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West Suffolk Epistle West Suffolk Baptist Church



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Thoughtfully Reformed - Redemptively Relevant

What Is a Covenant?

Do you remember the first time you read the Bible? Perhaps it was after receiving your own copy of the Bible as a child. Perhaps it was as an adult. Whenever it may have been, if you are at all like me, you probably recall the strangeness of it. This book was about God and about people who lived thousands of years ago in places many of us have never seen. Everything about them seemed different. Their cultures and customs were strange. Even the terminology presented challenges. As we read the Bible for the first time, we are often confronted with unfamiliar words.

The first time I read the Bible, one of the words that puzzled me the most was covenant. The first time I saw the word, I simply added it to my mental list of other unfamiliar words, something to look up at another time. However, as I continued reading, I noticed this word occurring with some regularity in obviously important contexts. God kept “*establishing*” covenants (Gen. 9:9; 17:7; etc.) and “*making*” covenants (Gen. 15:18; Ex. 34:10; etc.) and “*remembering*” covenants (Genesis 9:15; Exodus 2:24; etc.). There were “*signs*” of covenants (Genesis 17:11), and God’s people were commanded to “*keep*” the covenants (Genesis 17:9). The biblical authors, however, never provided a definition of the word. They obviously assumed that the original recipients of their books knew what they meant.

The word covenant appears for the first time in Genesis 6:18, where God says to Noah, “*I will establish my covenant with you.*” It occurs another 270 times throughout the Old Testament. Most often, it is a translation of the Hebrew word *berith*. In addition to being used to refer to covenants established by God with man, it is also used to refer to covenants made by men with one another (e.g., Genesis 21:27), to marriages (Malachi 2:14), to friendships (1 Samuel 18:3), to vows (Ezra 10:3), and to commitments (2 Kings 11:4), among other things. Covenants are even made with impersonal things such as stones and animals (Job 5:23), eyes (Job 31:1), death (Isaiah 28:15), and the day and night (Jeremiah 33:20). But what are these covenants?

As I began to study the Bible with more seriousness, I noticed that different reference works defined the word covenant in slightly different ways. In various lexicons and dictionaries, the word is defined as a “*pact,*” an “*agreement,*” an “*obligation,*” a “*mutual commitment,*” and a “*solemn promise made binding by an oath.*” Some authors define it as a unilateral promise. Others define it in terms of a contract. Although there was some overlap in many of these definitions, the diversity of meanings remained confusing to me.

Additionally, many of these definitions of the word covenant don’t fit with every use of the word in Scripture. Often, it seemed that certain authors had focused on one specific biblical covenant as the archetypal covenant and then constructed a definition based on that specific covenant. The definition was then applied across the board to every use of the word. Some, for example, looked at God’s covenant with Abraham as the archetypal covenant and then defined the word covenant in Abrahamic terms. In such cases, the word covenant tended to be defined as a unilateral promise. Others looked at the Mosaic covenant as the archetypal covenant and then defined the word in a way that fit that context. In such cases, the word tended to be defined in terms of a treaty. If we take this approach to defining the word covenant, however, we quickly encounter problems. We soon discover that our definition doesn’t really apply in every case in which the word covenant is found.



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A better approach is to examine every context in which the word covenant is used and attempt to discover the basic ideas that applies in every context. If we do this, we find that in every context, the word covenant (*berith*) is used to refer to a formal arrangement between two or more parties. That is the most broad and general idea communicated by the biblical word covenant. It is important to note that the kind of formal arrangement depends on the specific context and the nature of the parties involved. The formal arrangement might be a unilateral promise made by one party to another. The formal arrangement might be a bilateral agreement—a pact or a bond. If the formal arrangement is a pact or a bond, it will entail certain obligations. Some formal arrangements will be ratified with oaths and ceremonial rites. Some will confirm an existing relationship between two or more parties, and some will establish new relationships. Some will be accompanied by a sign. This more general understanding of the word covenant also enables us to understand how Scripture can speak of covenants made with stones and animals, eyes, death, and day and night. These too are formal arrangements between two or more parties. ~ **Dr. Keith A. Mathison**

