

Covenant Living: Living in Covenant with God

Jeremiah 31:31-34 ¹

As most of you know, we bought a small condo here in Columbia this week, and the next month or so will involve some fairly complicated logistics as we finally get settled a year after beginning the journey with you. If you haven't purchased any real estate since the 2008 housing crash, you might be surprised at the amount of paperwork required in order to buy a house these days. The pile of paperwork related to this relatively small transaction is nearly three inches thick!

All of that paperwork involved two sets of contracts: one set of contracts between Jill and me and the seller; and one set of contracts between Jill and me and the bank. "Contract" is the word we use for such agreements in the realm of business. In the realm of spiritual things, we call such agreements "covenants."

A covenant is a solemn promise made binding by a spoken or written statement or a symbolic action of some sort. A covenant implies that the parties involved have come to an understanding. They have come to an agreement on the matter in question, and they have arrived at an arranged settlement to which they commit themselves. A covenant is a formal agreement with stipulations to be fulfilled, and the promise is recognized by both parties as being binding.

Churches often have "church covenants," which are statements of mutual commitment to each other and to God. CBF has had a church covenant since our founding nearly forty years ago, and you can find it on our church website. After I received the first call from Karen Canfield in June, 2011, I immediately went to that website, because I wanted to see what sorts of commitments you had made to God and to each other, and I was pleased at what I found.

Before I made my way to the Covenant, I had already found the opening statement on the "About CBF" page, which says this:

CBF is difficult to put into words, for we have always been a congregation more controlled by spirit than structure. We are a "Fellowship," with all that this word implies about people and their relationships with each other and with God, not a "Church," with all that this word implies about buildings and the maintenance of institutions. CBF is about people in Christ and Christ in people. That is why the best profile of our congregation is a silhouette of people holding hands.

I remember telling Jill at that point, "I already like these people!" I liked the Covenant, too. I liked—and I continue to be grateful for—its honesty, its humility, and its humble graciousness as it outlines the commitments we make at CBF to each other and to God.

We're going to take these last two Sundays before Advent to briefly think together about our Church Covenant. Although the Covenant has three sections, it's really organized around what Jesus identified as the two great commandments: "*The most important [commandment],*" answered Jesus, "*is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these*" (Mark 12:29-31).

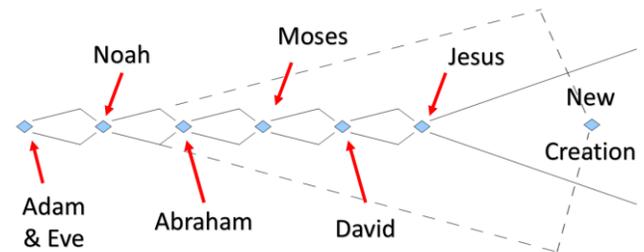
Love God. Love your neighbor. It's all as simple as that. It's all as difficult as that.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland on November 18, 2012.

This morning, we're going to look at the idea of "covenant" for a bit and then turn to what our Church Covenant says about loving God. Next week we'll look at what our Covenant says about loving each other.

The Bible is actually the record of five covenants God made with our ancestors and subsequently with us. Time after time, God initiated special relationships with special persons whose hearts were in harmony with God's purposes. Sadly, the more the descendants of those covenant leaders increased in number, the farther they moved from faithfulness to their covenant relationship with God.

This happened not once, but every single time, and so God started over yet again with a new covenant and a new family: Adam and Eve's descendants became more and more wicked (Genesis 4:1-10), and God initiated a covenant with righteous Noah (Genesis 9:9-17). After the flood, Noah's descendants increased, but so did their wickedness, so God initiated a covenant with Abraham (Genesis 12:1-2, 15:17-21, 17:1-11). Abraham's descendants increased, but they ended up far from God, and God initiated a covenant with Moses to create a nation in unique covenant with God (Exodus 6:1-8).



Centuries passed, and the nation's failure to keep their covenant with God led God to initiate a covenant with David and with his descendants (2 Samuel 7:12-16). The descendants of David missed the boat, too, so God initiated a new and very different covenant in the person of Jesus—who was also a descendant of David. This was the promised New Covenant about which we read in Jeremiah:

"The days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the LORD.

*"This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. **"I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts.** I will be their God and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more" (Jeremiah 31:31-34). . . .*

*. . . In the same way, after the supper [Jesus] took the cup, saying, **"This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you"** (Luke 22:20).*

This New Covenant remains in force today, and it will continue to expand until that moment when, in the fullness of time, God establishes the New Creation at last, the New Heaven and the New Earth of which we were reminded last week.

The covenants of the Old Testament—with Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David—were external covenants, and external laws never work very well. Written on the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments and on the scrolls of the Torah, the Law of Moses was external, like a coat, able to be put on and taken off, and it often was. In contrast with this, the New Covenant foretold by Jeremiah and fulfilled in Jesus was—and is—an internal covenant, written not on stone or scroll but on mind and heart.

The early Christians understood and proclaimed that God had acted in a profoundly new way through Jesus and the New Covenant. In the book of Hebrews, arguments are multiplied to demonstrate that the New Covenant of Grace both fulfills and replaces the Old Covenant of Law:

- “*Unlike the other high priests, [Jesus] does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins **once for all** when he offered himself*” (Hebrews 7:27).
- Jesus “*did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place **once for all** by his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption*” (Hebrews 9:12).
- Jesus “*has appeared **once for all** at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him*” (Hebrews 9:26-28).

Did you hear the theme in those passages? Philip Bliss wrote an old Gospel Hymn that highlights the phrase:

Now we are free, there's no condemnation,
 Jesus provides a perfect salvation;
 “Come unto me,” O hear His sweet call,
 Come, and He saves us *once for all*.

