

Leadership And Covenants (Part Four)

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A leader is a person who goes in advance of and acts as an influence on others. Forcing others is not implied in the term. In contrast, the term implies that the leader is to be a guide through verbal instruction and an influence through being an example. This subject is important to those of us whom God has called because His Word clearly shows that Israel's and Judah's failures as nations formed to represent Him were largely caused by a dearth of good shepherding, pointing directly to the quality of leadership. God highlights their failures by calling their leaders foolish and irresponsible shepherds.

A Subject Critical to Our Lives

We need to understand why the subject of leadership is vital so that we can understand what we are involved in through our calling. We all want to be well-prepared for His Kingdom, so learning God's standards of leadership is essential because of what lies in our future. Revelation 5:9-10 alludes to this need in our future:

And they sang a new song, saying: "You are worthy to take the scroll, and to open its seals; for You were slain, and have redeemed us to God by Your blood, out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and have made us kings and priests to our God; and we shall reign on the earth."

The issue in the vision of Revelation 5 is finding One who is qualified to open a certain scroll that contains a listing of events that will occur beyond the present time, both before and after Christ's return. The issue is resolved because Christ, the Lamb, is qualified to open it because of what He has already accomplished. He is our Redeemer and thus qualified. His qualification sets an example for us to follow in our Christian lives.

Verse 10 concerns us most. It helps to know that the term "kings and priests" is better translated as "kingdom of priests," as numerous modern translations render it. Christ has appointed the redeemed (verse 9) as a kingdom of priests to serve our God and to bear a measure of rulership ("we shall reign on the earth"). They are appointed to a responsibility by Christ because they, like Him, have been prepared to render these services in God's behalf.

Beyond the priestly functions, rulership is clearly in view for the redeemed. Christ will appoint only those already prepared for these positions. Both rulership and priestly functions contain shepherding responsibilities. A priest is an individual especially consecrated to the service of a deity as a mediator between the deity and his worshippers.

Note two passages of Scripture that confirm what we are being prepared for:

» You also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. . . . But you are a

chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light. (I Peter 2:5, 9)

» They sang as it were a new song before the throne, before the four living creatures, and the elders; and no one could learn that song except the hundred and forty-four thousand who were redeemed from the earth. These are the ones who were not defiled with women, for they are virgins. These are the ones who follow the Lamb wherever He goes. These were redeemed from among men, being firstfruits to God and to the Lamb. (Revelation 14:3-4)

Both of these future positions help us focus on what we are to do within our calling now before the events of Revelation 5 and 14 occur. We must prepare to lead in the Kingdom of God. The world's approach to salvation focuses almost exclusively on being saved by confessing Jesus Christ as Savior. As important as that is, it pays little attention to any other purpose and responsibility attached to it.

Jesus Is Our Example

However, this period prior to our ultimate admission into the Kingdom of God has a major purpose: to be prepared to continue serving God at a remarkably higher level of responsibility after Christ returns. We are being created into Jesus Christ's image, and leadership is what God is looking for in us. He does not need to see us leading vast numbers of people, but He wants to see leadership in spiritual growth as we overcome our carnal natures. How? We are to be living sacrifices, deliberately choosing to allow ourselves to be transformed into the image of Jesus Christ through obediently following His way of life. If we lead others in this life, it is primarily by example, as we are not forcing God's way on others.

The covenants God made with mankind are important to our preparations for the future. Without a broad understanding of what is required of us in our relationship with God, found in the covenants, we cannot possibly be a leader in His Kingdom. We will be teaching the very things we are now learning through following God's way.

At the beginning of this series, we saw how much more frequently the forms of "follow" appear compared to those of "lead." The Bible teaches that to be a righteous leader a person must first be a serious follower. Interestingly, many modern translations render the word "follow" as "pursue" because it emphasizes the vigor with which following is to be done.

Here are four New Testament examples of the Bible's teaching on following:

» Matthew 4:19-20: "Then [Jesus] said to them, 'Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men. They immediately left their nets and followed Him.'"

