

ORDINANCE OF COVENANTING.

(Covenanting Confers Obligation, Part 3)

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

Question 1.—*Do covenants have a distinct obligation peculiar to themselves?*

Answer.—Covenants possess an obligation distinct from God’s law, Eccl. 5:4-6. The covenanter is brought under an additional obligation to do the will of God, Lev. 19:12. He is bound not merely by the naked authority of the divine word, but by his own voluntary act, Num. 30:2. The covenant does not bind to *anything additional* to what the law of God contains, but it *additionally* binds—it superinduces a new and *different* obligation, Deut. 10:20. As in the case of an oath, Ex. 22:11. The obligation to tell the truth is universal and perpetual; but an oath brings the person who swears, under an additional obligation, 2 Cor. 1:23. Before he took the oath, if he deviated from the truth, he was guilty simply of lying; now he is guilty of *perjury*, Lev. 5:1. Before, he violated only the authority of God; now he violates both the authority of God and the obligation of his oath, 2 Chron. 6:22, 23. The obligation of God’s law must *never be examined*, but in order to know its meaning and extent, Ps. 119:33, 34. But all vows *ought to be tried*, in their matter and manner, by His law, in order to know whether they are lawful and binding, or not, Isa. 8:20.

Question 2.—*What constitutes the formal reason of covenant obligation?*

Answer.—It is the personal act of the covenanter which constitutes the formal reason why a duty, when sworn to, is binding as a covenant duty, and not the obligation of the divine law, or morality of the act, Lev. 27:2, 8. Were the morality of the duty the reason of covenant obligation, then all mankind would be formally covenanters, because the reason extends unto all, inasmuch as the moral law binds every man, Rom. 10:5. Thus covenanting would be useless, and carry no obligation in it at all; for it does not affect the morality of the duty, that being the same before as after covenanting, Jas. 2:8-12. Whereas God’s law binds *all men*, whether they will or not, Ezek. 20:11, 13, 21. Vows bind none, but such as *take them*, and those *whom they represent* in that deed, Deut. 5:3; 29:14, 15.

Question 3.—*What conclusions might we draw concerning the obligation which covenanting confers?*

Answer.—There are several things we ought to conclude:

First, covenanting entails obligation even on the unbeliever who vows and swears, Gen. 21:27, 32. Were it not to do so, then no command of God would be binding on the wicked, *cf.* Prov. 28:4; the moral unfitness of man in a state of nature, would shield him from the claims of God’s law, and any ordinance of God might be abused with impunity, *cf.* Ps. 50:16. Every law of God contemplates an immediate and an ultimate end, Lev. 18:5. If a vow is made in sincerity, God will give grace to fulfil it in some measure, Isa. 57:15; and if neglect in the supposed case follow, chastisement will be inflicted, 2 Chron. 33:23, 24. If a vow is made deceitfully, otherwise than which the wicked cannot make it, a double obligation is contracted:—an obligation to punishment for dealing falsely with God, Isa. 48:1, 2; and a debt of obedience because of submitting, though feignedly, to an ordinance appointed by Him, Ps. 81:15. Thus, God will not accept the vows of the wicked, Ps.

78:36, 37; but He will claim what they vow, and will punish them if they do not make it good, Ezek. 17:15. So, Israel, though many of them did not enter into it with sincerity, were charged with breaking the covenant with God which they professed to make at Sinai, and punished for the sin thereby contracted, Deut. 31:16, 17. Thus, also, Zedekiah suffered for breaking the covenant which he made with the king of Babylon by oath, Ezek. 17:18, 19. Indeed, it is the wicked alone who break the covenant of God, they never sincerely have entered into it, but their disregard of it, after having professed to accede to it, is represented as a violation of it and over such impends a fearful woe, Isa. 24:5, 6.

Second, though some connected with the visible church do not engage in the duty of formal covenanting, they are not therefore free from covenanting obligation, Jer. 11:1-10. All who were not in the communion of the true church, are exposed to the wrath threatened against those who are far from God, Jer. 10:25. A connection with that church brings one under obligation, Isa. 51:2, 3. The vows of God are upon all, received by baptism, or the Lord's supper into its communion, whether worthy members or not, Ps. 56:12. The spiritual blessings promised to Abraham and to His seed, even to all the faithful, belong to the people of God therein, Gal. 3:14; and all the duties incumbent on those to whom great and precious promises have been made, devolve on them, Isa. 48:1. Until it is paid, every vow made by a member of the church, whatever be his character, he is under obligation to perform, Ps. 119:106; 1 Sam. 1:11. Until they are paid, all the vows vowed by those in the church of God who represented him in all past time, are upon him, Ps. 116:14-19.

