

ORDINANCE OF COVENANTING.

(Public Social 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 public social covenanting?*

Answer.—Like personal covenanting, social covenanting is an act of acquiescence in the covenant of God, Deut. 29:10-13. It is a solemn religious transaction in which men, with joint concurrence, avouch the Lord to be their God, and engage, in all the relations of life, to serve him by obedience to his law, in the performance of all civil and religious duties, in the confidence of his favour and blessing in the fulfillment to them of all his gracious promises, Josh. 24:1, 25; 2 Chron. 15:9, 12, 15.

First, it is performed by the Christian church in her collective *ecclesiastical capacity*, Neh. 5:12, 13. She must be one in doctrine, worship, government and discipline, because unity of existence is necessary to any body confederated in the act of social covenanting, 1 Cor. 1:10. Those who hold the truth cannot enter into it with the infidel, the unbeliever, the erroneous or profane, for all who are united in the act of covenanting must have the same motives and contemplate the same end, 2 Cor. 6:15. While it is true that no church is free from imperfection so as not to need an enlargement or correction of its views, no body of professing Christians are warranted to unite in covenant with those who do not hold the truth, 1 Cor. 10:20, 21. The unity of the Spirit is necessary to having the bond of peace, Eph. 4:3. Moreover, no church, in entering into covenant, includes so much in her engagements as the Word of God requires, Neh. 13:25; hence, a standing of Christian profession higher than has yet been attained to by any, has to be aspired at in the act of covenanting, Heb. 11:8. It is required that a closer regard should be paid to the character of the true church lest any unite upon a basis other than the truth, Rev. 3:7-10. It is the duty of all to join with those who are nearer the consummation of Christian character, Ezek. 3:10, 11; nor may those nearer go back or wait on the others, but they should invite these to follow and unite, that all in due time may together go on to perfection, Jer. 15:19.

Second, this act is performed by Christians in a *national capacity*, Neh. 10:29. Acknowledging the law of God as the basis for legislation, both ecclesiastical and civil; recognizing themselves as individually and jointly called to obey it; as put in possession of common benefits arising from the dispensation of the law of Christ, in things civil as well as religious; and as called to promote the interests of the kingdom of Him who is king in Zion, the Governor among the nations, they engage in this, Ps. 22:25-28. Because the members of Christ's church are members of civil society, of which He is the Head, Zech. 14:9; they have a reason not less substantial than for vowing ecclesiastically than for engaging as members of the civil body in this exercise of covenanting, Ps. 72:11.

Third, various communities may be confederated together into one solemn covenant with God, Isa. 19:18; 2 Chron. 23:1. However, it is not intended that different churches holding different sentiments, and entertaining different plans of attaining even to a good end, may warrantably so unite in a confederacy in an ecclesiastical capacity, for whatever prevents different churches from adopting the same standards is sufficient to prevent them from associating in a league, or covenant, Isa. 8:12.

Fourth, this act implies all that is included in personal covenanting because, although the body is that engaged, it cannot be engaged in perfection without the concurrence of each individual, 2 Kings 23:2, 3. The work of acceding to the covenant conditions on the part of each is personal and the provision upon which the whole body takes hold is accepted by each in particular, Ex. 24:3. Thus, the act of the society, in covenanting, is complex and places the same demands upon all, though they may not be able to perform its duties except conjointly, 2 Chron. 34:32, 33.

Fifth, this act of covenanting, on the part of the covenanting community, as a body, is the acceptance of the covenant of God in general and its special benefits in particular, Jer. 4:2. Abraham, the father of the faithful, bears testimony to his repeated acceptance of the promises of God, Rom. 4:20-22; Heb. 11:17. So, as a people, the Israelites in this act received the promises, Rom. 9:4. These covenants were the different dispensations of the same covenant, Heb. 8:6-10.

Sixth, in this act of covenanting, the covenanting community vow to God to render both a general and a specific obedience, which includes the whole law of God, Ex. 24:7. And, at each act of covenant renewal, this obedience is expressed or implied, Josh. 24:24, 25. Thus, at the return from the captivity, the oath taken included the promises to discharge specific demands of God's law, Ezra 10:3-5.

Seventh, this act of covenanting is a solemn federal transaction among the members of the covenanting community, 2 Chron. 23:16. The promise of obedience to God by vow or oath, includes a promise of certain services to each member of the confederation, Deut. 29:1, 12. Therefore, when a vow or oath to God, to accept of good from one another, or to perform mutual services among themselves is made, a corresponding engagement to each other is thereby made among them, Neh. 9:38; 10:1. Although the vow or oath is not an engagement to men, what is promised to God, to be performed by men, constitutes the reality or substance of an engagement thereby made to them, 2 Chron. 29:10. The recognition of their engagement to one another may be implied, if not expressed, while the covenant of the LORD to Whom they vow to obey is explicitly adhered unto, as seen in the days of Josiah, 2 Chron. 34:31, 32. Conversely, these mutual engagements may be expressed while the covenant of God is implicitly renewed, as in the case of Zedekiah and the people of Israel, who entered into a covenant to set free those servants who were their brethren, a duty enjoined on the occasion of the covenanting on Sinai, Jer. 34:8-18; Ex. 21:2. In other cases, both the engagement to God and those who covenant to one another may be explicit, as with Jehoiada, 2 Kings 11:17.

