

Sunday, September 6, 2015 -- "Our Covenant: Part 1 - Committing and Learning" -- Deuteronomy 6:4-12; 1 John 2:12-17; Mark 3:31-35

COVENANT	BIBLE VERSE(S)	NOTES
We Covenant	Matthew 26:28 Heb 8:6-13	<p>The foundation for the Congregational tradition is built on covenants. The Puritans, of whom the Congregationalists derive from, believed that since God organized his relationship with humanity by way of covenants, we should model our relationships in the same way. The theological reasoning for this idea comes from what is called 'federalism'.</p> <p>"Federalism" is the act of standing in for another by way of legal obligation through a contract or covenant. Federalism frames our relationship to God and Christ in terms of obligations, payments, reciprocity agreed upon by the parties, and of course judgment for defying the contract. In federalism, the defying of the contract or covenant always falls to the human being, not to God, which means we are not really in a traditional covenant anymore. It is more like a relationship between a king and the king's people. Promises made by a king are binding to the inhabitants of the kingdom, not necessarily to the king himself. However, what defines a just and true king is one who accepts and holds to the covenant he has declared to the people as well. Since God is just, God's covenants with God's people are binding through the ages. God cannot renege on promises God has made, because to do so undercuts God's authority and steadfastness. Who would worship a God that always broke covenant?</p>

A 'covenant', then, is a binding promise which comes from a greater authority and grants certain things to the people, and with the granting of those things, demands certain expectations.

God's covenants to us build upon one another. The first covenant, the Adamic covenant, grants stewardship of the earth to humankind with the expectation that we tend the earth in the same way and with the same care God would. The second covenant is the Noachic covenant, is a promise from God to humanity that the world will never again be destroyed by God. We are given the ability and responsibility to till the soil and work the land. The Abrahamic covenant makes Abraham the father to all those who follow God. Our responsibility to that covenant is to always recognize Abraham, the wandering Aramean, as the father of our faith. The Mosaic covenant gives the Promised Land to the Israelites as a light unto the world. The responsibilities to the covenant with Moses are listed in the 10 Commandments. The Davidic covenant says the throne of David will never be unoccupied. And then there is the Jesus covenant, the 'new covenant poured out in his blood' (Lk 22). Our responsibility to the Jesus covenant is faith, and faith is the adherence to Jesus' only law, which we will discuss in a moment.

Notice that we say "We covenant", not "I covenant". All Congregational churches are built upon the covenant each member makes with one another. We promise these things to one another and to God. The 'we' aspect of this is so important.

It means we commit to a continued understanding of our spiritual life with one another. That means we must constantly be in a position of listening to one another, to learning from one another, to caring for one another.

In Puritan times, there was a regular and deliberate practice of creating ‘personal covenants’. Very often, a believer would write a new personal covenant with God every year. During the next month, leading up to our new member Sunday, I encourage you all to write a ‘personal covenant’ which reflects your personal relationship with God and Christ. In Puritan days, in order to be a member of a Congregational church, you had to have a ‘testifying event’, some definitive experience with the Holy Spirit, which you could report on to the congregation. This event granted you access to the Lord’s Supper and full membership in the church. Until the testifying event, you were not considered to be ‘regenerate’, purified for the consumption of the bread and the cup. We don’t do that here. But I would encourage us all to write a ‘personal covenant’. I will do it also. Then, on October 4th, New Member Sunday, if you would like to share your covenant, we can make space for that in the service.

Our covenant is what makes us a Congregational church. We bind ourselves to God and one another covenantally as a model and reflection of the same way God has bound God’s self to us through the covenants of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David and Jesus. In this way, we become a light, a beacon on the hill, for the whole world.

With God and with one another	Luke 10:27	<p>Given our definition of covenant above, this part of our covenant simply tells us to whom we are covenanting - to God and to one another. Remember Jesus' encounter in the Gospels with the lawyer:</p> <p><i>Luke 10: 25) Now an expert in religious law stood up to test Jesus, saying, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" 26) He said to him, "What is written in the law? How do you understand it?" 27) The expert answered, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself." 28) Jesus said to him, "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live."</i></p> <p>When we think of Jesus' rule for life, think of it in terms of spatial relationships. "With God" references height and depth, up and down, the vertical; "with one another" references right and left, forward and back, the horizontal. This is, once you see it, a direct reference to the Cross of Christ. When Jesus is speaking with the lawyer, it is as if he is saying, <i>"You inherit eternal life by loving the Cross which I am going to on your behalf. Love the Cross and you will live."</i></p> <p>So part of how I hear our covenant is this way: <i>"We covenant at the foot of the Cross of Christ..."</i></p>
To seek God's will	1 Jn 2:14-17 Mk 3:31-35	<p>The very first act we commit to together is to seek God's will. Which is a pretty loaded statement. What is God's will? What is God's desire for us right now? How do we figure that out?</p>

