

THE CHURCH AS A COVENANT COMMUNITY

Deuteronomy 5:1-21; 2 Corinthians 3:4-6, 12-18

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INTRODUCTION

Our understanding of the Church determines the shape of our Christian lives and the vision and passion of the ministries we offer to God. If we understand the Church as a human institution consisting of individuals choosing to join an organization governed by the laws of social interaction, we will see our Christian lives as private matters independent of the Church. Our ministries will be personal projects to fulfill our desires and goals. However, if we understand the Church to be first a people God has called into being, then God's vision for the Church becomes determinative for us.

The people of God have always known that the Church began with God. The New Testament Greek word for Church, *ekklesia*, means "the called out ones." The Old Testament equivalent described Israel as the people summoned into the presence of God to hear Him and to respond obediently to Him. In (Deuteronomy 4:10) God commanded Moses, "Assemble the people before me to hear my words so that they may learn to revere me as long as they live in the land and may teach them to their children". Deuteronomy 5 describes Moses and Israel obeying this command. The formation of ancient Israel as the people of God was neither Moses' nor Israel's idea. It was God's idea. God called Israel into being, and God calls the Church into being. When God called His people, He called them into a covenant community (Deuteronomy 5:2-5).

Deuteronomy 5:1-5 (NIV)

[5:1] Moses summoned all Israel and said: Hear, O Israel, the decrees and laws I declare in your hearing today. Learn them and be sure to follow them. [2] The LORD our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. [3] It was not with our fathers that the LORD made this covenant, but with us, with all of us who are alive here today. [4] The LORD spoke to you face to face out of the fire on the mountain. [5] (At that time I stood between the LORD and you to declare to you the word of the LORD, because you were afraid of the fire and did not go up the mountain.)...

Moses is trying to remind the children of Israel of the covenant God had made with them at Horeb. The actions of the covenant He made with the children of Israel were a foreshadow of the covenant He would establish at the cross on Calvary. There are some important things in these verses that show the establishment of that covenant.

- There were decrees and laws, "the decrees and laws I declare in your hearing today..." (Clarity dispels doubt, God makes following Him clear.)

- There was the command to learn them “Learn them...” (Education dispels misunderstanding and reveals real expectations rather than assumed, unspoken, or unspecified expectations.)
- There was the command to follow them, “be sure to follow them...” (Effort shows sincerity, it separates true believers from those who would seek the covenant for it's benefits only, and for their own self interests.)
- There was the establishment of authority, “The LORD spoke to you face to face...” (Not an authority handed down from some distant generation but a face to face encounter with almighty God.)

This was God's call to His people then, and it is His call to His people now. God moves first, not man, and when God moves there is no doubt. God calls us into being. His people, His church, His denominations, His local churches, and the individual members of His Kingdom, He calls them into being.

I. THE COVENANT COMMUNITY IS BASED ON HISTORY.

A. The opening words of the covenant appear in Deuteronomy 5:6: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.” The Old Testament covenant of community of Israel was based on the Exodus, God's gracious act of liberation from slavery. The people's crying to God in their bondage, the calling of Moses, the plagues and struggle with Pharaoh, the Passover lamb, the Exodus, the passing through the Red Sea, and God's provision through the wilderness wanderings **form** the story of God's redeeming of Israel out of slavery. Israelite worship would forever retell that marvelous story, creating for each new generation and awakening in each existing generation a commitment to live in faithful covenant relationship with God. The covenant community is based on history.

B. During the last supper Jesus described the cup as “the new covenant in [His] blood, which is poured out for you” (Luke 22:20). The New Testament covenant community of the Church is based on the gracious acts of the atoning death of Jesus and His resurrection. As Christians we celebrate the Lord's Supper, preach the cross of Christ, and worship on Sunday in celebration of the Resurrection as reminders of what God has done in history to make us His covenant community.

Deuteronomy 5:6: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.” Looking into the future God might have said; “I am the Lord your God, who put my Son on the cross for you, to bring you out of the slavery of sin.” The New Testament covenant community of the church is based on the cross. Remember, in the shadow of the cross on one side, is the life Jesus lived here on earth. God became a man, incarnation. In the shadow of the cross on the other side, is an empty tomb. That's the history we must never forget.

C. The Church of the Nazarene was called into being by God through His gracious acts in history a century ago. In many places around the world at that time, God was pouring out His Spirit on people and calling them to share His holy nature and His passion for a holy people. The Church of the Nazarene was formed by people who heard that call of God to holiness. Retelling the stories of how God raised us up to proclaim scriptural holiness creates in each new generation and awakens anew in existing generations the vision God desired to accomplish through us as a Church.

That is why we celebrate our Centennial. It is not to glorify the Church of the Nazarene or to boast of our achievements. We celebrate our Centennial to remember the way God entered human history and raised up our church to proclaim holiness around the world. Our remembering will stir anew in us the passion to accomplish what God desired to do through the people called Nazarenes.

II. THE COVENANT COMMUNITY LIVES WITH OBLIGATIONS.

A. Immediately following the reminder of the Exodus, God gave the Ten Commandments to Israel as His expectations for the Old Testament covenant community (Deuteronomy 5:7-21).

Deuteronomy 5:7-21 (NIV)

[7] "You shall have no other gods before me.

[8] "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. [9] You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, [10] but showing love to a thousand [generations] of those who love me and keep my commandments.

[11] "You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.

[12] "Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the LORD your God has commanded you. [13] Six days you shall labor and do all your work, [14] but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor the alien within your gates, so that your manservant and maidservant may rest, as you do. [15] Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.

[16] "Honor your father and your mother, as the LORD your God has commanded you, so that you may live long and that it may go well with you in the land the LORD your God is giving you.