Eighth, there is, in the act of public social covenanting, a public acceptance of the truth of God and a renunciation of error, Deut. 26:17-19. It is the act of a witnessing body that, having engaged to be the LORD's in this exercise of covenanting, is appointed to bear testimony for Him, Isa. 44:5, 8. In public social covenanting, the covenanters confess Him before men, Isa. 43:10. In vowing, or swearing to give obedience to His law, is implied an approbation of His holy oracles, 2 Kings 23:21; and that approval is also declared in covenanting, Acts 24:14. They who keep God's covenant also keep His testimonies; and they who cleave to the one, adhere to the other, Ps. 119:30, 111; the covenant promise is to those who keep both, Ps. 25:10; 132:12. Thus, they who take the covenant of God into their mouths must also declare His statutes, Ps. 50:16.

Ninth, it is an act performed in the name of those who engage in it, and in the name of posterity, Gen. 17:10. The LORD made a covenant at once with Noah, and with his descendants, Gen. 9:11, 12. Likewise, He made a covenant with Abraham as the father

of many nations, Gen. 17:4. So, in the land of Moab, the Israelites and their seed after them, at once entered into such a relation, Deut. 29:14, 15. Moreover, when they did so, the Israelites were encouraged to choose life that both they *and their seed* might live, Deut. 30:19. Elsewhere, we see the covenant made with Phinehas, was not entered into merely for himself, but also for his posterity who should exist in the distant future, Num. 25:12, 13; Ps. 106:30, 31. And, at Sinai, when Israel engaged to be for the LORD, in the second commandment, they had addressed to them a reason for obedience that implied their engagement took in their children, Ex. 20:5, 6.

Question 2.—*Is every covenant made with God ratified by an oath?*

Answer.—In many passages the idea of oath and covenant are associated together forming a strong presumption that the one is essential to the other, Ezek. 16:59.

Additionally, the Hebrew verb “swear” (*šāba* ‘; שָׁבַע), Deut. 10:20; and two of its corresponding nouns are derived from a word for the number seven (*šeba* ‘; שֶׁבַע), Gen. 7:4. This was a sacred number for the Hebrews and many other nations and was used for the purpose of signifying an oath, so that seven vouchers sometimes accompanied the act of swearing, Gen. 21:27-31. The design of using this number was to confirm the covenant by using an oath, Heb. 6:16. Hence the connection of keeping sabbath to covenanting, as an oath for confirmation, Isa. 56:4, 6.

Finally, a covenant with God, whether secret or public, from its very nature cannot be entered into without an oath, Ps. 132:2. Mutual promises among men, though they confer obligation, do not always stand connected with a covenant with God, for they are made sometimes without a vow or an oath, Matt. 5:33-37. But, a promise made to God must be made either by vow or oath, or by both, Josh. 2:12; and since no covenant with Him can be made without a promise, every covenant is ratified by oath, or the oath implied in a vow, 1 Sam. 20:42.

Question 3.—*By what arguments can the moral obligation of covenanting in New Testament times, be solidly proved?*

Answer.—The moral obligation in New Testament times can be proved: 1.) Because it was obviously a duty under the Old Testament dispensation, and being nowhere repealed, and being moral as opposed to typical, it is of present obligation, Ps. 76:11; moral duties do not diminish in their obligation by lapse of time, Matt. 5:17-19. 2.) From the Scripture prophecies, evidently referring to the New Testament times, and even yet to be fulfilled, Isa. 19:18, 21, 23-25; Jer. 50:4, 5. 3.) Because the New Testament recognizes the obligation, Rom. 6:13 *with* 2 Chron. 30:8; 2 Cor. 8:5. Additionally, covenant breakers have a place in the catalog of sinners, Rom. 1:31; 2 Tim. 3:3. 4.) It was one of the distinguishing privileges of the Jews to be in covenant with God, Ezek. 16:8; Jer. 3:14. The privileges of the New Testament dispensation are increased not diminished, Heb. 12:18, 22. 5.) This duty is involved in the church’s relation to God, as a married relation, Hos. 2:19, 20; Eph. 5:30; 4:25. Covenanting is only a solemn recognition of this relation, and engagement to evidence this by a life and conversation becoming the Gospel, Neh. 10:29. Isaiah alludes to New Testament times, and celebrates not only an ecclesiastical, but national marriage, Isa. 62:4. National marriage implies a national deed whereby the inhabitants, in their national capacity, solemnly covenant with God, Neh. 9:32, 38. 6.) The duty, when performed in its true spirit, is a source of unspeakable benefit to a people; and, as nations seek the blessing, they should perform the duty, Ps. 144:15.