Once for all, O sinner, receive it!
Once for all, O friend, now believe it!
 Cling to the Cross, the burden will fall,
 Christ hath redeemed us *once for all!* ²

My friends, this is BIG NEWS. Can you sense the wonder of it? And it's with all this as context that we begin to be able to understand the affirmations of our congregational “Covenant with God, Our Father.” Let's look at those eight statements briefly.

1. We accept, O Lord, Your forgiveness for the sins we have committed, and pray that You will stop their harmful effects; we covenant with You to be forgiving persons.

The covenant begins where it must begin, in our acceptance of our situation before God as sinners worthy of judgment as well as our acceptance of God's provision of forgiveness—once for all—through Jesus' sacrifice that inaugurated the New Covenant. That acceptance causes us to be “born again”—Jesus' words (John 3:3)—and to become new creations in Him (2 Corinthians 5:17). Apart from this transformation, we are unable to enter into the New Covenant at all, much less to actually keep our part of it.

This first statement recognizes that our sin causes harm far beyond our awareness of its effect and that it continues to do so long after we have repented from it. And it reminds us that God's forgiveness of our sin is conditioned upon our willingness to forgive those “*who trespass against us*” (Matthew 6:12-15).

2. We thank You, O Lord, for touching our hearts and lives with Your healing; we covenant with You to be healers of others.

² Philip P. Bliss, “Free from the Law, O Happy Condition,” in *Sunshine for Sunday Schools*, 1873.

The second statement expresses thanks to God for our own spiritual healing and covenants with God to pass that healing on to others in any way we can. Paul told us that *“God comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God”* (2 Corinthians 1:4). *“Freely you have received,”* Jesus said; *“freely give”* (Matthew 10:8).

3. We thank You, our Father, for making us aware of Your Presence; we covenant with You to watch for, wait upon, and depend on Your help in our daily lives.

The third statement recognizes with gratitude that we would not know God at all had God not chosen to reveal Himself to us in ways that we could perceive and understand. Our covenant commitment grows out of Jesus’ teaching in the Upper Room: *“No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing”* (John 15:4-5).

4. We thank You, O Lord, for accepting us as persons, when we are so far from being holy and righteous; we covenant with You, to be persons who accept others, even when they do not measure up to our standards.

Statement four expresses gratitude for the fact that *“God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us”* (Romans 5:8). This statement also invokes the principles Paul gave us in Romans 14: *“Accept the one whose faith is weak, without quarreling over disputable matters. . . . Who are you to judge [God’s] servant? To their own master, servants stand or fall. And they will stand, for the Lord is able to make them stand. . . . So then, each of us will give an account of ourselves to God”* (14:1, 4, 12).

5. We thank You, O Lord, for being interested in our lives; we covenant with You to let Your Son Jesus be our Lord.

The fifth principle celebrates God’s concern for us as both Father (Psalm 103:13; Matthew 6:9) and Shepherd (Psalm 23; John 10:1-18). Our covenant responsibility and commitment is to “let Jesus be our Lord,” which means that we commit ourselves to obeying everything He has commanded us to do, chief among which is to love each other (Luke 6:46; John 14:15; Matthew 28:20).

Such obedience is not to be taken lightly. Two words that never go together are “No” and “Lord.” Jesus has the right to command (Matthew 7:21).

6. We recognize, O Lord, the steadfastness of Your faithfulness to us; we return that commitment and dedicate our lives to You and Your service.

The sixth principle joins the psalmist in affirming that *“Your love, LORD, reaches to the heavens, your faithfulness to the skies”* (Psalm 36:5). Our pledged response includes at least these four things:

- *“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth”* (2 Timothy 2:15).
- *“Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you”* (Matthew 28:19-20).
- *“For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do”* (Ephesians 2:10).

- “Seek first [God’s] kingdom and his righteousness, and all these [other] things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:33).

**7. We thank You, O Lord, for breaking some of the sinful bonds on our lives;
we covenant with You to be Christian toward those who are not experiencing this
freedom.**

Although Jesus has already achieved final and complete victory over the powers of evil, the seventh statement acknowledges that we ourselves have not. We have more familiarity than we want to have with Paul’s lament in Romans 7 that “*I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. . . . For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out*” (7:15, 18).

The seventh statement also reminds us of Paul’s warning in Galatians 6: “*Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ*” (6:1-2).

**8. We thank You, O Lord, for loving us when we do not deserve Your love;
we covenant with You to love one another as You have loved us.**

The final statement of the first section of our Church Covenant acknowledges once more with wonder and amazement how much God loves us, having chosen us in Christ “*before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight*” (Ephesians 1:4). As John exulted, “*See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called the children of God! And that is what we are!*” (1 John 3:1).

And our covenant response to God’s love is to pass it on to others that they may know it, too: “*Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. . . . This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. . . . We love because God loved us first*” (1 John 4:7, 10-11, 19).

This is My Father’s World

Maltbie Babcock

This is my Father’s world, and to my listening ears, all nature sings,
and round me rings the music of the spheres.

This is my Father’s world, I rest me in the thought of rocks and trees,
of skies and seas; His hand the wonders wrought.

This is my Father’s world, the birds their carols raise; the morning light,
the lily white declare their Maker’s praise.

This is my Father’s world, He shines in all that’s fair;
in the rustling grass I hear Him pass, He speaks to me everywhere.

This is my Father’s world, O let me ne’er forget
that though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the Ruler yet.

This is my Father’s world, the battle is not done;
Jesus who died shall be satisfied, and earth and heav’n be one!