

Does a National Covenant Bind When One Party Deceives?

Joshua 9:15; 2 Samuel 21:1

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As we continue our study of what the Holy Scripture teaches about national covenanting, we come to consider whether a National Covenant is lawful and binding if one nation enters a covenant with another nation under false pretense or enters that covenant under the cloak of deception intending to gain some advantage for itself (for example, forging an alliance with a more powerful nation in order to secure protection from a threatening enemy).

At the time in which the Solemn League and Covenant was sworn by the Kingdoms of England, Ireland, and Scotland in 1643, King Charles I was waging a war against his own Parliament and people in England in order to assert an unlawful power over the people of England. This civil war was turning in favor of the King's royal forces. The Parliament of England, in desperation, reached out to the Kingdom of Scotland for help by suggesting they form a civil league and unite their military forces in order to overcome the tyranny of Charles I. Scotland was open to the idea, but only if England was also willing to include in that civil league a solemn religious covenant whereby these kingdoms should also make every effort to promote the one true Christian and Reformed religion in their respective kingdoms based upon a common Confession of Faith, common Catechisms, common Directory for Public Worship, and common Form of Church Government.

The Solemn League and Covenant was sworn to God and ratified by the respective Parliaments, Churches and people of England and Scotland. However, after the civil war began to turn in favor of the Parliamentary forces against King Charles I, it became apparent that many in England promoting Independency and Sectarianism had forged the Solemn League and Covenant in order to secure the military support of Scotland, but had not dealt honestly in the religious part of the Covenant. The Independents in England claimed that they did not share the same interpretation of the religious aspects of the Solemn League and Covenant. However, they never bothered to raise their differences with Scotland until the tide of the war was turning in their favor. Once King Charles I was on the run, the Independents and Sectarians in Parliament, in the Westminster Assembly, and in the Army began to sing a different tune: "Uniformity in religion was not our intention." Scotland was betrayed and was deceptively used. Was Scotland still bound to keep the Solemn League and Covenant with England? Or did the deception of those in England break the bond to which they had sworn to God?

I. Let us consider today the following objection: A National Covenant Does Not Bind Those Nations Who Covenanted or Their Posterity Where Deception Was Practiced by One of the Nations.

A. A similar situation occurred with the covenanted nation of Israel at the time in which Joshua ruled as civil leader and judge in Israel. For we find in Joshua 9 how Israel was dealt with deceptively by the Gibeonites and yet how Israel honored that National Covenant as being a lawful covenant in itself that could neither be broken by the generation that originally swore that National Covenant nor by succeeding generations that followed.

B. Let us turn to Joshua 9 and consider the historical context of this National Covenant that was forged under the cloak of deception by the Gibeonites.

1. After the completion of the forty years of wandering in the wilderness which God in His wrath appointed upon that unbelieving generation, Joshua led Israel into the land promised to them by God.

There were now mighty nations and fortified cities that stood in their way. The first city to fall was Jericho which literally fell as the Lord caused the walls all around it to crumble to the ground. News of the destruction of Jericho by God spread throughout the nations and cities in Canaan. Great fear fell upon these idolatrous nations and cities. Thus, they formed a military alliance to war against Israel (Joshua 9:1-2). Now the leaders of the royal city of Gibeon (which was near Jericho) feared the God of Israel greatly and feared that they would be destroyed by Joshua as had been done to Jericho. They could either put their trust in this military alliance among the idolatrous nations and cities of Canaan or they could forge a new alliance with Israel. God had brought a fear on the Gibeonites that He had not brought in the same way upon the other nations or cities in the land (Joshua 9:9-10).

2. Thus, the Gibeonites contrived a deceptive scheme in order to secure their safety and preservation from destruction (Joshua 9:3-13). They would approach Joshua and the elders of Israel under the false pretense that they were ambassadors from a nation that lay far distant from Canaan (exactly where they never revealed to Joshua). And in order to pull this deceptive scheme off, they wore old garments and worn out sandals, old sacks with moldy bread, and old dried-out wine skins.

3. Now why didn't the Gibeonites simply send a delegation to Joshua and the elders of Israel pleading for peace and unconditionally surrendering to Israel? Perhaps word had been circulated among the Gibeonites that God had commanded Israel not to make a covenant of peace with any of these idolatrous nations within the land (as is stated in Deuteronomy 7:1-4). If that were the case, why did the Gibeonites pursue such a covenant of peace with Israel? Perhaps the Gibeonites had also heard that God had commanded Israel to offer terms of peace to nations that were not within the immediate vicinity of Canaan (as noted in Deuteronomy 20:10-18). Thus, the Gibeonites craft this scheme to appear as though they have come from a far distant land to engage in a covenant of peace with Israel.