Unqualified Christians

Words mean things, and, if we're not careful, words can easily die the death of one, two, or a thousand qualifications. As editors, we often deliberate the use of words in their contexts and the appropriate uses of qualifiers in modifying words, particularly those words with eternal significance. For example, what's the difference between a Christian and a true Christian, faith and true, saving faith, a church and a true, biblical church? We find ourselves using qualifiers, such as the word true, in order to emphasize the marked difference between a true Christian and a false, or nominal, Christian, between a true church and an apostate church.

In the course of our use of language, certain qualifiers become necessary on account of the misuse and abuse of words that are used inappropriately. One of the primary reasons the magisterial Reformers of the sixteenth century found it necessary to use the word *sola* to qualify theologically loaded and thus eternally significant words, such as Scripture, faith, grace, and Christ, is on account of the misuse of those words and the doctrinal nuances added to those words by many within Roman Catholicism. Similarly, when it came to defining what a true church is over and against the apostate churches that stemmed from Rome, the Reformers looked to Scripture alone to determine what comprises a true church. In his *Institutes*, John Calvin wrote, "*Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists*" (4.1.9). Calvin and the Reformers understood that the pure preaching of the Word and the right administration of the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, which includes the practice of church discipline, were essential elements of a true church, with the implicit repudiation of false churches that did not conform to these fundamental biblical qualifications.

In one sense, the marks of a true church are the same marks of a true Christian, who displays his faith in the gospel of Christ with fruits unto daily repentance, faith, and eternal life. While there remains confusion about the nature of a true church, even more troubling is how few Christians seem to grasp the simple, biblical meaning of what it is to be a true Christian — or should I just say, without qualification, a Christian, saved by grace, through faith, because of Christ. ~ **Dr. Burk Parsons**



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The Discipline of God

Church programs, campus ministries, and independent organizations today emphasize the need for radical discipleship. It is not always clear what they mean by this. The word radical can be a trendy term. What is clear is this: if one's view of discipleship undervalues discipline, then we can say that whatever adjective that person uses before the term discipleship, the latter has ceased to be biblical.

The words *disciple* and *discipline* derive from one Latin root and carry the notion of order. Referring to treatment that corrects or punishes, discipline is instruction or knowledge given to a learner (*discipulus*). Discipleship and discipline are inseparably connected; Jesus' ministry exemplifies that. Christ did not hesitate to correct His disciples (Matthew 8:26; Mark 10:14, 16:14; Luke 9:54–55), who often addressed Him as "*Rabbi*" or "*Teacher*."

This is not surprising, for what godly father allows his child to persevere in disobedience? Hebrews declares, "*For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth*" (12:6, KJV used throughout). The Father's chastening is indispensable to our relationship with Him. When the Father adopts us into His family, showering us with love, He treats us as true sons, fatherly discipline included. Discipline is not an end in itself; God uses it to correct our defective behavior and bring us to obedience (Leviticus 26:23; 1 Corinthians 5:5). Determined to have holy children, God disciplines us privately through providences and publicly through church discipline.

That means, **first**, that every Christian undergoes private chastisements for sin. After David committed adultery with Bathsheba and then murdered Uriah, the Lord sent Nathan to rebuke him. "*The Lord also hath put away thy sin; thou shalt not die. Howbeit, because by this deed thou hast given great occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme, the child also that is born unto thee shall surely die*" (2 Samuel 12:13–14). The Lord sent David consequences for his sin to vindicate His own honor and lovingly brought David to repentance and worship, as Psalm 51 poignantly describes. "*Chastising is an effect of his love,*" says John Owen.

A cautionary note is that not every chastening act of providence stems from divine discipline. Though all suffering derives from the fall, there is not always a direct correlation between personal sin and personal suffering, as the accounts of Job and the man born blind plainly teach (see John 9:3). In their cases, God's chastening hand was motivated primarily by the furthering of His own glory. We cannot always link suffering to specific sin.

