

What Is the Role of History in National Covenanting?

Psalm 78:1-8; Hebrews 6:11-12

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This Lord's Day we embark upon a journey in which we move from a scriptural justification of national covenanting and the *Solemn League and Covenant* to an historical justification of national covenanting and the *Solemn League and Covenant*. We have sought to lay out the biblical principles involved in national covenanting and as well to answer various objections that have arisen over many years. Now we shift our attention to the application of those biblical principles to a specific historical National Covenant—namely the *Solemn League and Covenant*. The *Solemn League and Covenant* does have the unique distinction of being the only National Covenant (in the recent history of the past 500 years and perhaps much longer) in which three kingdoms bound themselves together and covenanted with God to be His people in a perpetual covenant until the sun, the moon and the stars cease to shine. In this next stage of our study, the Scripture will not be absent; however, our goal is to apply what we have already learned from Scripture to history.

With that in mind, I would like to turn our attention briefly today to a biblical discussion of history and its importance to us. With that in mind, let us turn to Psalm 78:1-8. From this text, I would like to answer three questions: (1) What Is History? (2) For Whom Is History Relevant? (3) Why Is History Relevant?

1. **What Is History?** History is (as some have noted) HIS (that is God's) STORY. History is the outworking of God's eternal plan wherein God glorifies His justice and His grace. Note in Psalm 78:4 what it is that we are not to hide from our children but rather to show to them: "the praises of the LORD, and his strength, and his wonderful works that he hath done." History is not just a recollection of who begat who and when so and so died. History is not a continuum of unrelated events in time that bear no relationship one to another. History tells the mighty acts of God in time wherein He saves undeserving sinners and judges people and nations that hate Him and forget Him. According to Psalm 78:4, history consists of God's actions and God's work in time wherein He reveals His praise, His strength, and His wonderful works of justice and mercy. Dear ones, we not only read of God's mighty works in the Book of Nature all around us as we behold the vast complex universe which the Lord has made, but we also read of God's mighty works in the Book of History from the creation until now. Of course the Book of Nature and the Book of History must be interpreted by God in the Book of Revelation—the Bible. Therefore, history is not and ought not to be boring because in every event (whether great or small, whether the history of nations or your own personal history) God's mighty hand is at work governing all events in accordance with His most wise and most holy eternal plan. History reveals that Almighty God is near us, is personal, and is most wise, most just, and most merciful. He is not a God who has created us and then taken some celestial vacation from us. God has visited this sinful world and has redeemed undeserving sinners in the person and work of Jesus Christ—the central figure of all history. Nations and individuals that trust Christ, love and serve Him will be saved, preserved, and blessed. Nations and individuals that hate Christ, ignore and neglect Him will be judged.

2. **For Whom Is History Relevant?** History is not only relevant to historians and to those with degrees behind their names; history is relevant to you and to your children for a thousand generations to come. Note to whom the history of God's praise, God's strength, and God's wonderful works is to be told and explained: Read Psalm 78:5-6. To say that history is unimportant to you is to say that God and what He does is unimportant. To say that history is irrelevant is to say that you and your posterity are irrelevant, for you and your posterity also display the mighty acts of God in time. From one generation to the next, our job as Christian parents is to open the Book of Scripture, the Book of Nature, and the Book of History for our

children, so that they might behold their mighty God who goes forth riding upon the clouds of heaven like a chariot in saving undeserving sinners throughout history, but also in saving (in particular) such an undeserving sinner as is that child's parent and as is that child.

3. **Why Is History Relevant?** It should be apparent that since history reveals God and His mighty acts, history is relevant if we would grow in our knowledge of Him. History not only reveals God's mighty acts, but also reveals those who trust Him, love Him, and obey Him, and also those who hate Him, forget Him, and disobey Him. History reveals to us a faithful people who have followed Christ and also an unfaithful people who have served themselves and their own imaginations. History is relevant because we are doomed to repeat the sins of our forefathers if we don't learn from their sins, errors, and backslidings: Read Psalm 78:7-8. One of the sins that we commit and into which we fall that leads us into so many other sins is our forgetfulness of God's mighty acts in judging and saving people. Because we are sinners, we want to think we are sovereign in our lives. Thus, we do not want to be reminded of what God has done. We only want to be reminded of what we have done. How much more we are likely to forget God and go our own way when we do not see Him personally involved in all that happens to us. We are much more likely to repeat the sins, failures, and backslidings of our fathers when we do not learn from history what God would teach us. We can only fulfill God's command to follow the faithful when we have an eye to Scripture and history so as to distinguish the faithful from the unfaithful (Hebrews 6:11-12). The Lord will humble all who forget Him and will bless all who remember Him to humbly fear Him and to joyfully praise Him for all that He has done in history and in your own personal history in saving you, correcting you, and providing for you.

