

ORDINANCE OF COVENANTING.

(Duty of Covenanting, Part 2)

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

Question 1.—*How is covenanting commanded in the moral law?*

Answer.—Covenanting is enjoined in the first three precepts of the Ten Commandments, wherein the manner of injunction is prohibitory of contrary practices thereby intimating that there is a duty to be performed, *cf.* Matt. 5:21, 22.

The *first* precept, which forbids all respect to other gods before God, Ex. 20:3; implies that He, before Whom all things are manifest, claims all the devout obedience of men, 1 Sam. 12:24. To prefer God to others is not merely to cast them and their services off, but to acknowledge and reverence Him as the object of supreme regard, Deut. 6:5, 14. The first commandment, therefore, condemns the idolater, of whatever class, and includes, instead of covenanting with the gods of the heathen, that obedience which chooses to serve the LORD, like Joshua and all Israel covenanting at Shechem, Josh. 24:14-23.

In the *second* commandment, Ex. 20:4-6; there is an implied injunction to serve God and, since vowing and swearing are a part of the service due, to worship entering into covenant with Him, Ps. 116:14, 18.

The *third* commandment, which forbids the irreverent use of God's name, Ex. 20:7; authoritatively inculcates the holy use of it in covenanting, Ps. 50:14-16. The saints, in calling upon the name of the LORD, have vowed and sworn to him, without abusing His name, Deut. 10:20.

Question 2.—*What are some of the other ways in which we may perceive the perpetual moral obligation to engage in the exercise of covenanting?*

Answer.—This exercise of covenanting is demonstrated to be of perpetual moral obligation as being enjoined in the several statutes that illustrate the ten precepts of the law:

First, there are the commands to glorify God wherein God is glorified when the perfections of His nature and his execution of His purposes are celebrated, Ps. 29:2-9. So, every spiritual act of worship is glorifying God, and when He commands that His name be glorified, it can be certain that vowing and swearing must be included, Lev. 19:12. Truly, the LORD claims the subjection of every capacity of mankind, 1 Cor. 10:31; moreover, He says to His people, as well as to His Anointed, that He will be glorified in them, Isa. 49:3. This command has been interpreted by His people to be accomplished through making vows, Ps. 22:23-25.

Second, there are the commands to worship God, which was performed with the bowing of the head, the inclining of the body, or the bending of the knee, Gen. 24:26, 48. The term employed to designate the act of offering worship (*šāḥā*; שָׁחָ), Ps. 5:8; means literally, *to bow himself down*, Gen. 24:52. Thus, in this position, there is a token of the intentness of the mind in which the act of swearing to God ought to be performed, Ps. 45:11; and as that act sometimes accompanied and indicated the exercise of swearing by His name, so when attention to His worship is urged by His authority, no part of religious worship is uninculcated, Isa. 45:23.

Third, there are the commands enjoining faith, for in every variety of circumstances the duty of believing is incumbent, Heb. 11:6. Vowing and swearing to God cannot be properly performed without faith, Isa. 65:16; and, so, when faith is commanded without special reference to some duties, it is inculcated to all, and therefore in regard to covenanting, Deut. 6:13.

Fourth, there are those commands which forbid federal transactions with that which is evil, whereby the Israelites were forbidden to enter into treaty with the Canaanites or their gods, Ex. 23:32. The reason given is, that, had they done so, they would have fallen from the service of God as a people who regarded not His covenant, Ex. 23:33. Again, at a later period of their history, the people of Israel were warned to refrain from making covenants with the heathen, Isa. 8:12. And to show that disobedience to this command would have led them away from avouching the LORD Himself as a covenant God, they are commanded to cling to that covenant, Isa. 8:13. The spirit of these commands has descended to New Testament times, 2 Cor. 6:14-16; because such associations with the heathens, having idolatrous worship, is calculated to lead from obedience to God and are snares to the soul, contrary to the divine intent for believers, 2 Cor. 6:16-18.

Fifth, there are commands enjoining the vowing of the vow, which, though commanded obedience under a former dispensation, no less commands it now, Ps. 76:11. The principles on which the vow is made, are immutable, and while the church is on earth, it will continue to be obligatory, Isa. 19:18, 21; Zeph. 3:9, 10; Acts 11:21-24.

Sixth, there are commands inculcating the swearing of the oath both explicitly, Deut. 6:13; 10:20; as well as those which enjoin the manner of covenanting, Jer. 4:2. Since the oath is never disconnected from a covenant with God, when it is enjoined, the duty of covenanting is also enjoined, Gen. 26:28; Deut. 29:12, 14. Lawful oaths between nations, or between a people and their sovereign, bind all parties, not merely one to another, but also in solemn engagement to the Most High, 2 Kings 11:4. Oaths taken in courts of judicature, civil or religious, and the marriage oath, bind the parties in like manner, 2 Sam. 21:7; 1 Kings 2:43.

