

An Historical Defense Of Covenanting And The Solemn League And Covenant #3

Isaiah 19:21

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In our last lecture, we considered the moral nature and scriptural duties found in the Solemn League and Covenant. For if what is promised to be performed in the Solemn League and Covenant is not a moral duty found in God's Word, yea is even contrary to God's Word, then there can be no moral duty to own it as obliging upon anyone. We, however, are convinced (and have addressed this matter in the last lecture) that the Solemn League and Covenant is morally obliging because the duties found in it are biblical. Remember that the religious goal of the Solemn League and Covenant was not a mere confederation of Churches from England, Ireland and Scotland working together in brotherly love, but further than this, the Solemn League and Covenant and the duties contained therein promote a unity based upon UNIFORMITY in doctrine, worship, discipline and Church government. Dear ones, we are not praying for a confederation of Churches, we are praying for a unity in Churches—a unity based upon both love and the truth, a unity based upon uniformity in doctrine, worship, discipline and government. Any other view of ecclesiastical unity is a lie, a mere confederation, and a conspiracy against true unity. In marriage, there is a confederation of persons to be joined as husband and wife. However, unity in a marriage only comes where there is unity in love and in the truth, that is, where there is a likemindedness in doctrine, worship, discipline and government (1 Corinthians 1:10). How many marriages sadly have become a mere confederation of convenience rather than a union of love and truth. And the difference between these two types of marriages is evident to all—the blessedness of true unity in love and truth and the misery of mere confederation for the sake of convenience.

Moving on to the matter that is before us today, it is objected by some that the Solemn League and Covenant is not a covenant made directly with

God, but only a covenant made with man. This objection denies that God was one of the parties in the Solemn League and Covenant, but rather affirms that the parties were only the three Kingdoms of England, Ireland and Scotland. We have maintained in this series of sermons and lectures that the Solemn League and Covenant was made by the three Kingdoms (as one party collectively) directly with God (as the other party). Those promoting this objection have no problem in saying that God was a witness to the Solemn League and Covenant, but they deny that this covenant was made directly with God. This objection emphasizes the distinction between a vow and an oath. A vow is a lawful and moral promise made directly unto God. An oath is lawful and moral promise made unto men wherein a specific appeal to God is made to bear witness to the promises made between fellow human beings. I do believe the three Kingdoms also made covenant with one another and called God to witness that as well, but there is nothing inconsistent in saying that the three Kingdoms both vowed a National Covenant unto the Lord in the Solemn League and Covenant and also called God to witness by an oath they made with one another (as Israel did in Deuteronomy 29:14). This we shall demonstrate in a few minutes. We shall first consider from the Scripture a particular National Covenant in Isaiah 19, and second we shall review some historical testimony confirming that the Solemn League and Covenant was made directly with God.

I. God Is One Party In The National Vow Of Egypt (Isaiah 19:21).

A. The reason I chose this text was because it not only gives us biblical truth concerning a National Vow, but also because it gives us biblical truth concerning a Gentile Nation (namely, Egypt) that will yet in the future millennium unite as one national moral person in covenanting directly with God. This is not Israel; this is a Gentile Nation. It is typical of what will occur throughout the whole world when the Lord restores His ancient covenanted people of Israel and brings in the fullness of the Gentiles (as we see in Romans 11). Let me then gather certain truths from

this text for our better understanding of a National Covenant made with God.

B. Isaiah 19 is a prophecy directed to Egypt. It foretells various events that the Lord will bring upon this Nation. I do not have time to expound the whole chapter, but in the former part of the chapter, we see the righteous judgment God shall bring upon Egypt “as a Nation”; and in the latter part of the chapter, we see the gracious blessing God shall bring upon Egypt “as a Nation”. This has obviously not been fulfilled of Egypt as a Nation, even though the Gospel has gone into Egypt, and Christ has brought some Egyptians to Himself. This prophecy is yet to be fulfilled in the future time of millennial blessing wherein Christ will reign in glorious majesty over the Kingdoms of this world from His throne in heaven.

