



WHAT IS THE REFORMED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH?

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The Reformed Presbyterian Church is sadly an obscure church to most today. Depending on where one lives, it might be assumed that the RPC is a split-off from some more familiar denomination or else a brand-new church altogether. Growing up in Ireland, I remember some people thinking that the RPC split from either the Presbyterian Church in Ireland or the Free Presbyterian Church of Ulster. In fact, it split from neither. The same mistake can be made in Scotland with different denominations. Interestingly, there are others in Ireland, particularly older folk, who know the RPC as the Covenanters. “That’s the Covenanter church,” or “The Covenanters still sing the Psalms.” This nickname is quite helpful for us as we pursue an understanding of who we are and why we exist and can be a very simple way to answer others when they ask these questions. The Reformed Presbyterian Church is the church of the Covenanters.

To understand what the Reformed Presbyterian Church is, we must first familiarise ourselves with our past. Then we will examine what covenants are using the testimony of Scripture. Having done this we can then see in what sense today’s Reformed

Presbyterians are Covenanters. All of these considerations are important because if a denomination's reason for existence is not Scripturally founded then it is guilty of grave sin, remembering "that there should be no schism in the body" (1 Cor. 12:25).

Part 1: History

The Scottish Presbyterian family tree is both confusing and a tragic story. If you study church history, you can try to analyse the divisions:

- was it right for the Free Church to split from the Church of Scotland in 1843?
- was it right for the Free Presbyterian Church to split from the Free Church in 1893?
- was it right for the Associate Presbyterian Church to split from the Free Presbyterian Church in 1989?
- was it right for the Free Church (Continuing) to split from the Free Church in 2000?

I have my opinions on these events, and so might you. If you look at the "family tree" for the Reformed Presbyterian Church, however, you will immediately notice that it was not created from splits along the way. Our history goes back further, particularly to the Second Reformation. In order to understand our distinctives, let's go back one step further again to the

First Reformation in Scotland and look at three important dates.

1560 – The key year of the **First Reformation in Scotland**. Mary of Guise, the Roman Catholic Regent Queen, brought in a French army to help crush the Reformation. The French were defeated by the Protestant noblemen with the help of an army from Protestant England. The Reformation Parliament, then free to meet, abolished Roman Catholicism from the Church, repudiated Papal control, and approved a Protestant confession of faith (Scots Confession). The first General Assembly of the Reformed Church met and adopted the First Book of Discipline.

1581 – **The King's Confession**. At various times leading up to 1560, groups of Protestants had come together by covenant to dedicate themselves to the work of Reformation, often at times of crisis. It was natural then to make another covenant amid concerns that the attainments of the Reformation were being lost and that Scotland was relapsing into Roman Catholicism. This new covenant was called the King's Confession. Some enemies of Protestantism would have restored the Roman Catholic Mary, Queen of Scots, to the throne, longing for Popery to be fully restored. In response, a covenant was drawn up uniting the Protestants together to maintain the Reformation. James VI acceded to this Covenant (hence it was called

the King's Confession) and was ratified by the General Assembly. The full text of the King's Confession can be read in the appendix.

1618 – The Articles of Perth. Despite having signed the King's Confession, James VI was not true to his vows. The Scottish sovereign had gained the throne in England in 1603 and aligned himself more with its Episcopal religion. James became a despot and wanted to enforce his own rules on the Reformed Church in Scotland. His policy could be summarised in the words, "no bishop, no king," i.e. in order to maintain his rule as king he believed he needed to enforce episcopacy on the Kirk. He stripped back the freedom of the General Assembly by imprisoning or exiling faithful ministers and by ensuring the Assembly was made up of those who would vote for his policies. He forced five Roman Catholic/Episcopal practices on the church: (a) kneeling at the Lord's Supper, (b) private baptism, (c) private communion, (d) the observance of holy days, and (e) confirmation.

For the faithful in the Scottish Church, not only were these practices wrong intrinsically, not only were they enforced on the Church improperly, but further, they were practices which broke their covenant with God in 1581. There was another crisis situation. A Second Reformation would be necessary, or all would be lost.

In 1625, James VI of Scotland (James I of England) died and his son Charles I inherited the throne. Known as a tyrant, Charles would lose the English Civil War and be executed for high treason in 1649. His relationship with the Scottish Church was no better, especially as he considered himself to be supreme over it. In 1637, he forced the English Book of Common Prayer on the Scottish church without its consent. This liturgy contained Roman Catholic practices, expressly against the King's Confession and the Word of God.

NATIONAL COVENANT (1638)

Uniting together to resist this degeneration, the Scottish people signed the National Covenant in February 1638 in Greyfriars, Edinburgh, and then later throughout Scotland. As it was signed by "Noblemen, Barons, Gentlemen, Burgesses, Ministers, and Commons," it was truly a national and representative covenant. This Covenant had three sections:

- (i) A renewal of the King's Confession (1581) verbatim.
- (ii) A lengthy legal section, written by Archibald Johnston of Wariston, listing Acts of Parliament that opposed Roman Catholicism and supported the Reformation.
- (iii) A practical application to the present need. This section was written by Rev. Alexander Henderson and is reproduced in the appendix.

The National Covenant was not an act of rebellion against the King; rather it asserted the legal justification for the Reformed faith and worship and pledged the people to maintain it. The National Covenant upheld Christ's Kingship over the Church, free from tyranny.

