

ORDINANCE OF COVENANTING.

(Covenant Duties, 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.—*Why ought a covenant with God engage all to duties to society in general?*

Answer.—The constitution of the various relations of human society, and the law and varied providential arrangements of the Almighty, all require that mutual regard for the welfare of one another, should be cherished by all, Gal. 6:10. As those who do not love their brother give no evidence that they love God, so they who fear Him ought to manifest their love to Him by using all those means, of which covenanting is one, by which the utmost efficiency for good may be given to their resolution to serve the LORD, and to their interest in the prosperity of their neighbor, 1 Tim. 6:17, 18. These duties, that ought not merely to be performed but vowed, are owing:

First, to families, because the relations of the domestic circle are of Divine appointment, Ps. 68:6; 107:41. To be mutual helpers to one another, husband and wife are associated by marriage, Gen. 2:22-24; and the duties of parents to their children, and of these to their parents, are numerous and definite, Eph. 6:1-3. The common obligation of all of them to God, behooves in vowing to Him to be acknowledged, not merely as individuals, but as members of families, so that all ought to perform the duty in secret, and in a public social capacity, Jer. 31:1. Each member of a family in secret ought to covenant as a member of the family with God, and the whole family on warranted occasions of public solemn covenanting, even though there might be no more associated in the service than themselves, ought to engage to duties not merely to others, but to themselves in their domestic capacity, under threat of the wrath of God for not doing so, Jer. 10:25. Noah and his family in their associate capacity covenanted with God, Gen. 6:18. And by their families did Israel in the land of Moab, taking hold upon His covenant, present themselves before Him, Deut. 29:18. In the marriage covenant husband and wife bind themselves in the presence of God to the duties of that relation, submitting to one another in the fear of the LORD, which is manifested in the service of vowing to Him, is inculcated upon them, Eph. 5:21, 22, 25. And to support, and govern, and bring up their families in the nurture and admonition of the LORD, is incumbent on them, and ought to be the subject of solemn vows, because their children are the LORD's, Ps. 127:3. They are His gift, and in them He possesses a covenant right, so they ought to be set apart to Himself sacramentally (circumcision in the OT and baptism in the NT), Gen. 33:5; Acts 2:39. Moreover, the people of Israel covenanted to obey the command, Deut. 6:6, 7. Thus, the words of the Psalmist, speaking the language at once of inspiration and of believers, must be considered both as a promise and a vow which should be adopted by all, Ps. 78:2-7. Not less than the performance of the duties of parents to their children ought the obedience of children to their parents or guardians to be covenanted, because when duties of the moral law are promised in covenant, these are vowed, Ex. 34:27, 28; and, since obedience to parents *in* the LORD cannot be fully performed without the resolution to render it solemnly expressed to the LORD, it ought to be performed by being specially covenanted in and to the LORD, Col. 3:23, 18-21.

Second, to civil communities, as is enjoined as imperative upon all, 1 Pet. 2:17. The duties owing to all in their various relations, should be discharged because of God's appointment, Col. 3:22, 4:1. Rulers should honor their subjects, by recognizing them as the channel through which in the providence of God their just title to rule was transmitted, Deut. 1:13; and by acting towards them as in possession of rights committed to them by God as the Moral Governor of the universe, which rulers deputed by Him are bound to acknowledge and preserve entire, 2 Sam. 23:3. Additionally, nations are called to honor lawful civil rulers by rendering them all that homage and subjection which is consistent with the dictates of the Divine law, Tit. 3:1; and all should honor all men by vowing to perform the duties owing to them, 1 Sam. 24:21, 22. So, if men do not vow unto God in a secret and a public manner to fulfil to the various lawful civil communities with which they may be connected, their obligations, by reckoning those as unworthy of the solemn promise to God to obey them, they do not honor them, and thus by disobeying His command, they dishonor God, Prov. 24:21. The duties of masters and servants to one another, are duties which each respectively owe to Christ, Eph. 6:5-9. Now, since God has made promises to men, and at the same time enjoined duties, equally with every other class of duties to which men should engage, as a matter of obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ, these duties which each owe to the other ought to be vowed for they are duties to God, Ps. 47:7. They are both therefore included in the oath of allegiance which both kings and subjects ought to swear to Him, 2 Kings 11:17. If a civil constitution is according to the Word of God, if the rulers who carry its ordinance into effect be men fearing God and hating covetousness, and if they dispense in a righteous manner its just laws, obedience is due by the people, and ought to be vowed to God, 1 Pet. 2:13, 14. What kings and others in power in civil society ought to swear to the people, and in joining with their people on occasions of public covenanting, ought to vow and swear to the LORD, is to rule according to the law of Christ, Josh. 1:8, 9; 1 Chron. 11:3. And lawful civil rulers are represented as the ministers of God, and consequently as acting in the capacity of servants, voluntarily devoted to His service, not merely in their personal, but also in their public character, Rom. 13:3, 4.

