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 4: The National Covenant of Scotland, 1638.

Subscribed at first by the King's Majesty, and his Household, in the year 1580; *thereafter by persons of all ranks in the Year* 1581, etc. etc. *subscribed by Barons, Nobles, Gentlemen, Burgesses, Ministers, and Commons, in the year* 1638: *approven by the General Assembly* 1638, etc.

(Continued)

Contents: Concluding Paragraphs for 1638 Covenant Renewal:

Note: These paragraphs which follow were also appended to the National Covenant. They outline the commitments of the Presbyterian Church of Scotland in 1638 in a new era of Reformation. During preceding decades, new innovations had been imposed on the Church of Scotland. In some cases, these were innovations not explicitly named in the original National Covenant or "Negative Confession," but Bible-believing Presbyterians considered them as previously renounced because they were inventions, and appendages of the religion practiced by the Roman Church. Some of these innovations included an Episcopal hierarchy in the church government, and traditions familiarly known as the "Articles of Perth." These included (1) the Celebration of festival days, such as Christmas, (2) Kneeling at communion, (3) Confirmation of youth by imposition of hands, (4) Private Baptism, and (5) Private communion. All these innovations were determined to be "forborne" by this Covenant until a General Assembly assessed their Biblical warrant. By the end of 1638, they were declared by the General Assembly to have been "abjured by the Confession of Faith" and the full intention of this Covenant was put in effect.

IN OBEDIENCE to the commandment of God, conform to the practice of the godly in former times, and according to the laudable example of our worthy and religious progenitors, and of many yet living amongst us, which was warranted also by act of council, commanding a general band to be made and subscribed by his Majesty's subjects of all ranks; for two causes: one was, For defending the true religion, as it was then reformed, and is expressed in the Confession of Faith above written, and a former large Confession established by sundry acts of lawful General Assemblies and of Parliaments, unto which it hath relation, set down in publick Catechisms;

and which hath been for many years, with a blessing from Heaven, preached and professed in this kirk and kingdom, as God's undoubted truth, grounded only upon his written word. ► The other cause was, For maintaining the King's Majesty, his person and estate; the true worship of God and the King's authority being so straitly joined, as that they had the same friends and common enemies, and did stand and fall together. And finally, being convinced in our minds, and confessing with our mouths, that the present and succeeding generations in this land are bound to keep the foresaid national oath and subscription inviolable,

Q. 1. What Scriptures might be cited to warrant the effort to defend a practice from the "laudable example of our worthy and religious progenitors"?

Q. 2. Just as these Covenanters refer to their "former large Confession," what Confession would Covenanters have cause to reference in subsequent times?

Q. 3 What can we note about the expressed obligation to maintain the King's Majesty?

Q. 4. What do these Covenanters say about the relation of the covenant to succeeding generations?

We Noblemen, Barons, Gentlemen, Burgesses, Ministers, and Commons under-subscribing, considering divers times before, and especially at this time, the danger of the true reformed religion, of the King's honour, and of the publick peace of the kingdom, by the manifold innovations and evils, generally contained, and particularly mentioned in our late supplications, complaints, and protestations; do hereby profess, and before God, his angels, and the world, solemnly declare, That with our whole heart we agree, and resolve all the days of our life constantly to adhere unto and to defend the foresaid true religion, and (forbearing the practice of all innovations already introduced in the matters of the worship of God, or approbation of the corruptions of the publick government of the kirk, or civil places and power of kirkmen, till they be tried and allowed in free Assemblies and in Parliament) to labour, by all means lawful, to recover the purity and liberty of the Gospel, as it was established and professed before the foresaid novations. ► And because, after due examination, we plainly perceive, and undoubtedly believe, that the innovations and evils contained in our supplications, complaints, and protestations, have no warrant of the word of God, are contrary to the articles of the foresaid Confession, to the intention and meaning of the blessed reformers of religion in this land, to the above-written acts of Parliament; and do sensibly tend to the re-establishing of the Popish religion and tyranny, and to the subversion and

ruin of the true reformed religion, and of our liberties, laws, and estates; we also declare, That the foresaid Confessions are to be interpreted, and ought to be understood of the foresaid novations and evils, no less than if every one of them had been expressed in the foresaid Confessions; and that we are obliged to detest and abhor them, amongst other particular heads of Papistry abjured therein. ► And therefore, from the knowledge and conscience of our duty to God, to our King and country, without any worldly respect or inducement, so far as human infirmity will suffer, wishing a further measure of the grace of God for this effect; we promise and swear, by the GREAT NAME OF THE LORD OUR GOD, to continue in the profession and obedience of the foresaid religion; and that we shall defend the same, and resist all these contrary errors and corruptions, according to our vocation, and to the uttermost of that power that God hath put in our hands, all the days of our life.

