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GOD'S ETERNAL COVENANT AND THE SABBATH

Covenant and _Sabbath_ are two words that have been eternally linked in God's economy.

Traditionally, the word *covenant* has been defined as a formal agreement between God and His people consisting of God's promises to them of blessings and salvation. The people were then required to perform some actions that in the Old Testament mostly related to rituals in connection with the sanctuary. The covenant was ratified or confirmed through an oath and/or sacrifice. Failure to perform these rituals was seen as a breach of the covenant. Unfortunately, little by little, the popular emphasis became focused on the actions: If you performed them, you were right and acceptable; if you didn't, you had failed. Ultimately, in the eyes of the people, perfect performance came to mean acceptance or salvation; failure meant rejection or being lost.

The problem with that understanding is that salvation by works has never been a part of God's plan, neither in the Old nor the New Testament. No human being has ever been saved by works. "In [God's] sight no one living is righteous" (Ps.

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143:2, NKJV), and "by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight" (Rom. 3:20, NKJV). But the Jewish religious leaders failed to understand this and therefore misapplied God's instructions and began to see the activities as an end in themselves, the performance of which would lead to an acceptance before God.

This attitude resulted in one of the key messages of the prophets: that we should stop this empty performance because God is not interested in it (Isa. 1:11–14; Amos 5:21, 22). It was not because they were doing something wrong, or that God had suddenly changed His mind, but in many cases the performance had become an empty ritual and was no longer an expression of the people's inmost desires. God had always wanted all their actions to be an expression of their hearts' desire. Even an external act such as circumcision was to be an expression of an inner attitude of love and servitude (Deut. 10:16; 30:6).

What does this have to do with the covenant? *Covenant* is translated from the Hebrew term *berit*, the basic meaning of which is still uncertain. Scholars generally believe, however, that it refers to some kind of a bond or a binding agreement between two partners.[1] The English word *covenant* conveys quite well what it is all about: *co*[n], meaning "together" and *venant*, from Latin *venire*, meaning "to come." Covenant is thus the formalization of a decision by two partners to "come [and stay] together," based on a preceding action of good will by the initiator through which he or she shows care or concern for the recipient.

Recently, the attention of scholars has been drawn to this relational aspect of the covenant. In what has been referred to as a groundbreaking article, one scholar has pointed out that rather than being a dry formality between strangers, covenants are about kinship and originated as a "legal means by which the duties and privileges of kinship may be extended to another individual or group,"[2] and it is in that context that we should also understand ancient Israelite marriage: It is the means by which a bride entered a kinship relationship with the groom's kin.

As God introduced His plan of redemption to Moses, He expressed the essence of the covenant: "'I will take you as My people, and I will be your God'" (Ex. 6:7, NKJV, see also Deuteronomy 29:12, 13). This expression and variations of it are repeated more than 30 times in the Bible, usually with the concept of the covenant being either explicit or implied in the context. It expresses a close personal relationship similar to that of a family. In many respects a covenant is like a marriage. Both involve a commitment, which is expressed by the man when he, in effect, says to his partner, "I want you to be my wife, and I will be your husband" which, again, is parallel to the covenant formula: "I'll be your God, and you will be my people." This is why marriage is the most frequently used illustration in the Old Testament of the relationship between God and His people—and unfaithfulness is seen as adultery.

The day on which this commitment is formalized, then, becomes a reminder or a memorial of that relationship. In the case of marriage, that day is the wedding day; in the case of the covenant, the Scriptures identify it as the Sabbath, the sign of the covenant (Ex. 31:13, 17). These days represent historical facts that nothing or no one can change any more than a birthday. No day or institution can replace a wedding day for two lovers as long as they remain in a faithful relationship with each other. It is only if either partner decides to shift loyalty to a different partner that the memorial of their union can be

changed. The same is true of the Sabbath. As long as humankind recognizes and accepts what the covenant stands for, nothing or no one can replace the significance of the Sabbath, which represents the essence of the covenant: "I am your God, you are my people." Even the Roman Catholic Church, which assumes credit for transferring the sanctity of the Sabbath to Sunday, sees this significance of the Sabbath but also acknowledges that the seventh day is the biblical memorial of Creation and redemption.[3]

God has always worked with humanity within the context of a covenant, from the time of Adam at Creation (Hosea 6:7) to the Earth made new (Rev. 21:7). Its essence has always been the same: "I am your God; you are My people." Therefore, in the Old Testament it is referred to 16 times as the eternal or everlasting covenant. It is also significant to note that the Old Testament never speaks of *covenant* in the plural—only singular, even though it is associated with various individuals. This supports the idea that God has only one covenant, which He adapts to the needs of the different individuals and times.

But whenever there has been a major change in human experience that affected humanity's relationship with God, He has adjusted some of its application details to meet human needs at that time, though these adjustments have not affected the contents of or the commitment to the basic, eternal covenant of which the Sabbath is a sign.