Now that we have a biblical view of history, let us turn our attention to a period of history that greatly reveals the mighty acts of God in time. I would like to give a very brief historical overview of events leading up to the *Solemn League and Covenant*, events surrounding the *Solemn League and Covenant*, and events following the *Solemn League and Covenant*.

I. **Events Leading Up to the *Solemn League and Covenant*.**

A. One major set of events leading up to the *Solemn League and Covenant* revolved around the doctrine and practice that kings are absolute in their power and authority to rule over their kingdoms and subjects—absolute in rule over both the Church and State. This doctrine and practice obtained particular significance with Henry VIII of England when he severed his ties with papal Rome. The Supremacy Act was passed by Parliament on November 3, 1534 in which Henry and his successors were declared to be “the only supreme head” on earth over the Church of England. In so doing, England simply exchanged one earthly head over the Church (namely, the Pope) for another (namely, the King). The *Solemn League and Covenant* set forth the biblical doctrine that kings and rulers in a covenanted land were only to be preserved in their rule as they preserved, protected and defended the one true Christian religion revealed in Scripture. The *Solemn League and Covenant* made clear that the King was not absolute in his authority, but that the King and Parliament ruled together under God for the glory of God and the good of the people. That wicked system of rule over the Church by the King (or civil magistrate) was called Erastianism (the name being derived from Thomas Erastus, a physician at Heidelberg who promoted the doctrine of the magistrate's rule over the Church in 1568). Erastianism robbed Christ of His sole rule over the Church. The civil magistrate usurped the crown right of Christ as Mediatorial King over His Church. This unjust power and tyranny (of especially the Stuart monarchs—James I and Charles I leading up to the *Solemn League and Covenant*) led the Kingdoms of England, Ireland and Scotland to defend themselves against this tyranny and to engage themselves collectively as one party in a covenant with God to uphold the absolute rule of Christ alone over His Church and a limited role of the King over his Kingdoms.

B. A second set of events leading up to the *Solemn League and Covenant* followed from the first, namely that a system of Church Government needed to be established that would best comport with the King's absolute authority. Thus, Prelacy was established as the system of Church Government in England and Ireland and Scotland (though it was firmly resisted there). Prelacy was that system that made a hierarchy in the Church wherein the King appointed archbishops and bishops to do his bidding in the Church. There was no equality of authority among ministers, but rather a hierarchy of one Minister over other Ministers within the Church. Authority was not invested into the hands of a plurality of Ministers and Elders, but into the hand of one man (whether an Archbishop or a Bishop) who then passed that authority to minister on to those under him. There was no place for the biblical office of Ruling Elder or for the establishment of a Session, Presbytery, or General Assembly in the Prelacy practiced in Britain at that time. Again, this Prelacy recognized the King of England as the earthly head of the Church. Tremendous abuses within the Church were legislated by Archbishops and Bishops who sought to curry the favor of the King.

C. Thirdly (and finally for the purpose of this brief overview), the events leading up to the *Solemn League and Covenant* culminated in a desire for the three Kingdoms to unite as one collective body in a civil league and in an ecclesiastical covenant with God. Just as we noted that there were both civil and ecclesiastical components to the National Covenant Renewal at the time of the Priest Jehoiada and of the young King Joash (in 2 Kings 11:17), so the three Kingdoms of England, Ireland and Scotland (having the same King but separate Parliaments) saw their duty to bind themselves to God as His people in order to defend the lawful rights of the King, Parliament, and people, and to protect the lawful rights of Christ's Church in promoting the true Reformed Religion of the Bible. They sought to implement at a national level the blessed truth found in Ecclesiastes 4:9-12. Social covenants (marriage, familial, ecclesiastical, civil and business) bind us to perform our duties to one another, seeking the grace of God to be faithful for the glory of God and for the good of ourselves and our posterity.

