

An Historical Defense Of Covenanting And The Solemn League And Covenant # 11

Zechariah 2:11
March 22, 2009
Rev. Greg L. Price

We come to the conclusion of our present series in defending national covenanting and in defending in particular the descending obligation of the Solemn League and Covenant to all posterity (whether familial, ecclesiastical or national). Today we will consider a concluding objection and some concluding questions. But first, let us turn to our text from the inspired pages of Holy Scripture.

I. A Most Glorious Time Of Worldwide National Covenanting Is Coming To Planet Earth (Zechariah 2:11).

A. The Historical Context.

1. The meaning of the name “Zechariah” is God remembers—God remembers the Covenant with His people. People may forget that Covenant, may ignore and neglect that Covenant, may despise and hate that Covenant, but God always remembers the Covenant made with His people and the Covenant they have made with Him. The meaning of Zechariah’s name (God remembers) bears directly upon the theme that we find in this prophecy which should cause the heart of every Christian to leap for joy; for the only reason we are not destroyed for our many violations of Covenant with God is because we have settled our case once and for all upon the perfect Covenant-keeping of Christ rather than upon our own Covenant-breaking (Titus 3:5-7). In judicially forgiving us all our sin when we trust alone in Christ as our only hope of eternal salvation, the Lord remembers the Covenant-keeping of Christ in fulfilling all righteousness for us and remembers not our many Covenant violations against us any longer.

2. As Zechariah begins this prophecy, God's people have been delivered from captivity by the decree of Cyrus (Ezra 1:1) and have returned to the land promised to them by God. The first building project initiated in Jerusalem was to rebuild the Temple that had been destroyed by the Babylonians. God's people made a great start in laying the foundation of the Temple and building the brazen altar under the leadership of Ezra, Zerubbabel, and Joshua the High Priest, but soon found their hearts pulled away from the primary work of building the Kingdom of God to the secondary work of building their own kingdoms (as they increasingly used their time and resources to focus primarily on building bigger and more comfortable homes). The House of God lay in ruins, the ordinances of the Church were incomplete, and the people of God fell into apathy and indifference.

a. Some fell into apathy due to the small beginnings in laying the foundation of the Temple that was once one of the greatest wonders of the world at that time. Why try to rebuild the Temple when it will never look like the glorious Temple that Solomon built?

b. Others fell into apathy because those who returned to Judah were ruled by the Persian Kings who could stop the Temple building project (and this did happen for a period of time) just as easily as Cyrus had commanded the Temple to be built. Why try to rebuild the Temple when we are ruled by a government that may snatch away in a moment all the labor we employ in seeking to rebuild the Temple?

c. Others fell into apathy because there were enemies like the Samaritans who had perverted the true worship of God and outnumbered the Israelites who sought to worship the Lord God in spirit and in truth. Why try to rebuild the Temple when we are comparatively such a small remnant of people in comparison to all of our enemies around us?

d. Others fell into apathy because the things of this world, their own homes, their own kingdoms, their own dreams, and their own desires for the things of this world were far greater than their

love and desire for the faithful ordinances of God and the promotion of the Kingdom of God in rebuilding the Temple at that time. Why should we worry about rebuilding the Temple at this time when we have so many other things on our mind? There will be plenty of time later to rebuild the Temple when we have completed the projects at home that are taking so much of our time.

e. The people of God said (according to Haggai 1:2): “The time is not come, the time that the LORD’S house should be built.” It was inconvenient, time consuming, and required sacrifice to rebuild the Temple. It was not comfortable and there were so many obstacles to overcome. So they said, “Why try to rebuild the temple at this time? Let’s wait until a better time when it’s not so difficult.”

f. The excuses offered by God’s covenant people at the time of Zechariah remind us of the excuses we have offered or have heard others offer so often as to why it is not the right time to pray for and invest our time and resources into rebuilding the Temple and Church of Jesus Christ that has fallen into such a state of disrepair that the Ordinances of Christ are few and are not administered purely by so many and the faithful Ministers who will stand for the truth of Christ before friend or foe are so few. Dear ones, let us not be like those who made excuses as to why the rebuilding of God’s Church could not move forward, but rather let us put away all excuses and press forward in this day of small beginnings knowing that it is “not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, saith the LORD of hosts” (Zechariah 4:6).

