

## What Is National Covenanting?

Galatians 3:15; Joshua 9:15

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What is national covenanting? Is it an ordinance for only the nation of Israel or is it also an ordinance for all Christian nations as well? Is the Solemn League and Covenant a national covenant that binds only England, Ireland, and Scotland or does it also extend to the former and present dominions of Great Britain as well (including the United States and Canada)?

I have three goals in pursuing the subject of national covenanting. First, I would seek to defend the doctrine and practice of national covenanting from Scripture as an ordinance for all Christian nations. Second, I would seek to demonstrate that the Solemn League and Covenant (1643) is a scriptural national covenant. Third, I would seek to prove that the Solemn League and Covenant binds presently not only the nations of England, Ireland, and Scotland, but also binds the former and present dominions of Great Britain (including the United States and Canada). Through this whole study of a neglected subject in Presbyterian Churches today, I would pray that we would all be awakened to our gross sin of covenant-breaking against the Lord our God as a nation and to our desperate need of Jesus Christ who alone can remove this sin and all other sins from the moral person of this nation.

Looking now at Paul's argument in Galatians 3:15, he says: "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." In Galatians chapter 3, Paul seeks to demonstrate that the gracious covenant God made with Abraham (which promised him and his posterity salvation through Christ, the true seed of Abraham) was firm and secure, not on the basis of one's obedience to the Law, but on the basis of God's promise through Christ the Mediator. Paul uses an argument from the lesser to the greater in Galatians 3:15 to add weight to the inviolable, perpetual nature of God's Covenant of Grace (which extends from Adam after the fall even to the end of the world). This Paul does by comparing God's Covenant of Grace (a covenant between God and Christ who represents sinful men) with that of mere human covenants between men and men. As Calvin states on this verse (*Calvin Commentaries*, Volume XXI, p. 93): "Human contracts are admitted on all hands to be binding: how much more what God has established?"

If, for example, you signed a commercial covenant (or contract) with a contractor to build you a home for so much money, and if he did not keep his word in completing your home, would you not view that as a violation of that covenant into which you both had entered? If even such covenants made with fellow men are binding, how much more binding are covenants wherein God is one party and man (either individually or collectively) is the other party? Paul (in Galatians 3:15) is specifically seeking to demonstrate the perpetual and inviolable nature of the Covenant of Grace between God (as one party) and Abraham and his posterity as the other party. Although Abraham and his posterity will fail to keep the Covenant with God as they ought, God will not fail to keep it in saving and redeeming His people from their sin through the righteousness of Jesus Christ. The unfaithfulness of man in keeping His good and holy commandments will not nullify the Covenant, for God will see the Covenant realized in the lives of His people in spite of their unfaithfulness.

Similarly, it is true of all national covenants wherein a nation formally engages itself to be God's people—those national covenants are likewise perpetual whenever the posterity is included (as we shall see shortly). For in a national covenant God is one party and the people (collectively as a moral person) are the other party. Simply because people violate a covenant made with Him does not end the covenant obligation—otherwise

every covenant would simply end at the point that it is violated and there would be no further obligation to keep it or consequences in violating it when one party sins against the covenant.

## **I. What a National Covenant Is.**

A. A national covenant is an ordinance of God (Joshua 24:25) wherein a nation through its people and official representatives (2 Kings 11:17; Nehemiah 9:38; Nehemiah 10:28-29) formally engages itself and all those that are represented therein (Deuteronomy 29:14-15) to be God's people in loving obedience to His commandments (2 Chronicles 15:12-15).

B. The Covenant of Grace (wherein Christ perfectly fulfills all righteousness and purchases redemption for His people and wherein the Spirit of God applies all of the benefits of redemption to this redeemed people) is summarized for us by our Lord in these words: "I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people" (2 Corinthians 6:16). We note that on the part of God, He freely and graciously covenants to be the God of His people—having freely loved and redeemed them, He promises to bless them. On the part of the people, they voluntarily covenant with God to be His people through faith in Jesus Christ. Having been freely loved and redeemed by Christ from sin and hell, they promise on behalf of themselves and their posterity to love and serve Him all of their days in keeping His good and holy commandments. As we shall see, what is true of individuals is also true of families, churches, and nations as well, who likewise have a duty to collectively enter into covenant with God as God's people. Thus, covenanting is a divine ordinance grounded in and flowing from the grace which God has shown to His people through Jesus Christ and His finished work of redemption. Such incomprehensible love and grace must elicit from us an unfeigned love, sincere gratitude, and faithful obedience.

C. National covenanting is not a Covenant of Works under which we place ourselves and our posterity in establishing and renewing such social covenants with God. For the Covenant of Works declares: "Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them" (Galatians 3:10). We do not establish or renew covenants in order to be either justified before the infinitely holy tribunal of God (i.e. to make ourselves acceptable to God on the basis of our works of righteousness), nor to escape eternal condemnation from the Lord our God (for it is not our works of righteousness that can ever deliver us from the condemning wrath of God, but rather our Savior's works of righteousness alone that can satisfy the justice of an offended and holy God).

## **II. National Covenanting Is an Ordinance for All Christian Nations and Not for Israel Alone.**

A. There are many who would like to reserve and limit national covenanting to Israel alone as if national covenanting was distinctively for Israel alone (a judicial law). However, covenanting (whether individual, familial, ecclesiastical, or national) is not a judicial law of Israel, but rather a moral law that is firmly embedded in the Third Commandment ("Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain: for the LORD shall not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain" Exodus 20:7).