1. As we move to Isaiah 19:18, we note the words, “In that day.” This is a future time of promised salvation that is to come upon the entire Nation of Egypt. This does not foretell the salvation of a small group of people living within Egypt, but the conversion of the vast majority of the Nation to Christ and also an official National Covenant Egypt shall make with God. Note that this prophecy speaks of five cities in Egypt speaking “the language of Canaan” (verse 18) while one city shall be called “The city of destruction” (verse 18). To speak “the language of Canaan” would be a way of saying that Egypt will speak the same truths in the same way (by way of uniformity) as God’s people Israel will do. In other words, Egypt will be covenanted together with Israel and Assyria (as are the three Kingdoms of England, Ireland and Scotland in the Solemn League and Covenant), for the prophecy goes on to say that in that future time of millennial blessing these former enemies will be covenanted together as one, each Nation being God’s covenant people (Isaiah 19:23-25). It would seem that in that future day of worldwide reformation (which may even occur within our lifetime or that of our children’s) that Egypt (as typical of all Gentile Nations) will see five out of six of its cities swear a National Covenant “to the LORD of hosts” (Isaiah 19:18) while one city of six will refuse to do so and so will be devoted to destruction for its rebellion against Christ. Note that the Scripture states that Egypt will

“swear TO the LORD of hosts” (Isaiah 19:18) rather than “swear BY the LORD of hosts as an oath”. In other words, this swearing by Egypt in its national capacity will be a National Vow sworn “TO the LORD of hosts” wherein Egypt is one party and God is the other party to whom the Vow is made. Egypt as a Nation will swear to be God’s people, and God will own Egypt as a Nation as “My people” according to Isaiah 19:26.

2. Secondly, we note in this prophecy a national uniformity in religion rather than various denominations believing and practicing contrary truths (Isaiah 19:19-20). The fact that there is only mentioned ONE “altar to the LORD in the midst of Egypt” (Isaiah 19:19) speaks of the same type of uniformity in religion that was practice by Israel which also had only one appointed altar in the Temple for the uniform doctrine, worship, discipline and government of God.

3. Thirdly, the Lord reveals through His prophet Isaiah more information about the National Covenant of Egypt (Isaiah 19:21). The Lord will make Himself known to Egypt in opening her eyes to the truth. Even as God must open the eyes of us all because we all are spiritually blind and cannot see and understand the truth of Christ (due to the total depravity of our faculties), so will God open the eyes of Egypt as a Nation to behold the glories of Christ whom they will embrace as a people (and those obstinately refusing to do so will be punished). Moreover, the Egyptians as a united people will “vow a vow unto the LORD and perform it” (Isaiah 19:21). Again, note that when a National Covenant is stated to be made with God, it is to “vow a vow UNTO the LORD.” When God is one party in a covenant (or a vow), the prepositional phrases most commonly used are: “TO the Lord”, “UNTO the Lord” or “WITH the Lord” (as is seen in Deuteronomy 29:12; 2 Chronicles 29:10; Numbers 30:2). When God is not a party to a covenant but is called to witness the oath made between human beings, the prepositional phrases most commonly used are: “BY the Lord”, “IN the presence of the Lord”, or “IN the name of the Lord” (Deuteronomy 10:20; Joshua 9:18; Nehemiah 13:25; Isaiah 65:16). Finally, note from this very brief survey of Isaiah 19, it is clear that Egypt has engaged itself in covenant with the Lord, for the effect of this National Vow is that the people of Egypt as a Nation become

the people of God in Isaiah 19:25 (even as Israel as a Nation became the people of God by means of their National Covenant at Mt. Sinai, Exodus 19:5). Incidentally, God calls the former enemy of Israel, Assyria, “the work of my hands” which is also the covenant name God gives to His people Israel (Isaiah 60:21). This prophecy refers to the restoration of Israel to Christ at the time of the future millennium as we see Israel distinguished from the Gentile nations in Isaiah 60:16.

C. What we have sought to demonstrate from Scripture is that covenants made with God (wherein God is a party to the covenant made) use certain prepositions (“with”, “to”, “unto”), whereas oaths made with men (wherein God is called to be a witness) use a distinct language as well (“by”, “in”). This should be helpful as we move briefly to the next main point where we seek historical testimony to make more clear whether God was in fact a distinct party in the Solemn League and Covenant.