II. Events Surrounding the *Solemn League And Covenant*.

A. Charles I having sought to bring his Kingdoms under his absolute sway of authority found resistance to this tyranny among the Kingdoms. Led first by Scotland who set out the principles of the King's rightful place in their own *National Covenant* (actually a covenant renewal) in 1638, Charles I approved and signed this Covenant, but sought to bring Scotland under his tyrannous power by going to war against her, eventually backing down when confronted with a determined Scotland who was not willing to allow the King to subject her any longer to his absolute rule. This stand by Scotland against Charles I likewise encouraged England to resist the King's tyranny as well. The King raised his royal forces against Parliament and the people. Parliament and the people defended themselves against the military force of Charles I, but lacked the resources to overcome the King's royal forces. Parliament saw their hope of victory lying in a civil covenant with Scotland to subdue the hostilities of the King. Thus, Parliament looked to a civil covenant with Scotland as a means of defending themselves against the absolute rule and tyranny of Charles I.

B. Scotland, on the other hand, had sought on previous occasions to discuss with England the importance of uniting together in a religious covenant made unto God whereby they would be joined together in uniformity of one doctrine, worship, discipline and government. Scotland rightly saw this religious covenant as the basis of preserving and protecting not only the one true Reformed religion, but in so doing protecting the lawful civil liberties of King, Parliament and people. Religious tyranny leads to political tyranny, whereas religious reformation and uniformity in the truth leads to civil reformation and liberty. If Christ is dethroned from His rightful place of rule in His Church, usurpation and political expediency and tyranny will naturally follow in the course of events.

C. Alexander Henderson, a godly and learned Minister from the Church of Scotland and Commissioner to the Westminster Assembly, drafted the *Solemn League and Covenant*. After approval by the Church of Scotland, it was presented to the Parliament of England. The *Solemn League and Covenant* clearly laid out (in the First Article) the following three standards that were to be followed in bringing reformation and uniformity in religion to the British Isles.

1. The first standard of reformation in the *Solemn League and Covenant* states, “That we shall sincerely, really, and constantly, through the grace of GOD, endeavor, in our several places and callings, the PRESERVATION of the reformed religion in the Church of Scotland, in doctrine, worship, discipline, and government, against our common enemies.” Carefully note that the covenant calls for “the PRESERVATION of the reformed religion in the Church of Scotland, in doctrine, worship, discipline, and government”—not the reformation of religion in Scotland, but the preservation of it. Whereas, in England and Ireland it is not the preservation of religion that is required, but rather “the REFORMATION of religion in the kingdoms of England and Ireland, in doctrine, worship, discipline, and government.” What was implied was that Scotland had already manifested reformation in its doctrine, worship, discipline and government and that England and Ireland needed to likewise manifest reformation to the degree of reformation already attained in Scotland. This became a very important issue in subsequent years when English Independents departed from the uniformity of the *Solemn League and Covenant* in doctrine, worship, discipline, and government, and rather pushed for toleration of various religious sects (or denominations), thereby promoting ecclesiastical schism and division in the Church within the three Kingdoms.

2. The second standard of reformation in the *Solemn League and Covenant* states that the reformation of religion in the kingdoms of England and Ireland, in doctrine, worship, discipline, and government must be “according to the Word of GOD.” This obviously is the final and supreme standard for all reformation. The Independents in the Westminster Assembly finding they were unable to convince the Assembly that their position on Church Government was of divine right as found in Scripture, turned to political expediency to bring about the desired results of promoting Independency and squashing Presbyterianism. The Independents violated their own word and submitted copies of their Independent platform of Church Government to the Parliament without previously allowing the Westminster Assembly the opportunity to first review and discuss the document (entitled, *The Apologetical Narration*), as all in the Assembly had previously promised to do (in the previously established operating rules for the Westminster Assembly). Thus, when biblical arguments were not successful in convincing the Assembly of their position from Scripture, the Independents resorted to pragmatism in violation of their own promise.

3. The third standard of reformation in the *Solemn League and Covenant* states that reformation in doctrine, worship, discipline and government would be according to “the example of the best reformed Churches.” And yet there were no examples of Reformed Churches in the various nations that practiced Independency—all were Presbyterian in Church government.

