

Covenant of Love
July 24, 2011
Lynchburg, Virginia
Genesis 1:26-31

EXHORDIUM

Today, I am beginning an eight sermon series on the covenant. Those sermons will be the Covenant of Love, Fall and Proto-Evangel, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, New Covenant in Jesus Christ and then finally, The Covenant in the Eschaton.

If you have been going to this Church for a while, you have heard the word covenant a lot. You probably really noticed it because you may have got through the rest of your life rarely hearing this word. Even at a wedding, you may have heard about the bond of marriage not the covenant of marriage. But at Providence and in CREC or Reformed circles, you cannot go a day without someone referring to the covenant. We have Covenant Renewal Worship, The Covenant of Creation, marriage Covenant, Covenant Baptism, Covenant Communion, Covenant Community, Covenant Promises. It seems we can use the term covenant to describe nearly every relational situation. Do we have covenant on the brain? Or, are the ideas and practical outworkings of covenants truly essential to the life of the Christian?

Well, obviously, I think Covenants are essential. And perhaps better than saying that they are essential, we should understand them to be the fundamental way in which we relate to God and to one another.

Covenant- the essential elements of a covenant are 1. contracting parties, 2. the promise and 3. the condition. But we can have this without understanding the nature of love in that relationship. In order to understand covenants rightly, we must incorporate love.

This is true in the covenant within the Godhead and it flows from this to all other covenants. Without the element of love, then all such covenants are bound to fail. Conversely, this is also why the failure of any covenant is a breach of love.

And this is the aspect of covenant that I want to focus on today, love. It is my hope that if we begin to understand the nature of covenants properly, we will then understand our relationship to God and to one another in a

better way. My hope is that this will produce in us a deeper and more compelling motivation for obedience. These sermons will be somewhat theological but I hope that we see that such theology is intensely practical.

If we understand covenants as merely obedience, doing the right thing, or bringing sanctions for doing the wrong thing, then we miss the heart of the matter. However, if we begin to understand how the covenant functions as a boundary of a love relationship, then we have made tremendous headway in how we function together as God's covenant people.

EXEGESIS

Gen 1:26-31 26 And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth.

God created man in His image. If we think about this in terms of covenant, we can see that what applies to God applies to man. God is already in a relationship before He creates man. There is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They are three distinct persons and they are in complete unity with one another. The Father loves the Son. The Son is in submission to the Father. The Holy Spirit flows from and submits to both Father and Son. Although there three persons, there is no conflict within the Trinity. The three persons are all in a relationship that is bound by mutual love.

When we relate this to creation, we see that man was created to image God. He was created in the image of God, that is he reflected the Triune nature and he was to continue to do so in his relations with other creatures, the animals, the earth and other human beings, including spouse and children.

And this was all to be done out of a motivation of love for God and love for all that God had created that was good. This helps us to see in a larger way why the Fall is so monumental. We tend to think in terms of Adam failing a small prohibition: Don't eat from this tree. But the Fall was much more than that. It was an act of complete disloyalty, a failure of monumental proportions to the higher law, the law of love. It was at its essence, a flagrant infidelity.

27 So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.

I am thankful that the Scripture is worded this way. We see that not only was man, or men, created in the image of God but so was woman, or women. God shows us that the woman also fully carries the image of God. Since this is the case, it is an interesting aside that Eve's initial failure did not immediately destroy the image of God in her, or presumably her eventual offspring. God is a covenantal God and Eve broke the covenant. But God has also set the world with proper authorities, federal representatives. Eve was the mother of all living but she was not the federal head of all living. When Eve sinned, there was still a way out for mankind. It was not until Adam sinned, that mankind fell.

This reveals the gracious character of God. He is not interested in merely having His creatures do what is right. He does want them to do right. He gives commands. But there is a sneaking propensity for mankind to do what is right in order to commend oneself to God. This is backwards. We should desire to do what is right because we love God and want to please Him. It is a desire to please God that should motivate us not the desire to put ourselves forward as worthy of God's favor. His favor comes to us and then we respond in love to Him. It is important that we get the order right.

When we sin, we should not feel bad because God showed up and caught us. Or, even that we somehow lost our reward. That is true but what should cause us to feel bad, a sense of conviction if you will, is that we have disappointed the One that loves us and that we love. That is a much higher motivator to do right. In fact, the other kind, motivation out of list checking, is very weak indeed.

Think in terms of your children. Do they do their work because you hold the law, the stick, the spanking spoon over them? Or because they do not want to displease the parents. Or, to put it positively, they do the work because they want to please?

This is why it is such a shame when parents are really hard to please. If the child is seeking the pleasure of the parent, as all children are, then they are following the right motivation. It is a great shame for a parent to be displeased in such a situation.

