



The Vineyard: Scientists in the Church

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Appendix 1: The Word “Covenant”

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Appendix 1: The Word “Covenant”

We have several times mentioned *covenant* and it would seem to be helpful to give some indication of the richness contained in that word. The covenant relationship between God and humankind, first with Israel and then in the church, forms the basis for Christian existence. The holy society in which we cling to God (Augustine’s definition of the church) grows out of God’s covenanting himself first to Mary and then with the church. The covenantal theme is not one dimensional; in fact, it has many elements that are not easily separable. It has many expressions and shows significant development through the history of biblical revelation. All that shall be attempted now is a discussion of some essential elements of covenant. This schematic treatment is no more than a weaving together of textual notes on covenant from *The Jerusalem Bible*. This in itself gives a good idea of the theme’s richness.

The word “covenant” appears first in Chapter 6 of Genesis, when God promises Noah that “I will establish my Covenant with you, and you must go on board the ark. ...” (6: 18). This covenant, like all covenants with God, is not an agreement between equals. Rather it is made on God’s initiative and is his guarantee offered to those he has chosen. The covenant also demands a response from the one to whom it is offered. It must be ratified, accepted. In accepting it one accepts a responsibility, an obligation before God.

The covenant with Noah (Gn 9: 1-17) involved the whole creation. The obligation imposed was, as in Eden, to be “fruitful, multiply, teem over the earth and be lord of it.” Also, Noah and his descendants were to eat nothing with blood in it: “He who sheds man’s blood, shall have his blood shed by man, for in the image of God man was made.” Abraham’s covenant embraced his descendants only and carried with it the obligation of circumcision. The Mosaic covenant is confined to Israel and brings with it an obligation of fidelity to the Law (Ex 9: 5) and to the sabbath observance in particular (Ex 31: 16-17).

The covenant at Sinai bound the whole nation and the whole nation received a law: the Decalogue and the Book of the Covenant. This law, with subsequent elaboration, became the charter of Judaism and it is also a witness against the Jewish nation. Moses is the mediator between God and the people. He unites the people with God symbolically by sprinkling the blood of a single victim first on the altar, which represents Yahweh, and then on the people. The First Covenant is ratified by blood just as the New Covenant is ratified by the blood of Christ.

In the First Book of Kings (8: 22f) it is stated that God’s kindness to his people flows from the Sinaitic covenant, but is conditioned on their faithfulness. Thus, the whole theology of the covenant, the central doctrine of the Old Testament, is tied together by the idea of mutual fidelity.

In Hosea, the *knowledge of God* and *hesed* are linked. *Hesed* is a bond or contract. As used by Hosea in the context of married love, it assumes a warmer significance: it means the tender love God has for his people. The knowledge, then, is not merely intellectual. God makes himself known to Israel when he engages himself by covenant and shows his love for Israel by the benefits he confers. Similarly, Israel knows God when she loyally observes God’s covenant, shows gratitude for his gifts and returns love for love.

In Jeremiah (31: 31-34) and Ezekiel (36: 27), mention is made of a new covenant God will make with his people. While earlier perspectives on covenant remain (namely, human obedience to the Law, and the divine presence bestowing peace and material prosperity) three new elements are added: God’s spontaneous forgiveness of sin (Jer 31: 34; Ezk 36: 25,29); individual responsibility and retribution (Jer 31: 29; Ezk 14: 12f); interiorization of religion: the Law is no longer to be a code regulating external activity but an inspiration working on the heart of man (Jer 31: 33; 24: 7; 32: 39).

With the prophetic books there is a deepening of the understanding of covenant. Hosea’s conception of a marriage of Yahweh with his people, dating from the covenant of Sinai, was to become familiar. The prophets call idolatry *prostitution* or *adultery*. Jeremiah and Ezekiel allude to this theme several times. In the second part of Isaiah, the restoration of Israel is described as the reconciliation of a wife who has been unfaithful. In the New Testament, Jesus speaks of the messianic age as a time of wedding (e.g., Mt 22: 1-14; 25: 1-13). For St. Paul, Christian

marriage is a symbol of Christ's union with his church (cf. Ep:5: 25-33).

The salvation of Israel is the fulfillment of the covenant and of the promise. It is the foundation of hope and the center of faith for the people of God. It is summed up in Micah 7:20: "Grant Jacob your faithfulness, and Abraham your mercy, as you swore to our fathers from the days of long ago." This is echoed at the beginning of the New Testament in the Canticle of Zechariah (Lk 1: 67-75):

Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, for he has visited his people, he has come to their rescue and he has raised up for us a power for salvation in the House of his servant David, even as he proclaimed, by the mouth of his holy prophets from ancient times, that he would save us from our enemies and from the hands of all who hate us. Thus he shows mercy to our ancestors, thus he remembers his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham that he would grant us, free from fear, to be delivered from the hands of our enemies, to serve him in holiness and virtue in his presence, all our days.

