

ORDINANCE OF COVENANTING.

(Covenanting Confers Obligation, Part 1)

“[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 does covenanting confer obligation?*

Answer.—What is promised to God by vow or oath, ought to be performed also because of the act of covenanting, Deut. 23:23. The performance of that exercise is commanded, and the same law which enjoins that the duties thereby engaged be discharged, finds the covenanter, or the covenanting community, bound by the deed itself to fulfil them, Deut. 29:9; and thus, by the service, the party under original obligation to obey, is brought under one that is superadded, Num. 30:2. The covenanting party, not as independent, but as under the authority of God, by means of the exercise binds itself to duty, Ps. 89:34. He commands to vow, that men may be brought under additional obligation; and when they obey, He recognizes them as voluntarily engaged, and, according to His will, additionally called to fulfil, Ps. 76:11. It is wrong to imagine that the obligation comes solely from the will of those who vow, Acts 23:12. Were not the exercise of vowing commanded (which implies it be done according to the word and command of God), nor the law of God to hold those who engage it bound by their own act, these should not be under obligation, Ps. 56:12. By vowing, they bind themselves, not as by themselves, but by the authority of God, Deut. 6:13. Or, by vowing, they submit to a requirement of His law, in yielding obedience to which they become bound, not by themselves but by His authority, to perform the duties vowed, Ps. 119:106.

Question 2.—*How do we know that personal and social covenanting confers obligation?*

Answer.—That personal and social covenanting both entail obligation on the covenanting parties appears:

First, there are several Scriptures which present these parties as *bound*, cf. Num. 30:4. In reference to the truth that a wicked ruler is destitute of right to claim the allegiance of his subjects by oath, or in any other manner, it is asked if the unrighteous judge might *bind* (*govern*), Job 34:17 (*ḥābaš*; הָבַשׁ; bind, or govern). Reproaching his servants, Saul noted that they had *bound themselves* (*conspired*) making a league with David, 1 Sam. 22:8 (*qāšar*; קָשַׁר; bind, or conspire). The Psalmist notes this same *binding*, or *conspiracy*, which he calls the *pride* of man, Ps. 31:20 (*rōkes*; רִכָּס; band, or league). Moreover, concerning an oath or vow, the law clearly references this binding, Num. 30:2 (*Heb.* v. 3; *’āsar*; אָסַר; tie, or bind). In each of these cases, the idea of *binding* is connected to that of *covenant engagement* and, though the verb signifying *to bind* is different in each passage, all appear in the *emphatic* form and, it is notable, the binding spoken of in each of these cases is connected with the voluntary actions of the parties brought under obligation, cf. Num. 30:9, 10.

Again, other Scriptures point out, that in covenanting men are *joined* (*lāwâ*; לָוָה; to be joined, or bound to one in a relationship) to the LORD, both Jew and Gentiles, both individual and nationally, Jer. 50:5; Isa. 56:3; Zech. 2:11. They imply not less than that covenants made should be adhered to, Heb. 10:23. The same is expressed in passages,

in one of which some are said to *take hold* of (*hāzaq*; קַיֵּץ; take hold of, or seize) the LORD's strength, Isa. 27:5; in the other of His covenant, Isa. 56:4-6. Elsewhere, they are said to *take hold of*, or *cleave to*, their brethren in their covenanting, Neh. 10:29. A covenant is designated as *sure*, or *certain*, as that of Nehemiah and Israel is so represented, Neh. 9:38 (*Heb.* 10:1).

Finally, those who engage in the exercise are said *to cleave* (*dābaq*; דָּבַק; join, or cling to) to the LORD, Deut. 30:20. This is represented in several places by Moses as the design of the discharge of the duty, Deut. 10:20. By the emblem of the girdle which cleaves permanently to the loins, the truth of the appointment of covenanting as a means of securing devotedness to the LORD is taught, Jer. 13:11. The girdle which the prophet had been commanded to hide, in process of time was marred and profitable for nothing; but, it represented not the faithful in Israel who clave to the LORD, but those who, having vowed and sworn to him deceitfully, fulfilled not their obligations, Jer. 13:1-10. This is contrary to the resolve of David who clave unto God, Ps. 63:8. It was in the exercise of vowing to God and fulfilling his obligations that he did so, Ps. 63:11.