In 1640, the General Assembly stated that any who had signed the National Covenant and later spoke against it would be disciplined for perjury. The following year, the Scottish Parliament made signing the National Covenant a requirement in order to take one's seat in Parliament. The Covenant was to be read at each Parliament's opening. There is no doubt that Scotland was a Covenanted people in both Church and State.

SOLEMN LEAGUE AND COVENANT (1643)

When civil war erupted in England the Parliamentarians looked to Scotland for support. The Scottish promised help on the condition that a religious Covenant be signed, known as the Solemn League and Covenant (SL&C).

This Covenant promised to preserve the Reformation in Scotland and to further it in England and Ireland. It aimed to bring about the closest conformity of doctrine and worship among the three nations. It was publicly sworn and signed by the House of Commons, the Westminster Assembly, the Commission of the

Scottish General Assembly, and the Convention of Estates of the Parliament of Scotland. Later, the common people would also sign it. Like the National Covenant of 1638, the signing of the SL&C produced a covenanted Church and State, however, now it included the kingdoms of England and Ireland too. The work of the Westminster Assembly was one part of striving to unite together the nations around Biblical doctrine and worship.

It is noteworthy that when King Charles II was crowned at Scone in 1651, he swore his “allowance and approbation” of the National and Solemn League and Covenants and that he would “prosecute the ends thereof.” Scottish defeat by Cromwell’s army led to Charles II fleeing abroad. After the death of Cromwell, Charles II was brought back to the throne, known as the Restoration, 1660. Charles II broke his vows and thus began the persecution of the Covenanters.

THE RESCISSORY ACT (1661)

By this Royal Act Charles II abolished all the Acts of Parliament since 1640, including many Reformed laws. In effect it was regression to Episcopacy at the stroke of a pen. Despite the fact that Charles II had acquiesced to the Covenants in 1651, he declared the Covenants unlawful and had them publicly burned.

The difficulty of the situation must be understood. Ministers who had sworn the Covenants had to choose between breaking their vows (and continuing in their parishes) or staying true to the Covenants, being ejected from their churches, and facing persecution. Members of Parliament who had sworn the Covenant had to choose between breaking the Covenants by the new requirement to swear allegiance to Charles II “over all persons and in all causes” (i.e. Church and State), or face persecution. The common people who had signed the Covenants also had to choose between an easier life through renouncing the Covenants or a life of uncertainty and danger by remaining loyal to the Covenanted cause.

It is very difficult for us to say what we would have done, but I hope it is clear to us what should be done. Thousands of Covenanters chose fidelity and so suffered terrible persecution from this time right up to the Revolution Settlement of 1688. The latter portion (1685-1688), under James VII (James II of England), is known as “the Killing Times” due to its brutality. It would be a false impression to think that all of the Church endured faithfully during this time. Many compromised and turned back. But others were ushered to a martyr’s crown because of their adherence to the Covenants.

“THE GLORIOUS REVOLUTION”

There was a need for peace to be restored to the kingdom which would come by the Revolution Settlement. But what would happen to the Covenants?

In 1688, William of Orange, a Dutch prince, invaded England. William was a nephew by marriage of King James II and had been invited by certain parliamentarians to take the throne and prevent a national crisis. William’s reign ended the bloodthirsty persecution, and a new era of tolerance was ushered in. The Revolution secured England and Scotland from the danger of a Roman Catholic monarch. In Scotland, the Church was reorganised as a Presbyterian church again. For the majority, this bloodless revolution was greeted favourably as it terminated the years of violence and turmoil. People were ready for settlement and in a way that is understandable. Although to much of the populace the Revolution Settlement was a moment of glory, to the faithful Covenanters it was a further test – would they “esteem the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt”? The Settlement was highly flawed. We will not look at all its deficiencies but will focus particularly on issues with the Covenants.

First, it should be noted that William was crowned King without any thought to him signing the Covenants. Scotland had required Charles II to swear allegiance to

the Covenants to rule over them yet did not require William to do the same. This omission denied that Scotland (and England and Ireland) were covenanted with God at all. The Solemn League and Covenant explicitly required the three kingdoms to labour for close uniformity in the religion of England and Ireland with that of Presbyterian Scotland. William, however, felt free to become Supreme Governor of an Episcopal church in England and establish a Presbyterian church in Scotland. He thus firmly closed the door to the prospect for uniformity of religion and any further reformation according to the Word of God.

Second, while William's policy was notably different from the Stewart kings (as he did not consider himself supreme over the church in Scotland), he did not revoke the Recissory Act which had abolished the Covenants as unlawful oaths. Thus, the Covenants were not restored to their rightful place in the newly resettled church. Prior to the persecution, adherence to the Covenants was essential to holding office in the church. But in the new church the covenant vows were ignored, indeed broken. The resettled church was legally established as the Church of Scotland but not on the principles achieved at the Second Reformation. For example, while ministers were to subscribe to Presbyterian government, they did not need to declare Episcopal government as unscriptural. This left room for Scottish curates who had undermined the

Reformation and supported the persecution to join the Church of Scotland as Presbyterian ministers, without change of convictions.

By accepting the Revolutionary Settlement, the Church of Scotland and the State failed to reform the church to its more Biblical position of the Second Reformation. They consented to the continued validity of the Rescissory Act - in other words, denying that Church and State must fulfil their vows to God. Since Charles II did not have the jurisdiction to erase the covenant obligations made before God (as he attempted to do in the Rescissory Act), the Church of Scotland and the Scottish Parliament should not have accepted William's establishment without a recognition of these ongoing obligations.

