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 5: The Solemn League and Covenant, 1643.

Historical Notes on the SL&C from James Kerr's Introduction to "The Covenants and the Covenanters."

Charles I. was endeavouring to secure the recognition of his absolute monarchy in England. There also he rigorously demanded submission to despotic claims. By abolishing Parliaments, annulling charters, appointing the star chamber, he introduced a reign of terror. In the room of those legislative bulwarks of liberty, which the nation had constructed through the skill and experience of generations, a "grim tyranny," writes Dr. Wylie, "reared its gaunt form, with the terrible accompaniments of star chamber, pillory, and branding irons. It reminded one of sunset in the tropics. There the luminary of the day goes down at a plunge into the dark. So had the day of liberty in England gone down at a stride into the night of tyranny." The oppressed people turned to the Covenanters of Scotland for sympathy and counsel. The negotiations resulted in the preparation of an international league in defence of religion and liberty. ► Against the banner of the King they raised the banner of the Covenant. Alexander Henderson drafted the new Bond. The document breathed the spirit of the National Covenant of Greyfriars, condemned the Papal and Prelatic system, pled for a constitutional monarchy, and outlined a comprehensive programme for future efforts in extending the principles of the Reformation. On September 25, 1643, it was subscribed in St. Margarets Church, Westminster. The members of Parliament in England and the Westminster Assembly of Divines stood with uplifted hands, and, as article after article was read, they took this Oath to God. The Commissioners from Scotland to the Westminster Assembly united with the people of England in the solemnity of the day. ► Thus the representatives of the two nations stood before the Lord. This was the Solemn League and Covenant, "the noblest in its essential features," writes Hetherington, "of all that are recorded among the international transactions of the world." The Parliament and Westminster Assembly issued instructions for its subscription throughout the kingdom. The classes and the masses in England, Scotland, and Ireland received it with gladness. In the face of a despotism unexampled in the history of these lands, high and low, rich and poor, bowed themselves as one before the throne of God. "For at that time day by day there came to David to help him, until it was a great host like the host of God."

A SOLEMN
LEAGUE AND COVENANT,
For REFORMATION, and Defence of Religion, The Honor and Happiness of the King, and the Peace and Safety of the three Kingdoms of Scotland, England, and Ireland.

Approved by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland on August 17, 1643.
Appointed to be sworn throughout England and Wales by the English Parliament, February 2, 1643/4.
With Instructions for taking the Covenant, and an Exhortation by the Westminster Assembly.
Ratified by the Parliament of Scotland, July 15, 1644,
Along with the Treaty between the Kingdoms of Scotland and England, etc.

WE, Noblemen, Barons, Knights, Gentlemen, Citizens, Burgesses, Ministers of the Gospel, and Commons of all sorts, in the kingdoms of Scotland, England, and Ireland, by the providence of GOD living under one King, and being of one reformed religion, having before our eyes the glory of GOD, and the advancement of the kingdom of our Lord and Saviour JESUS CHRIST, the honour and happiness of the King's Majesty and his posterity, and the true publick liberty, safety, and peace of the kingdoms, wherein every one's private condition is included: ► And calling to mind the treacherous and bloody plots, conspiracies, attempts, and practices of the enemies of GOD, against the true religion and professors thereof in all places, especially in these three kingdoms, ever since the reformation of religion; and how much their rage, power, and presumption, are of late, and at this time, increased and exercised, whereof the deplorable state of the church and kingdom of Ireland, the distressed estate of the church and kingdom of England, and the dangerous estate of the church and kingdom of Scotland, are present and public testimonies; we have now at last, (after other means of supplication, remonstrance, protestation, and sufferings,) for the preservation of ourselves and our religion from utter ruin and destruction, according to the commendable practice of these kingdoms in former times, and the example of GOD's people in other nations, after mature deliberation, resolved and determined to enter into a mutual and solemn League and Covenant, wherein we all subscribe, and each one of us for himself, with our hands lifted up to the most High GOD, do swear,

I. THAT we shall sincerely, really, and constantly, through the grace of GOD, endeavor, in our several places and callings, the preservation of the reformed religion in the Church of Scotland, in doctrine, worship, discipline, and government, against our common enemies; the reformation of religion in the kingdoms of England and Ireland, in doctrine, worship, discipline, and government, according to the word of GOD, and the example of the best reformed Churches; and shall endeavour to bring the Churches of GOD in the three kingdoms to the nearest conjunction and uniformity in religion, confession of faith, form of church-government, directory for worship and catechising; that we, and our posterity after us, may, as brethren, live in faith and love, and the Lord may delight to dwell in the midst of us.