[17] "You shall not murder.

[18] "You shall not commit adultery.

[19] "You shall not steal.

[20] "You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.

[21] "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife. You shall not set your desire on your neighbor's house or land, his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor."

Deuteronomy 5—26, collects the many commands that God expected Israel to obey in gratitude for the freedom He had provided. Some people who enter the covenant relationship of marriage are surprised to find that the marriage covenant comes with expectations and obligations. They should not be surprised. All covenant relationships have expectations and obligations.

B. Since we are saved by faith, not by works, are there no obligations in the Christian covenant community? The confusion arises over the difference between **how we enter** the new covenant community and **how we live in it**. We are saved by faith through grace, not by works, not by fulfilling obligations. We enter the new covenant community by faith alone. However, God has expectations for us as we live in that community. Jesus made those obligations clear to us in three ways.

First, obligation is summarized with the two Great Commandments—to love God wholeheartedly and to love our neighbors as ourselves (Matthew 22:36-40).

Matthew 22:36-40 (NIV)

[36] "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"

[37] Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' [38] This is the first and greatest commandment. [39] And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' [40] All the Law and the Prophets **hang** (to stand, to hang, to be suspended, CWS-NT) on these two commandments."

Think about a man standing at the edge of the great Grand Canyon. In places that great canyon is more than a mile deep. His arm is great and muscular. He is holding a chest that contains all of the law of God along with all of its interpretation and application as given by God's prophets and teachers. If he lets go or his arm fails the chest will crash to the bottom of the canyon and be washed away. If he holds tight, if his arm does not fail, the law of God remains in place. That is the picture of this Greek word hang. The arm that the law of God and all of its interpretations and applications is supported by, is the law of agape love. Our obligation is an obligation of Agape love. (Remember what agape love is? Agape love is the kind of love that is an exercise of the human will aligned with the divine will in deliberate choice, made without assignable cause, or passion, or feelings, or

affections, except that which lies in the nature of God Himself. (CWS-NT)

Second, obligation is summarized with the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18-20)

Matthew 28:18-20 (NIV)

[18] Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. [19] Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, [20] and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

The word obey in verse 20 is an indication of the method or behavior of the great commission. We are to obey and teach obedience, but obedience to what? Jesus said, the law of God. And the focus of the law of God is the law of Agape love.

Third, obligation is summarized with the transformation toward Christlikeness (2 Corinthians 3:18), which is the expectation of life in the new covenant community.

2 Corinthians 3:18 (NIV)

[18] And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

How do I move toward Christlikeness? I move toward Christlikeness by obedience. I move toward Christlikeness by Agape love.

C. Life in the covenant community of the Church of the Nazarene also has expectations. We remember not only our history but also our obligation to witness to the world through living the ethics of holiness. That is why we Nazarenes are committed to the Covenant of Christian Character and the Covenant of Christian Conduct. These general and specific rules express our understanding of what God asks of us in covenant community.

III. THE COVENANT COMMUNITY HAS CONSEQUENCES.

A. Because there are obligations in a covenant community, there are also consequences. The Old Testament relates consequences for obeying and failing to obey covenant obligations. Deuteronomy 5:16 identifies the consequences of obeying the fifth commandment: "so that you may live long and that it may go well with you in the land the LORD your God is giving you." Deuteronomy 27—28 lists the blessings that follow obedience and the curses that come with disobedience. The most severe consequence of disobedience would be for God to terminate the covenant relationship.

Probably one of the best indications of a person's participation in the covenant life is revealed in their actions. One of the hot topics of people from all cultures and generations rests with their possessions. The blessings and curses associated with the use of personal possessions are a good example of this.

Malachi 3:8-12 (NIV)

[8] "Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me. "But you ask, 'How do we rob you?' "In tithes and offerings. [9] You are under a curse—the whole nation of you—because you are robbing me. [10] Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it. [11] I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not cast their fruit," says the LORD Almighty. [12] "Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land," says the LORD Almighty.

The consequences for the covenant community of Israel had clear and understandable definitions. They were declared and taught so that there was no doubt about how God would respond to the Covenant Community. Those laws formed the foundation for the New Testament Covenant Community. The New Testament Covenant is not a new covenant that casts aside the old covenant; rather it is an expansion of the old, a coming to maturity. In the New Testament Covenant the Old Testament Covenant is brought toward further fulfillment or completion.

B. The New Testament covenant community of the Church also has consequences for obeying and failing to obey Christ's expectations. Failing to obey the law of love cripples the witness of the Church and hamstring the fulfilling of the Great Commission. Living out the expectations of Christ brings the Fruit of the Spirit and joyful participation in both worship and witness to the world.

Jesus made these consequences very clear.

Matthew 5:17-20 (NIV)

[17] "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. [18] I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. [19] Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. [20] For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

C. If we, as the Church of the Nazarene, are obedient to His call to propagate holiness of heart and life around the world, we may look forward to another century of significant ministry, growth, and success. If we forget who we are and why God raised us up, we will lose the joy of salvation and perhaps cease to exist before another hundred years ends.

CONCLUSION / INVITATION

God has called us into covenant relationship with himself. We are not just another human organization. The Church is a covenant community. That means we have a history that can revitalize our vision. It means we have obligations that call us to live in holiness. It means we face consequences that motivate us to be truly the people God is calling us to be. But we can never be a holy, covenant community unless we experience God's transforming work of making us holy. Are we willing to open our hearts to the Holy Spirit and ask Him, "Holy Spirit, what do You need to do in my heart to make me holy? I open myself to your design for me and for my church."

—Roger L. Hahn

(Modified by Rev. David G. Bostick)