The Reformation Covenants:

A Study Series
On the National Covenant of Scotland, 1580/1638,
And the Solemn League and Covenant, 1643.

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Part 1: Introduction to Reformation Covenanting.

A Characteristic of Reformation Progress and Success

Although in our day increasing numbers of Reformed Christians enjoy giving attention to the Confessions of Faith and Catechisms from the Reformation era, and often find great blessing in gathering from these the doctrines which are neglected in the public teaching of the church, or avoided as a source of controversy; yet the fuller history of the Reformation directs us also to consider the various oaths, vows, and covenants, by which cities and nations, rulers and people, several times committed themselves, life and all, to the cause of Reformation and the defending of a Biblical Religion and Church. To neglect this part of the history is fatal, because it severs these historical reformation efforts from the Biblical examples in ancient times under Old Testament kings and other rulers. By doing so, it presents to the present generation a misleading model of how the Christian Church today should hope to bring Biblical repentance and reformation to cities and nations of a new era.

The Biblical Precedent

On the one hand God himself is the supreme author and ruler of the relationship which subsists between him and his people. He proclaims his Covenant and brings his people into an alliance or relationship with himself on his terms. This is seen especially in God's making his covenant with Abraham, and later with Israel under the care of Moses. Genesis 17.1-14; Exod. 19.3-6; 20.1-3; Exod. 34.28; Deut. 29.1, 10-15.

Not in opposition to this, nor in replacement of this, but in light of this, several Old Testament reformations were initiated and carried forward in the hands of godly rulers by a renewing or renovating of covenant with God. When sin, irreligion, or false religion had for a time displaced true religion and keeping covenant with God, a confession of these sins was accompanied by renewed commitment to the Lord, often in specific terms, expressed by God's people, asserting both what they would do no more, and also what duties they were resolved to pursue for the time to come. In other cases, not sin, but important events and circumstances drew the Lord's people into the same measure of corporately drawing near to the Lord. In this, they assured one another of their common commitment and support in such important causes. Josh. 24.14-16, 21-22, 25-26; 2 Chron. 15.8-15; 2 Chron. 23.16; 2 Kings 23.3.

Finally, it should not be forgotten, that our Lord Jesus' institution of the Lord's Supper is explicitly formulated as a sign or sacrament of his covenant with his people: Matth. 26.26-29.

First Generation Reformers: The Lutherans in 1531.

In our study series through Dr. Symington's "Messiah the Prince" we supplemented lesson 26 with the text of the Schmalkaldic League from 1531. This League was adopted by several German reformers (among the nobility) for mutual defence, and for upholding the Gospel and preaching of the Word of God. Romanist abuses of God's worship and religion had been reformed, but they anticipated the Roman Church would resist their efforts:

> "Therefore, we have formed a Christian brotherly agreement with and among one another. We make it for the praise of God Almighty, for the spread and growth of godly, free doctrine, and for the revival and promotion of a united, Christian body, and for the peace of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation and all that is honorable, also for the prosperity, welfare, benefit, and honor of all of our principalities, cities, and lands. We do this solely for the purpose of defense and self-preservation, which is accorded to everyone both by customary and written law. This association shall be considered and accepted at this time through the power of this document in the following form and measure...
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> "… Our League is intended solely for defensive and repulsive purposes and not for any of us to start a war of any kind. It may happen that one of us, no matter which one, shall be attacked and invaded or threatened by feud and invasion because of the Word of God, the evangelical doctrine, and our holy faith, or on other grounds that depend on the Word of God, the evangelical doctrine, and our holy faith, or because of something alleged against one of us, so that we others, who are not attacked, can conclude that this attack is being made principally because of the Word of God, and thus could be extended to the rest of us. In that case, we others who are all united in this Christian League, also each on his own account, shall, as soon as we hear and accept report from the victim or another reliable source, regard the matter as though we ourselves were under attack, made feud against, or invaded, and as though the matter were our own. In that case, each ally shall, without delay and without waiting for the others, muster all of his resources to aid him who has been declared feud against or invaded," etc. etc.

The Reformation in Geneva

In Geneva, even before Calvin's arrival, covenanting and public oaths obtained a place. At first this was by way of the official renouncing of Romanism, with a general adherence to the Protestant cause:—a promise "to live according to the Gospel and the Word of God." Soon afterward, William Farel and John Calvin pressed for the city to take their covenanting a step further.

At Geneva, May 21st, 1536, (History of J.H.M. d'Aubigné):

> "Besides the mass of the people, the ambassadors of Berne were present in the church, and among them the chief of the liberating army, Nagueli. One of the most heroic Genevans and most sincere Christians, the intrepid Claude Savoye, was president. When he arose to speak, he reminded them of the flight of the bishop, the arrival of the Gospel in Geneva, the

glorious deliverance granted to the city; and then he added, in a voice that was heard all down the nave, 'Citizens, do you desire to live according to the Gospel and the Word of God, as it is preached to us every day? Do you declare that you will have no more masses, images, idols, and other papal abuses whatsoever? If any one knows and wishes to say anything against the doctrine that is preached to us, let him do so.'