II. God Is One Party In The Solemn League And Covenant.

A. Perhaps you are asking why it is even important whether God is actually one of the parties to the Solemn League and Covenant. What difference does it make whether God is a party to the Covenant or whether He is simply called to be a witness to the Covenant? In one sense there is no real difference as to the perpetual obligation of the Solemn League and Covenant to all posterity. For the “oath” made with the Gibeonites in Joshua 9 was of a moral and of a perpetual obligation to all posterity even though this covenant was not made directly with God but rather with men (wherein God was called to witness it as seen in Joshua 9:18-20). For God judges Israel some five hundred years later during the reign of David for Saul’s violation of the covenant made with the Gibeonites (2 Samuel 21:1). It appears that those who frame this objection against God being a party in the Solemn League and Covenant likely believe that if the Solemn League and Covenant is simply an oath between the three Kingdoms wherein God is called to be a witness (and not a covenant made directly with God), the obligations of the covenant may be terminated because of

the faithlessness and covenant-breaking of the three kingdoms. Thus, according to this reasoning, it would make the Solemn League and Covenant nonobligatory upon posterity because it would cease to be a binding covenant due to the unfaithfulness of all the parties involved. As I said earlier, even if (which I do not grant) the Solemn League and Covenant were only a National Oath (and not a National Vow), it may still be argued that that National Oaths may be perpetually binding upon posterity in all of the moral duties contained in it (per the National Oath Israel made with the Gibeonites in Joshua 9). However, if the Solemn League and Covenant is a National Vow made directly with God by the three Kingdoms and a Covenant that binds all posterity, it is impossible to make the Covenant and the moral duties found in it to be null and void, for God is the party to whom the vow is made. He will never be unfaithful in a covenant (so such a covenant can never be rescinded because of His unfaithfulness), and He will always hold us to fulfill our lawful vows made to Him. No matter where we go on the face of this planet, He is the universal Governor and will hold us to our covenant made with Him. No matter how many hundreds of years pass, He is from everlasting to everlasting, and He will be there to require the lawful covenants of fathers upon their children. No matter if every human being in the Nation forgets the covenant made with God, He is omniscient and does not forget. No matter how much the covenant is trampled under the feet by the whole Nation who breaks it, He is absolutely righteous and owns the covenant as His. There is no way to escape lawful covenants made directly with God (even to all the posterity included in that covenant). It is my suspicion that this is why this objection is made.

B. Let us consider the words in the Solemn League and Covenant that identify it as a National Vow made directly to God (thus making the eternal God a party to this Covenant). They occur at the very end of the Preface: “wherein we all subscribe, and each one of us for himself, with our hands lifted up TO THE MOST HIGH GOD, DO SWEAR.” Then follows that which is sworn to the Most High God as indicated by the hands lifted up to Him. We shall note that this observation finds the most

credible testimony. But also note that at the end of the Solemn League and Covenant, God is called to witness what is stated as well: “we profess and declare, before God and the world...” Thus, the Solemn League and Covenant is both a National Vow and a National Oath and both terms are used by the original framers and subscribers to the Solemn League and Covenant.

C. Let us now hear the historical testimony of those who originally framed and subscribed the Solemn League and Covenant.

1. Let’s start with a faithful covenanting minister of the Church of Scotland who took the Solemn League and Covenant. John Guthrie preached this sermon upon breach of the Solemn League and Covenant in 1663.

Objection 3. The Solemn League and Covenant must be broken, because we are not bound to keep with them that broke to us first. But it is so betwixt us and England. Ergo—

Answer. Are there not many make [making—GLP] this objection who, I dare say, never read the covenant? Thou poor, blind creature, how darest thou speak of it? These that will say so, it seems they never understood the League and Covenant, because it is not a bargain betwixt two parties on earth—the one whereof breaking, the other is free. BUT THESE THREE LANDS ARE ONE PARTY, AND THE GOD OF HEAVEN IS THE OTHER PARTY, therefore, though England should break, should Scotland also break the covenant? It is not after this tenor:--We will endeavour reformation in these lands, but if you break, we will break also. No; it is each man swearing for himself that he shall, in his place and station, endeavour reformation, so that if it were left all to one man, he must endeavour reformation. For, consider the last words of the article. Each of them for himself did lift up his hands TO THE MOST HIGHT; and so these three lands are one party, AND THE OTHER PARTY IS THE GOD OF HEAVEN” (_Sermons Delivered In Times Of Persecution In Scoltand_, p.668, James Kerr, ed. Caps added for emphasis.).