Second, God enjoins obedience as the fulfilment of covenant duties, for He gives command to *do* the words of His covenant, Jer. 11:6. By His authority He calls on men to *keep* the words of His covenant, Deut. 29:9. The obedience thus inculcated was not merely made known by the glorious Lawgiver, but acknowledged as obligatory by men, Josh. 1:7; Ps. 25:10. In two channels, from one source, its claims proceeded: *first*, directly through the promulgation of the Divine law to men, Ps. 103:7; and *next*, through the acknowledgement, by covenant engagement, of that law as holy, just, and good, Rom. 12:1, 2. Had obedience been claimed to the duties inculcated, as if they had been merely requirements of the law, they had not been spoken of as performed in fulfillment of covenant engagement, Heb. 8:9. Because the words of the covenant are done or kept when those are performed, they are incumbent on account of the making of the covenant, Ps. 25:14. By submitting to the rite, every one that received circumcision became a debtor to do the whole law, Gal. 5:3. And in like manner, by covenanting, each one who vows to God becomes bound, by His command, to keep or do the words of his law as the words of His covenant, Ps. 50:16. And finally the LORD commands that His covenant (and His law) be kept as a charge, which is manifest, Ps. 132:12. By His charge, or His law and covenant, as a trust, He explicitly gives His people commandment to keep, Deut. 11:1. A sentiment reiterated in the New Testament, Rev. 2:25, 26. In such injunctions, the same thing, under two aspects, is commanded to be kept because the statutes of God are at once the commands of His law and the dictates of His covenant, Ps. 89:30-35. These are kept as His law, when obeyed, because of His authority as righteous moral Governor of all, Ps. 47:7, 8; they are kept as the requirements of His covenant when recognized as not merely issued according to His sovereign will, but as having received the acquiescence of the heart, and been acceded to by solemn oath and vow, Ps. 103:18. God's law remains the LORD's permanent charge, whether or not it is obeyed by men, Matt. 5:17, 18; it remains so when presented, and acceded to in its covenant form, Ps. 78:10; but when it is accepted in vowing to God, it is so conveyed over to the believer, that at once he is called to keep it sacred to the Lord's service, and to stand chargeable in His sight for the use he makes of the precious trust, Matt. 25:19; Luke 19:15. That he may not dishonor the God of his salvation, by making little progress in the use of precious means of spiritual improvement, and that he may not be found unfaithful, he endeavors to

manifest the deep-felt sense cherished by him of the reality of his obligation acknowledged, Ps. 119:111.

Third, the LORD commands that the vow be paid, Ps. 76:11. A lawful promise to men binds to performance, and why not a vow to God? Matt. 5:33. If the vow made, whether in the use of the oath implicitly or explicitly, be not paid, the truth will not have been spoken, contrary to the ninth and also the third commandment, Ex. 20:16, 7. Thus, the command enjoining the truth to be spoken, and that forbidding that God's name be taken in vain, both inculcate, therefore, the fulfilment of the vow, Eccl. 5:4. Even were we altogether ignorant of the reason why the vows were uttered, we should, because of the authority of God, willingly acquiesce in them, Heb. 11:8; but the ground of them He has been pleased to make known, Ps. 98:2. A disruption of ends from means, grosser than the separation of the fulfilment of the vow from the making of it, could not be perpetrated, Ps. 50:14. A vow is nothing; yea, worse than nothing; injurious to those who make it, and dishonoring to God, if it be not performed, Eccl. 5:5.

Fourth, the LORD threatens those who keep not His covenant, even with temporal and spiritual deprivations, Jer. 11:3, 4, 10-12; Deut. 29:18-21; Jer. 34:18-20; Ezek. 17:18, 19. Eternal ruin awaits the impenitent violator of covenant engagements, Rom. 1:31, 32. Were not the acceptance of the law of God in its covenant form to entail obligation, the breach of it would not be denounced as a breach of covenant, Jer. 5:2, 9; nor would His wrath descend on men as unsteadfast in His covenant, or as having broken it, but as having violated His holy law, Ps. 78:37. Where there is guilt, there is sin; and where there is sin, there was obligation; and where there is punishment, there were all, Gen. 18:25. What was uttered by Jephthah regarding a vow which was unlawful, must have been employed by the fearers of God in reference to vows of which He approved, Judg. 11:35. The language of the Psalmist, dictated by the Spirit of inspiration, confirms the principle that vows and oaths require that they be fulfilled, Ps. 61:8; 116:14; 119:106.