OPPOSITION TO THE REVOLUTION SETTLEMENT

In 1690, the Covenanters had only three ministers for somewhere between 7,000-10,000 souls, many of their ministers having been martyred. This group of Covenanters had become known as the United Societies. They had refused all compromise and had been persecuted for it. The United Societies petitioned the General Assembly to consider the matters for which they had contended during the persecution. The General Assembly refused, and the three Covenanter ministers compromised by joining the Revolution Church. This travesty left the United Societies without

ministers, yet resolute in their principles. In later years, one of the three ministers, Alexander Shields, deeply regretted his decision to enter the Revolution Church.

The United Societies were occasionally supplied with preaching from Rev. David Houston, an Irish Covenanter minister, but the bulk of his efforts were among the Covenanters across the Irish Sea. This meant that when the Scottish Societies met for services they were usually led by elders. In 1706, John Macmillan, a minister in the Church of Scotland, left that Church for the United Societies, having come to share their convictions. Once again, the Covenanters had a minister of their own to preach and administer the sacraments. A licentiate, John MacNeill, also joined the United Societies, but as there was only one minister and no Presbytery, he was not ordained. MacNeill continued preaching to the Covenanters until his death in 1732. In 1743, another minister, Thomas Nairn, applied to the United Societies. Now with two ministers, the Reformed Presbytery was constituted.

It is worth stressing that the Reformed Presbyterian Church did not separate from the Revolution Church of Scotland (as the other Scottish Presbyterian denominations have done), rather the United Societies refused to compromise in 1690 by joining an organisation that failed to recognise its vows before God. They had refused to compromise by the threat of

persecution, and they would continue to refuse to compromise even if it meant they would not have the material advantages that came through being recognised as the Established Church. As they stated in 1692, “Oh! how astonishing! The like not to be heard among the heathen, that these solemn vows and covenants should not only be scorned, derided, openly burnt, and made a capital crime to own them, by open and avowed adversaries, but also cast by and buried by the ministers of the church of Scotland, called Presbyterians.” The Reformed Presbyterian Church continues today bearing witness to the Church and nation’s covenantal obligations, praying that they would not remain buried away and forgotten.

Part 2: Theology of Covenants

While the historical facts have been examined, it is necessary to look theologically at covenants. We must test our long-held views by Scripture lest they be a groundless tradition.

WHAT IS A COVENANT?

William Symington defines a covenant as “a mutual engagement between two parties in which certain performances are stipulated on the one hand and certain promises on the other hand.”

A covenant, like an oath, appeals to God regarding one's sincerity and is to be taken with a consideration of "the weightiness of so solemn an act, and therein to avouch nothing but what he is fully persuaded is the truth" (WCF 22.3). Like a vow, a covenant is "made voluntarily, out of faith, and conscience of duty, in way of thankfulness for mercy received, or for the obtaining of what we want, whereby we more strictly bind ourselves to necessary duties" (WCF 22.6).

A covenant is an act of religious worship in which the worshipper vows obedience to God, while swearing adherence to the Redeemer's covenant mercies, as seen in Isaiah 56:6, "Also the sons of the foreigner who join themselves to the LORD, to serve Him, and to love the name of the LORD, to be His servants – everyone who keeps from defiling the Sabbath, and holds fast my covenant."

Although any individual may make a personal covenant with God, covenanting may also be a corporate act towards God, in which a group of people take the Lord as their God, vow to serve Him, and trust in His unmerited grace and blessing.

The light of nature shows that such covenanting is appropriate. Think of how after Jonah had been cast into the sea, the mariners, previously pagan yet having encountered the judgement and mercy of God, are led to make vows, "Then the men feared the Lord

exceedingly, and offered a sacrifice to the Lord and took vows.” (Jonah 1:16).

Is Covenanting Required?

It is one thing to say that covenanting is permissible, but is it required by God’s Word? Most definitely! We can see this from the commands of God, the example of the saints, and the promises in God’s Word.

1. THE COMMAND TO COVENANT

Old Testament Israel was undoubtedly in a covenant with God, which He appointed for Israel and into which they voluntarily entered. There were two parties (Jehovah and the Israelites). Stipulations were made and promises were offered. The Israelites entered into the covenant by joint concurrence which was renewed at various points through its history. Israel swore its covenant as part of its keeping of the first commandment to have no other gods besides the living and true God. We see the command to covenant in the following verses.

Deuteronomy 10:20: You shall fear the LORD your God; you shall serve Him, and to Him you shall hold fast, and take oaths in His name.

Deuteronomy 29:1: These are the words of the covenant which the LORD commanded Moses to make with the

children of Israel in the land of Moab, besides the covenant which He made with them in Horeb.

2 Kings 17:38: And the covenant that I have made with you, you shall not forget, nor shall you fear other gods.

2 Chronicles 30:8: Now do not be stiff-necked, as your fathers were, but yield yourselves to the LORD; and enter His sanctuary, which He has sanctified forever, and serve the LORD your God, that the fierceness of His wrath may turn away from you.

Psalms 2:10-12: Now therefore, be wise, O kings; be instructed, you judges of the earth. Serve the LORD with fear and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest He be angry, and you perish in the way, when His wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all those who put their trust in Him.

The covenant made by Israel was **ecclesiastical** and **national**, binding the institutions of church and state. Israel was the visible church and a nation. This proposition is easily demonstrated by looking at those involved at times of covenant renewal.