Second, Christ viewed discipline as part of church ministry. In establishing the New Testament church, Jesus committed to His disciples the keys of the kingdom along with the power to bind and loose (Matthew 16:19; 18:15–18; John 20:23). The strong language in these passages should not be interpreted too literally, as if the church itself has the power to forgive or condemn sin eternally. But Jesus has specially empowered the overseers of His church to regulate its membership and conduct. He instructs them whom to include and whom to exclude, and He provides biblical precepts that members must obey.

Church discipline thus has positive and negative aspects. Positively, church discipline includes instruction and teaching. The church is every believer's educator, trainer, and nourisher, as the Spirit acts through the preached Word, the sacraments, and church discipline. Negatively, discipline involves corrective actions for members, from rebuke to excommunication (Matthew 18:15–17). In this, the church officers utilize the keys of the kingdom.



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The apostles and early church leaders understood Christ's instructions as abiding principles. The apostolic church administered firm discipline to those erring in doctrine or practice. Witness, for example, Paul's sharp admonitions to the Galatians for abandoning the gospel (Galatians 3:1–7) and how he urges the Thessalonians to withdraw from the disobedient (2 Thessalonians 3:6; see also Titus 3:10) and the Corinthian church to expel the immoral believer (1 Corinthians 5:4–8). Passing the torch of ministry to younger pastors Timothy and Titus, Paul insists those who sin should face public rebuke (1 Timothy 5:20) and that vain talkers and deceivers must be stopped (Titus 1:10–11). Jude bids the church save some *"with fear, pulling them out of the fire; hating even the garment spotted by the flesh"* (Jude 1:23). The church is to discipline believers if their behavior is inconsistent with the gospel.

The apostles, then, viewed discipline as a requisite, perpetual function of the church. The church is to regulate who is part of the community, disciplining members who seriously err in doctrine and life, and expelling impenitent members (Matthew 18:15–17). Not an end in itself, expulsion is the public means God uses to cause repentance or cleanse His church of defilement. *"Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump,"* says 1 Corinthians 5:7.

The Reformers generally identified three marks of a true church: sound preaching of the Word, right administration of the sacraments, and biblical exercise of discipline. An important part of the church's ministry is to grow believers from spiritual infancy to adulthood by instructing and correcting. Quoting Cyprian's saying, *"You cannot have God as your Father if you do not have the church as your mother."* John Calvin explained that God gathers His children into the bosom of the church *"not only that they may be nourished by her help and ministry as long as they are infants and children, but also that they be guided by her motherly care until they mature and at last reach the goal of faith"* (Institutes of the Christian Religion 4.1.1).

Discipline thus promotes genuine piety and godliness rather than rebellion or legalism — privately and in church ministry. By cultivating private disciplines such as Bible reading and meditation, praying, devotional reading, and journaling, Christians usually grow in godliness. But godliness also results from public church discipline, which should seek to encourage Christians to repentance and to live lives of holy, responsive, gratuitous obedience to God. Discipline so practiced offers the law as a set of rules we must follow not to earn God's acceptance but to express gratitude for being accepted in the Beloved (Ephesians 1:6). Believers do not achieve genuine piety by legalistic law-keeping, but by a life of love conversant with God's law, flowing from our standing in Christ. Thus, piety is not isolationist spirituality but a lifestyle of loving God and neighbor fostered by spiritual discipline. It brings together the freedom of love and the discipline of obedience. From these considerations, we may conclude that piety grows best in the context of the church, where preaching, administering the sacraments, and discipline work together to promote godly living in the home, church, school, and marketplace.