"There was a deep silence: all were in expectation. Will not some voice, friendly to Rome or to the world, protest against reform? The aged and devout Pierre Lullin, the spiritual catholic Jean Balard, the frivolous Jean Philippe, the episcopal Malbuisson, Richardet, Ramel, De la Rive, and others, known for their attachment to Rome, are going, doubtless, to take up the premier syndic's challenge. The hour is striking; Geneva is about to decide its future. If it is true that the pope is Christ's vicar, and as God upon earth, let them say so! Now or never. They wait: they wait still; not a word disturbs the solemn silence of the people. No one made opposition. The fact was duly recorded. Then other accents than those which had been anticipated resounded through the aisles of the cathedral.

"Was it the voice of pious syndic Lever, or of one of the Two Hundred, or of some one in the body of the meeting? The council registers do not inform us. That voice, speaking in the name of the united nation, proclaimed: 'We all, with one accord, desire, with God's help, to live under that holy evangelical law, and according to God's Word as it is preached to us. We desire to renounce all masses, images, idols, and other papal ceremonies and abuses, and to live in union with one another, in obedience to justice.' When the voice ceased, all the people held up their hands and repeating a unanimous oath, exclaimed: 'We swear it... We will do so with God's help... We will!' The assembly broke up, and the citizens departed, congratulating each other that the innumerable tyrannies of 'Pharaoh' and the darkness of the 'sorcerers' were to be succeeded by the mild light of Jesus Christ and the life-giving breath of liberty."[1]

The Geneva Confession 1536/1537

It was after this, in August of the same year, that Calvin was confronted by Farel about remaining in Geneva to help his reformation efforts there. By the end of the year, Calvin had finished and published his Catechism, and presented his Confession of Faith to the rulers of the city. On March 13, 1537, the Council had adopted the articles of this Confession. The intention of Farel and Calvin is plain from the title:

"A Confession of Faith which all the Citizens and Inhabitants of Geneva and Subjects of the Country Are to Swear to Keep and Hold.

"First, we declare that for the rule of our faith and religion, we wish to follow the Scripture alone, without mixing with it any other thing which might be fabricated by the interpretation of men apart from the Word of God;" etc.[2]

1 J.H. Merle d'Aubigné, History of the Reformation in the Time of Calvin. Lib. 9, ch. 14. pp. 412-413 in v. 5. ed. 1880. Available 2026.07.11 at https://godrules.net/library/daubigne/77daubigne_e34.htm

2 Full text is found in "Reformed Confessions" ed. Dennison, vol. 1; also "Confessions and Catechisms," ed. M. Noll.

Applying this policy to the church in Geneva, in the administration of the Lord's Supper, was what led to the trouble that Farel and Calvin later found. New leaders in the government were unwilling to allow the pastors to exclude from the Supper those who would not swear to this Confession. Farel and Calvin were determined that such guarding of the Lord's Supper was necessary. In the conflict, a decision being made against them, they were given three days to depart from Geneva.

Discussion Questions:

Q. 1. What negative consequences may be associated with the modern tendency to look at Confessions of Faith as being the only basis of unity in the Church?

Q. 2. Which examples from Holy Scripture give us the main precedent for the use of covenants in the Christian Church's reforming efforts?

Q. 3. Who were the first Protestants to implement the biblical practice of covenanting in order to defend and promote the Reformation cause?

Q. 4. How was the initial covenanting or swearing in Geneva an example of biblical repentance?

Scottish Covenants from 1557 to 1562.

From the beginning of the Reformation in Scotland, covenants in favor of the cause of the Gospel or "Evangel" were sworn by the Nobility and Gentlemen who joined themselves to the Protestant "Congregation." John Knox's "History of the Reformation" records five particular covenants sworn at different places in the effort to uphold this cause. These were not "National" covenants as what would come later, but they prepared the way to such commitments.

The First Covenant of Scotland. At Edinburgh, 1557.