2. But someone may object, John Guthrie was not a member or commissioner to the Westminster Assembly, so he may be misinformed about the Covenant being made with God. Well, let’s consider the words of some of the members to the Westminster Assembly. Did they understand that the Solemn League and Covenant was made directly with God?

a. Joseph Caryl a member of the Westminster Assembly, gave this sermon at Westminster “at that Public Convention (ordered by the Honorable House of Commons) for the taking of the Covenant, by all such of all degrees as willingly presented themselves, upon Friday, October 6, 1643.” The House of Commons even gave its stamp of

approval to what Caryl preached by thanking him for the Sermon and officially ordering its publication. Listen to the words of Caryl.

And this covenant is the bond of a twofold union. First, It unites us of this kingdom among ourselves, and this kingdom with the other two. Second, It makes a special union of all those who shall take it holily and sincerely throughout the three kingdoms WITH THE ONE-MOST [perhaps the word “high” is missing here—GLP] GOD. Weak things bound together, are strong, much more then, when strong are bound up with strong: most of all, when strong are bound up WITH ALMIGHTY.... And therefore, I reckon this the least part of our strength, that these three strong kingdoms will be united by this covenant. Nay, if this were all the strength, which this union were like to make, I should reckon this no strength at all. Wherefore, know that this covenant undoubtedly is, and will be a bond of union BETWEEN STRONG AND ALMIGHTY: BETWEEN THREE STRONG NATIONS, AND AN ALMIGHTY GOD. THIS COVENANT ENGAGES MORE THAN MAN, GOD ALSO IS ENGAGED (“Sermon At Westminster”, _The Covenants And The Covenanters_, pp. 211,212, James Kerr, ed. Caps added for emphasis.).

b. Edmund Calamy, a member of the Westminster Assembly, gave this sermon on January 14, 1645 “before the then Lord Mayor of the city of London, Sir Thomas Adams; together with the Sheriffs, Aldermen, and Common Council of the said City, being the day of their taking the Solemn League and Covenant, at Michael Basenshaw, London.”

The solemnity and weightiness of covenant-taking consisteth in three things. 1. BECAUSE IT IS MADE WITH THE GLORIOUS MAJESTY OF HEAVEN AND EARTH, WHO WILL NOT BE TRIFLED AND BAFFLED WITHAL; and therefore, what Jehoshaphat said to his judges, “Take heed what ye do: for ye judge not for men, but for the Lord, who is with in the judgment. Wherefore now, let the fear of the Lord be upon you,” the like I may say to every one that enters into covenant this day; “Take heed what ye do; FOR IT IS THE LORD’S COVENANT, and there is no iniquity with the Lord (“Sermon At London”, _The Covenants And The Covenanters_, p. 322, James Kerr, ed. Caps added for emphasis.).

c. But since these members of the Westminster Assembly did not author the Covenant, perhaps they did not properly understand the parties who were engaged in it. Alexander Henderson gave this address to the House of Commons and the Westminster Assembly before taking the Covenant which address was officially published by order of the House of Commons. Henderson is usually credited with having been the original author of the Solemn League and Covenant.

When a people begin to forget God, He lifteth up His hand against them and smiteth them: and when His people, humbled before Him, LIFT UP THEIR HANDS, not only in supplication, BUT IN COVENANT BEFORE THE MOST HIGH GOD, He is pleased (such is His mercy and wonderful compassion) first, to lift His hand unto them, saying, “I am the Lord your God;” as we have it three times in two verses of the 20th of Ezekiel: and next He stretcheth out His hand against His enemies and theirs. IT IS THE BEST WORK OF FAITH, TO JOIN IN COVENANT WITH GOD, the best work of love and Christian communion, to join in

covenant with the people of God (“Address At Westminster”, _The Covenants And The Covenanters_, p. 152, James Kerr, ed. Caps added for emphasis.).

3. But perhaps I hear the objection that these were only members of or commissioners to the Westminster Assembly—they don’t speak for the Westminster Assembly as a whole. Consider then the following words of exhortation by the Westminster Assembly to all those who subscribe the Solemn League and Covenant.

