



## **Covenant Living in a Contractual World**

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Our witness in society may find new energy if we can rediscover, for a new day,  
an idea at the heart of our Reformed tradition—the idea of covenant.

### **The Idea of Covenant**

I was part of a generation of seminary students for whom the idea of “covenant” was a prime topic in Old Testament study. We were assigned a little book called *Covenant* by Delbert Hillers. The book led us through ways the Hebrew Scriptures describe God’s relationship to God’s people—all described as different kinds of covenants. There’s the Abrahamic covenant, the Mosaic covenant, and the Davidic covenant. There are conditional covenants, in which God makes a promise on the condition that God’s people fulfill certain rules and norms. There are unconditional covenants, in which God promises to be faithful no matter humanity’s response. Some promises are made only to God’s chosen people. Others are made to all creation, irrespective of who obeys God. In the midst of the study of covenant, I wondered why we were spending so much time analyzing specific details and missing what seemed to be the main point, the pure miracle at the heart of it all—that *we worship a God who makes promises*. Our Creator promises to act to benefit the well-being of all creation. Furthermore, our Creator wants sentient beings to know the promises, to know them in more than one way, and to know them in a way that elicits response. *Wow!*

So take a step back from the details and see this: The people of ancient Israel experienced reality in ways not all that different from how we experience things. At times, they felt abandoned by their Creator. There were periods when they felt blessed and led. At other times, they were in

disarray and confusion. Additionally, there were times of clear insight. In the midst of those very human experiences, ancient Israel began to feel a certain drumbeat of realization about whom the God they worshiped was. They began to realize that their God had *character* and was not as capricious as their experience of reality suggested. They began to sense that it was in God's nature to be given over, to commit. Out of that realization came the witness of the prophets who heard God's deep and abiding promise to always be with them and know them. God's love, they confessed, was (and is) stronger than the vagaries of experience. The prophets called the promise that came from that love a "covenant," and their response made them a people in covenantal relationship. In fact, the covenant with God made them a people.

Ultimately, the covenant idea lands in the New Testament—in Jesus, God's covenant with us is most fully expressed. The idea has a history beyond the New Testament, too. Fifteen hundred years later, it comes forward in a particular way in the Reformation faith we claim. It is so central to Reformed faith that our tradition is sometimes called "Covenant Theology." The story of how God covenants with us and our response in covenanting with both God and with each other shapes the core of how Reformed Christians talk about several things: God, the church, human relationships, how we should order society. *Using "covenant" to shape all of human life might be the most important ethical idea our tradition has given Western culture.*

### **Covenant vs. Contract**

As the influence of the Protestant Reformation has waned, and as theological ideas have been diluted in the undertow of secularism, much of the rich complexity of covenant has been lost. It has been reduced to "contract," in search of the simplicity and clarity the word implies. In fact, in your dictionary app you'll see covenant described as a synonym for contract. But in the nuanced history of Reformed faith, it's been anything but that. Covenants and contracts are related ways of describing relationships, but if they're mashed together we lose something vital. Blurring the line between the two affects how we think about who we are, what we owe each other, what we owe strangers, and who are our friends. It impacts how we marry, how we parent, how we vote, how we do business, and how we try to be church. It influences Brexit votes, immigration debates, church splits, economics, how we govern, how we campaign, how we police, changing

definitions of what's public and what's private, and struggles over human rights in a time of global war. It influences how we think about God.

For these reasons, now might be a good moment to dust off the old idea of covenant and wonder together how we might reinterpret covenant-thinking for our time—*covenant-thinking in a contractual world*.

### **Describing the Difference**

So what is a covenant, if it's not just a synonym for a contract? Put simply, a covenant is a promise that finds its authority and power outside the details of its content and the resources of whoever is impacted by the promise. A covenant is a promise that participates in a larger story that gives it meaning, or makes sense of it as it is performed. Peter Block, John McKnight and Walter Brueggeman, authors of *An Other Kingdom*, give an example. They define covenant in this way:

A covenantal relationship is based on a vow. It requires an act of imagination and neighborliness. You cannot point to covenant. You can only point to a specific performance of covenant. Generosity is, for example, a specific performance of covenant. (2016, p. 61)

The marriage vow is an obvious example of a way of promising that mirrors the story of how our Creator has made promises to us. For believers, the wedding ritual is an act of worship in which the community calls on the Holy Spirit to give covenantal power to the marriage vow. But, the extreme fragility of marriage in our culture also shows how these covenant-like promises too often become prisons of obligation, on the one hand, or merely disposable preferences, on the other. The promise-maker often forgets the difference between covenant and contract.

