

Does a National Covenant Cease to Bind When Circumstances Change?

Deuteronomy 5:1-5; Exodus 20:1-2

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Can a national covenant bind posterity perpetually if the covenant is altered (by way of words or circumstances) in the least point? In other words, is a national covenant still binding upon posterity if any of the circumstances and any of the words used in the original covenant have been subsequently altered or changed (even in the smallest detail)? When is an altered covenant no longer essentially the same covenant as the one that was originally sworn? As we shall see when we discuss more specifically the *Solemn League and Covenant* (1643) in the near future (God willing), there are those who maintain that if any of the words and circumstances that are included in the original *Solemn League and Covenant* must be altered because they no longer apply to a succeeding generation, then the Covenant itself no longer binds posterity. Why? Because it is said that it is no longer the same Covenant. For example, if the words “king” and “parliament” (which are found in the *Solemn League and Covenant*) no longer apply to the nation or to its national posterity (because a nation now has a “president” and a “congress” instead of a “king” and “parliament”), then (according to those holding this view) the *Solemn League and Covenant* no longer binds that nation or that national posterity. And the reason it no longer binds (according to this view) is because the explicit words and circumstances in the original covenant no longer apply as they once did. But is this true? Is there scriptural support for such a view? Or may a national covenant perpetually bind posterity even when specific words or circumstances from the original national covenant no longer apply in the same way? Do such circumstantial changes alter the essence and substance of a national covenant?

I. A Lawful National Covenant May Include Alterable Circumstances and Yet Perpetually Bind Posterity (Deuteronomy 5:1-5).

A. First, note from our text that Moses reminds Israel that the covenant made between God and the Nation and Church of Israel at Mt. Sinai was one made not only with those who were alive and present at Mt. Sinai, but one that was made with those in the following generation (after most of the previous generation had died in the wilderness)—that covenant was made with US, the next generation, and not with our fathers alone. This will be important to remember when it is recalled that the national covenant of Israel was renewed in Moab prior to Israel entering into the Promise Land (Deuteronomy 29:1). If the national covenant made with God in Moab is a renewal of the same covenant made at Sinai (as certainly it is), we will see shortly that the same covenant may include circumstantial alterations in the words to accommodate a new historical situation without changing the substance or perpetual obligation of the original national covenant.

B. Now, let us go back to Exodus 19-20 and consider the context in which the Ten Commandments are given and then we shall consider more closely the words used in some of the Commandments.

1. The context immediately preceding the giving of the Ten Commandments at Mt. Sinai is that of God covenanting with Israel to be their God and Israel covenanting with God to be His people. Note with me that in Exodus 19:4 Jehovah first identifies Himself as Israel’s Savior in delivering them out of bondage in Egypt and in saving them from destruction and like an eagle that carries its babies on its wings Jehovah redeemed Israel unto Himself as His people. Now (in Exodus 19:5) because Israel had already been redeemed by the Lord and brought unto the God of their salvation, Israel is to express their faith, love, and gratitude to Jehovah by willingly obeying His commandments and keeping His covenant in which they are about to engage themselves as a Nation and a Church. If Israel (as a Nation and a Church) obeys God’s commandments and

keeps God's covenant (as an evidence of their faith in the Lord), the Lord promises on His part to honor them as His chosen and redeemed people throughout the whole world (Exodus 19:5-6). Moses then takes this gracious covenant to the official rulers and representatives of Israel (in Exodus 19:7) who engage themselves to faithfully follow the Lord as His Nation and Church (Exodus 19:8; Exodus 24:3,7; Deuteronomy 26:16-19). What I am seeking to show by way of the context surrounding the Ten Commandments given at Mt. Sinai is that they were originally given by God to a covenanted Nation and Church. The Ten Commandments are a part of the gracious covenant which God made with Israel and which Israel likewise received. For as we turn to the Preface to the Ten Commandments (in Exodus 20:1-2), we observe likewise that obedience to the Ten Commandments was not the ground of Israel's salvation, but rather that obedience to the Ten Commandments was the result and evidence of Israel's faith in the prior redemption and salvation of God. For first, Jehovah declares Himself to be Israel's God and Redeemer, and on the basis of God's salvation, Israel is then called to obey the Lord by keeping His commandments and covenant. The fact that the Ten Commandments (with the Preface) were a part of a gracious covenant between God and Israel does not mean that the Ten Commandments are only intended for Israel. As we see in Romans 3:19-20, they are a universal moral standard of God's righteousness for all people and all nations. The Ten Commandments WITHOUT the Preface declare an unalterable Covenant of Works wherein the righteousness of God's Law condemns Adam and all his posterity by ordinary generation. The Ten Commandments WITH the Preface speak of a Covenant of Grace in which God saves guilty sinners by His gracious work of redemption and then calls them to trust Him and walk in loving obedience and thankful gratitude to Him. Note what is said in this regard in the *Larger Catechism* (Question 101):