What about Cain and Abel? Wasn't it the case that God was not pleased with Cain? Yes, but why? Cain was envious of Abel. His desire was not to please God but rather to have God more pleased with him than with his brother. And the truth was that Cain, in fact, hated Abel. The Bible clearly teaches that you cannot love God and hate your brother. So, we learn that God was displeased with Cain because Cain both hated his brother and did not love God. His motivations were all completely self-centered.

28 And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.

Before the Fall, God gave Adam and Eve the dominion mandate. They were to have dominion over the entire Earth. This dominion necessarily involved their love for one another. It involved their commitment to one another but also their conjugal love. This love, this mutual indwelling was to be the paradigm of covenant faithfulness to all generations. The two shall become one flesh, thus each one becoming part of the other. This physical relationship was to reveal the spiritual reality of husband and wife. What God had joined together let no man put asunder.

This relationship of husband and wife, is a bond of covenant. Just as God covenanted with Adam and Eve in the garden, so they were to covenant with one another. And we can begin to see how the covenant is to be understood. In marriage, although it is a legally binding covenant, it is not merely that, nor was it ever meant to be that. Some marriages are merely a legal agreement, to souls living in the same house. In such a situation, even if neither partner cheats on the other, we recognize that the marriage is less than a true marriage. There is a legal bond, and the stipulations of that bond have been technically obeyed, and yet all can easily see that the marriage is missing a vital necessity. That necessity is love.

If the husband will not lay down his life for the bride, bestowing loveliness upon her, cherishing her, desiring her, then he is not being faithful as a husband. Such a husband cannot defend himself by saying he works hard, brings home a check, and does not sleep around. He has still utterly failed as a husband.

If the bride does not respect, honor and adore her husband she is not being a faithful wife. She cannot say but I take care of the house, feed the kids and make dinner. If she has not adorned the house with beauty and love, then she has failed as a wife.

This is all said to point out how we can technically be in legal covenant but not in reality be faithful to that same covenant. If we understood that God existed in covenant, prior to the creation, then we can get a better handle on how to understand covenants. This will help us to more easily recognize when our covenantal relationships fail to meet the love test.

29 And God said, Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed, which is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree, in the which is the fruit of a tree yielding seed; to you it shall be for meat. 30 And to every beast of the earth, and to every fowl of the air, and to every thing that creepeth upon the earth, wherein there is life, I have given every green herb for meat: and it was so.

In a right functioning relationship, there is little need for rules. God created everything good and then He gave it to man. God set the world before man and said that it is all yours. Go do whatever you want. We see in the beginning, Augustine's maxim delivered by God, "Love God and do what you want."

There were virtually no rules for Adam and Eve, save one. And even before there was law proper, and even before sin, the prohibition provoked a negative response. It did take a bit of treachery by one of God's creatures to make it happen but Eve desired the one thing that she could not rightly have. This was a direct affront to God.

God had bestowed love and all manner of blessing on Adam and Eve. Because of His great love for them, it was right for Him to expect absolute obedience. For them to fail to obey Him was a failure of love, not merely a failure of performance.

31 And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good. And the evening and the morning were the sixth day.

Everything that God had made was good, even the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. We tend to think of the tree as evil but it was not. It was a good tree. The prohibition against eating from it was a Father's direction to His children. They failed to heed His wisdom, seeking to procure from the good Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil before they were ready to do so. We know that the Tree itself was not evil and that it did not produce something bad, say poison. Eve ate of it and she did not die. But the death of disobedience came upon her and Adam after he had eaten.

CONDITION

Gen 2:16-17 16 And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: 17 But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.

EXHORTATION

We need to rethink our idea of the Covenant. It is not merely a legal document binding us to certain rules. There are rules but the purpose of the rules is to bound a relationship of love.

This relationship is foremost in our relationship to God. This is true as individuals but is also true corporately. Each of you are children of God the Father. But corporately, we are the people of God. We relate to Him in both ways.

The fact that we are the people of God means that we must also learn to relate to one another in a covenantal fashion. And with our new found understanding of the nature of the covenant, our relations should be motivated by love. This means that we do not simply do what is right based upon technicalities. Our goal is not to be right but rather to do right. And sometimes, willing to do right means willing to be wrong or to be wronged. This is the law of love, which is a higher law than the law of right and wrong.

I know the technical mind does not like this. Just give me the rules and I will follow them. The problem with this approach is that it is not motivated by love. When we begin to think more like God, we can begin to see the flaws in this way of thinking.

God is patient and long-suffering. He does not quickly return judgment on evil. But when judgment delays, sin increases. This is true and so judgment should come at the right time. How long? Two days, two years, two decades? God sometimes waits for generations before He brings judgment on rebellion. But sometimes He visits judgment quickly. This sort of thing takes wisdom. And I want to argue that the wisdom is governed by love.

Love can delay chastisement and love can bring chastisement quickly. But if our motivation is truly love, then let wisdom have her full reign.