Third, a minority in a church, or that in a nation, are bound by the lawful public vows made by the whole body, even though the community as a whole, may have cast them off, Hos. 11:12. Though a nation, or a body professing to be a church, after having come under obligations to duty, were to resolve that truth is error, or that duty is sin, yet such a resolution could not bind the community, Hos. 4:15-17. No authority whatsoever will dissolve the obligation of an oath, Gal. 3:15. Hence, when lawful covenant engagements are disregarded by a community, the excellence which gave it an attractive power is gone, Ezek. 16:59. Then the glory is departed, and the degraded society, like the robe which once covered the living body, but is afterwards cast off, is faded and corrupt, Isa. 28:1-5. The living principle embodied in some members of such a community, behooves to be become separate from it, and to show that, indeed, that body which came under obligations that are not exhausted, is in succeeding times to exist in a new but glorious sphere, 2 Cor. 6:17, 18. It is not the enfolding form, but the living faithful body, that is the care of the covenant, Rom. 9:6. Each member owes a debt of covenant duty, Rev. 3:12. And though apostasy may paralyze the body, so that by it as a whole, that obligation may not be felt, let that which lives, therefore, act in fulfilling it, even through a disruption and consequent re-organization, Gal. 6:16; Rev. 3:4. Devotedness to duty will be visited with an energy which will increase in the face of every difficulty, Isa. 59:19-21. To flee individually from obligation, is to share the wholesale ruin of the whole unfaithful mass, only in order to be taken and fall, each one personally for his iniquity, Rev. 3:15, 16.

Fourth, covenanting does not implicate, or compromise, conscience, Gal. 5:1. By this, it is intended that the exercise does not bring under any obligation to do what is evil, or to abstain at any future time from modifying the engagements made, so as to render it more and more perfect, Acts 23:12, 14; Prov. 4:18. It is admitted, even contended for, that the exercise of covenanting brings under obligation; however, it is only to duty, Ezek. 20:37. The duty is not to be abandoned because it cannot be properly performed, Jer. 31:32. If it

were, then, for the same reason, every other might be disregarded, Matt. 6:12. No covenant engagement is perfect, 1 Kings 8:46. Either in its matter or manner, each of these may have many defects, Jas. 3:2. Indeed, were one to vow all the duty unfolded in the Scriptures, the engagement would be sound, Ps. 119:96. So, God's law binds all men to *absolute perfection* in holiness, 1 Pet. 1:15, 16. Our vows do not bind to absolute perfection, but to the most sincere and strenuous endeavors *we can* by the grace of God assisting us, Ps. 44:17, 18. By covenanting to do duty, we are neither foolishly nor sinfully committed, Ex. 24:7. We ought to make every lawful effort to perform duty; yet, our best efforts to serve God are but approximations, Col. 3:23, 24. God's law binds all men to absolute perfection *forever*, Ps. 119:160. Our vows bind only to that which is proper in this *present life*, Rom. 7:2.

Finally, that men are bound by previous descending covenant obligations, is no reason why they should not themselves engage in covenanting, Ps. 105:8-10. Have not all the chosen of God to be brought successively nearer and nearer to Him? Isa. 45:23. Covenanting is a means of the restoration of men to Him from every imperfection, whether in an unconverted or converted state, Jer. 4:4. Engaging in it, they are described as returning unto God, Jer. 4:1, 2. Throughout their lives, believers will be imperfect, and will be called to use this means of attaining their expected end, Isa. 56:4, 6. The obligations entailed from the past bind to the duty, Ps. 132:12. The very first obligation, voluntarily accepted by personally or socially discharging it, binds additionally to it, Ps. 103:18. Every new performance thereof adds to the motive to engage in it again, Ps. 89:34; so that, instead of the obligation to covenant being diminished by the doing of the duty, it is rather increased, Ps. 56:12.

Question 4.—*Upon what principle may we conclude the conferred and descending obligation of covenants?*

Answer.—The principle in question is founded in the right which parents have to represent their posterity in certain social transactions, Gen. 17:7, 8. It is supposed in the continued identity of societies throughout successive generations, Josh. 24:3. And it naturally enough follows from the common interest, which children have along with their parents, in those objects for which federal deeds are framed, Ps. 78:3-8. In this case representation springs, not from choice, as when men appoint their civil and ecclesiastical functionaries, but from the appointment of God, from a divinely authorized constitution—a constitution the existence of which is distinctly recognized and clearly admitted by God himself, Heb. 7:9, 10.