3. Dear ones, this is the historical situation in which Zechariah is called to prophesy that God remembers His Covenant with His people and that none of the excuses the people have raised have merit in light of the Covenant obligations that they owe to the Lord who has redeemed them and in light of the Covenant faithfulness of God to save them and deliver them from all their enemies.

4. Through the faithful preaching and prophesying of Haggai and Zechariah (two contemporary prophets in Judah at this time

according to Ezra 5:1) and through the faithful service of the magistrate (Zerubbabel) and through the faithful ministry of the High Priest (Joshua), the Lord caused His people to cast aside all of their vain excuses for why they could not devote themselves to rebuilding His Kingdom and caused them rather to renew their National Covenant with the Lord on two different occasions (Ezra 10:3; Nehemiah 9:38). As a result the temple was rebuilt and completed with great rejoicing and praise to God for His faithfulness to them in remembering His Covenant (Ezra 6:14-15,20-21).

B. The National Covenant of Israel (Zechariah 2:10,11b,12).

1. In order to encourage the returned captives, the Lord reminds His people Israel that there is coming a time of much greater rejoicing in the future for Israel in which the blessings of the Lord will extend to them to such a far greater degree. The time of rejoicing that occurred when the Temple was rebuilt in the time of Zechariah will be only a foretaste of the much greater rejoicing that shall be theirs when God will supernaturally draw many Gentile Nations into covenant with Him. For this time of future unparalleled blessing promised to Israel will occur according to Zechariah 2:11 “in that day.” In what day? “In that day” when “many nations shall be joined to the Lord” and “shall be my people” declares Jehovah God. We will look more closely at the Gentile Nations in a moment, but understand at this point that Zechariah has moved forward in prophetic time to a future day of great spiritual blessing to come upon Israel as Jehovah will again remember His Covenant with His people and draw them unto Himself even after they had rejected, hated and pressed the Roman Governor to crucify their Messiah, Jesus Christ, God’s only begotten Son. Even after thousands of years of rejecting God’s Covenant, God remembers His Covenant with them (“For this is my covenant unto them, when I shall take away their sins” Romans 11:27). We will have more to say about this passage in a future sermon.

2. This period of time of God's unparalleled blessing upon Israel to which Zechariah prophetically points has not yet occurred for we have never witnessed both Israel as a Nation in covenantal union with Jehovah at the same time that "many Nations" are joined by way of National Covenants to the Lord to become God's people. Thus, the time in which these prophecies are to be fulfilled yet awaits us in that glorious millennial period of time of worldwide reformation as Christ reigns from heaven and pours out His Spirit upon the Nations of this world to a degree that we have not yet witnessed.

3. The presence of the Lord in coming and dwelling in the midst of Israel that is mentioned here in Zechariah 2:10,11 does not refer to the bodily coming of Christ to the earth during the future millennial period anymore than the Lord's presence in coming and walking in the midst of Israel at the time of Moses referred to the bodily coming of Jehovah (Exodus 20:24; Leviticus 26:11-12). For God comes to His New Testament Church and dwells in their midst, not bodily but spiritually and covenantally (2 Corinthians 6:16), and the Lord Jesus comes to the Seven Churches of Asia and walks in their midst, not bodily but spiritually and covenantally (Revelation 1:13), and likewise in our midst spiritually and covenantally as those Churches represent the Church visible and universal (Revelation 2:1). This prophecy in Zechariah 2 foretells the Covenant renewal of Israel with her God as is clear from verse 12 where clear covenantal language is used (as we likewise see in Isaiah 19:24-25).