[A]nd that same God, who, but even as yesterday vouchsafed to disperse and scatter those dark clouds and fogs, which overshadowed that loyal and religious kingdom of Scotland, and to make their righteousness to shine as clear as the sun at noon-day, in the very eyes of their greatest enemies, will doubtlessly stand by all those who, with singleness of heart, and a due sense of their own sins, and a necessity of reformation, SHALL NOW ENTER INTO AN EVERLASTING COVENANT WITH THE LORD, NEVER TO BE FORGOTTEN (“Exhortation By The Westminster Assembly”, _The Covenants And The Covenanters_, p. 311, James Kerr, ed. Caps added for emphasis.).

4. But there arises another objection soon afterwards, namely, that the Westminster Assembly was no official Church Court but rather a synod of men gathered by Parliament to advise them. Let us hear then the words of the faithful General Assembly of the Church of Scotland.

Although there were none in the one Kingdom who did adhere to the Covenant, yet thereby were not the other Kingdom nor any person in either of them absolved from the bond thereof, since in it we have not only sworn BY THE LORD, BUT ALSO COVENANTED WITH HIM. It is not the failing of one or more that can absolve others from their duty or tie TO HIM; besides, the duties therein contained, being in themselves lawful, and the grounds of our tie thereunto moral, though others do forget their duty, yet doth not their defection free us from that obligation which lies upon us by the Covenant in our places and stations. And the Covenant being intended and entered into by these Kingdoms, as one of the best means of steadfastness, for guarding against declining times; It were strange to say that the backsliding of any should absolve others from the tie thereof, especially seeing our engagement therein is not only national, but also personal, everyone with uplifted hands swearing by himself, as it is evident by the tenor of the Covenant. From these and other important reasons, it may appear that all these Kingdoms joining together to abolish that oath by law, yet could they not dispense therewith; much less can one of them, or any part in either of them do the same. The dispensing with oaths hath hitherto been abhorred as Antichristian, and never practiced and avowed by any, but by that man of sin; therefore those who take the same upon them, as they join with him in his sin, so must they expect to partake of his plagues (“A Brotherly Exhortation From the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, To Their Brethren in England”, August 6, 1649, _The Acts Of The General Assemblies Of The Church Of Scotland_, pp. 474,475. Caps added for emphasis.).

5. The voice of the objector grows weaker and weaker, but we hear that this is not yet sufficient because the General Assembly is only a Church Court and not a Civil Court. Let us then hear the exhortation of the English Parliament to all those subscribing the Solemn League and Covenant (“Exhortation To Take the Covenant”, February 1644).

The honourable house of Parliament, the Assembly of Divines, the renowned city of London, and multitudes of other persons of all ranks and quality in this nation, and the whole body of Scotland, have all sworn it, rejoicing at the oath so graciously seconded from heaven. God will, doubtless, stand by all those, who with singleness of heart SHALL NOW ENTER INTO AN EVERLASTING COVENANT WITH THE LORD (_The Absurdity and Perfidy of All Authoritative Toleration of Gross Heresy, Blasphemy, Idolatry, Popery, etc._, John Brown of Haddington, 1803, Still Waters Revival Books reprint, 1997, p. 161. Caps added for emphasis.).

6. Finally, there is only one last objection. The King, Charles II (January 1, 1651 at his coronation), did not so understand the Covenant to be made with God. Consider well that this truth was first preached to the King on that day by the Rev. Robert Douglass:

[F]or our king is not only to be crowned, but to renew a covenant WITH GOD, and his people. Answerable hereto, there is a twofold covenant in the words, ONE BETWEEN GOD, and the king and the people: GOD BEING THE ONE PARTY, the king and the people, the other; another between the king and the people, the king being the one party, and the people the other.

Before Charles II was granted the exercise of his royal rule and authority, he took the Solemn League and Covenant lifting up his right hand TO GOD, and did swear his approbation of the Solemn League and Covenant. Not until there is contrary testimony to overturn what has been presented herein will we move from our position that the Solemn League and Covenant is a National Covenant and Vow engaging the everlasting God as the first Party in that Covenant and the three Kingdoms (and all their posterity) as the second party. Dear ones, how solemn and sacred indeed is such a Covenant in which God owns it as His own—a perpetual Covenant that will never be forgotten to all posterity. God grant us His special grace to own it as a divine privilege and awesome responsibility to be under the bonds of such a Covenant. For the Lord our God will require it and will Himself cause it to be owned by all of the posterity so bound. For as Egypt will vow as a Nation unto the Lord, so shall the United States and Canada do likewise as the posterity of England, Ireland and Scotland.

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"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).