D. The *Solemn League and Covenant* was sworn by Church and State (in England, Ireland and Scotland) and by the people of every class through the years 1643-1644 and in the years immediately following.

III. Events Following the *Solemn League and Covenant*.

A. Political leverage of the Independents in places of authority (such as Oliver Cromwell and his Parliamentary Army) brought the *Solemn League and Covenant* to a place of various interpretations (that were not raised at the time it was sworn) and of outright denial of the covenant because it did not promote sectarianism (or denominationalism), but rather condemned it as that which must be uprooted from “all his Majesty’s dominions”. Although the Independents had sworn to endeavor by God’s grace to uproot

sectarianism in England, they rather protected it and established it as the national religion.

B. In Scotland, there was the political intrigue of those who were called “Engagers” who sought to restore Charles I to his place of authority upon the throne in order to destroy Cromwell and his Independents. The Engagers thought they could work out a compromise with Charles I in order to deal sectarianism a deathly blow. This plan was an ungodly compromise of the moral principles found in the *Solemn League and Covenant* and proved unsuccessful. Those involved in this plan endorsed by the Parliament of Scotland were condemned as malignant covenant-breakers by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland (1649) for using political expediency to achieve a good goal of uprooting sectarianism. The ends, however, do not justify the means. We do not do evil that good may come (Romans 3:8).

C. One other case of political expediency within Scotland brought the *Solemn League and Covenant* into virtual scorn and the Church of Scotland into fractured disrepair. The issue was whether those who had previously been removed from the army or from holding political office in Parliament (by the Act of Classes, 1649) for having previously violated the *Solemn League and Covenant* could be restored to their previous places in the military and government without some demonstrable proven “track record” of repentance. The Resolutioners (in 1650) opted on the side of political expediency that these men in the military and in the Parliament were needed to fight against Cromwell and his army. The Protestors declared that such malignant violators of the *Solemn League and Covenant* could not be immediately restored and to do so was to break covenant with God. The result was a division within the Church of Scotland that has never yet been healed. The faithful Protestors would not be removed from the biblical and moral principles found in the *Solemn League and Covenant*. It was the Resolutioners that moved scriptural landmarks that had been established.

D. About the same time that the Resolutioners were seeking to fortify their government and military with covenant-breakers, they were also working closely with Charles II (son of executed Charles I). Again, due to political pressure and expediency, there was not due caution taken to try and test the convictions of Charles II. Charles II swore the *Solemn League and Covenant* at Spey (June 23, 1650) and at Scoon (January 1, 1651). The Scottish Resolutioners rallied behind Charles II, but Cromwell soundly defeated Charles II, and he fled to France. Charles II was restored to the throne in 1660 and approximately six months later (January 25, 1661), he along with Parliament repudiated the *Solemn League and Covenant* stating it to be null and void and publicly burning it.

E. Let me close by stating that when the so-called Glorious Revolution occurred (1688) with William and Mary coming to the throne of Britain and when the Scottish Church was nationally established again at that time, it was not established on the basis of the *Solemn League and Covenant* or upon the Reformation that occurred in Scotland from 1638-1649 (the height of its reformation and purity as a Church). This established Church (at the time of the “Revolution”) showed itself to be unfaithful and covenant-breaking in denying its biblical constitution long since established by civil and ecclesiastical law in Scotland. This is why (in part, though there were many other sound reasons) faithful Covenanters did not unite with that Established Church under the Revolution Settlement (1689-1690), nor can they even to this day recognize as faithful any Presbyterian Church that proceeds from such covenant-breaking origins while they yet continue in such unrepentant covenant-breaking constitutions and paths.

Dear ones, we began this sermon by seeking to understand the proper role of history. As noted, in history we see the mighty works of God in judging those who break covenant with Him and in blessing those who keep covenant with Him. We may be few in number presently, but we stand in the paths trodden by our faithful

covenant-keeping forefathers. We will not be moved from these paths by the sarcasm, the malice, the attacks, or the backsliding of the vast majority of Christian Churches (even Reformed Churches) and Christian brethren whom we love. May God help us to learn from history the price that we must pay for standing for the truth, and may we firmly stand there until the Lord removes us from this world.

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