» Matthew 19:21: "Jesus said to him, 'If you want to be perfect, go sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, and come, follow Me.'"

» II Thessalonians 3:7-8: "For you yourselves know how you ought to follow us, for we were not disorderly among you; nor did we eat anyone's bread free of charge, but worked with labor and toil night and day that we might not be a burden to any of you."

» I Corinthians 11:1: “Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ.”

Jesus says His doctrine was not His own, but He spoke what He received from His Father (John 12:49). Was Jesus a leader? Certainly! John 7:14-17 says of Him:

Now about the middle of the feast Jesus went up into the temple and taught. And the Jews marveled, saying, “How does this Man know letters, having never studied?” Jesus answered them and said, “My doctrine is not Mine, but His who sent Me. If anyone wills to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or whether I speak on My own authority.”

Jesus so faithfully followed the Father’s teaching that He never deviated even one time! The result is that in all of earth’s history there has never been a better leader in how to live life.

When we add to this that the purpose of our calling is to be prepared to rule—or lead—others under Jesus Christ, the need for following His guidance becomes plain. His covenants spell out in overview what we must faithfully follow according to His will. The fruit of that activity will be leadership in His way because of our experiences in following it.

The Covenants, a Necessary Part

Where do we now stand in regard to our personal knowledge of God’s way and His leadership requirements? The apostle Paul vividly describes our present state in I Corinthians 1:26-29:

For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence.

This humbling description reveals why leadership development is necessary for us. Our need is great! God does not call people who have already developed leadership in His way and possess all the qualities He desires in His Family. Instead, He calls those with potential, gifts them with the raw materials they need, and then creates them into what He desires, working in and through them with their cooperation.

Recall that Peter wrote that we are “being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood.” We are raw material, as it were, being formed into what our Creator God desires that we become individually and that His Family becomes collectively. His work has been proceeding since Adam and Eve; nothing has changed in what He began from the foundation of the world. He is following sound building principles to produce the qualities of leadership He desires in His children.

So, why do we need a good understanding of the many covenants that appear in Scripture? Because they are foundational to His purpose in that they provide us with overall direction.

The book of Deuteronomy is organized and written in the form of an ancient covenant. If the Israelites had ever lost their way spiritually, Deuteronomy could have been studied and its principles applied, and they would once again have been back on track toward completing their purpose. The book touches on virtually every subject needed for salvation, though it does not go into fine detail.

This, in general form, is what covenants do: They provide guidance. Each covenant is a teaching vehicle that reveals in broad strokes God's purposes for us. Each covenant is linked to the others to provide a clearer picture to prepare us to understand what God expects of us. In them, we see, not only His purposes, but His judgments as well, allowing us to learn how He thinks.

Covenants are unifying instruments, but they unify only if they are faithfully adhered to by all the parties involved. God, whom the Scriptures affirm cannot lie (Numbers 23:19; I Samuel 15:29), is the faithful God. Our faithfulness, on the other hand, remains to be shown. The covenants provide us with a great deal of a Christian's worldview. Without them, we wander in a spiritual wilderness without a cloud for shade or a constant light to guide.

General Information on Covenants

Three legal documents that play large roles throughout people's lives all begin with the letter *c*: covenants, contracts, and compacts. All three, as stand-alone terms, have distinctive differences in application, but in one broad sense they all have essentially the same meaning. All three are used to indicate a legal document that draws disparate parties together in a relationship, unifying them in an agreement to accomplish a purpose.

In general practice, though, it has been common in English-speaking nations to separate their usage more specifically to three different kinds of agreements. *Compact* tends to be used for political pacts, *contract* for business agreements, and *covenant* for concords that involve the solemnity of God, either implied or directly named within them.

We enter into none of them on a daily basis, but they touch virtually everyone's life at one time or another. "Compact" is the least used of the three terms, as it generally used among nations. When we buy a house, we enter into a contract with a bank, and the same holds true when we buy an automobile or anything else that we pay for through credit. Marriage involves the making of a covenant, making it perhaps the best understood of the three.