Seventh, there are those commands which enjoin the exercise in all its parts, such as that command to keep His covenant when He delivered statutes, Ps. 111:9. One of the duties of this covenant was to engage in the exercise of covenanting, Isa. 55:3. Additionally, of these statutes, like the foregoing in Isaiah, this duty is explicitly enjoined upon those taken into His covenant, 1 Chron. 16:15.

Eighth, this exercise is inculcated in the threatenings of divine judgment uttered against such as disregard it, Gen. 17:14. And if it was culpable and dangerous to refuse a sign of the covenant, is it not peculiarly so to refuse to accede to it in actually taking hold upon it? so that neglect of the duty has been denounced, Jer. 11:9-11. Among the observances engaged to by Israel at Sinai, were those of vowing and swearing and, for disobeying the words of that covenant, and consequently, for not observing the exercise of covenanting, many were threatened with a curse, Jer. 11:3, 4. To show that the sin of refusing to engage in this exercise is corresponding to that of breaking the covenant of God, those who have broken their vows, and those who have not in vowing sought the LORD, are classed together and threatened, Zeph. 1:4, 6. The sin of refusing to covenant, when found in the visible church, is the breach of an anterior covenant obligation to engage in that service, and is punishable as a breach of covenant, Ex. 4:24-26. And finally, what a powerful motive to perform the duty is afforded in the denunciation of Christ against those who do not confess Him, Luke 12:9.

Question 3.—*Has the duty of swearing the oath been abrogated under the New Testament?*

Answer.—The duty of swearing the oath has not been abrogated under the NT, 2 Cor. 1:23; and therefore, that of covenanting is perpetual obligation, Rom. 1:31. With comparatively few exceptions, it is generally admitted that the use of the oath is lawful in things civil, Heb. 6:16; and on the grounds on which this rests, it must be concluded that swearing is obligatory in those also that are religious, 1 Kings 8:31. The LORD Himself, in an extraordinary manner, called Abraham once and again, formally to enter into covenant with Him, and accordingly swear, Gen. 17:9; but after the resurrection, the dawn of the present dispensation, Jesus addressed Peter in terms warranting him to reply using the oath, John 21:15, 17. In His instructions, He did not condemn the use of the oath on every occasion, but only the frivolous use of the oath, Matt. 5:34-37. Moreover, that He does not condemn swearing by the name of God in some cases is clear because He does not mention that name as among those things that may not be used in swearing, Matt. 23:18-22. The oath, therefore, coeval with other institutions of religious worship, with them, through every age, shall continue to be observed, Matt. 5:17, 18. In every age there will be found those who, entering into explicit engagements with the LORD by oath, will obey His words, Isa. 27:5; the word translated “strength” (*mā’ôz*; מְעֹז), is derived from the word “to be strong” (*‘āzaz*; אָזַז), Ps. 89:13. This word is connected to that word “God” (*‘ēl*; אֱלֹהִים), which literally means “mighty one,” or “strength,” Ps. 80:10 (“goodly” is alternately “mighty” but it is *‘ēl*; אֱלֹהִים, “cedars of God”); and comes from that word “to swear,” or “to make an oath” (*‘ālā*; אָלַף), Ezek. 17:13. Hence, their close connection is sometimes expressed, Ps. 43:2.

Question 4.—*How ought we to understand those passages that seem to represent the exercise of vowing as not obligatory?*

Answer.—There are two passages which appear to imply that vowing is not a duty:

First, there is that statement found in Moses which suggests that forbearing to vow is no sin, Deut. 23:22. However, the statement, which follows a command respecting the manner to vow, Deut. 23:21; implies that the law of God does not disregard the vow but that it does not enforce it where it would prove oppressive, or otherwise injurious, *cf.* Ps. 66:13, 14. It is the obligation of those who take upon themselves vows, not to refuse a lawful vow when tendered, Neh. 5:12; but to take care that, when it lies in their power to make or forebear, they consider the obligation entailed before entering the oath or vow, Prov. 20:25. So, for example, it is dutiful for the parties entering into the marriage covenant to vow to fulfil the obligations of that relation, 1 Cor. 7:39; but it is not incumbent upon those who are not called in providence to enter into that relation, to vow to perform its duties, 1 Cor. 7:28.

Second, there is that statement of Solomon which some take to mean that vowing is not a duty, Eccl. 5:5. The declaration does not bear, that if one were not inclined to pay, it would not be sinful to omit vowing, but it means that it is sinful to make a vow falsely, and omit the performance of what should have been sincerely vowed, *contra* Ps. 116:18. As the passage above, when the heart is opposed to the duty, a person cannot vow sincerely and is likely to slack in the paying of the obligation, Acts 5:4.