Today, though, discipline has declined in the contemporary church; churchgoers see themselves as independent, voluntary members, accountable to no one. But Hebrews 13:7 says that submission to God and His appointed authorities, not autonomy, is a mark of faith. Our baptism into the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost signifies this subjection to authority. When the Israelites were *"baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea,"* they were baptized under his God-given authority (1 Corinthians 10:2). Baptism into the name of the triune God means that God calls us to be His disciples and brings us under His authority, exercising that authority through the church.



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Some think that church discipline is cruel; they fail to see that giving medicine to the sick is never cruel. Others fear that church discipline will strip the church of her glory, costing respect and members. In actuality, when the church faithfully administers discipline, she grows in respect, glory, and often membership, just as she did after Ananias and Sapphira were disciplined (Acts 5). Others argue that God does not need officers to keep His church pure since vengeance belongs to Him — He will manage His own vineyard. It is true that God needs no man. But He delegates authority to human officers who exercise discipline in His name, for His glory and the church's purity. Sadly, few Christians realize today that receiving discipline from Jesus' appointed office-bearers, ruling in accord with God's Word, is receiving discipline from our Father Himself.

Discipline, then, is inseparable from discipleship. This is evident in our private lives, as God promises chastisement to all His children, and in the ministry of the church to her members. We must reclaim the teaching of the New Testament, the ancient church, and the Reformers, that receiving God's discipline willingly is a distinguishing mark of every true Christian. God promised to disciple and discipline His children, Jesus commanded it of His disciples, the apostles insisted on it in the churches, and the Reformers reckoned it a mark of the true church. As we await the judgment day, let us strive to disciple and discipline as God does, so the church might appear a spotless, beautiful bride for her long-awaited Bridegroom. ~ *Dr. Joel R. Beeke - President and professor of systematic theology and homiletics at Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary, a pastor of the Heritage Netherlands Reformed Congregation in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and editorial director of Reformation Heritage Books.*

The Antidote to Anemic Worship

Evangelical Christians have been especially attentive to worship in recent years, sparking a renaissance of thought and conversation on what worship really is and how it should be done. Even if this renewed interest has unfortunately resulted in what some have called the "worship wars" in some churches, it seems that what A.W. Tozer once called the "missing jewel" of evangelical worship is being recovered.

Nevertheless, if most evangelicals would quickly agree that worship is central to the life of the church, there would be no consensus to an unavoidable question: What is central to Christian worship? Historically, the more liturgical churches have argued that the sacraments or ordinances form the heart of Christian worship. These churches argue that the elements of the Lord's Supper and the water of baptism most powerfully present the gospel. Among evangelicals, some see evangelism as the heart of worship and therefore plan every facet of the service—songs, prayers, the sermon—with the evangelistic invitation in mind.

Though most evangelicals mention the preaching of the Word as a necessary or customary part of worship, the prevailing model of worship in evangelical churches is increasingly defined by music, along with innovations such as drama and video presentations. When preaching the Word retreats, a host of entertaining innovations will take its place.



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Traditional norms of worship are now subordinated to a demand for relevance and creativity. A media-driven culture of images has replaced the word-centered culture that gave birth to the Reformation churches. In some sense, the image-driven culture of modern evangelicalism is an embrace of the very practices rejected by the Reformers in their quest for true biblical worship.

Music fills the space of most evangelical worship, and much of this music comes in the form of contemporary choruses marked by precious little theological content. Beyond the popularity of the chorus as a musical form, many evangelical churches seem intensely concerned to replicate studio-quality musical presentations.

In terms of musical style, the more traditional churches feature large choirs—often with orchestras—and may even sing the established hymns of the faith. Professional staff and an army of volunteers spend much of the week in rehearsals and practice sessions.

All this is not lost on the congregation. Some Christians shop for churches that offer the worship style and experience that fit their expectations. Those dissatisfied with what they find at one church can quickly move to another, sometimes using the language of self-expression to explain that the new church “*meets our needs*” or “*allows us to worship.*”

A concern for true biblical worship was at the very heart of the Reformation. But even Martin Luther, who wrote hymns and required his preachers to be trained in song, would not recognize this modern preoccupation with music above all else as legitimate or healthy. Why? Because the Reformers were convinced that the heart of true biblical worship is the preaching of the Word of God.