II. That we shall in like manner, without respect of persons, endeavour the extirpation of Popery, Prelacy, (that is, church-government by Archbishops, Bishops, their Chancellors, and Commissaries, Deans, Deans and Chapters, Archdeacons, and all other ecclesiastical Officers depending on that hierarchy,) superstition, heresy, schism, profaneness, and whatsoever shall be found to be contrary to sound doctrine and the power of godliness, lest we partake in other men's sins, and thereby be in danger to receive of their plagues; and that the Lord may be one, and his name one, in the three kingdoms.

1. What are the ends or motivations for Covenanting specified in the Preamble?
2. What is the obligation embraced in the first article of the Covenant?
3. How do the obligations to the then-present religious order of each nation differ in the first article?
4. What elements of the Christian religion and practice are encompassed by the first article?
5. What form of church government is explicitly rejected in the second article?
6. Is the second article merely concerned with outward forms of religious activity and unity?
7. How are other unbiblical forms of church government, besides that which is named, implicitly rejected?

III. We shall, with the same sincerity, reality, and constancy, in our several vocations, endeavour, with our estates and lives, mutually to preserve the rights and privileges of the Parliaments, and the liberties of the kingdoms; and to preserve and defend the King's Majesty's person and authority, in the preservation and defence of the true religion, and liberties of the kingdoms; that the world may bear witness with our consciences of our loyalty, and that we have no thoughts or intentions to diminish his Majesty's just power

and greatness.[1]

IV. We shall also, with all faithfulness, endeavour the discovery of all such as have been or shall be incendiaries, malignants, or evil instruments, by hindering the reformation of religion, dividing the king from his people, or one of the kingdoms from another, or making any faction or parties amongst the people, contrary to this League and Covenant; that they may be brought to publick trial, and receive condign punishment, as the degree of their offences shall require or deserve, or the supreme judicatories of both kingdoms respectively, or others having power from them for that effect, shall judge convenient.

V. And whereas the happiness of a blessed peace between these kingdoms, denied in former times to our progenitors, is, by the good providence of GOD, granted unto us, and hath been lately concluded and settled by both Parliaments; we shall each one of us, according to our place and interest, endeavour that they may remain conjoined in a firm peace and union to all posterity; and that justice may be done upon the wilful opposers thereof, in manner expressed in the precedent article.

8. What is the qualification joined to preserving and defending the King's Majesty's person and authority in the third article?
9. In the fourth article, what does this covenant oblige swearers to do about malignants who seek to hinder the reformation of religion or foster discord among those united by the covenant?
10. Was the fifth article of this Covenant positively furthered by the Incorporating Union of 1707?

VI. We shall also, according to our places and callings, in this common cause of religion, liberty, and peace of the kingdoms, assist and defend all those that enter into this League and Covenant, in the maintaining and pursuing thereof; and shall not suffer ourselves, directly or indirectly, by whatsoever combination, persuasion, or terror, to be divided and withdrawn from this blessed union and conjunction, whether to make defection to the contrary part, or to give ourselves to a detestable indifferency or neutrality in this cause which so much concerneth the glory of GOD, the good of the kingdom, and honour of the King; but shall, all the days of our lives, zealously and constantly continue therein against all opposition, and

1 In the 1990s copies of the SL&C were circulated which here read "... we have no other thoughts or intentions to diminish his Majesty's just power and greatness." The word "other" is found in many copies since then but is misleading and not found in the original copies of the SL&C.—JTK.

promote the same, according to our power, against all lets and impediments whatsoever; and, what we are not able ourselves to suppress or overcome, we shall reveal and make known, that it may be timely prevented or removed: All which we shall do as in the sight of God.