In Matthew 24, the destruction of Jerusalem marks the end of the Old Covenant. Christ has thus manifestly returned to inaugurate his kingly reign.

Such a decisive intervention in the history of salvation (the Jerusalem Bible, note in Mt 24) will not occur again until the end of time when God will judge the whole human race, now chosen in Christ, with the same judgment he pronounced (in 70 A.D.) upon the first chosen people. For this reason the destruction of Jerusalem is here described in terms of the 'day of Yahweh' foretold by the prophets (cf. Amos 5: 18f; 8: 9f). No other intervention of God in history so involves the whole cosmos or prophesies its end as this one does, and the actual end of the world will be no more than the climax of all this.

As at Sinai, the blood of victims sealed the covenant of Yahweh with his people (Ex 24: 4-8), so on the cross the blood of Jesus seals the new covenant (Lk 22: 20) between God and us. This is the covenant foretold by the prophets. Jesus took on himself, in his body, the task of universal redemption that Isaiah had assigned to the Servant of Yahweh (Is 42: 6; 49: 6; 53: 12).

In the Synoptic gospels, Jesus used the vine as a symbol of the Kingdom of God (Mt 20: 1-8; 21: 28-31) and the "*fruit of the vine*" is the Eucharistic sacrament of the New Covenant (Mt 26: 29f). Jesus calls himself (Jn 15: 1) the true vine whose fruit (the true Israel) will not disappoint God's expectation.

The Holy Spirit, distinctive of the New Covenant, is not only an exhibition of healing or charismatic power, but is especially an inward principle of new life, a principle given by God.

Finally, in a magnificently beautiful recapitulation at the close of the Book of Revelation, many aspects of the covenantal relationship are brought out:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; the first heaven and the first earth had disappeared now, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, and the New Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, as beautiful as a bride all dressed for her husband. Then I heard a loud voice call from the throne, 'You see this city? Here God lives among men. He will make his home among them; they shall be his people, and he will be their God; his name is God-with-them. He will wipe away all tears from their eyes; there will be no more death, and no mourning or sadness. The world of the past has gone.'

The covenant into which we enter with our baptism is a *co-venire*, a coming together with the Father in Christ. That covenant is a gratuitous gift of God which, however, is conditioned on our free positive response. That covenant is not a formless or a bloodless generality. In our positive response, in our *yes* to God, we accept his commandments and the way of life he asks of us. We acknowledge our dependence on him in the church, we concern ourselves with others, we accept God's will along with the gifts he showers upon us, we center our lives on him and not on ourselves. With respect to our Father we truly become his children; we learn in the Gospels (cf. Mk 10:5, Mt 18:3 and Jn 3:5) that this is the only way in which we can enter into the Kingdom of God.

This *co-venire* with God implies a new relationship between a human being and God and with that new affiliation a new relationship between human beings and creation. That new relationship prepared the ground for the development of science in the Christian west.(1) Also, that new relationship with God demands a new way of life:

For this the Church was founded: that by spreading the kingdom of Christ everywhere for the glory of God the Father, she might bring all men to share in Christ's saving redemption; and that through them the whole world might in actual fact be brought into relationship with Him. All activity of the Mystical Body directed to the attainment of this goal is called the apostolate, and the Church carries it on in various ways through all her members. For by its very nature the Christian vocation is also a vocation to the apostolate. No part of the structure of a living body is merely passive but each has a share in the functions as well as in the life of the body. So, too, in the body of Christ, which is the Church, the whole body, "according to the functioning in due measure of each single part, derives its increase" (Eph. 4:16). Indeed, so intimately are the parts linked and interrelated in this body (cf. Eph. 4:16) that the member who fails to make his proper contribution to the development of the Church must be said to be useful neither to the Church nor to himself.(2)

Our covenant to God in the church calls us to "be perfect just as our heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5:48). This is not an optional request; it is not some vague ideal; it is a command from Christ. It is an imperative that we grow as deeply into Christ as his gifts to us allow. This obligation is common to all who profess to be alive in Christ. For all Christians there are means available in the church to work toward a full covenantal response. These means are meant for all; they are to be used by all.(3)

Endnotes

1. For a further discussion of this topic, see Enrico Cantore, S. J., "The Christic Origination of Science," *ITEST Monograph*, 1986. Reprinted from the *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation*, Vol. 37, No. 4, Dec., 1985.
2. *The Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity*, no. 2, p. 491.
3. For further consideration of the covenant we recommend *You See Lights Breaking Upon Us: Doctrinal Perspectives on Biological Advance* by Robert Brungs, S.J.

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