### **Mapping the Difference**

To be the kind of commitment I've just described, a covenant is not equal. By that, I mean that covenantal promises oblige the promise-maker first before they ever ask anything of the one or ones to whom a promise is given. In this way, a covenant begins from one side, even if it

includes expectations of another. A contract, on the other hand, is a promising that's rooted in agreement before it's ever described. A contract is ideally based on an equality of power and balanced obligations.

A covenant welcomes another's promise in response and receives that promise gratefully, but it doesn't *require* a response. In a covenantal relationship, a promise-maker sees their promise to be more important than the other's promise, *because the promise is an expression of a promiser's character before it is an embrace of terms*. That doesn't mean there is no mutuality in covenants. There's more or less mutuality, depending on the covenant. Nor does it mean that there aren't contractual aspects of a covenant. ("In the context of our principled commitments to each other that transcend specific agreements, we agree that if I do this, you'll do that.") The conditional parts of covenantal relationships buttress what's unconditional. When "push comes to shove," though, in a covenantal relationship you will respond not out of the tit-for-tat needs of a moment, but from what makes life more meaningful or more true than is required by the fine print.

We can enter covenantal relationships because we are, first, in relationship with a larger story to which we are obliged, to which we are *given over*. In that sense, a covenant is an expression of our character, our very selves. It's a *giving over* of *given-over* selves. It's an attempt to imitate what we believe to be true of God, that God gives Godself to what God has made, overflowing in love before demanding obedience. God overflows to create well-being among more than just those speaking promises. In this way, covenants create community.

And there's another idea. Covenant creates *community*, what we used to call a *commons*. It creates a space where we live together, making life together, sharing commitment and inspiring a kind of generosity that's grounded in what we owe each other as children of God. In this way, we initiate a covenantal community by gestures, words, and customs that allow a healthy balance among relationships that are grounded in commitments deeper than the agreements we're negotiating in a particular moment. My grandmother used to remind me to thank anyone who did something for me, even if they were merely fulfilling a contract. In so doing, she instilled in me the conviction that covenants humanize our more instrumental relationships. By creating community in this way, covenants make those who honor them *participants* in the kind of

community covenants allow. I receive more than food from a waiter, for example. I also receive my humanity from her, and she receives hers from me. Even though I pay her, I also thank her.

To develop this kind of community, covenants also require *sacrifice*. One of the Hebrew terms for covenant in the Old Testament is rooted in the ritual of sacrifice. You "cut" a covenant, as ancient Israel cut animals in sacrifice to God. We don't cut animals anymore, yet we know that covenants require sacrifices in ways that contracts don't. In the wedding ceremony, the exchange of rings symbolizes the sacrifice of worldly goods for the good of the marriage.

Rather than requiring sacrifice, a contract requires skills. It manages exchanges between people and creates a system of transactions. It keeps the peace and limits individual behavior and demands. A contract defines the behavior of people in a certain kind of relationship over a certain period, based on mutual interests. In this way, a contract is a way of *protecting* individuals or groups. While a covenant is "offered" or "made," a contract is "concluded" or "settled," conditioned by negotiation rather than by generosity.

The first question a contract asks: What do I require from others in this relationship? What am I willing to give to receive what I need? The first question a covenant asks: What do I, or what do we, owe others because of who we are?

A covenant tends to be spare in language. Think of marriage again: it signals a life-long commitment, yet the vows are quite brief.

A contract can be far more detailed. An internet joke about attorneys makes the point, with a professor in a contract law class asking one of his better students,

"Now if you were to give someone an orange, how would you go about it?" The student replies, "I'd hand her the orange and say, 'Here's an orange.'" And the professor retorts: "No! No! Think like an attorney!" And the student pauses, then replies again, "Okay, I'd tell her this:

'I hereby give and convey to you all and singular, my estate and interests, rights, claim, title, claim and advantages of and in, said orange, together with all its rind, juice, pulp, and seeds, and all rights and advantages with full power to bite, cut, freeze and otherwise eat, the same, or give the same away with and without the pulp, juice, rind and seeds, anything herein before or hereinafter or in any deed, or deeds, instruments of whatever nature or kind whatsoever to the contrary in anywise notwithstanding the orange.'

(Accessed October 21, 2016. <http://www.lawyersweekly.com.au/folklaw/6045-world-s-best-and-worst-lawyer-jokes>)

In their detail, contracts try to take in every contingency. They are built on suspicion because we need to be careful sometimes. They can be detailed, ironically, because they're *not* meant to last.

Christian covenants don't bother with such detail, because they trust time, virtue, and rituals of forgiveness and acceptance to work through whatever conflicts arise. Spare in their language, they are built on trust. They are more open-ended because they are meant to last through change.