Each of these, whatever it is called, is just an agreement between two or more parties. They all define the terms of a relationship and list specific responsibilities. In simple terminology, they all say that party A agrees to do such and such, and that party B agrees to do this and that within the framework of the agreement. Also among the terms are stipulated penalties to be imposed if a party fails to carry through on what he has pledged to do.

In general, a covenant made with God is no different than other formal agreements, but the fact that it is made *with God* makes a huge difference in its importance to life.

Who knows how many such agreements are entered into every single day? But despite the multiple billions of people born since Adam and Eve, relatively few have actually entered into a covenant

with the true God. Some demographers estimate that as many as seventy billion people have lived on earth. But even if one billion have made a formal covenant with God, involving both Old and New Covenants combined, that would still be just over one percent of all who have lived.

The biblical covenants of God are generally ignored—even by many of those who make them! However, despite this general neglect, they are important parts of our relationship with Him, and we must show our leadership, not just by generally knowing of them, but also by having a good understanding of what they delineate as our responsibilities to Him and our fellow man. Because God is involved in them, we must believe and make good use of His covenants by faith. Some level of faith is also involved in the business contracts we enter and the political compacts nations make, but these approach nowhere near to the level of a covenant with God.

The Covenants Apply to All

We can grasp the foundational seriousness of a covenant with God by briefly reviewing how far-reaching God's sovereignty is over all, as His Word states. God, unlike mankind, is omnipresent:

For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account. (Hebrews 4:12-13)

God is fully aware of what is occurring in His creation. Not only that, He is also all-powerful and prepared to act should He determine the need to do so.

There is absolutely no way to avoid the seriousness of this issue, for God has determined to relate to His children first through calling them and giving them His Spirit, then by leading them to understand more deeply His requirements, as given in His Book. Of course, these communications from Him include the covenants. Every person involved in God's creative processes has access to the same terms, but each to his own level. "For everyone to whom much is given, from him much will be required" (Luke 12:48).

Paul writes in Romans 1:18-20:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse.

This means that, to some level, even the uncalled and unconverted are answerable to Him for the conduct of their lives. This truth is important. God has given life and breath to all, and He upholds all things by the word of His power (Hebrews 1:3). Thus, creation and God's sustaining oversight of His creation tie everybody to Him even before conversion.

In addition, God has given all a measure of conscience, as we see in Romans 2:11-16:

For there is no partiality with God. For as many as have sinned without law will also perish without law, and as many as have sinned in the law will be judged by the law (for not the hearers of the law are just in the sight of God, but the doers of the law will be justified; for when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them) in the day when God will judge the secrets of men by Jesus Christ, according to my gospel.

Mankind, then, even before an individual's calling and conversion, is equipped with some basic knowledge and guidance regarding right and wrong. But most conclusive of all is Romans 1:18-20, where God confirms that all humanity, including the unconverted, are to some degree "without excuse." Thus, He warns that, despite His being out of sight, we must be aware that, though merciful, He is watching and exercising His authority.

Theologian Cornelius Van Til perceptively observed:

There is not a place in all the universe where man can go and say, "This is my private realm." No button he can press and say, "Here I step outside God's jurisdiction." There is not a square inch in God's creation over which Christ is not Sovereign, that He cannot say, "This is mine."

Colossians 1:16-17 confirms this about Him:

For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him. And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist.

Those He calls especially owe Him their loyalty. He has greatly gifted us to better enable us to keep our pledge to Him. In practical application, this means that we must bear witness of our gifting by the way we live our lives.

A Legal Bond

A covenant makes a relationship between parties much closer and tighter in that it defines the relationship. However, a biblical covenant generally gives broad perspectives rather than narrow details. Other portions of the Bible explain the details.

A covenant is a legal bond between God and us. We must never forget that He is the Sovereign Ruler of a Kingdom to whom we have pledged our loyalty. That this bond is "legal" helps us to take it more seriously. A "bond" is something that holds separate things together, joining those things as one in a relationship.