All of you stand today before the LORD your God: your leaders and your tribes and your elders and your officers, all the men of Israel, your little ones and your wives – also the stranger who is in your camp...that you may enter into covenant with the LORD your God. (Deuteronomy 10:12)

We make a sure covenant and write it; our leaders, our Levites, and our priests seal it. (Nehemiah 9:38)

In these two examples the covenant was not made by the church alone. The church was certainly present, but also the nation of Israel (or Judah in the latter case), a body politic. Therefore, covenanting was required of Israel both religiously and judicially.

Some would say that covenanting is a duty for Old Testament times, but now no longer appropriate. Certainly, some laws no longer bind in the New Testament age. The ceremonial laws have been fully abrogated because they are gloriously fulfilled in Christ (WCF 19.3). The judicial laws were Israel's constitutional laws and therefore expired with Israel. The laws of another country cannot bind our country and vice versa. Yet there are general principles of the judicial laws which would be suitable for our nation nowadays (WCF 19.4). The duty of covenanting, however, is neither part of the ceremonial nor judicial laws. It is part of the moral law, and therefore perpetually binding, indeed even more so under Christ, the Mediatorial King, in the Gospel (WCF 19.5). It is the duty of both church and state to submit to Christ by covenanting with Him. Do we as Christians not long for the nations to kiss Christ (Psalm 2:12), to turn to Him and worship (Psalm 22:27), and to call Him blessed

(Psalm 72:17)? We sing these requests – do we mean them?

While some argue that covenanting is not applicable to the New Testament church or to governments today, the burden of proof lies with them. Can they just make a moral obligation disappear by their say so? A command can only be abrogated by the same authority that originally commanded it. A corporal cannot rescind a sergeant major's orders. It takes authority to bind, and it takes authority to loose. Since God ordained the duty of covenanting in the Old Testament, only God can abrogate it in the New Testament. Yet He does not. There is no passage that speaks of the impropriety of churches or nations covenanting. The command of God continues from Old to New Testament. The New Testament speaks of Christ as Head of the Church and King of kings. The expectation for covenanting is surely heightened. We even see allusions to covenanting in passages such as Romans 6:13 and 2 Corinthians 8:5.

Public corporate covenanting is commanded in the Word of God. It is a duty of us today.

2. EXAMPLES OF COVENANTING

How gracious is our God that He did not only give us a book of laws, statutes, judgements, and ordinances! He has reinforced these lessons with many historical

accounts, including both failures and victories in the Christian life. “Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition...” (1 Cor. 10:11).

We can learn a lot about covenanting from precedents in the Biblical narrative. In fact, several of the high points for Israel were at times of covenanting with the Lord. These accounts are not merely laid down as history but are for admonition to today’s duty.

(A) UNDER MOSES (DEUTERONOMY 29)

In this chapter, Moses renews the covenant with the people of Israel in Moab, “besides the covenant which He made with them in Horeb.” The circumstances favour covenant renewal because the people are on the cusp of entering the Promised Land. Notice how the covenant is grounded in the gracious salvation of God (v2-8). “**Therefore** keep the words of this covenant, and do them, that you may prosper in all that you do.” (v9). When a church or nation covenants with God it is a response to grace; not a legalistic endeavour to earn merit.

Why was it necessary? Everyone is subject to the law of the Creator whether they covenant or not. But it is by covenanting that a people formally take God to be their God, “that He may establish you today as a people for Himself, and that He may be God to you” (v13). Notice

who took the covenant, “All of you stand today before the Lord your God: your leaders and your tribes and your elders and your officers, all the men of Israel, your little ones and your wives—also the stranger who is in your camp” (v10-11).

(B) UNDER JOSHUA (JOSHUA 24)

When Israel possessed the land, the covenant was renewed under Joshua at Shechem. Once again, the vows are grounded in the Gospel, particularly the signal act of salvation in the Old Testament – the Exodus – but more recent acts of God’s grace are also added as motivation to covenant with Him.

In response, the people vow to serve the Lord and solemnly reaffirm it, “No, but we will serve the Lord!” (v21). Now let us be clear: if Israel had not covenanted at this stage in Shechem, and had gone on to disobey God, they would have been guilty. But they renew the covenant nonetheless, binding themselves voluntarily to obedience. Fresh instances of God’s grace (or our failures) require renewal of our covenants.

(C) UNDER ASA (2 CHRONICLES 15)

As one of the reforming kings, Asa was used by God to turn Judah from apostasy back towards God. When a nation needs reformation, it is right to solemnly covenant to do this work. Asa hears the encouragement and sobering warning of the Lord by

His prophet Azariah, “The Lord is with you while you are with Him. If you seek Him, He will be found by you; but if you forsake Him, He will forsake you” (v2). He is exhorted to “be strong and do not let your hands be weak, for your work shall be rewarded!” (v7). Asa assembles the people to covenant with God, but notice it is not just those from his domain in Judah, but also the large numbers who came over from the northern kingdom of Israel (v9). The unity that these believers would experience was not merely in a common history or language, but in a common faith, particularly in a mutual covenant with the Lord. Such a threefold cord is not easily broken. If we are to have unity among the Reformed churches today, it should be on the foundation of solemn covenant.

“And all Judah rejoiced at the oath, for they had sworn with all their heart and sought Him with all their soul; and He was found by them, and the Lord gave them rest all around” (v15).