4. We note that Joshua and the elders of Israel then investigated their moldy food and concluded that they were from a distant land without seeking the counsel of the Lord before entering into this covenant of peace with the Gibeonites (Joshua 9:14). Israel leaned upon their own understanding and perception of what they saw with their eyes and heard with their ears. They did not turn to the Lord to seek His counsel, but acted rashly in walking by sight rather than walking by faith in the Word of the Lord. As we shall see, the deception of the Gibeonites did not annul this National Covenant even upon all of the posterity of Israel and Gibeon once it was sworn, nor did the rashness of Joshua and the elders of Israel in entering into this National Covenant annul this National Covenant once it was sworn. Many have sought to loose themselves from lawful covenants by saying they rashly entered into a covenant before fully understanding all of the ramifications and consequences of that covenant or promise (whether a church covenant, business covenant, or personal covenant). However, dear ones, if the content of that covenant is lawful in itself, then one's rashness or short-sightedness in entering it is no lawful reason for subsequently breaking it.

a. How we must follow the precept of the Lord that we might enjoy the promise of the Lord: "Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths" (Proverbs 3:5-6). Dear ones, we cannot expect God to bless our decisions and to direct our paths if we are leaning upon our own understanding rather than trusting in His Word and acknowledging Him in the decisions we make.

b. When you look at the English word "acknowledge" in Proverbs 3:6 you should see in it the root word "know." In fact, the Hebrew word used here for "acknowledge" is the word "know." Here the Lord commands us to know Him in all our ways i.e. not only to profess Him with our mouths as being the One who directs all of our ways in a general sense, but to know Him in a familiar sense in all the circumstances and decisions of life that confront us. How we become so preoccupied with our work that we forget to know the Lord in all of our ways.

c. Dear ones, is Christ simply a part of your life or is He your life? "For to me to live is Christ" (Philippians 1:21). Have you relegated the Lord to a neat, comfortable corner in your thoughts,

desires, words, and deeds, so that He doesn't make life too uncomfortable for you, or do you want to know the Lord in a familiar fellowship in all your ways (in both blessing and in suffering)? Do you want Him not only to comfort and encourage you when you are down, but do you want Him to rebuke and correct you when you stray? Do you want His will in your life more than anything else (even if you struggle daily to overcome some besetting sin)? Many will say they want to know the will of God for their lives, but then when they know it, they suppress it, or ignore it because it is not what they wanted to hear (just as did the Jews in Jeremiah 42:1-3,6, 10-11 and Jeremiah 43:1-2). Our desire to know the will of God for our lives or to receive His direction in our lives will be manifested in our desire to obey Him in that which we already know to be His revealed will for us (John 7:17). We are hypocrites if we only want to know God's will where it is unclear, and yet are unwilling to do His will in the areas in which He has already clearly revealed it to us.

5. Thus, Joshua and the elders of Israel, as the official representatives of Israel, engage themselves and all of Israel (and all of Israel's posterity) in this covenant of peace with the Gibeonites (Joshua 9:15).

6. It was not until three days later that Israel learned that the Gibeonites had lied to them and deceived them (Joshua 9:16-17).

7. The people of Israel were upset with Joshua and their elders and murmured against them for rashly entering this covenant of peace with the Gibeonites (Joshua 9:18). But the elders of Israel made it clear that the covenant of peace that they had made with the Gibeonites could not be broken. Why? First, because it had been sworn in the name of the Lord (this is explicitly stated in Joshua 9:19). Second, because it was a lawful National Covenant even if it was engaged by way of deception on the part of the Gibeonites and by way of rashness on the part of the Israelites (this is inferred by good and necessary consequence from the following points).

a. When the people of Israel object to the Covenant with the Gibeonites after learning of their deception, Joshua and the elders of Israel upon review of the National Covenant determine to keep it, which they could not have done if it had been an unlawful National Covenant (Joshua 9:19).

b. It is clear that God avenged this covenant of peace as lawful. First, in that He gave Israel a mighty (yea, a miraculous) victory (by way of the sun remaining in its place for about a whole day) over the Canaanite nations that sought to destroy the Gibeonites for making a covenant of peace with Israel (Joshua 10). Second, in that He brought a plague upon Israel during the reign of David (2 Samuel 21:1) about 400 years later when King Saul slaughtered many of the Gibeonites in violation of that National Covenant (perhaps out of a misguided zeal to purify Israel of this Canaanite race).

