting must be engaged in *intelligently*, not merely as the desire to perform the service but with an enlightened apprehension of the nature of the exercise, Prov. 20:25. Those who are covenant children of God are taught of Him, and draw near to Him as if He were not unknown, but revealed to them in His grace which, in its spiritual character, contains the intellectual discernment of true faith, Heb. 11:6. Although none can by searching find out God, nor find out the Almighty unto perfection, Job 11:7; yet, those whom He saves know Whom they worship, John 4:22. Every service of the true religion must be performed only according to the instructions of His Word, Deut. 4:2. So, every lawful approach to Him, whether by vow or oath, must include a just appreciation of the character of God as revealed, and be according to a divine warrant and direction of God, as had the saints of old, Isa. 19:21; Jer. 31:33, 34.

Second, covenanting must be engaged *cordially*, from the heart, for there is no religious homage, or reverential honor, which does not come from the heart, Ex. 35:21, 22. Those who truly seek to glorify God will not draw near Him only with their lips while their hearts are far removed from Him, Isa. 29:13. Therefore, the men of Judah were careful to join their hearts to their exercise of covenanting, 2 Chron. 15:15. Moreover, whenever the covenant of God is taken hold of by men returning to Him, the whole heart will be engaged, Jer. 24:7.

Third, covenanting must be engaged with *deliberation*, forsaking the service of the devil and fixing the heart to fight under the banner of Christ, Jer. 11:8. So, Joshua's address at Shechem was delivered, not that Israel should all choose God as if none of them had chosen Him before, but that those who had not cleaved to His covenant should cleave to it by taking hold of it, as seen in the answer they gave Joshua at that time, Josh. 24:15-17.

Fourth, covenanting should be engaged with all *sincerity*, as there are dreadful denunciations which are uttered against those who swear falsely, Zech. 5:3, 4. In an oath given falsely, God is defied, His power to punish is challenged, and the stroke of His indignation is impiously invoked to descend upon the head of the guilty juror, 1 Kings 8:31, 32. In contrast, the people of God must swear in truth and with respect to judgment, Jer. 4:2. With David, they can declare this sincerity, Ps. 119:106; so that each of them may be described as having that character required by the Psalmist, Ps. 24:3, 4. In this sincerity, they will be firm to keep their pledge given in vowing unto God, 1 Chron. 12:18.

Fifth, covenanting was engaged in the first ages *accompanied by sacrifice*, Ps. 50:5. The phrase, *kārat bērit* (כרת ברית), "to cut a covenant," Gen. 15:18; consists of two terms, each of which points to the sacrificial rite. The latter word *bērit* (בְּרִית; a covenant) is derived from a verb which can mean *to cut*, or *to choose* (*bārā'*; בָּרָא), Josh. 17:18; or *to eat* (*bārā'*; בָּרָה), 2 Sam. 12:17. It is also connected to the root word *bar* (בַּר) meaning *pure*, or *clean*, Ps. 18:26. That which is *chosen* to be *eaten*, that which is *cut* for food, is that which is *pure*, so herein lies the connection between the occasion of solemn covenanting and the eating of the flesh of the sacred victims, Lev. 6:26. The other word *kārat* (כָּרַת; to cut) literally means to cut, or divide, the animal sacrificed into two pieces at the ratification of a covenant, Jer. 34:18-20; which was done by Abraham, when the LORD made a covenant with him, Gen. 15:8-18. This phrase is used in the Hebrew in various

places to describe the making of a covenant, 2 Sam. 5:3; 2 Kings 11:4; Josh. 9:6, 7; Ezra 10:3; even when the word *covenant* is missing the word *to cut* signifies the same thing, 2 Chron. 7:18.

The bisection of the victim symbolized Christ slain and affording access to God through Himself, the rending of the vail, and the act of passing through the parts was an emblem of holding communion with God, as made know in Christ, Heb. 10:19-23. The act of swearing by the name of God was wont to be symbolized by the offering of the sacrifice, hence the *seven* (the emblem of an oath) sacrifices was the swearing of it, Num. 23:1, 4. This practice, which Balak, at Balaam's suggestion followed, was the practice of God's ancient people, Job 42:7-9. The connection between covenanting and sacrifice is also found in the account of Hezekiah, 2 Chron. 29:10, 11 (*burn incense, or make an offering*); it was made by *sevens*, 2 Chron. 29:20-24; and all Judah and Israel were enjoined by the king to accede to the covenant, 2 Chron. 30:8.