Notice how the covenant was further renewed under Jehoida (2 Kings 11:17) and Josiah (2 Kings 23:3). In the first case, since God removed a wicked ruler from over His people they band together in solemn covenant, led by Jehoida, the High Priest. In the second case, in response to the rediscovery of the Law, young King Josiah leads the nation in their vows, “and all the people took a stand for the covenant.” See also

Nehemiah 9-10 for the covenant renewal after the return from exile, particularly see how confession of sin is a proper component of covenanting.

In conclusion, these examples give us a taste for the practice of covenanting in the Old Testament church and nation of Israel. We can summarise what we have seen: (i) the basis of covenanting is grounded in the Gospel, not a legalistic work; (ii) the occasion of covenanting is at key moments of history, before reformation, after God's acts of deliverances, in response to rediscovering the Word, etc; (iii) the nature of covenanting is to be taken willingly, by the full extent of church and nation, with confession of sin, a time of great joy, etc.

3. PROMISES ABOUT COVENANTING

Although the duty of covenanting is less clearly seen in the New Testament, Scripture is not silent about covenanting in New Testament times, rather it gives us predictions of times in which public covenanting will occur. Let us look at two such passages.

A) Isaiah 19:18

In that day five cities in the land of Egypt will speak the language of Canaan and swear by the LORD of hosts; one will be called the City of Destruction.

This prophecy refers to Gospel days (“in that day”) when the news of the Messiah will go out abroad. Five Egyptian cities, the enemies of God’s people, will speak the language of Canaan – not by learning Hebrew (i.e. not a prophecy about Gentile ministry students!) but by learning a spiritual language (one of repentance, faith, and that endeavours to magnify Christ – a language learned through a new birth). These cities (not representing simply Egyptians in general, but cities officially) swear by the Lord of Hosts, or covenant with Him. Does this prophecy not encourage us to expect enemy cities and nations to be turned by God’s grace and kiss the Son?

B) Jeremiah 50:5

“In those days and in that time,” says the Lord, “the children of Israel shall come, they and the children of Judah together; with continual weeping they shall come, and seek the Lord their God. They shall ask the way to Zion, with their faces toward it saying, “Come let us join ourselves to the LORD in a perpetual covenant that will not be forgotten.”

In one sense, this prophecy speaks of the return of the exiles from Babylon, yet there is more to it. It speaks of the Gospel age when the Gentiles will make their way to Jerusalem, not physically but spiritually, by covenanting with God forevermore. If this prophecy can be taken for the bringing in of the fullness of the

Gentiles to the church, then it is right that this New Testament time period is one characterised by voluntary covenanting amongst the Gentiles, just as ancient Israel did in the Old Testament.

In conclusion, the Law gives us the warrant for covenanting, the historical books set before us how covenanting is to be done, and the prophets give us the hope for the New Testament era that there shall be covenanting. Taking together our historical study (Reformed Presbyterians have consistently stood “For Christ’s Crown and Covenant”, i.e. the National Covenant and Solemn League and Covenant) and our theological study (covenanting is warranted by the Scriptures), we are left with the question – are these historical covenants still relevant to Scotland today?

We may think ideally for a moment. Why would Christians not wish, by God’s grace, to draw closer to Him and publicly pay homage to King Jesus? Surely our desire ought to be that the Body of Christ would do the same, promising to be faithful to her only Head. Would it not also be a wonderful thing if our land would “kiss the Son” legally and constitutionally? Since Christ is over both institutions of Church and nations, they should submit formally to Messiah the Prince.

The National Covenant (1638) and the Solemn League and Covenant (1643) are salient examples of precisely that. These compacts were signed by ecclesiastical and

civil leaders, recognising that although Church and State are distinct, both are under Christ and ought to aim for His glory, particularly in Reformation. The question we now consider is whether these historical Covenants have any contemporary relevance.

The Reformed Presbyterian Church has long testified that they do, even as a lone voice at times. Historically, we have spoken of a “descending obligation” of the Covenants; in other words, our generation is bound by the same vows even though they were taken in the 17th Century. All office-bearers of the Reformed Presbyterian Church vow that they believe this to be true. Let us substantiate this claim.

1. DO COVENANTS HAVE A “DESCENDING OBLIGATION?”

A covenant is in effect as long as the two parties live. Since we are referring to pledges made with the Eternal One, it is evident that He is still the same. The vows are not broken from His side. What of the other party? The other party is human, by nature finite. If the covenant is a personal covenant between an individual and God, it cannot bind posterity. It would be ludicrous to suggest that marriage vows tie children to their parent’s marriage. Likewise, the obligation of ecclesiastical membership vows do not pass on to your children – they must profess their faith and take these vows themselves. But it is not always the case that

covenants are individual. Many covenants are social, taken by a church or nation. It can be readily evidenced that the human party on one side of the covenant lasts longer than a generation and therefore the covenantal responsibility must continue also.

The very first covenant was made with Adam and “in him to his posterity” (WCF 7.2). The duties of this contract abide – perfect and personal obedience. This moral imperative has descended to all children of Adam, and thus by nature we have all stood guilty of the breach of this covenant and under its penalty.

What of the Lord’s covenant made with Israel in which they promised obedience to their God as they adhered to His grace? The onus to obey the covenant descended from age to age, and not merely to individuals who made the vows for themselves. As one generation passed away, the next generation was obliged to obey what their fathers had sworn and to adhere to the grace of Jehovah. If the generation was unfaithful, then they were said to have broken the covenant. It is only possible to be guilty of breaking a covenant made by their fathers if they were party to the covenant, regardless of the fact that they did not individually swear to it (Deuteronomy 29:25, Jeremiah 11:10).