C. The National Covenant of Many Gentile Nations (Zechariah 2:11a).

1. We have considered briefly the prophesied time of Covenant blessings to be brought upon Israel, now let us consider the prophesied time of Covenant blessings to be brought upon Gentile Nations. Note carefully here what we find likewise in Romans 11 (and many other places in Scripture) that when Israel as a Nation is recalled to her Covenant with God, likewise many Gentile Nations will have been and

will be brought into National Covenants with God (Romans 11:25-27; Isaiah 19:24-25). This is what Zechariah here prophesies as well.

2. Notice the covenantal language used in regard to the Gentile Nations by Zechariah in Zechariah 2:11.

a. “Shall be joined to the LORD.” How is an entire Nation and its national representatives joined to the Lord? A Gentile Nation is joined to the Lord in the same way that Israel is joined to the Lord i.e. by way of a National Covenant (Jeremiah 50:5—the same Hebrew word for “join” that is used in Zechariah 2:11 in the case of Gentile Nations is also used here in Jeremiah 50:5, לָוָה). If for Israel and Judah to be joined to the Lord is to be joined in a perpetual and everlasting National Covenant to the God of their salvation, then likewise for the many Nations here mentioned (in Zechariah 2:11), it is for them to be joined in a perpetual and everlasting National Covenant to the God of their salvation.

b. “Shall be my people.” There is not a more clear expression of covenantal union between God and a people than this language where we find it used often of God’s covenantal relationship with Israel (Leviticus 26:9-12). And yet that same covenantal language is used here in reference to God’s Covenant with Gentile Nations by way of National Covenants (see also Isaiah 19:25 where Egypt as a Nation will covenant with God, and God shall say of Egypt as a Nation at that future time, “Blessed be Egypt my people”).

3. Finally, carefully observe that in that millennial worldwide reformation a National Covenant shall not only exist between God and Israel or only between God and Egypt, but rather will exist between God and “many Nations” (according to Zechariah 2:11; Isaiah 2:1-4; Psalm 72:8-14). Dear ones, we have the exciting prospect that what we presently see by way of much Covenant-breaking in this nation will not long continue, but this Nation will (in the near future we pray) be turned by God’s almighty power and by the outpouring of His Spirit upon us into a Nation which owns the Solemn League and Covenant of their forefathers. Just as God gave this prophecy of national covenant renewal

to Israel of old in Zechariah 2 in order to encourage them to rebuild the Temple that had fallen, so the Lord encourages us today by this prophecy of National Covenant renewal among the Gentile Nations which is to come in order to encourage us to work in faith and hope in rebuilding the Church that has fallen, casting aside all excuses we might use to delay the work of building God's Kingdom (beginning in our own families in times of family worship and times of corporate worship with God's people).

II. One Objection. "There are no Reformed Church Courts in the United States that have owned the Solemn League and Covenant as "our Covenant", thereby showing that the Solemn League and Covenant was viewed as merely an example to be followed in covenanting, but not a Covenant that by way of descending obligation bound families, Church or Nation in the United States." Let's consider what both Church Courts in the United States and Ministers in the United States have said about the Solemn League and Covenant being "our covenant" and binding the posterity in the United States.

A. First, the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America.

1. In 1807, the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (RPCNA) adopted as a Term of Communion the following testimony to that Church's belief in the descending obligation of the Solemn League and Covenant to those in the United States:

and that the obligation of these covenants extends to those, who were represented in the taking of them, although removed to this or any other part of the world, insofar as they bind to duties not peculiar to the church in the British Isles, but applicable in all lands.

2. In 1839, the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (RPCNA) published a document in overture entitled "Testimony For Public Covenanting" in which the descending obligation of the Solemn League and Covenant to them in the United States is stated in these words:

The Solemn League and Covenant was one vow in which the members of the church and citizens of the state were bound inseparably, though distinctly; and whom any principle of the covenant binds, the whole binds; because it cannot be divided. "What God hath joined together, let no man put asunder."