It is explicitly said that a covenant with God was made by sacrifice, Ps. 50:5. Moreover, when the people of Israel fell into idolatry by offering sacrifices on high places, they made a covenant with idols instead of God Himself, Josh. 23:16.

Covenants were ratified with the sprinkling of the blood of the sacrifice, which can be seen in the transaction at Sinai, Ex. 24:5-8. This blood, sprinkled at the altar, testified of the LORD's acceptance of the sacrifice and of the people who presented it, and to the acceptance of the great propitiation made for sin, Ex. 29:16. The sprinkling of the blood upon the people signified the application of the blood of Christ, the blood of the covenant, for pardon and cleansing of sin for the ransomed community, 1 Pet. 1:2. To that sacrifice, the ancient covenanter looked forward, presenting his sacrifice, or oblation, taking hold upon the covenant, before the Incarnation, with encouragement, Zech. 9:11; and, though there is no more oblation to be offered, now the covenanting believer vowing to God still comes in the same spirit in which that covenant was made by sacrifice, Heb. 12:24.

Sixth, in all ages, covenanting, like all that is acceptable service, is *performed by faith*, Heb. 4:2, 6. It is by faith that Abraham took hold of the covenant of God, accepting the promise, Gen. 15:6. Swearing to the LORD in faith, entails a reception of the promise as made forth in God's covenant, Isa. 45:24. Thus, all who have properly engaged in this exercise will testify of their laying hold of the promise that God be their God, Ps. 31:14. For with the heart man believes unto righteousness and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation, Rom. 10:10. Faith in Christ is, then, the foundation laid in Zion, Isa. 28:16; and public vowing is the exercise of solemn self-surrender to God, 1 John 4:15.

Seventh, covenanting should be engaged in *devotionally*, being a part of religious worship, it claims that solemnity of mind due to every religious service, Zeph. 1:7. Therefore, it was performed in the solemn assemblies of the people of God, being often observed in the temple, where the oaths of God's people would come before His altar, 2 Chron. 6:22. It is an holy exercise, calling His people to be holy, or separate, avoiding any confederacy with the heathen, Isa. 8:12, 13. It should be performed with godly fear and reverence, which Isaac and Jacob, in covenanting with Him, acknowledge cherishing a holy awe, Gen. 31:53; and this reverential feeling prevails in the minds of all who truly perform this exercise, Isa. 45:23. This exercise requires the accompaniment of confession of sin, as Israel when attempting this service, Jer. 31:9; and on these occasions a sin-offering was wont to be *cut*, 2 Chron. 29:21; but this acknowledgement of sin is the duty of all spiritual sons of Zion, Jer. 50:5, 6. It ought to be made in the exercise of prayer, for the term which the LXX use to render "vow" in the OT, (*euchē*; εὐχή), is

sometimes used for a “vow” and sometimes for “prayer,” Acts 21:23; Jas. 5:15. The vow, as well as the oath which embodies adoration, is made by prayer, so that the church is instructed to vow and pray, Hos. 14:1, 2.

Eighth, covenanting is sometimes engaged *with a lively voice*, for the tongue of man is the glory of man, and with it the praise of God is proclaimed, Ps. 29:9. Holy thoughts and affections unexpressed are sometimes like fire shut up in the bones, Jer. 20:9. Therefore, the saints of God have expressed themselves in this service verbally, as in Moab, when they avouched, or confessed aloud, Deut. 26:17; or, when Judah returned to the LORD, under king Asa, 2 Chron. 15:14.

Last, covenanting with God is sometimes *confirmed by means of subscription*, Neh. 10:1-29. It was probably in imitation of the practice of the people of God that covenants among idolaters were written, Isa. 28:18 (כָּפַר; *disannulled*, or *covered*, or *blotted out*, as if it had been written). The application of the seal was the equivalent of writing a signature and, on occasions of federal ratification or matters of public record, it would accompany the subscription of the name, Jer. 32:10. It is to this practice that Nehemiah refers when he speaks of the covenant renewal in his own day, Neh. 9:38. Whatever may be said of this practice in times past, it is warranted to be used in succeeding ages, Isa. 44:5.