In other words, the requirement to obey the covenant descended to each generation so that they were just as bound to obey as their ancestors were. The reason was

that **the nation and church of Israel** were bound by the covenant, not just Moses' generation. Because Israel continued to exist constitutionally from one generation to the next, Israel's covenant obligations were perpetuated also.

Such a principle is clearly seen today in political treaties made generations ago that have a sustained effect for many years. If our Government were to declare war, then our country would be at war. Even if there were to be a subsequent General Election and a brand-new Government constituted, the country remains at war. Correspondingly, debts contracted by our nation in the past cannot be evaded in the present simply by arguing the liability belongs to those who went before us. A Biblical example of such a political treaty can be seen in the covenant made with the Gibeonites in Joshua 9:15 and yet the obligation continued many generations later even to Saul who was guilty of their bloodshed (2 Samuel 21:1).

As William Symington says, "The descending obligation of covenants is thus no novel, unheard of peculiar principle, but one of old-standing- a principle which has been acted upon in every age, in things both sacred and common, and which is even now an established law in civil jurisprudence."

Lest there be any confusion, any vows taken to perform something sinful can never bind subsequent

generations, but rather should be repented of. Nevertheless, we are discussing morally right covenants taken by church and commonwealth before the Eternal One. Since these institutions continue to exist as moral entities, remaining under Christ, therefore “Make vows to the Lord your God, and pay them” (Psalm 76:11a).

2 WHAT ABOUT THE NATIONAL COVENANT AND THE SOLEMN LEAGUE AND COVENANT?

We have looked previously at the circumstances of these Covenants. In each there were two parties, on the one hand the true God of the Bible and on the other Scotland and the three Kingdoms respectively. Both Covenants have stipulations and promises, they are vows of obedience that swear adherence to the Covenant of Grace. Both Covenants are public and social covenants, entered into with “joint concurrence.” These Covenants, following the requirements of the Lord’s commands, are according to the examples of Old Testament Israel and are a partial fulfilment of the prophecies made of the New Testament period.

Do these Covenants have any relevance today? Surely more than just relevance! These Covenants have a continuing obligation for as long as the moral persons within the Covenants exist. The National Covenant continues to bind the Kirk, throne, and parliament to

the worthy cause of promoting and maintaining the Reformation. The Solemn League and Covenant likewise binds the three kingdoms (Scotland, England/Wales, and Ireland) to these same ends.

Just because we have lamentably broken “the covenant made with our fathers,” it does not remove our obligation, but rather makes it imperative that we return to the Lord, that he might return to us.

Practical Application

The Reformed Presbyterian Church stands “For Christ’s Crown and Covenant.” We are the only denomination in Scotland to do so. But how do we apply these principles today? What is the most consistent Covenanter response to the challenges of the 21st Century? A principled Covenanter must not be someone aware of our bygone days yet doing nothing about it. I suggest a four-strand approach.

1. FERVENT PRAYER

There will only be a return to the Lord in church and nation if the Holy Spirit Himself reforms and revives His people, and therefore we need to be a praying people. We must pray penitently for our breach of covenant, but also hopefully and expectantly that the gracious God would fulfil His promises. “‘Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit,’ Says the Lord of hosts.” (Zechariah 4:6)

2. FAITHFUL PREACHING

The vast majority of society has no thought of God, never mind the Covenants to Him which we are breaking. Most will never even have learned of them in school. The people must be informed through soul-searching, evangelical preaching. “Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God.” (Romans 10:17)

It is simplistic to think that a straightforward Gospel message is enough, perhaps sprinkled with some theological teaching. There must be a faithful preaching of the whole council of God, including all the doctrines of Scripture. Since oaths and vows and the doctrine of the civil magistrate are part of the system of doctrine in the Westminster Standards (a reflection of the fact that these doctrines are first in the Scriptures), a robust political theory is part of the remit of the pulpit. Of course, it should not become overwhelming, but rather one doctrine among many. Unless there is preaching on these things how will there be a turning back to the Lord?

“Then the Lord said to me, ‘Proclaim all these words in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem, saying: ‘Hear the words of this covenant and do them.’” (Jeremiah 11:6)

3. POLITICAL DISSENT WHEN NECESSARY

As Covenanters we recognise that political involvement is important and that nations have a duty to confess Christ. But there are areas where the privilege of political activity may involve a compromise of our principles, particularly an undermining of the Covenants we have made. I would suggest that in these areas, the best response is a principled political dissent. I do not mean a disinterestedness in politics, a retreat and hide mentality, or an attitude that we are too holy to meddle in these affairs. Rather political dissent involves a sacrifice of a right, e.g. voting, for the sake of higher principle, e.g. the honour of Christ.

Some take the view that Christians should always vote for the lesser of two evils, but by so doing a Christian actively votes for wickedness, even if less sinful than the alternative. We should only vote for Christian candidates who fear the Lord. But the candidate's individual merits (or his party's manifesto) are not the only factors when voting. The parliamentary system as a whole should be examined. When this is done carefully, it becomes apparent that political dissent is the most consistent action. Why is that the case?

