

Jan 3

Signs of the Covenant

Gen. 9:8-17; Ps 105:4-10

Some words get your attention more than others. They put you in a heightened sense of attentiveness.

I was getting a chest x-ray this week and after the tech had gone back to make sure they developed properly, she asked, *have you had a chest x-ray in the past 5 years?* Yes, I said, *about two years ago.* *Was it normal,* she asked? This was the phrase that got my attention. *Is there a problem with my films,* I asked? Turned out to be a problem with the machine, but I was wired for most of the day.

During this past semester, my daughter called me one day and said, *Dad I need to interview you for a class.* Sure, what class, I asked? *Human sexuality,* she said. Turns out she was constructing a genogram and needed to ask questions about my side of the family. But the words got my attention.

Church covenants don't seem to get our attention anymore. They have lofty antiquated language that seems far removed from the words and images that bombard us today. Many church members are unaware that their church HAS a covenant. But we take out our covenant and dust it off every year. It was meant to get the attention of our life and faith.

We have regularly taken the first Sunday of the year as a time of covenant remembrance and renewal. If we didn't do this, our covenant would be covered in cobwebs. My prayer for us is that we will renew our commitment to God's covenant with us and the covenant we have made with each other.

Let's first of all remember what it means to be in covenant with God and then what it means to be in covenant with each other.

In our Call to worship, we heard the words of the Psalmist say,

*God remembers his covenant forever,
the word he commanded, for a thousand generations,
the covenant he made with Abraham,
the oath he swore to Isaac.*

*He confirmed it to Jacob as a decree,
to Israel as an everlasting covenant.*

We find more than one covenant in the Old Testament. This is a reference to the Abrahamic covenant in which God promised to make the descendants of Abraham into a great nation that received great blessing from God. The goal of the covenant was that God through Israel would bless all other nations. Because God made this an everlasting covenant, many Christians believe that God will keep the promise he made to his chosen people.

God also made a covenant with **Moses** regarding the Law and **David** regarding his royal lineage. God made a covenant with **Noah** and we have heard some of this story found in Genesis 9. Let me point out some unusual language in this passage. Turn to Genesis 9.

Look with me at **vv 14-15**. This is God speaking. *Whenever I bring clouds over the earth and the rainbow appears in the clouds, I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind.*

I was always taught in church that the rainbow was given to help US remember God's covenant. But here, we read that the rainbow reminds GOD of his covenant. Does God need reminding? Instead of rubber bands or sticky notes, does God hang his reminders in the sky? It's a strange thought, but also a biblical one. If God uses reminders, how much should we?

Another key phrase I want you to notice is in **v. 9**: *I establish my covenant...* This is always the wording when covenants are established. They are always created or established by God and God calls them MY covenants. Covenants in Scripture are unilateral.

I remember negotiating for marbles when I was a kid. You would bargain until you found a deal acceptable to you and the other party. But God's covenants are not like contracts. They are non-negotiable. God defines them and states clearly what we can expect from God and what God expects from us.

Sadly, my first experience with covenant was not in relationship to God, but to my big brother. As the eldest, he made this covenant because he had to share a bedroom and bed with his little punk brother. He laid out the boundaries and made the promises. There were bed boundaries: his side and my side. I was never to lie

down or encroach on his side. He promised he would pull my ears off if I did. He set out his part of the closet, his part of the dresser, his stuff. If you stay clear, I will give you life, he said. If you don't, prepare for doom.

Unlike my brother, God makes covenants for our benefit, not God's. God is clear about the promises he makes, but we are free to reject the terms and go our own way. God will never break the covenants He makes, but we can. God defines life as it ought to be lived and we are free to follow or take a different path.

We are more familiar with the last covenant in Scripture which is the New Covenant created by the life death and resurrection of Jesus. Every time we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we are reminded that the cup represents the New Covenant in his blood.

What is sometimes lost in our understanding of personal faith is that being in covenant with God puts us in covenant with other believers. If God is our father, all of God's children are our brothers and sisters. Here again, God's covenant is unilateral. We don't get to choose who is in or who is not in the family. That's for God alone.

Our ancestors in the Baptist movement created church covenants to describe how the new covenant shaped behaviors in the church. They described in general terms how church members would live together as a family.

Unfortunately church covenants have been better in theory than in practice. They have helped build unity and faithfulness and they have been like that covenant with my brother, some exercising power over others out of human pettiness. As Bill Leonard once said, once early Baptists started policing, they never seemed to know when to stop. They became more and more rigid like the Puritans.