> "WE perceiving how Satan in his members, the Antichrists of our time, cruelly do rage, seeking to overthrow and destroy the Gospel of Christ, and his Congregation, ought, according to our bounden duty, to strive in our Master's Cause, even unto the death, being certain of the Victory in him: The which our duty being well considered, We do promise before the Majesty of God, and his Congregation, That we (by his grace) shall with all diligence continually apply our whole power, substance, and our very lives, to maintain, set forward, and establish the most blessed Word of God, and his Congregation: And shall labour according to our power, to have faithful Ministers, truly and purely to minister Christ's Gospel and Sacraments to his people. We shall maintain them, nourish them, and defend them; the whole Congregation of Christ, and every Member thereof according to our whole powers, and waging of our lives, against Satan and all wicked power that doth intend Tyranny or trouble against the foresaid Congregation. Unto the which holy Word, and Congregation, we do join us; and so do forsake and renounce the Congregation of Satan, with all the superstitious abomination and idolatry thereof. And moreover, [we] shall

declare ourselves manifestly enemies thereto, By this our faithful Promise before God, testified to this Congregation by our Subscription at these Presents.

"At Edinburgh, the third of December, anno 1557. God called to witness.

"Sic subscribitur. A. Earle of Argyle. Glencarne. Mortoun." etc. etc.

The Second Covenant of the Scottish Reformers. At Perth, 1559.

This covenant names several congregations which were all met together by representatives in the Town of Perth. Its length is brief like the former, and its provision is similar to the Lutheran Schmalkaldic League in obliging all the members to regard "trouble intended" against any members to be matter obliging the whole to convene for defence. The cause remains the same as what was intended in 1557 at Edinburgh:

"to keep a constant amity, unity, and fellowship together, according as they are commanded by God, are confederate, and become bounden and obliged in the presence of God, to concur and assist together in doing all things required of God in his Scripture, that may be to his glory; And at their whole powers to destroy and put away all things that doth dishonour to his Name, so that God may be truly and purely worshipped."

Three further covenants, "bands," or "bonds" were sworn in Scotland at Sterling in 1559, at Leith in 1560, and at Ayr in 1562. This last covenant also refers to the "Government of the Church now established amongst us." This is an allusion to the progress of the Protestant cause in Scotland. The first meeting of a General Assembly of the Church was held in 1560, and they continued in 1561 and 1562. Also, the first meeting of a Protestant Parliament was held in 1560.

England

Although it is a step forward into the second century of reformation efforts in Europe, we should also note the "Protestation Vow" of England as a forerunner of the "Solemn League and Covenant" to be sworn only two years later. This Vow was sworn in May 1641, first by members of Parliament, and afterward more generally throughout England. The preamble makes clear the motivation leading to this covenant:

"WE the Knights, Citizens, and Burgesses of the Commons house in Parliament, finding, to the great grief of our hearts, that the designs of the Priests and Jesuits, and other Adherents to the See of Rome, have of late been more boldly and frequently put in practice then formerly, to the undermining and danger of the ruin of the true reformed Protestant Religion in His Majesty's Dominions established: And finding also that there have been, and having just cause to suspect that there still are, even during this sitting in Parliament, endeavors to subvert the fundamental Laws of England and Ireland, and to introduce the exercise of an Arbitrary and Tyrannical Government, by most pernicious and wicked Counsels," etc. etc.

"I [first-name last-name] do in the presence of Almighty God, Promise, Vow, and Protest, to maintain and defend, as far as lawfully I may, with my life, power, and estate, the true Reformed Protestant Religion, expressed in the Doctrine of the Church of England against all Popery and Popish Innovations within this Realm, contrary to the same Doctrine, and according to the duty of my Allegiance, His Majesty's Royal Person, Honor, and Estate; As also the Power and Privileges of Parliament; The lawful Rights and Liberties of the Subject, and every person that maketh this Protestation, in whatsoever he shall do in the lawful pursuance of the same. And to my power, and as far as lawfully I may, I will oppose, and by all good ways and means endeavor to bring to condign punishment, all such as shall either by Force, Practice, Counsels, Plots, Conspiracies or otherwise, do any thing to the contrary of any thing in this present Protestation contained. And further, that I shall in all just and Honourable ways endeavor to preserve the Union and Peace between the three Kingdoms of England, Scotland, and Ireland; And neither for hope, fear, nor other respect, shall relinquish this Promise, Vow, and Protestation."

Discussion Questions:

Q. 5. What is a useful primary source for examining the covenants of the early phase of the Scottish Reformation?

Q. 6. Were these Scottish covenants for the defence of the Reformation and early Protestant people the deeds of the pastors, the common people, or the civil rulers?

Q. 7. How did the later Scottish covenants or bands partake of the nature of a "league" like that of Schmalkald?

Q. 8. What concerns or fears led to the swearing of the Protestation Vow in England?

Other Resources:

- James Kerr's "The Covenants and the Covenanters" — See the introduction and example sermons from the times of the National and Solemn League and Covenant.
- Archibald Mason's "Observations on the Public Covenants."
- William Robert's "The Duty of Covenanting" from his Reformed Presbyterian Catechism.
- John Geree's Sermon "Judah's Joy at the Oath," preached in 1641.