While the United Kingdom does not have a written Constitution, it does have a series of acts of Parliament and conventions that have evolved through the years. Of importance to our discussion is the Bill of Rights

(1689), adopted after the “Glorious Revolution.” We ought to remember that Scotland, England, and Ireland were, by merit of signing the Covenants in 1638 and 1643, constitutionally obliged to further the ends of the Reformed cause ecclesiastically and civilly. Just because the Covenants were later burned publicly, outlawed during the Persecution, and (intentionally) forgotten at the Revolution does not remove their propriety. The Covenants had been part of the Law and Order of the Kirk and the most important constitutional document of the State. Regrettably, a nation that had submitted to Christ its King, legally sought to dethrone Him and has thus continued in its rebellion to the present day.

At the Revolution Settlement, the Covenants were scandalously omitted from the Constitution of both the newly established Church of Scotland and State, and so, with a heavy heart, the Covenanters (later the Reformed Presbyterian Church) dissented. The sacrifice of the martyrs for the Crown rights of Christ has since been reinterpreted to have been for “civil liberty,” and so the pages of that era of the history book were closed without learning its lessons. Vows are weighty, solemn, and binding. Where they are broken or where circumstances require us to break them the only course open to us is to dissent so that we do not become complicit in the sin.

What circumstances would compel us to break our vows? There is a complex connection between the voter and the current (Covenant-breaking) constitution. The relationship between MP and voter is one of representation. We vote for the MP to take decisions in Parliament in our place. In order for him to do that, under the current British Constitution, he must take an Oath of Allegiance to the Queen. Allegiance to a Crown is not inherently wrong, but there is something about our current system that muddies the waters. Unfortunately, the monarch has taken an Oath of Coronation, which not only stands in sharp opposition to the Solemn League and Covenant but rather requires the breaking of it. How can we (through our representative) pledge allegiance to what goes against Christ?

Let us look at one part of the Oath of Coronation: *“Will you to the utmost of your power maintain the Laws of God and the true profession of the Gospel? Will you to the utmost of your power maintain in the United Kingdom the Protestant Reformed Religion established by law? Will you maintain and preserve inviolably the settlement of the Church of England, and the doctrine, worship, discipline, and government thereof, as by law established in England? And will you preserve unto the Bishops and Clergy of England, and to the Churches there committed to their charge, all such rights and privileges, as by law do or shall appertain to them or any of them?”*

The Oath demands maintaining “the Protestant Reformed Religion established by law.” This sounds like wonderful language until we realise that the form of religion established by law is one that has rescinded the legal pledges taken before God which is a breaking of the third commandment. It is a religion (established by law) which is inferior to an earlier legal establishment of religion and could only take its place by the violent overthrow of the truth. Furthermore, the Oath enjoins the Queen to “maintain and preserve inviolably” elements of the Church of England that no Presbyterian ever could wish to be preserved, and indeed countless Covenanters died rather than accept. This Oath compels the Crown to maintain an Erastian, semi-Roman Catholic institution. The Covenants on the other hand call for rulers to do all in their power to reform the Church of England, that it be Reformed and Presbyterian.

An MP taking an Oath of Allegiance pledges, “*I... swear by Almighty God that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth, her heirs and successors, according to law. So help me God.*” The allegiance here is to her as Head of State which office she only holds on the basis of her Oath of Coronation. The allegiance sworn is one that aids and abets the Sovereign in making legislation that forsakes the Covenants.

We must remember that members of the Scottish Parliament at the Second Reformation swore the National Covenant and were not permitted to sit unless they did. Today, MPs swear (or they can affirm) an Oath of Allegiance and are not permitted to sit unless they do. It is not simply that we miss the old ways and think they were better. Rather, if we analyse the situation, we see that the contemporary Oath goes against the former Covenants by allegiance to the Queen (and thus her Oath of Coronation) and by a recognition of a British Constitution which has rescinded the Covenants. The whole system is broken because it is based on a broken constitution.

I could not take the Oath of Allegiance and therefore I dare not ask a representative to take it in my stead. Therefore, I do not vote for those who would take an Oath built on the ruins of the Covenants, but rather spoil my vote to show my dissent. I would dearly love to vote as politics interests me. I bear no hatred towards my country (nor its Queen) but seek its welfare. However, since a legitimate vow “binds to performance, although to a man’s own hurt” (WCF 22.4), there seems to be no way to vote consistent with Covenanter principles.

It may all sound quite confusing. Indeed! Is it just academic theory? No! If it were just an assessment of history no longer pertinent it would be one thing. We

are discussing something of serious weight to the welfare of today's society, since, as we saw last time, there is a descending obligation of responsibility to us. Since the Covenants are still binding, it is worth contemplating how we uphold them.

4. WITNESS-BEARING

The previous point shows a negative application of our principles: political dissent so that we do not further the treachery of our land. But it is not enough to know what not to do; we must also think of what we may positively do to turn around the situation. We should positively put our case to those in authority over us. How many think-tanks and lobby groups there are around Westminster and Holyrood that have such influence on governmental policy. It is clear that some groups, such as the LGBT lobby, have great resources at their disposal and thus have a disproportional influence on policy.

Reformed Presbyterians should see that we have the answer to our political dilemma. We have a real treasure, doctrines which have been entrusted to us by our forefathers yet forgotten to society through the years. We should take pains to call our MPs and MSPs to account.

In 1661, Rev. James Guthrie became one of the first of the martyrs to die for adherence to Christ and

Covenant. He was sentenced to be hanged for this faith. Guthrie's last words, addressed to all who witnessed his execution, are worthy of note, "The Covenants! The Covenants! They shall yet be Scotland's reviving."