Q. What is the preface to the ten commandments:

A. The preface to the ten commandments is contained in these words, I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Wherein God manifesteth his sovereignty, as being JEHOVAH, the eternal, immutable, and almighty God; having his being in and of himself, and giving being to all his words and works: AND THAT HE IS A GOD IN COVENANT, as with Israel of old, SO WITH ALL HIS PEOPLE; who, as he brought them out of their bondage in Egypt, SO HE DELIVERETH US FROM OUR SPIRITUAL THRALDOM; AND THAT THEREFORE WE ARE BOUND TO TAKE HIM FOR OUR GOD ALONE, AND TO KEEP ALL HIS COMMANDMENTS (emphasis added).

2. Having considered the covenantal context in the giving of the Ten Commandments, let us briefly consider specific alterations made to three of the Ten Commandments which demonstrate that the Scripture itself allows for specific words to be altered in a lawful National Covenant without altering the perpetual obligation of that Covenant to all posterity.

a. Please turn with me to the Fourth Commandment as stated in Exodus 20:8-11 (read it). This version of the Fourth Commandment was given at Mt. Sinai when Israel first engaged itself as a Nation and a Church to be God's people. Now hold your place here in Exodus 20 and turn with me to the covenant renewal of Israel with God in the land of Moab before entering into the Promise Land in Deuteronomy 5:12-15. There I would have you note that this version of the Fourth Commandment is not word for word the same as that just read in Exodus 20:8-11. Please note especially the words found at the end of Deuteronomy 5:14 and all of Deuteronomy 5:15:

that thy manservant and thy maidservant may rest as well as thou. And remember that thou wast a servant in the land of Egypt, and [that] the LORD thy God brought thee out thence through a mighty hand and by a stretched out arm: therefore the LORD thy God commanded thee to keep the sabbath day.

There is a special emphasis placed upon the rest that Israel is to give to their servants on the Sabbath knowing how God delivered them from servitude in Egypt. How could the covenant made in the land of Midian (as found in Deuteronomy 5) be essentially the same covenant in sense and substance with that found in Exodus 20 if there has been an alteration in the words of that national covenant? Dear ones, it is not the mere alteration of the words used that make a lawful covenant unlawful, but rather the backsliding from the moral principles to which a nation was previously engaged, and thus perverting the moral truths which a nation previously owned that turns a lawful covenant into a broken covenant. It is one thing to alter the specific words of a lawful national covenant because a nation no longer embraces those moral principles. However, it is another thing to alter the words of a lawful national covenant in order to clarify the same moral principle in its application to a different circumstance not previously mentioned. Thus, it is not the outward written form of a lawful National Covenant or the outward circumstances of a lawful National Covenant that are unalterable, but rather the moral truths and principles that are agreeable to the Law of God that are unalterable.

b. It is not only the words of the Fourth Commandment that are altered, but also the words of the Fifth Commandment (in Deuteronomy 5:16) and the words of the Tenth Commandment (in Deuteronomy 5:21) as well (as you compare them with Exodus 20:12 and Exodus 20:17 respectively). What does this demonstrate? It demonstrates that the precise words of a national covenant may be changed without altering the sense and substance of a lawful national covenant. However, that is only true with this specific qualification: There can be no alteration that would either state or imply any backsliding, perverting, or minimizing former obligations to moral principles contained in the original lawful national covenant. Having made a lawful promise, you cannot alter the sense and substance of that promise so as to loose yourself from that promise. Let's say that Israel wanted to worship other gods or to marry heathen wives, could they alter the covenant they had made with God? Of course not! The moral principles of God's Law being universal in nature cannot be altered. However, if Israel wanted to make clear that the moral truths in their national covenant not only apply to them when they have judges, but also apply when they have kings, not only when they are one nation, but also when they are two separate nations, not only when they are free, but also when they are in captivity, such changes do not alter the sense and substance of their national covenant, but only alter changeable circumstances (which as we shall see has been the practice of our covenanting forefathers in their national covenants as well). How firm and secure would promises, covenants, oaths, or vows be if we could alter the sense and substance of the promise when our circumstances changed? It would make a mockery of a promise because we (as sinful human beings) will always seek to justify why we cannot keep a lawful promise (whether personal, ecclesiastical, or national) due to the changing of our outward circumstances.