A weld is a bond joining separate metal objects into one. Glue bonds individual wooden parts into one piece. Colossians 3:14 provides us an example of a spiritual bond: "But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection." Love is not the only ingredient that holds a marriage

together, but it plays a major role in making two people as one. Even as love is a bond in marriage, it is also a major ingredient in the covenants of God.

In our relationship with Him, faith in God's love for us, in His faithfulness to provide as He says, and in the legality of the covenants are all bonding agents of considerable spiritual importance. God's purpose for His people is to bring us all into oneness with Him, which Jesus confirms in John 17:20-23:

I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me.

The covenants comprehensively cover all of life. God designed a plan to satisfy His creative pleasure, and at the same time, to bring Him glory and enable Him to safely share Himself with others in peace. This is one reason why nothing regarding His purpose for mankind is done away. His purpose is serious business. To be prepared to be a kingdom of priests, we need as much of His way from His Word that we can cram into our minds and character. He knew before He began that we would sin because He already had experienced it with the angels. They had sinned even though they were far superior to us in creation, besides the fact that they could literally see Him. He also planned from the beginning for our redemption, as shown in the first or second covenant depending upon how they are separated and counted.

We need to designate a few basic rules regarding biblical covenants before going any further.

As we read the Bible, we should not expect it to announce, "This is a covenant, so pay attention." Naming a section of Scripture a "covenant" is a conclusion reached because God is clearly speaking and establishing a package of rules of conduct within a relationship. In biblical covenants God is always seen as absolute Sovereign of His creation and its purpose. All biblical covenants are initiated by God, and He determines their purposes, terms, and penalties.

Their terms are non-negotiable. God's negotiating a covenant's terms with us would be similar to our entering a contract with an infant. We are alive, and that is the extent of our ability to add to a covenant's needs and value pertaining to God's purpose. We simply lack knowledge and understanding, and our ever-present carnality makes us singularly unqualified. Even after we are called and converted, we have extremely little understanding about what God is doing with us.

A few covenants, actually dictated by God, are termed "universal" by scholars because they apply directly to all of mankind, not just to the called ones. In fact, we are better off saying these covenants are imposed whether men witnessed them or not.

We should never forget that God is never unjust in what He assigns mankind, as His purpose is to create and save. He is not attempting to make things difficult. Whatever requirements the covenants contain are necessary for our overall education in God's way of life. Remember, too, God's written Word contains the terms so each person does not have to literally hear the details. They can always be read. In fact, for our good and God's glory, they must be read frequently and meditated upon.

We will call the covenants by the names scholars have given them. When we finish with each covenant, its main features will be summarized. Sometimes, the covenants will be expounded fairly extensively due to the settings in which the terms are given and because particular points demand it. We will find that some of the terms are quite obvious, and also that, at first glance, some of the covenants do not even appear to be covenants.

“And God Blessed Them”

As we begin to examine the first covenant, note and consider parallels between it—one that focuses on the physical creation and the beginnings of God’s relationship with mankind—and the spiritual creation that follows later in God’s revelation of Himself and His purpose for it. In Revelation 13:8, Christ is referred to as the “Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.” God was prepared for mankind’s redemption from that time forward, so He has had the same purpose from the beginning. Considering these parallels will add immeasurably to our grasp and appreciation of God and His awesome purpose for us.

The first covenant is called the Edenic Covenant. It is universal in scope, applying to all mankind whether converted or unconverted. Yet, recall the principle that “to whom much is given, from him much will be required.” We who have been converted have been given a great deal, and more is required of us because God has given us gifts denied the unconverted.

The scriptures below, which we will refer to from time to time, are not given in any particular order, but just in the order that they appear in the Bible:

» Genesis 1:1-2: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.”

» Genesis 1:22: “And God blessed them, saying, ‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth.’”

» Genesis 1:26-28: “Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’ So God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. Then God blessed them, and God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over every living thing that moves on the earth.’”

» Genesis 2:15-17: “Then the Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to tend and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, ‘Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.’”