As God is one party, the Covenanter who emigrates, is after emigration, still within the dominions of him "who is King of Kings and Lord of Lords." Those who have come into the United States, since the taking of the covenants, are as really under the kingly authority of Christ, as they were in Great Britain; for he is "the Lord of the whole earth."

The colonies, at the time of entering into the Solemn League and Covenant, were an integral part of the British nation. They held their lands under the crown, and were governed by deputies of the throne, whom they acknowledged as their governors.

The old Congress of 1774, solemnly claimed for themselves, and for the people of the colonies whom they represented "all the rights and immunities of British Citizens." (See Marshall's Life of Washington.) The most excellent part of their birthright and immunities, was, that they inherited a title to the covenant blessings of their ancestors, who entered into federal relations with the God of Israel. It may be said in reply to this, that they did not intend to claim the covenant birthright. It is admitted that they did not, and that in doing, so, they committed a great sin. Men often do things, when they do not understand their own transactions, as the Assyrian king fulfilled the counsel of the Lord, although "he meant not so, nor did his heart think so." Isa. 10:7.

B. Second, the Associate Synod of North America likewise testified of the descending obligation of the Solemn League and Covenant to themselves though living in the United States in a document entitled, *A Display of the Religious Principles of the Associate Synod of North America*, Revised in 1813, pp. 220,223.

To allege that those who adhere to the Solemn League in a suitableness to our circumstances, in these United States, are bound to the king and parliament of Great Britain, is as ridiculous as to say, that because we adhere to the Old Testament, therefore we are bound to the ceremonial law.

So we acknowledge these engagements [i.e. the National Covenant and the Solemn League and Covenant] still binding upon us.

C. Third, the Reformed Presbytery in the United States likewise testified of the descending obligation of the Solemn League and Covenant to themselves though living in the United States.

1. *A Short Vindication Of Our Covenanted Reformation*, 1879.

Also, **our Covenants**, National and Solemn League, may and ought to be renewed—not that they have become old, as many say; but that they are to be owned as obligatory upon us, and a sense of their permanent obligation deepened upon our own souls, and exhibited to others by the solemnity of an oath.

2. Minutes Of The Reformed Presbytery, June 1st, 1887.

And, finally, we can never be sufficiently thankful to God for permitting and honoring us as a Presbytery, unitedly and publicly, with our hands lifted toward heaven, to pledge anew adherence to **our Covenants**, National and Solemn League at North Union, Butler Co., Pa., 1881.

D. Rev. Alexander Craighead renewed the National Covenant and Solemn League and Covenant as a remnant of faithful Covenanters in Middle Octorara, Pennsylvania (November 11, 1743) making it clear that they did not cease to be bound though now living in the his Majesty's dominion in North America (*Renewal Of The Covenants*, p. 12).

And thus **our holy Covenants**, National and Solemn League, discover themselves to be perpetual and of constant obligation upon this Realm [the Realm of the British Colonies as the posterity of Britain—GLP].

One of Craighead's first actions in his new association was to lead the American Covenanters in a renewal of the covenants on November 11, 1743. This service was a tangible expression of their belief that the obligation of the covenants rested on them in America as it had on their ancestors in Scotland.... By 1743, few people, even in Scotland, took this covenant seriously. But the society people continued to believe that the promise in the covenants, made as it was to God as well as to men, was binding on the continuing church and state. This they termed the "descending obligation of the covenants." They carried this belief in the "descending obligation" of the covenants with them across the Atlantic to the colonies (David Melville Carson, *A History Of The Reformed Presbyterian Church In America To 1871* [A Doctoral Dissertation], 1964, pp. 27-28).

E. Rev. James R. Wilson, DD, was Professor of Systematic Theology at the Seminary for the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America (RPCNA). In a lecture he delivered (November 7, 1848) at the Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary (and which was subsequently published), Mr. Wilson clearly owns the Solemn League and Covenant as binding upon those living in the United States.