Q. 5. What is the first resolution expressed in the second paragraph above?

Q. 6. What is the second resolution, or second part of the resolution expressed in the second paragraph above?

Q. 7. Can the words of the Covenant be interpreted beyond their own literal explicit signification?

Q. 8. What kind of resistance is promised in this second paragraph?

And in like manner, with the same heart, we declare before God and men, That we have no intention nor desire to attempt anything that may turn to the dishonour of God, or to the diminution of the King's greatness and authority; but, on the contrary, we promise and swear, That we shall, to the uttermost of our power, with our means and lives, stand to the defence of our dread sovereign the King's Majesty, his person and authority, in the defence and preservation of the foresaid true religion, liberties, and laws of the kingdom; as also to the mutual defence and assistance every one of us of another, in the same cause of maintaining the true religion, and his Majesty's authority, with our best counsel, our bodies, means, and whole power, against all sorts of persons whatsoever; so that whatsoever shall be done to the least of us for that cause, shall be taken as done to us all in general, and to every one of us in particular. ► And that we shall neither directly nor indirectly suffer ourselves to be divided or withdrawn, by whatsoever suggestion, combination, allurement, or terror, from this blessed and loyal conjunction; nor shall cast in any let or impediment that may stay or hinder any such resolution as by common consent shall be found to conduce for so good ends; but, on the contrary, shall by all lawful means

labour to further and promote the same: and if any such dangerous and divisive motion be made to us by word or writ, we, and every one of us, shall either suppress it, or, if need be, shall incontinent make the same known, that it may be timeously obviated. Neither do we fear the foul aspersions of rebellion, combination, or what else our adversaries, from their craft and malice, would put upon us; seeing what we do is so well warranted, and ariseth from an unfeigned desire to maintain the true worship of God, the majesty of our King, and the peace of the kingdom, for the common happiness of ourselves and our posterity.

Q. 9. What is the qualification of that defence of the King promised in the third paragraph?

Q. 10. Describe the mutual assistance for other Covenanters promised in the third paragraph.

Q. 11. What will be done if divisive motions are stirred contrary to the covenant?

And because we cannot look for a blessing from God upon our proceedings, except with our profession and subscription we join such a life and conversation as beseemeth Christians who have renewed their covenant with God; we therefore faithfully promise for ourselves, our followers, and all others under us, both in publick, and in our particular families, and personal carriage, to endeavour to keep ourselves within the bounds of Christian liberty, and to be good examples to others of all godliness, soberness, and righteousness, and of every duty we owe to God and man.

And, that this our union and conjunction may be observed without violation, we call the LIVING GOD, THE SEARCHER OF OUR HEARTS, to witness, who knoweth this to be our sincere desire and unfeigned resolution, as we shall answer to JESUS CHRIST in the great day, and under the pain of God's everlasting wrath, and of infamy and loss of all honour and respect in this world: most humbly beseeching the LORD to strengthen us by his HOLY SPIRIT for this end, and to bless our desires and proceedings with a happy success; that religion and righteousness may flourish in the land, to the glory of GOD, the honour of our King, and peace and comfort of us all. In witness whereof, we have subscribed with our hands all the premises.

The article of this covenant, which was at the first subscription referred to the determination of the General Assembly, being now determined; and thereby the five articles of Perth, *the government of the kirk by bishops, and the civil places and power of kirkmen, upon the reasons and grounds*

contained in the Acts of the General Assembly, declared to be unlawful within this kirk, we subscribe according to the determination aforesaid.

FINIS.

Q. 12. What must be joined to the act of covenanting if we desire the blessing of God?
Q. 13. How is the principle of representation expressed in the fourth paragraph above?
Q. 14. How does the fifth paragraph define the success hoped for by these Covenanters?
Q. 15. What is the resolution about the articles of Perth expressed in the Covenant?

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Excerpts from James Kerr's Introduction to "The Covenants and the Covenanters."