It is the duty of the civil magistrate to legislate against all evil denounced in the Scriptures, Prov. 20:8. He may not assume to himself the authority of sitting lord over the consciences of men, nor legislate where no law ought to extend, Jas. 4:12; Ps. 94:20; but he ought to forbid all vice and impiety, and encourage every excellence, Prov. 14:35. He is not only called upon to prohibit some practices clearly sinful but, he is called upon to interpose his authority, on behalf of civil society, against those who invade its just rights, Ps. 82:3, 4. Nor is he at liberty to disregard, in his administration, what man owes to God, Ezra 7:23; so, while he should enforce the duties of the second table of the law, he also ought to inculcate the observance of the first, 2 Kings 18:4. Moreover, the suppression of evil requires there to be penal sanctions affixed to human law, Prov. 16:14; however, these penalties also must be regulated by the Word of God, Ps. 2:10-12; and, in inflicting them, the Divine judgment will be consulted in opposition to the vague or biased judgment of man, Ezra 7:25-28. Besides preserving external peace and concord, administering justice, defending and encouraging such as are and do good, the civil magistrate should be found promoting the interests of true religion, Isa. 49:23. Nevertheless, he is not to do this by dictating to the church of God, or legislating in it, 2 Chron. 26:18; but by countenancing with his civil sanction all its ordinances, by exerting his influence in her outward support and defense against all external enemies, and by keeping from places of

power and trust in the nation all hostile to her interests, 2 Kings 23:3-5, 16; 2 Chron. 34:33.

The people, both in regard to the choice of rulers and obedience to them, have important duties to perform:

First, as to the choice of rulers, there must be an intimate correspondence between the character of the law and the qualifications of those who dispense it, Deut. 16:18-20. While an irreligious or immoral governor would pervert the course of justice in the administration of laws truly excellent, he would be utterly incompetent to the improvement of those that might be defective, Prov. 28:15. The acts of the best of civil governments, even those founded upon the statutes of Divine truth, from the very nature of society, require frequently to be modified, Amos 6:12. Because every human system is liable to change for the better or worse, it is destructive to admit into the councils of a nation, or to the administration of its laws, men opposed to their salutary spirit, Eccl. 10:16, 17. Thus, it should not be supposed that the adherents of false religion, or men uninfluenced by any moral or religious feeling, would promote in their administration the distribution of justice, Ex. 18:21, 22. It is abomination for kings to commit wickedness, for the throne is established through the administration of righteousness, Prov. 16:12; on the other hand, the wicked walk freely when the most corrupt of men is exalted to the place of rule, Ps. 12:8. Moreover, although sometimes time appears to give a right to possession, after an invasion of property and the usurpation of royal prerogatives, by a degraded and servile people, so that they regard such as to submitted to and even acknowledged as lawful; yet, as the thief and robber, through his heirs to the third or fourth generation may possess the fruits of his spoil, his crime stands chargeable before God, so the ruler whose throne is founded on iniquity, Hos. 8:4.

Second, the obedience due to these rulers, its nature and extent, are defined by the Word of God, Prov. 8:15, 16. To the law of God, all mankind are under permanent obligations, Rom. 13:8, 9; and all, in their peculiar relations, are bound to render obedience to those rulers who are vested with authority from Him, 2 Pet. 2:10. We can conceive of some civil governments as originating from the obscure intimations of the light of nature concerning sin and duty, Rom. 2:14, 15; and as under the superintendence of men possessed of qualities compatible with the views of those whom they rule over or govern, Eph. 4:17; here, though the compact is very imperfect, it would be mutual and consistent, and the duties recognized by each party completely obligatory on both, Acts 14:16. An increase of knowledge, however, would demand reformation, Acts 17:30; and so far as such would not be attempted when manifestly necessary, so far the law of God would be disregarded and His authority opposed by that government, Acts 9:15. To rulers possessed of Scriptural qualifications, cordial obedience is due, Rom. 13:1. For such, prayer is to be made, 1 Tim. 2:1, 2. In order that proper subjection be maintained, it must not be merely for wrath, but for a conscientious regard to duty, Rom. 13:5.