And, because these kingdoms are guilty of many sins and provocations against GOD, and his Son JESUS CHRIST, as is too manifest by our present distresses and dangers, the fruits thereof; we profess and declare, before GOD and the world, our unfeigned desire to be humbled for our own sins, and for the sins of these kingdoms: especially, that we have not as we ought valued the inestimable benefit of the gospel; that we have not laboured for the purity and power thereof; and that we have not endeavoured to receive CHRIST in our hearts, nor to walk worthy of him in our lives; which are the causes of other sins and transgressions so much abounding amongst us: ► and our true and unfeigned purpose, desire, and endeavour for ourselves, and all others under our power and charge, both in publick and in private, in all duties we owe to GOD and man, to amend our lives, and each one to go before another in the example of a real reformation; that the Lord may turn away his wrath and heavy indignation, and establish these churches and kingdoms in truth and peace. ► And this Covenant we make in the presence of ALMIGHTY GOD, the Searcher of all hearts, with a true intention to perform the same, as we shall answer at that great day, when the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed; most humbly beseeching the LORD to strengthen us by his HOLY SPIRIT for this end, and to bless our desires and proceedings with such success, as may be deliverance and safety to his people, and encouragement to other Christian churches, groaning under, or in danger of, the yoke of antichristian tyranny, to join in the same or like association and covenant, to the glory of GOD, the enlargement of the kingdom of JESUS CHRIST, and the peace and tranquillity of Christian kingdoms and commonwealths.

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11. Besides opposition to this Covenant, what else is considered sinful in the sixth article?
12. The sixth article speaks of a resolution to promote, according to our power, the blessed union and conjunction of this covenant. What means should Covenanters have embraced as the reasonable effort to promote that blessed union and conjunction?
13. With what does the conclusion of the Covenant begin?
14. How does this Covenant describe success in its conclusion?
15. What enlarged prospect and hope is presented in the final part of the Solemn League and Covenant's conclusion?

[Another Excerpt from James Kerr's Introduction, page 21-22:]

These Covenants exhibited the great ecclesiastical breadth of the Covenanters. The enthronement of the Word of God over the Church was one of the commanding objects of the Reformers. If only the Church would hear and honour Christ, her King, speaking in that Word, then would she be clothed with the sun, and have on her head a crown of twelve stars. The Reformers resolutely set themselves to apply the Word to the Church, in all her departments; she must be such an institution as her Lord had instructed. The will of priest, and prince, and presbyter, and people, must be set aside in the presence of the will of her sole Sovereign. The works of demolition and reconstruction must go on together. Built according to the design of her Lord, her bulwarks, and towers, and palaces shall command the admiration of the world.

[Quote from Thomas Henderson's Introduction to the Auchensaugh Renovation, page iv:]

These Covenants, (viz. the National Covenant and the Solemn League and Covenant) constituted the formal marriage relation between Jehovah and the United Kingdoms, and were the condition of admission to office and privilege. On account of them we were called Hephzibah, and Beulah, a land delighted in, and married to the Lord. [Isa. 62.4.] While we were faithful to God, he was good and gracious to us, and allowed us eminent times of refreshing from his presence. But when we forsook him, he also forsook us, and gave us up to counsels of our own, and we have vainly wandered ever since. By admitting the enemies of Reformation into places of power and trust, by the Public Resolutions;—by submitting to the usurpation of Oliver Cromwell, and by the unhappy restoration of Charles II. without any security in favours of the True Religion, our gold became dim, our most fine gold was changed.

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Q. Was the Solemn League contemplated and sworn as having an obligation on subsequent generations, like the National Covenant of Scotland?

[From J. W. Shaw:] The Solemn League itself asserts its lasting obligation. The Covenanters declare themselves bound to endeavor that the nations may "remain conjoined in a firm peace and union to all posterity." [Article 5th.] The General Assembly that proposed and adopted it, declare it to be "the most powerful means, by the blessing of God, for settling and preserving the Protestant religion with perfect peace, and propagating the same to other nations to all ages and generations." [Act 1643.08.17.]