This covenant begins by listing its blessings. God speaks directly to Adam and Eve, but since all humans came from them, this covenant is addressed broadly to the entire human race. The overall picture shown in this universal covenant is that the entire creation—the earth itself with all that is on it, humanity, and the life given us—is a multitude of gifts from God. The key to understanding this is the phrase, “and God blessed them” (Genesis 1:22). Both the Hebrew term and the English

translation of “blessed” indicate the same sense: “to do good for,” “to favor,” “to endow,” “to bestow prosperity or happiness,” and even “to honor and exalt.”

The Bible begins with the fact that, because of what God has done, we exist; we live and have being; we think, plan, build, and look to the future. We did not give ourselves even one of these necessary gifts. This is where our relationship with God must begin, where we must start in our thinking about ourselves. These realities, if taken to heart honestly and seriously, are major factors regarding our place in life.

Though not stated directly anywhere in Genesis 1 through 3, this is a truth gathered from the entire context of this covenant combined with understanding from elsewhere in God’s Word. These realities set a pattern for our entire relationship with God, showing immediately that it is His grace, His gifting, that provides us with the means for success within His purpose all the way to salvation itself. What we see here is a foundational forerunner, a physical parallel to the spiritual creation to come later.

The covenant’s emphasis is on His purpose. The earth itself is a major teaching device, and receiving it brings responsibilities whether one is converted or not. The most critical question is “How will we use what we learn from the creation to enhance life?” Caring for the creation requires work, as does spiritual salvation. So, earth is also given to us for our use within the parameters of His creative purposes.

In this respect, it is similar to the gifts of the Spirit listed in I Corinthians 12, where Paul writes that God “distribut[es] to each one individually as He wills” (verse 11). However, our carnal natures, unless wisely and strongly controlled, drive us to use our gifts self-centeredly rather than cooperatively for the profit of all.

Seven Major Principles

Perhaps most important, the Edenic Covenant introduces the sovereign Creator God Himself. In the first five verses of Genesis 1, He stands alone, drawing our focus to what He wants us to learn first about Him. He presents Himself as standing at the beginning of all things; He precedes everything. In all the other covenants, this pattern holds true: Each covenant focuses on the sovereign Creator God.

A second major point of focus for our thinking about God is that this covenant reveals that He is orderly. Every step in the creation week is taken in a scientifically logical progression. First, God must provide light so that what follows can live and grow. Then He makes the firmament, an atmosphere for creatures to breathe and live in, etc. This establishes that the creation and His purposes are not at all haphazard; randomness is not part of His nature. His orderliness establishes the principle that God is purposeful and has a plan that He is following step by step.

A third idea this covenant illustrates is that in the beginning everything is morally perfect like Him. No sin is present.

A fourth point we can infer from it is that no aspect of the creation is to be worshipped. Everything God made and gifted to us is inferior to the One who made all things. Only the Creator is to be worshipped.

Fifth, God charges mankind, beginning with Adam and Eve, with populating and subduing the earth. “Subdue” does not indicate mankind is to have an adversarial relationship with earth. The Hebrew term can have that sense, but when used in a peaceful context, as here, it is to be understood differently. It is illogical to conclude that, after giving us this beautiful gift, God wants us to proceed to beat it into submission.

In this case, *subdue* indicates “harness its potential” and “use its resources beneficially.” Humanity is not to allow it simply to go “wild.” This command includes such things as cultivating its fields and mining its mineral riches. We should harvest its trees in a constructive manner to build homes and make furniture. It includes domesticating its animals and exercising dominion over them without abusing them. Men are not to rape the earth but to manage through work what has been given. A major principle here is that mankind is created in God’s image and is to rule in God’s behalf as His servant and as He would. In other words, man is to follow God’s pattern. There is of course more to being in His likeness, but ruling is part of mankind’s likeness to God.

A sixth element this covenant establishes is that birth alone places a person into a stewardship responsibility. Each individual is to treat God’s wonderful gifts with loving care, as shown by the manner in which God created them.

Finally, man is to enjoy the foods produced in the Garden. To be continued.