B. The Third Commandment speaks of a universal duty to swear faithfully to God in all covenants that we make unto Him. This is not just an obligation that Israel owes to God, but one that Gentiles owe to God as well. This obligation has never been rescinded and certainly Christ did not repeal the Third Commandment. The Lord does not rescind all covenants in Matthew 5:33-37, but simply demonstrates how the Pharisees had abused the ordinance of covenanting by using oaths to escape their own responsibility in keeping them. Christ further condemns their playing loose and free with oaths in Matthew 23:16-22. The Lord

is not condemning the use of covenanting (whether personal, familial, ecclesiastical, or national), He is simply condemning the sinful abuse of covenanting by the Pharisees, and by inference clearing the way for the godly use of covenanting. We are told of the binding obligation and morality of covenanting when the Psalmist states that the righteous man “swaereth to his own hurt, and changeth not” (Psalm 15:4). Likewise, the abiding moral obligation to use lawful covenants (wherein the name of the Lord is invoked) is noted in Hebrews 6:16: “and an oath for confirmation is to them an end of all strife.” Even our text (Galatians 3:15) assumes the continued benefit and duty to engage ourselves by way of solemn oaths and covenants both to men and to God when Paul states: “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.” Furthermore, how could anyone be guilty of covenant-breaking if entering into covenants was unlawful in the age of the New Covenant (as we see in Romans 1:31 and 2 Timothy 3:3)?

C. Since it is a lawful ordinance to covenant with God as individuals (as may be seen in Psalm 76:11), it is likewise a lawful ordinance for a nation to covenant with God (as may be seen in Isaiah 19:18-21). Here we see that in the age of the New Covenant the nation of Egypt will covenant unto the Lord to be His people. The ordinance of national covenanting is here called a “vow” unto God which Gentile nations shall perform in the future during the millennium in the New Testament age. This duty to nationally vow unto the Lord is firmly anchored in moral obligation found in the Third Commandment.

### **III. A National Covenant Has a Descending Obligation That Binds Posterity.**

A. The inclusion of posterity in a covenant is not a novel concept to those who adhere to Reformed theology, for all of Adam’s posterity by ordinary generation was included in the Covenant of Works and we all sinned in him and fell with him in his first transgression. Likewise, all the posterity of Christ (His elect chosen in Him before the foundation of the world according to Ephesians 1:4) was included in the Covenant of Grace. Paul states in one verse both the inclusion of Adam’s posterity in the Covenant of Works and also the inclusion of Christ’s posterity in the Covenant of Grace: “For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive” (1 Corinthians 15:22). So likewise, our children as posterity are included in the gracious covenant God makes with us as believing parents (Acts 2:38).

B. The national covenant of Israel included not only those who were present and able to swear to God, but also included their posterity who were not yet born (Deuteronomy 29:10-15). So likewise by way of the same moral principle of covenant succession is posterity in any national covenant included in that covenant.

C. Even in covenants between men, posterity may be and are included. Consider the covenant that Joshua and the rulers of Israel made with the Gibeonites in Joshua 9:15. Some four hundred years later that covenant was violated by King Saul who out of a “zeal” for the Lord sought to destroy the Gibeonites. In the reign of King David, God brought a famine as judgment upon the nation of Israel that lasted for three years. The divinely appointed famine was due to the breaking of the covenant by King Saul that had been made with the Gibeonites at the time of Joshua as we see in 2 Samuel 21:1-2. The passing of hundreds of years could not rescind this covenant to posterity. The forgetfulness of the covenant made with the Gibeonites could not rescind this covenant to posterity. The “zeal” of King Saul in seeking to “purify” the nation of Israel could not rescind this covenant to posterity. For the whole posterity of both the Israelites and the Gibeonites were included in that covenant as two collective moral persons that continued to exist in their posterity. Furthermore, observe how the covenant made between David and Jonathan not only bound the two of them, but also bound all their posterity as well (1 Samuel 20:42). Just as Levi paid tithes in Abraham

(Hebrews 7:9), even so all posterity covenant in their fathers (when posterity is included). How much more this is true when it is a national covenant between God and man (wherein the national posterity is included)! That is why a covenant that continues to bind posterity may be called “a perpetual covenant” (Jeremiah 50:5). It continues as long as the posterity continues. Even as we consider national treaties, acts, laws, and ordinances, we see that not only is the generation viewed as being bound that were living at the time that the national transaction occurred, but also all of the national posterity are likewise viewed as being bound until that treaty, act, law, or ordinance is formally rescinded. Every time a new member of the nation is born, he/she is understood to be bound by these national transactions—they do not have to individually swear to each of them one by one. Because all of the posterity is viewed as being one moral person with those that represented the nation in these national engagements, all of posterity is understood legally to be bound. Obviously, we cannot be bound morally to that which is contrary to God’s Law, but that which is agreeable to God’s Law can and does bind the posterity of those faithful covenanters from the past.

Dear ones, how we should thank God for His Covenant of Grace and for all other sacred covenants with one another and with God. It is not a dishonor to be bound by covenants to God; to the contrary, it is one of our greatest honors to be bound to the Lord our God by covenant. We see from this short study how much of life is covenantal in nature. We see how heinous of a sin it is to disregard solemn covenants of faithful forefathers that were sworn on our behalf as posterity. The passing of hundreds of years does not excuse us from our covenant obligations. The unfaithfulness of generations does not remove the obligation to keep the solemn covenants of our forefathers. The forgetfulness of all who are bound does not make God forgetful of solemn covenants. Let us repent of all our covenant-breaking in commercial contracts with others, in our Church membership promises, in our vows to the Lord, in our marital covenants, and in our solemn national covenant—the Solemn League and Covenant.

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