Appendix

THE KING'S CONFESSION (1581)

We all and every one of us under-written, protest, That, after long and due examination of our own consciences in matters of true and false religion, we are now thoroughly resolved in the truth by the word and Spirit of God: and therefore we believe with our hearts, confess with our mouths, subscribe with our hands, and constantly affirm, before God and the whole world, that this only is the true Christian faith and religion, pleasing God, and bringing salvation to man, which now is, by the mercy of God, revealed to the world by the preaching of the blessed evangel; and is received, believed, and defended by many and sundry notable kirks and realms, but chiefly by the kirk of Scotland, the King's Majesty, and three estates of this realm, as God's eternal truth, and only ground of our salvation; as more particularly is expressed in the Confession of our Faith, established and publickly confirmed by sundry acts of Parliaments, and now of a long time hath been openly professed by the King's Majesty, and whole body of this realm both in burgh and land. To the which Confession and Form of Religion we willingly agree in our conscience in all points, as unto God's undoubted truth and verity, grounded only upon his written word. And therefore we abhor and

detest all contrary religion and doctrine; but chiefly all kind of Papistry in general and particular heads, even as they are now damned and confuted by the word of God and Kirk of Scotland. But, in special, we detest and refuse the usurped authority of that Roman Antichrist upon the scriptures of God, upon the kirk, the civil magistrate, and consciences of men; all his tyrannous laws made upon indifferent things against our Christian liberty; his erroneous doctrine against the sufficiency of the written word, the perfection of the law, the office of Christ, and his blessed evangel; his corrupted doctrine concerning original sin, our natural inability and rebellion to God's law, our justification by faith only, our imperfect sanctification and obedience to the law; the nature, number, and use of the holy sacraments; his five bastard sacraments, with all his rites, ceremonies, and false doctrine, added to the ministration of the true sacraments without the word of God; his cruel judgment against infants departing without the sacrament; his absolute necessity of baptism; his blasphemous opinion of transubstantiation, or real presence of Christ's body in the elements, and receiving of the same by the wicked, or bodies of men; his dispensations with solemn oaths, perjuries, and degrees of marriage forbidden in the word; his cruelty against the innocent divorced; his devilish mass; his blasphemous priesthood; his profane sacrifice for sins of the dead and the quick; his

canonization of men; calling upon angels or saints departed, worshipping of imagery, relics, and crosses; dedicating of kirks, altars, days; vows to creatures; his purgatory, prayers for the dead; praying or speaking in a strange language, with his processions, and blasphemous litany, and multitude of advocates or mediators; his manifold orders, auricular confession; his desperate and uncertain repentance; his general and doubtful faith; his satisfaction of men for their sins; his justification by works, opus operatum, works of supererogation, merits, pardons, peregrinations, and stations; his holy water, baptizing of bells, conjuring of spirits, crossing, saying, anointing, conjuring, hallowing of God's good creatures, with the superstitious opinion joined therewith; his worldly monarchy, and wicked hierarchy; his three solemn vows, with all his shavelings of sundry sorts; his erroneous and bloody decrees made at Trent, with all the subscribers or approvers of that cruel and bloody band, conjured against the kirk of God. And finally, we detest all his vain allegories, rites, signs, and traditions brought in the kirk, without or against the word of God, and doctrine of this true reformed kirk; to the which we join ourselves willingly, in doctrine, faith, religion, discipline, and use of the holy sacraments, as lively members of the same in Christ our head: promising and swearing, by the great name of the LORD our GOD, that we shall continue in the obedience of the doctrine and

discipline of this kirk, and shall defend the same, according to our vocation and power, all the days of our lives; under the pains contained in the law, and danger both of body and soul in the day of God's fearful judgment.

And seeing that many are stirred up by Satan, and that Roman Antichrist, to promise, swear, subscribe, and for a time use the holy sacraments in the kirk deceitfully, against their own conscience; minding hereby, first, under the external cloak of religion, to corrupt and subvert secretly God's true religion within the kirk; and after-ward, when time may serve, to become open enemies and persecutors of the same, under vain hope of the Pope's dispensation, devised against the word of God, to his greater confusion, and their double condemnation in the day of the Lord Jesus: we therefore, willing to take away all suspicion of hypocrisy, and of such double dealing with God, and his kirk, protest, and call the Searcher of all hearts for witness, that our minds and hearts do fully agree with this our Confession, promise, oath, and subscription: so that we are not moved with any worldly respect, but are persuaded only in our conscience, through the knowledge and love of God's true religion imprinted in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, as we shall answer to him in the day when the secrets of all hearts shall be disclosed.

And because we perceive, that the quietness and stability of our religion and kirk doth depend upon the safety and good behaviour of the King's Majesty, as upon a comfortable instrument of God's mercy granted to this country, for the maintaining of his kirk, and ministration of justice amongst us; we protest and promise with our hearts, under the same oath, hand-writ, and pains, that we shall defend his person and authority with our goods, bodies, and lives, in the defence of Christ, his evangel, liberties of our country, ministration of justice, and punishment of iniquity, against all enemies within this realm or without, as we desire our God to be a strong and merciful defender to us in the day of our death, and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ; to whom, with the Father, and the Holy Spirit, be all honour and glory eternally. Amen.

EXTRACT FROM THE NATIONAL COVENANT (1638)

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.

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, allurements, 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.

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.