8. But why wasn't this National Covenant unlawful when it violated the commandment of God, which stated that Israel was not to make a covenant with any of the neighboring nations (Deuteronomy 7:1-4)?

a. God honored the Gibeonites in submitting themselves to Israel and to Israel's God, which was the implicit terms of the covenant of peace (based upon Deuteronomy 20:10-11; Joshua 9:23-27). Even though God had commanded Israel to destroy all of the nations that dwelt near them, the reason for this command was the idolatry of these nations that would infect the Israelites if they were permitted to peacefully co-exist (Deuteronomy 7:2-5). Thus, if a nation was willing to submit itself to Israel and to Israel's God (to become proselytes), then the reason for destroying them no longer existed. This condition of peace was clearly one to which the Gibeonites were willing to submit.

b. Though the Gibeonites secured peace with Israel by way of lying and deception (which was sinful and unlawful), their desire to be saved by the God of Israel was genuine as in the case of Rahab, the harlot (Joshua 2). Likewise, remember that Jacob lied and deceived his father, Isaac, in order to obtain the birthright which Esau had despised. Jacob's lie and deception did not make the blessing null and void. God does not approve of lies and deception as a means to obtain the desired blessing from God, but He does approve of the faith and trust found in the heart of those who desired the blessing and salvation of God.

The end does not justify the means, but God takes into account even the weakness of faith of those who flee to Him for salvation. And the Gibeonites were fleeing to Israel's God for salvation. This ought to be a great encouragement to us who bring all of our sins and weaknesses in fleeing to the greater Joshua, the Lord Jesus, as we by faith (even by a weak faith) lay hold of the Covenant of Grace (our covenant of peace with God) in order that we might be delivered from everlasting destruction and from all of our enemies.

c. Carefully note that God hardened the hearts of all of the other nations around Israel so as to destroy them, but God softened the hearts of the Gibeonites in order to save them (Joshua 11:19-20).

d. Thus, it would appear that the National Covenant made with the Gibeonites was not unlawful because the terms of the covenant were not immoral—idolatry was not permitted to be exercised by the Gibeonites and they would become proselytes submitting themselves to Israel and to Israel's God. The lie and deception as to who the Gibeonites actually were was unlawful, but not the specific terms or conditions of peace found in that National Covenant. Though there was deception as to who they really were, there was no deception as to their willingness to surrender themselves to Israel and to Israel's God. Thus, there may be circumstances surrounding a lawful covenant that involve deception (as in this case), however, if the terms of the covenant are lawful, the covenant binds and obliges all parties (and all posterity perpetually as well).

e. Thus, even if there was deception on the part of many in England who entered into the Solemn League and Covenant, and even if they entered into that National Covenant so that they could merely secure the military help of Scotland (but did not expose their own private interpretation of that National Covenant in a public forum for fear that Scotland would not come to their aid), and if many rashly entered into that National Covenant out of a blind zeal, that Covenant still binds those original kingdoms and all their posterity. Why? Because the terms of the Covenant are moral and lawful and because that National Covenant was sworn to Almighty God who will not hold them guiltless who take His name in vain by swearing falsely. Listen closely to the words of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in this regard.

The Acts of the General Assemblies of the Church of Scotland, August 6, 1649, pp. 474-475.

Although there were none in the one kingdom who did adhere to the Covenant, yet thereby were not the other kingdom nor any person in either of them absolved from the bond thereof, since in it we have not only sworn by the Lord, but also covenanted with Him. It is not the failing of one or more that can absolve the other from their duty or tie to Him: Besides, the duties therein contained, being in themselves lawful, and the grounds of our tie thereunto moral, though the other do forget their duty, yet doth not their defection free us from that obligation which lies upon us by the Covenant in our places and stations. And the Covenant being intended and entered into by these kingdoms, as one of the best means of steadfastness, for guarding against declining times: It were strange to say that the backsliding of any should absolve others from the tie thereof, especially seeing our engagement therein is not only National, but also personal, everyone with uplifted hands swearing by himself, as it is evident by the tenor of the Covenant. From these and other important reasons, it may appear that all these kingdoms joining together to abolish that oath by law, yet could they not dispense therewith; Much less can any one of them, or any part in either of them do the same. The dispensing with oaths have hitherto been abhorred as Antichristian, and never practised and avowed by any but by that man of sin; therefore those who take the same upon them, as they join with him in his sin, so must they expect to partake of his plagues.

The Acts of the General Assemblies of the Church of Scotland, July 27, 1649, p. 460.

Albeit the League and Covenant be despised by the prevailing party in England, and the work of Uniformity through retardments and obstructions that have come in the way, be almost forgotten in these kingdoms, yet the obligation of that Covenant is perpetual, and all the duties contained therein are constantly to be minded, and prosecuted by every one of us and our posterity.

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