“That our ancestors who first settled these colonies, were, at the time of their emigration from the mother country, entitled to all the rights, liberties and immunities of free and natural born subjects, within the realm.” This claim is reiterated in their petition to the crown, in their state papers and is embodied in the Declaration of Independence, which was responded to by two and a half millions of people with acclamation. The best of these immunities were these secured by the great national charter, granted us by the Church’s Head—the Solemn League and Covenant. We have always recognized the covenants of our godly British ancestry as binding on us and on our seed forever.

III. Two Questions.

A. Question #1. Do civil rulers have the lawful authority to bind people to extra-biblical practices that are not inherently unlawful?

1. Lawful covenants may include matters that are not explicitly mentioned in the Scripture such as the binding National Covenant between the Gibeonites and the Israelites (Joshua 9) and the brotherly National Covenant between Tyre and Israel (Amos 1:9).

2. Such a National Covenant must be agreeable to the Word of God even if a specific term is not explicitly found in the Word of God. All such extra-biblical terms in a lawful National Covenant must also promote the moral good (as again agreeable to the Word of God) of the Church and Nation and not the moral decline and falling away of the Church or Nation from God.

3. Such a National Covenant must not deal in matters trivial wherein the matter of a Covenant simply becomes you will jump when I, the magistrate, say you should jump and as many times as I tell you to jump (even though jumping is not expressly forbidden by the Word of God). To this effect Samuel Rutherford comments in regard to the Church, but the same thing may be said in regard to the State as well.

No wise man would say that the Church might make a law, that all [people-GLP] should cast stones in the water.... for what actions have no good, nor lawfulness, nor aptitude to edify in themselves, these the [mere-GLP] will of man can never make good, lawful, and apt to edify, because only God, whose will is the prime rule of all goodness can create moral goodness in actions... Hence it follows that all actions and circumstances of their nature indifferent, must lose that indifferency, and receive from God some goodness, and aptness to edify, before they can be the reasonable and nearest matter of any civil or ecclesiastical constitution; because what rulers can in law and reason command, that they must will as good and apt to edify,

before they can bind others to will it. For a thing indifferent, as it is such, is neither good nor evil, and the object of the will is always [to be—GLP] good. Rulers command as God's ministers for our good, Romans 13:4 (*The Divine Right Of Church Government And Excommunication*, p. 648).

B. Question #2. Is a Covenant still binding upon the moral person that has in it not only that which is lawful, but also that which is unlawful?

1. If we view the Covenant as a whole, then we cannot keep a Covenant that has in it that which is unlawful and contrary to the Word of God ("Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain" Exodus 20:7).

2. However, if we view the Covenant from the perspective of that which is lawful in the Covenant that we have taken (it being agreeable to God's Moral Law), rather than casting away even the lawful part of the Covenant, it would perhaps be better to restructure the Covenant we took by disavowing that which was unlawful and only including in it that which is lawful. This would seem a better approach to honoring Covenants we took in sincerity, yet in ignorance of some revealed truth.

That brings us to the end of this present series. May we pray for, teach our families, and promote in every way we can within our sphere of influence the blessed and glorious covenanted reformation that Christ is going to bring to this world. And as we do so, let us seek in our own individual lives, in our families and in our Churches and Societies remind ourselves that we are joined to the Lord in Covenant—we are a Covenant people and a Covenant Nation. And just as we who are parents pray for our Covenant children that the spiritual promises of the Covenant (made to us and to our children) may be realized by faith alone and through God's grace alone (even when our children rebel and stray from Christ), so we pray likewise for this rebellious covenanted Nation.

Reformation resources by Greg Price (John Calvin, John Knox, Samuel Rutherford, *et al.*) are at <http://www.swrb.com/newslett/newslett.htm> and more free audio (MP3) Reformation resources by Greg Price (and many other Puritans, Covenanters, and Reformers) are at <http://www.sermonaudio.com/go/699> or at <http://www.sermonaudio.com/swrb>.

"Brethren, I speak after the manner of men; Though it be but a man's covenant, yet if it be confirmed, no man disannulleth, or addeth thereto" (Galatians 3:15).