This is why we find God establishing a covenant with Noah at the time of the Flood, a time of new beginnings in a new world environment (Gen. 9:9-17). Then God adjusted it to meet a new situation as He called Abram to be the father of a great nation (15:18), and again as He called Israel out of Egypt and formed it into His special people at Mt. Sinai (Ex. 19–24). Later, when Israel no longer wanted to be under the direct control of God through His prophets and judges but requested to be led by a king like the other nations, God confirmed His covenant with David (2 Sam. 7:4-17). Again, as the monarchy was coming to an end, God indicated that the Jewish nation would no longer be His special covenant people, and the access to the covenant would be extended to all nations on an individual, personal basis. He proclaimed a new covenant with His people because of their failure to be faithful to God, even though He was their "husband" (Jer. 31:31-33). It was then ratified and accepted by Christ on humanity's behalf when He came to live among humankind, and it would be open for anyone who wished to "enter," or join, through acceptance of Him. The ultimate adjustment will be when

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God completes the re-creation of the Earth at the end of the age (Rev. 21:7).

Many believe that the Sinai covenant, or the Old Covenant, as it is usually called, was exclusively made with the Jewish nation and limited to it alone. Closer investigation, however, reveals that God meant for it to be more inclusive. As Moses reviewed the history and experience of Israel before entering the Promised Land, he said about the Sinai experience: "'All of you stand today before the Lord your God: your leaders and your tribes and your elders and your officers, all the men of Israel, your little ones and your wives—*also the stranger who is in your camp, from the one who cuts your wood to the one who draws your water*—that you may enter into covenant with the Lord your God, and into His oath, which the Lord your God makes with you today, that *He may establish you today as a people for Himself, and that He may be God to you,* just as He has spoken to you, and just as He has sworn to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. I make this covenant and this oath, not with you alone, but with him who stands here with us today before the Lord our God, as well as with him who is not here with us today'" (Deut. 29:10-15, NKJV).

This is also confirmed in texts like Isaiah 56:1-8, which points out the fact that the Sinai covenant was to be open for everyone to join by personal choice—even by those who were usually classified as outcasts, such as eunuchs and foreigners. Both they and their sacrifices were to be fully accepted in the temple, and the temple itself was to be "'a house of prayer *for all the peoples*'" (vs. 7, NASB), and not just for the Jews alone.

Unfortunately, many of the Jewish leaders failed to recognize this fact and saw the covenant as a proof of their exclusive status with God to the exclusion of everyone else.

The "old" covenant at Sinai is also usually associated with works, some-

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times even spoken of as a covenant of works, referring mostly to the external, ritualistic requirements related to the sanctuary, but also including many aspects of daily life.

The biblical picture, however, is different. The Sinai covenant was not just about sanctuary rituals and works; it was much more inclusive. It was written on two tablets of stone and consisted of 10 commandments (Ex. 34:28; Deut. 4:13; 9:11). This means that what we usually perceive as requirements or commandments in actual fact are primarily statements about a relationship. This agrees with what we have already seen, that the covenant is primarily about a relationship between individuals or nations.

The basis for the covenant is love as revealed in actions that precede the covenant-making (Deut. 7:6-8), and call for a response of love (6:4-9). As God prepared the people for entering into the covenant with Him, He reminded them, "'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself'" (Ex. 19:4, NKJV).

Some scholars have also pointed out that the "Ten Words" come as a response to the introductory statement in Exodus 20:2—"'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage'" (KJV)—and the grammatical form used in the "commandments" can either be translated as commands "You shall not" or as descriptors—"You will not," thus describing what God expects to see in the life of individuals who accept the reality that God has redeemed them from their place of slavery. They are thus not restrictive requirements or demands, but rather a guideline or a list of expectations as to what would be an appropriate response to the experience of having been redeemed. "The Ten Words are not commands, nor are they couched in command (i.e., imperative) language. They are simple

future indicative verbs that indicate the future action that is the expected consequence of the preceding prologue: 'I am Yahweh your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt . . . , (and therefore) you will have no other gods before me,'" etc.[4]

The Sinai covenant did contain regulations concerning various external actions and activities, mostly associated with the sanctuary—among them circumcision. These acts, however, were never meant to be an end in themselves or even a means to an end. Rather, they were to be an external evidence of inward attitudes. This is clear from texts such as Deuteronomy 10:16, in which God says of circumcision, "'Circumcise the foreskin of *your heart,* and be stiff-necked no longer'" (NKJV, italics supplied). This is further clarified by Moses as he says, "'The Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, [i.e.,] to love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul'" (30:6, NKJV).