Our covenant recognizes we are seeking people, wanderers of the world, in the same way our Puritan forefathers and mothers were. Once we accept that we are seekers of God's will, we recognize two things:

- 1) We begin to recognize by worshiping together, praying together, singing together, helping one another and listening to God's word together that God is constantly present with us through Jesus Christ. Hopefully, our seeking God's will together here flows out into our daily lives in such a way that seeking God's will is also present with us there. 1 John 2 says, *14) I have written to you, children, that you have known the Father. I have written to you, fathers, that you have known him who has been from the beginning. I have written to you, young people, that you are strong, and the word of God resides in you, and you have conquered the evil one. 15) Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him, 16) because all that is in the world (the desire of the flesh and the desire of the eyes and the arrogance produced by material possessions) is not from the Father, but is from the world. 17) And the world is passing away with all its desires, but the person who does the will of God remains forever.* Not only does the person who does God's will remain forever, but the person who seeks God's will recognizes that God's will is eternal, whether we are doing it or not.

2) Second, seeking God's will binds us together in action as well as in word. We discover God's will by doing as Jesus' followers did, sitting at his feet and listening closely to him. In the Gospel of Mark, there is a moment where Jesus' family comes to get him, since they have decided he is insane - Mk 3:20. (Did you know his family thought he was insane? Most people skip right over this story.) But listen to what Jesus says about those who seek to follow God's will: *31) Then Jesus' mother and his brothers came. Standing outside, they sent word to him, to summon him. 32) A crowd was sitting around him and they said to him, "Look, your mother and your brothers are outside looking for you." 33) He answered them and said, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" 34) And looking at those who were sitting around him in a circle, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! 35) For whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."*

Those who seek God's will become part of the family of Christ. *'We covenant with God and with one another to seek God's will...'* We covenant at the foot of the Cross of Christ to seek fellowship in the family of Christ. Do you see the power that lies underneath the idea of covenanting with one another? It is humbling and empowering at the same time.

In the early Congregational churches, the congregation would review and rewrite their church covenant often because

		<p>the attention to the promises made with one another, ideally, deepened and renewed the faith and commitment of the people. The practice encouraged forward thinking, discussion and sought to break slavish adherence to the nostalgia of the past. No one could claim ownership of the past and lord it over the rest of the congregation. Again, I speak in ideals here. Human behavior suggests many difficulties in achieving that ideal. But this is why seeking God's will is first and foremost in our covenant. We humble ourselves to something greater than human works and traditions.</p>
As taught in the Holy Scriptures	Deut 6:5-12	<p>We become, as John Calvin said, 'teachable'. In his <i>Commentary on the Psalms</i>, Calvin said this of himself: <i>And first, since I was too obstinately devoted to the superstitions of Popery to be easily extricated from so profound an abyss of mire, God by a sudden conversion subdued and brought my mind to a teachable frame, which was more hardened in such matters than might have been expected from one at my early period of life.</i> God brought his mind to a 'teachable frame'. This is the outcome of seeking God's will - we become open to learning new things, to being an open vessel to God's teaching.</p> <p>To truly learn the mind must be anchored to something true, beautiful and good. Our anchor, then, is Scripture itself. The Scriptures teach us to seek God's will and to sit at the feet of Christ so that we are, with the demoniac in the graveyard, "<i>brought into our right mind</i>" by what we have learned.</p>

		<p>Notice what is important to our congregation through our covenant - the Cross of Christ, seeking, learning, teaching, Scripture.</p> <p>These are not simply Sunday morning acts. Our covenant is a daily, moment-by-moment affirmation of the Christ-filled, Spirit-led life. We seek, we learn and we subject ourselves to something far greater than ourselves. The Puritans were action-oriented people. They believed Christ became present for them in the actions of their daily lives and in their relationships with one another. Many of us know some history from the days of the Puritans and know that everything I have said here can go seriously wrong. This is why it is valuable to go back and reclaim what is good and true about what the early Congregationalists were trying to do.</p> <p>Part of what I wish to reclaim is that ‘teachable spirit’ they also sought, that seeking of God’s will together, in our bodily daily lives. I believe one of the ways we model that for ourselves and others is through sharing the Lord’s Supper. Here we bring ourselves to the foot of Christ’s Cross and sit at the feet of Christ to be taught in the simple act of sharing bread and cup, the body and blood of Christ. So let us open ourselves to becoming part of Christ’s family once again.</p> <p>- <i>Rev. Seth D. Jones</i> ©</p>
To walk together in the ways of the Lord	Lk 24 - Emmaus	NEXT WEEK __ Share in one another’s suffering for the sake of the revelation and presence of Christ.

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