I don't know how many Baptist churches have split because of covenant conflicts, but I figure it's about half. Had my brother's covenant been of the Baptist variety, I would simply have left to start a new bedroom

So now I invite you take a new look at an old church covenant, written somewhere in the mid-19th Century. You'll find it on the first page of your hymnal. The language may see archaic in places, but what it sets forth is both biblical and relevant.

If you look at the last phrase of the first paragraph, you will have the thesis statement. Our covenant is about *walking together in Christ in brotherly love*. Everything else is commentary on how we do this.

It is no accident that the next two paragraphs say very clearly that walking together means opening ourselves up to the guidance and even the rebuke of others. Baptists got weary of rigid and negative church discipline and consequently swung the pendulum to the other side. Nowadays we simply leave every person to his or her own life and faith. We hate the idea of confronting another church member or being confronted ourselves. What was broken with our legalism wasn't the biblical practice of keeping boundaries. What was broken is that we lost the essential quality of love and redemption that must be at the heart of discipline.

When my son was about three and the family van was brand new, he found a metal bar and proceeded to use it like a hammer on the side of that van. Each blow went beyond paint to bare metal. There were a dozen or more of these newly formed craters that greeted me upon my arrival home.

When I pulled into the carport, I could see them. I first confirmed that my new van wasn't new anymore. Then I stormed into the house to find out who was on my hit list. Sara told me that it was Aaron and that she had already disciplined him. But I headed to his room anyway and once again Sara told me to leave him alone because he had already been disciplined.

And she saved me from making a huge mistake in discipline. Every parent who has reflected on the discipline of their children knows what I'm talking about. I was ready to discipline Aaron not for his good but because I was madder than a hornet. **Good discipline is always instructive and redemptive. It is never a means to vent frustration or anger.**

The balance of our covenant expresses our promise to maintain the ordinances of the church, to grow in personal faith and to minister to those in need.

What we cannot lose sight of is the basic rationale of covenants. Baptists made them because people don't naturally live as followers of Christ. Left to ourselves, we do the easier not the better thing.

I had an aversion to study in college. There were too many people to see and things to do. When it became painfully obvious that this plan was not working, I tried to make a resolution to spend 2 hours in the

library every day. It was a good plan that I couldn't keep, just like most of our new year's resolutions. It was just too easy to find something more interesting.

The only plan that worked for me was to make a pact with one of my fraternity brothers. We would meet at the library at designated times and study in side by side cubicles for our 2 hours. If either of us didn't show, we were letting down our partner. Just knowing that someone else was expecting me--was bound to the same promise--made a huge difference in the level of my self-discipline.

Covenants assumed close relationships between all parties which was true when Baptist churches were small. Covenants lose their practicality when churches are large. I hope that in the future, our classes, teams and other groups will develop their own covenants. It would bring great power and commitment to our small groups.

This is why Baptists created church covenants. Not to restrict our lives but to help us reach levels of faith we would not otherwise achieve; to lift us up to higher ground.

As we trust that we have been brought by divine grace to embrace the Lord Jesus Christ, and by the influence of His spirit to give up ourselves wholly to Him, so we do now solemnly covenant with each other that, God helping us, we will walk together in Him in brotherly love;

That, as members one of another for the glory of Christ in the salvation of men, we will exercise a Christian care and watchfulness over each other, and as occasion may require, faithfully warn, rebuke and admonish one another in the spirit of meekness, considering ourselves lest we also be tempted;

That we will willingly submit to, and conscientiously enforce, all wholesome discipline of the church;

That we will uphold the worship of God and the ordinances of His house by regular attendance thereon, search diligently the Scriptures, observe closet or family worship, and seek to train up those under our care to the glory of God in the salvation of their souls;

That, as we have been planted together in the likeness of His death by baptism, and raised from an emblematic grave in newness of life, especially will we seek divine aid to enable us to walk circumspectly and watchfully in the world, denying all ungodliness and every worldly lust;

That we will remember the poor, and contribute cheerfully of our means for their relief, and for the maintenance of a faithful gospel ministry among us, and for the spread of the same to the ends of the earth;

That we will endeavor, by example and effort, to win souls to Christ; and,

Through life, amidst evil report and good report, seek to live to the praise of Him who hath called us out of darkness into His marvelous light to whom be glory and honor and power for ever and ever, Amen.