c. Observe that in the various covenant renovations subsequent to Moses and Joshua (under King Asa in 2 Chronicles 15, under Jehoiada, the High Priest, in 2 Chronicles 23, under King Hezekiah in 2 Chronicles 29, under King Josiah in 2 Chronicles 34, under Ezra in Ezra 10, and under Nehemiah in Nehemiah 9-10), the circumstances of Israel had changed and in some cases drastically, and yet in all of these examples of covenant renewal the alteration of different circumstances did not alter the sense and substance of the moral principles found in the original national covenant made at Mt. Sinai. For example, the original national covenant of Israel was made while Israel was under the rule of Judges (like Moses and Joshua) rather than under Kings (like Asa, Hezekiah, and Josiah). And yet the perpetual obligation of the national covenant made at Mt. Sinai continued to all posterity under these changes in the outward circumstances of the nation of Israel. Furthermore, the original national covenant was made with a united Israel consisting of twelve tribes, whereas the covenant renewals under Asa, Jehoiada, Hezekiah, Josiah, Ezra, and Nehemiah were made with part of Israel due to the division of the nation into the two Kingdoms of Israel and Judah (at the time of Rehoboam and Jeroboam). And yet the perpetual obligation of the national covenant made at Mt. Sinai continued to all posterity under

these changes in the outward circumstances of the nation of Israel. Moreover, the original national covenant was made with a free people who had been delivered from the rule of a pagan nation (Egypt), whereas the covenant renewal under Ezra and Nehemiah was made with a vassal people who were under the rule of the Medes and the Persians. God even continues to appeal to Israel in captivity as His covenant people (Ezekiel 11:16; Ezekiel 20:37) even though they are unable to follow the ceremonial laws (due to the temple being destroyed, having no fully functioning priesthood, and having few of the ordinances God had appointed).

D. Now this is the point. If the specific words of a lawful national covenant which God initiated with Israel can be changed without altering the sense and substance of that lawful national covenant, and if the change in the outward circumstances of national Israel may be altered without changing the perpetual obligation of that covenant to all posterity, then certainly a lawful covenant which a nation initiates with God (as for example the *Solemn League and Covenant*) may have the words of that national covenant changed or the outward circumstances of that national covenant changed without altering the sense and substance of that national covenant or changing the perpetual obligation of that national covenant to all posterity. In other words, this is simply an argument from the GREATER to the LESSER. If a national covenant that God initiates may be altered in its outward form and circumstances as long as there is no backsliding from the moral principles of that original national covenant, then a national covenant that a nation initiates with God may be altered in its outward form and circumstances as long as there is no backsliding from the moral principles of that original national covenant. If such changes may be made in the GREATER national covenant, then such changes may be made in the LESSER national covenant.

E. What about Galatians 3:15? Clearly, in light of the previous scriptural testimony, this is not forbidding the addition and alteration in an absolute sense, but in a particular sense: that is adding to and altering a lawful covenant so as to actually change the sense and substance of the original lawful covenant. That is what is prohibited in Galatians 3:15. But adding words and altering outward circumstances (without backsliding from the moral principles of a lawful covenant) is not prohibited. In fact, Paul uses the truth in Galatians 3:15 to demonstrate that the covenant promises made to Abraham are yet certain promises made to the seed of Abraham (namely, Christ and all those in Christ whether Jew or Gentile). And though there were outward changes made in the Abrahamic Covenant (from circumcision to baptism), the same moral principles of that covenant between Abraham and God continue unabated. The moral truths remained the same, even though outward circumstances were changed. We can especially see various outward changes in circumstances introduced with the national covenant under Moses—and yet that national covenant under Moses is essentially the same covenant God made with Abraham (Deuteronomy 29:13). Thus, even Galatians 3:15 implicitly recognizes the validity of altering outward circumstances of a covenant without altering the sense and substance of a lawful covenant. It indeed shows the sinfulness of our own hearts when we or anyone else would seek to loose ourselves from lawful covenants due to changes in our outward circumstances. Dear ones, we must understand that it is that very covenant faithfulness on God's part that is our salvation. If it were not the case, we would be in covenant with Him when we are obedient and out of covenant with Him when we were disobedient. But God's covenant faithfulness to us does not depend upon our obedience or lack thereof, but depends upon Christ's absolute and perfect obedience to the Covenant of Works which Adam failed to keep. Dear ones, if we begin to argue that we can loose ourselves from lawful covenants due to our changing circumstances, we are also by inference saying that God may do the same. The consequences of such a position leaves us hopelessly condemned as covenant-breakers. Let us rejoice in the fact that God is ever faithful to His promises regardless of the many changes in our circumstances.

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