A similar wholistic instruction is found concerning the Sabbath. The parallelism in Isaiah 56:2 indicates that "keep[ing] from profaning the sabbath," is about "'keep[ing one's] hand from doing *any* evil'" (NASB). God confirms the same through Ezekiel when He said the people "'profaned My sabbaths, for their heart continually went after their idols'" (Eze. 20:16, NASB) and "'profaned My sabbaths, and their eyes were [fixed] on the idols of their fathers'" (vs. 24, NASB).

These texts indicate that any neglect of the ideals of the covenant is regarded as a breach of the Sabbath in the same way as any marital unfaithfulness is a breach of the marital vows given on the wedding day. Observance of a fixed day does not replace a failed relationship. Being unfaithful to God in the week negates the bond of which the Sabbath is a sign.

True Sabbath-keeping is thus not limited to 24 hours of non-working or church attendance on Sabbath morning. It involves more than that. It actually involves a particular kind of a lifestyle, influenced by a close personal relationship with God of which the Sabbath day is a weekly memorial. The way the Sabbath day is observed becomes a reflection of one's relationship with God through the week, in the same way as a celebration of a wedding anniversary is a reflection of the relationship married partners have had with each other through the year, but is not limited to their "feeling" on the anniversary itself.

Further, observing the Sabbath is not something that has to be done in order to obtain something from God or to please Him, but it is kept in recognition of the fact of having been saved (Ex. 20:2), and in response to the benefits being enjoyed from the relationship with

Him. But, at the same time, it is also a sign of God's commitment to the covenant: He is, and will remain, humanity's God-Creator-Husband-Redeemer.

The question might be rightfully asked as to where the "new" covenant fits in. It has been pointed out that what was new about the new covenant was not its contents but the fact that the people had lost sight of what God's eternal character was all about.[5] A superficial reading of Jeremiah 31 and Hebrews 8 seems to indicate that the old covenant is to be replaced by a new one because the former was faulty. A more careful reading, however, reveals that this was not the case.

There was no problem with the covenant that necessitated its replacement. The problem was with the people: they failed to remain faithful to God, their Husband and Savior (Jer. 31:32; Heb. 8:8). The essence, or substance, of both—"I will be their God, and they shall be My people"—is the same (Jer. 31:33; Deut. 29:12, 13), so is also their purpose and expectations. The purpose of both is the people's salvation, well-being, and acceptance/forgiveness (Ex. 6:7; 20:2; Deut. 6:24; Jer. 31:34; Eze. 36:26, 27), and both expect obedience to God's statutes and ordinances (Ex. 19:5; Deut. 4:13; Eze. 36:27; 11:20).

Their differences are usually found to be mainly in the fact to whom they were directed and where they were recorded. It is true that the old covenant was given to the nation of Israel, whereas the new was directed to humanity in general, because the wall of separation had been broken down. As has been pointed out, however, the old was meant to be open for all, even though it was to be mediated through the nation of Israel. But because of their failure to do so, the new was not to be limited to a nation. It is also true that the new was to be written on the heart, whereas the old was written on two tablets of stone, but God expected the people to transfer it to their heart, so that their obedience would be from their heart and not just a blind following of an external list of requirements.

God has always wanted a heart religion, not just external conformity (Deut. 6:6; 11:18). When the people failed to internalize God's instructions but held on to the required rituals detached from their original relational roots, the rituals were no longer acceptable to God. They had become meaningless, just as an anniversary is meaningless if there is no relationship to commemorate (Isa. 1:11-15; Hosea 2:11; Amos 8:4, 5, 10). Paul seems to emphasize the same truth in Colossians 2:17, where he points out that any festival or religious ritual is just an empty shadow if Christ ("the body") is not in it, for Christ is the one who gives meaning to whatever we do. Apart from Him, everything is meaningless—no matter how well or how long it is performed. Therefore, Paul says, "Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31, NASB).

Sabbath is like a wedding anniversary that has meaning only for those who are married and have a loving relationship with their spouse. And the closer the relationship, the deeper significance the wedding anniversary will have. In the same way, the closer the relationship is with God, the deeper and the more significant meaning will the Sabbath and any other covenant-activity have.

Within God's eternal covenant, there is life and blessings. Outside there is death, for God alone is the source of all life and bounty. The plan of salvation, however, is about God's efforts to bring humanity back from the domain of darkness into the kingdom of His Son (Col. 1:14). Then the purpose of the covenant will be fully realized. God will finally dwell among humanity forever, they shall be His people, and He will be their God (Rev. 21:3, 7), a fellowship they will commemorate weekly "'from sabbath to sabbath, [as] all mankind will come to bow down before [Him]'" (Isa. 66:23, NASB) in eternal thankfulness. □

REFERENCES

[1] See M. Weinfeld, in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1977), vol. 2, pp. 253-256.

[2] Frank M. Cross, *From Epic to Canon* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), p. 8.

[3] See the Papal Letter '*Dies Domini*', 1998 §§ 12, 14.

[4] David Noel Freedman, ed., *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), vol. 1, p. 1184.

[5] *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, p. 74.