Discussion Questions:

Q. 1. What are the ends or motivations for Covenanting specified in the Preamble?

A. They affirm that the glory of God and advancement of the kingdom of Jesus Christ are before their eyes. They also express concern for the honor and happiness of the king, as well as the liberty and peace of the nation.

Q. 2. What is the obligation embraced in the first article of the Covenant?

A. The preservation of the reformed religion and the reforming of the churches in England and Ireland are embraced as obligations in the first article.

Q. 3. How do the obligations to the then-present religious order of each nation differ in the first article?

A. In Scotland, which was already reformed in doctrine, worship, discipline, and government, it was accounted their obligation to preserve and defend the existing religious order; but in England and Ireland, it was accounted their obligation to reform the religion of the nations in doctrine, worship, discipline, and government.

Q. 4. What elements of the Christian religion and practice are encompassed by the first article?

A. The first article is very comprehensive, showing concern for doctrine, worship, discipline, and government; as well as unity in the Church of Christ, and living in Faith and Love.

Q. 5. What form of church government is explicitly rejected in the second article?

A. The second article explicitly rejects Prelacy in church government and explains this as consisting of a hierarchy.

Q. 6. Is the second article merely concerned with outward forms of religious activity and unity?

A. No. It shows a concern for "the power of godliness," a care to avoid association with sin, and a spiritual outlook on the consequences of sin among God's people.

Q. How are other unbiblical forms of church government, besides that which is named, implicitly rejected?

A. When the article speaks more generally, pointing at what is hurtful about Popery, Prelacy, Superstition, etc. it describes these as "contrary to sound doctrine and the power of godliness." Because all deviant forms of church government tend to shift the balance of governing power toward either the multitude of people, or toward officers and church courts in ways not appointed by King Jesus, these may be accounted as operating "contrary to sound doctrine and the power of godliness."

Q. 8. What is the qualification joined to preserving and defending the King's Majesty's person and authority in the third article?

A. Similar to the language of the Scottish National Covenant, their commitment to the King is qualified as "in the preservation and defense of the true Religion and Liberties of the Kingdom."

Q. 9. In the fourth article, what does this covenant oblige swearers to do about malignants who seek to hinder the reformation of religion or foster discord among those united by the covenant?

A. The fourth article obliges swearers to use all faithfulness in endeavoring to discover these malignants.

Q. 10. Was the fifth article of this Covenant positively furthered by the Incorporating Union of 1707?

A. The Incorporating Union of 1707 did not define a "blessed peace" between Scotland and England, but a subjection of Scottish power to "British" power and a final incapacitating of Covenanters to work Reformation in England. As such, the Incorporating Union must be seen as a counter-acting of the obligations of article 5, not a fulfilling of it.

Q. 11. Besides opposition to this Covenant, what else is considered sinful in the sixth article?

A. The sixth article of this covenant accounts indifference and neutrality to be sinful or "detestable" because it should not be found in a business which so much concerns the Glory of God.

Q. 12. The sixth article speaks of a resolution to promote, according to our power, the blessed union and conjunction of this covenant. What means should Covenanters have embraced as the reasonable effort to promote that blessed union and conjunction?

A. Covenants were expected to promote the covenant according to their power, (each man's ability,) and to suppress contrary efforts, or reveal them that others may suppress them. Personal constancy in Christ's religion, and daily prayer for the cause of his kingdom would be chief means both then and now for keeping this covenant.

Q. 13. With what does the conclusion of the Covenant begin?

A. The conclusion of the Solemn League and Covenant begins with confession of sin.

Q. 14. How does this Covenant describe success in its conclusion?

A. The success which they name as their "purpose" and "desire" consists of an amending of their personal lives, and a real reformation that will turn away God's displeasure. Finally, they are aiming and hoping that God will "establish these Churches and Kingdoms in Truth and Peace."

Q. 15. What enlarged prospect and hope is presented in the final part of the Solemn League and Covenant's conclusion?

A. They hope that their efforts will become an encouragement to other Christian Churches "to join in the same or like Association and Covenant," with an anticipation that this will serve to the enlargement of Christ's kingdom and the peace and tranquility of "Christian kingdoms and commonwealths."