Thanks be to God, evangelism does take place in Christian worship. Confronted by the presentation of the gospel and the preaching of the Word, sinners are drawn to Christ in faith and the offer of salvation is presented to all. Likewise, the Lord’s Supper and baptism are honored as ordinances by the Lord’s own command, and each finds its place in true worship. But music is not the central act of Christian worship, and neither is evangelism or even the ordinances. The heart of Christian worship is the authentic preaching of the Word of God.

Expository preaching is central, irreducible, and nonnegotiable to the Bible’s mission of authentic worship that pleases God.

The centrality of preaching is the theme of both testaments of Scripture. In Nehemiah 8, we find the people demanding that Ezra the scribe bring the book of the law to the assembly. Interestingly, the text explains that Ezra and those assisting him read from the book, from the law of God, translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading” (Nehemiah 8:8). This remarkable text presents a portrait of expository preaching. Once the text was read, it was carefully explained to the congregation. Ezra did not stage an event or orchestrate a spectacle—he simply and carefully proclaimed the Word of God.

This text is a sobering indictment of much of contemporary Christianity. According to the text, a demand for biblical preaching erupted within the hearts of the people. They gathered as a congregation and summoned the preacher.



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This reflects an intense hunger and thirst for the preaching of the Word of God. Where is this desire evident among today's evangelicals?

In far too many churches, the Bible is nearly silent. The public reading of Scripture has been dropped from many services and the sermon has been sidelined, reduced to a brief devotional appended to the music. Many preachers accept this as a necessary concession to the age of entertainment. Some hope to put in a brief message of encouragement or exhortation before the conclusion of the service.

The anemia of evangelical worship—all the music and energy aside—is directly attributable to the absence of genuine expository preaching. Such preaching would confront the congregation with nothing less than the living and active Word of God. That confrontation will shape the congregation as the Holy Spirit accompanies the Word, opens eyes, and applies that Word to human hearts. ~ *Dr. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.*

Putting Faith into Action

The author of Hebrews defines faith as “the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1). Faith fills the vacuum of hope. Hope, when coupled with faith, has substance, and substance is something rather than nothing. Faith also provides evidence for that which is not visible. Faith is not blind. Indeed far from being blind, it is both far-sighted and sharp-sighted. Its evidence rests not on speculation but on confidence in a God who sees what we cannot see. It rests on trust in the reliability of every promise that is uttered by God.

It is one thing to believe in God. It is quite another to believe God. Abraham believed God when He said He would show him a better country. He believed God again later when God dramatized His covenant promise in Genesis 15, and by this faith Abraham was counted righteous. He was justified by his faith.

That Abraham's faith was genuine is seen in that he obeyed God by faith. True faith is always obedient faith. Abraham obeyed the call of God on his life—and he demonstrated this obedience when he “*went out.*” His faith issued in action. ~ *Dr. R.C. Sproul, Sr.*



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If you have a June birthday or anniversary that is not posted here or is listed in error, please e-mail Walt (gwlcfl0415@gmail.com).

Birthdays and Anniversaries Corner June 2020

*Gene A. (6)
Mike P. (27)*

*Brian and Muriel R. (7)
Ben and Carrie P. (23)
Ruth and Scott T. (25)*

On Sunday May 24, 2020 we celebrated a very special event after our morning worship service. Our Pastor and his wife celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary. We all gathered together around a table filled with cup cakes. One of our elders (Scott Thomas) put together a collage of past photos in memory of this special occasion.



***West Suffolk Baptist Church
Leadership***

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Please submit information to the editor by the second Sunday of each month preceding publication by e-mail, in person or at the church office. The editor reserves the right to edit for content or space. May the Father be glorified in every word.

Disclaimer: The views and opinions from the contributors to this newsletter do not necessarily reflect those of West Suffolk Baptist Church or it's leadership.