The National Covenant of 1580 was produced. An addition was made, in two parts. The part summarizing the Acts of Parliament, condemning the papacy and ratifying the confessions of the Church, was drafted by Warriston; that with special religious articles for the time was by Henderson. The spot chosen for the solemnities of the first subscription was the Churchyard of Greyfriars, Edinburgh. . . . In that memorable spot the Reformers gathered "the legitimate charters" of their nation into one document and presented them before heaven. Johnston unrolled the parchment in which these Scottish charters were inscribed, and read them in a clear, calm voice. "When he had finished, all was still as the grave. ► But the silence was soon broken. An aged man of noble air was seen advancing. He came forward slowly, and deep emotion was visible in his venerable features. He took up the pen with a trembling hand and signed the document. A general movement now took place. All the Presbyterians in the Church pressed forward to the Covenant and subscribed their names. But this was not enough; a whole nation was waiting. The immense parchment was carried into the churchyard and spread out on a large tombstone to receive on this expressive table the signature of the Church. Scotland had never beheld a day like that." ► "This," says Henderson, "was the day of the Lord's power, in which multitudes offered themselves most willingly, like dewdrops of the morning. This was, indeed, the great day of Israel, wherein the arm of the Lord was revealed—the day of the Redeemer's strength, on which the princes of the people assembled to swear their allegiance to the King of kings." Charles I. understood well the force of that mighty movement when, on hearing of it, he said, "I have no more power in Scotland than a Dog of Venice." The renewal of that covenant, 28th February, 1638, was a thunderbolt against despotism in Scotland, and the world over. "The chariots of God are twenty thousand."

The covenant was transcribed into hundreds of copies, carried throughout the country from north to south and east to west, and subscribed everywhere. The spirit that thrilled the thousands filling and overflowing Greyfriars Church and churchyard, spread with rapidity over the whole land. It combined the "whole nation into one mighty phalanx of incalculable energy." The last sparks of the King's fury burst out in secret instructions to his followers to use all power against the "refractory and seditious," and in a threat to send his army and fleet to Scotland, but these soon died away. The "refractory and seditious" king eventually surrendered to the Covenanters, abolished courts, canons, liturgies, and articles, and consented to the calling of a General Assembly.

Discussion Questions

1. What Scriptures might be cited to warrant the effort to defend a practice from the "laudable example of our worthy and religious progenitors"?

   A. Canticles 1.8; Hebrews 13.7; Phil. 3.17.

2. Just as these Covenanters refer to their "former large Confession," what Confession would Covenanters have cause to reference in subsequent times?

   A. The former large confession was that of 1560. Since the Second Reformation we refer to the Westminster Confession of Faith, as adopted by the Church of Scotland.

3. What can we note about the expressed obligation to maintain the King's Majesty?

   A. This was seen as "so straitly joined" with the cause of God's "true worship" that they "did stand and fall together."

4. What do these Covenanters say about the relation of the covenant to succeeding generations?

   A. They were "convinced in their minds… that the present and succeeding generations in this land are bound to keep the foresaid national oath and subscription inviolable."

5. What is the first resolution expressed in the second paragraph above?

   A. They "resolve all the days of their lives constantly to adhere unto and defend the foresaid true religion."

6. What is the second resolution, or second part of the resolution expressed in the second paragraph above?

   A. They also resolve "to labour, by all means lawful, to recover the purity and liberty of the Gospel, as it was established and professed before the foresaid [in]novations."

7. Can the words of the Covenant be interpreted beyond their own literal explicit signification?

   A. They must "be interpreted, and ought to be understood of the foresaid [in]novations and evils, no less than if every one of them had been expressed in the foresaid confession."

8. What kind of resistance is promised in this second paragraph?

   A. They promise to resist all errors and corruptions contrary to the faith they have professed in their national covenant and confession, including more recent episcopal innovations.

9. What is the qualification of that defence of the King promised in the third paragraph?

   A. They promise this "in the defence and preservation of the foresaid true religion, liberties, and laws

of the kingdom."

10. Describe the mutual assistance for other Covenanters promised in the third paragraph.

A. They look upon one another as having a common cause to maintain the true religion, and affirm "that whatsoever shall be done to the least of us for that cause, shall be taken as done to us all in general, and to every one of us in particular." This is language similar to the Schmalkald League of the German reformers in 1531, and to the Scottish bands of the 1550s.

11. What will be done if divisive motions are stirred contrary to the covenant?

A. "If any such dangerous and divisive motion be made to us by word or writ, we, and every one of us, shall either suppress it, or, if need be, shall incontinent make the same known, that it may be timeously obviated."

12. What must be joined to the act of covenanting if we desire the blessing of God?

A. "With our profession and subscription we [must] join such a life and conversation as beseemeth Christians who have renewed their covenant with God."

13. How is the principle of representation expressed in the fourth paragraph above?

A. The principle of representation was demonstrated on the part of covenanters who promised or engaged not only for their own conduct, but also for "our followers, and all others under us, both in publick, and in our particular families," etc.

14. How does the fifth paragraph define the success hoped for by these Covenanters?

A. The success they desire is "that religion and righteousness may flourish in the land, to the glory of God, the honour of our King, and peace and comfort of us all."

15. What is the resolution about the articles of Perth expressed in the Covenant?

A. The General Assembly of the Church determined that the five articles of Perth, and also the government of the kirk by bishops and the civil places and power of kirkmen, were "unlawful within this kirk."