Because our understanding of covenants is grounded in our promise-making God, covenants assume abundance. Contracts come out of a fear of scarcity, and a need to divide resources.

I have listed many differences here, but they tend to hover around an important one, which shows both how they are different and how they depend on each other: a covenant is based on hope; a contract relies on confidence (or lack of confidence). So covenantal understandings are often needed to help contractual agreements make sense. We need to sense that we have a fundamental, even unshakable, promise underlying a relationship to trust more interim agreements. We covenant to be truthful, for example, so that we may contract to be in business together.

So, in sum:

- Trust rules covenants. Power and judgment rule contracts.
- Self-sacrifice and regard for the other make covenants possible.
- Self-protection and suspicion of the other require contracts.

- Healthy discretion and patience keep covenants healthy.
- Gossip, inappropriate curiosity and need for constant review, power struggle and demand give rise to the need for contractual relationships.
- Covenant asks: What are my responsibilities?
- Contract asks: What are my rights?
- Covenant grounds citizenship; contract governs consumption.
- Love, hope, and vision desire covenants.
- Desire, need, and problem-solving seek contracts.

### **Covenant, Contract, and Community**

While covenants and contracts need each other, Christian social ethics wants to believe that healthy community comes when contractual relationships are secondary to covenantal ones. When contracts float independently, we become a society of competing personal interests without intervening promises or sacrifice to preserve justice and trust. We become all against all.

For Reformed believers, the covenants we make with each other are imperfect expressions of how God relates to us. When essential trust breaks down, a suspicious or contractual mentality sets in and relationships become fragile, overly careful, and strained. They can break down. We know that, and we live with that. In healthy communities, covenants and contracts can mutually reinforce each other. Rituals of confession, forgiveness, and truth telling can help us regain balance and restore health.

### **Impacting Our Lives**

So how does re-imagining a balance of covenants and contracts impact our lives? Let's ask the question in relation to four aspects of life: faith, family, church, and world.

Think about *faith*. Ask yourself what is the nature of your relationship with God. If you are honest with yourself, do you imagine your relationship with God as a contract? Much popular theology implies that belief is justified by a contractual relationship with the divine: 1) I behave morally, in some broad definition of morality; 2) God gives me a good life; and 3) my soul is secure past death. It's a theology preached from many pulpits, and in even more church school

classrooms. God, however, offers something deeper. God wants us to live in the assurance of an affirmation of God's promise to love through each struggle, through each moment, and through every experience of our lives. Whether we are worried or rejoicing, lonely or celebrating good company, at the beginning or at the end—God is God through it all. Therefore, God deserves, calls for, and invites our attention, our mind, our treasure, our trust, our passion and our love.

And so think about *family*—in whatever configuration we make family. What do you owe family? What do we promise the important others in our lives? Even in the face of undermining or resistance, even in times of struggles and wrestling, what is constant? Do you promise to love and then seek to carry it through? In a culture in which our food comes from stores, our schooling from institutions, our education from the media, our health from doctors, our stability from therapists, our intimacy from wherever we can find it—what is family? Which relationships are based on a covenant? And how do we nurture those relationships, through it all?

Think about the *church*. Like so many of our essential relationships, the church more and more feels like it is a part of a religious marketplace—more contractual than covenantal. People divide loyalties according to the provider of religious goods or programs that meets their perceived needs in a moment. We become consumers of church rather than builders and citizens of church. Ministry, leadership, worship, mission, and evangelism become distorted, as do the sacraments. Preaching changes, teaching changes, care changes. Everything changes. And much is lost. It becomes harder to challenge, to imagine, and to hold tight to covenant as we grow into a people who offer a unique witness to a way of living that is different from the rest of the world. How might a new thinking about covenants reshape our vision of church?

Think about the *world*. How might retrieving the idea of covenant impact our thinking about society? Reformed Christians have tried to build culture around the idea that well before being a network of contracted relationships, social order is, first, a covenant. We owe something to each other, and there is a space that is necessary in life where we meet, despite our brokenness, despite our needs, despite our guilt, despite our glory and our success. There is a space in which we meet as people who are equally in need of grace and, therefore, pick each other up and care for and tend to each other. This is the idea of "the common good." To deny this to someone, for

reasons of race, gender, class, life experience, criminal guilt, schooling, strength, or other reasons is to deny our basic covenant with God and with each other. Progress is based on how well we work to honor this essential covenant, over time. As Reformed Christians, we do not believe that society is a war of all against all. We believe it is a space of common good, of shared opportunity, and of available grace. Or at least we want it to be.

The idea of commonwealth is an extension of this. Reformed Christians are not afraid of prudently redistributing wealth. In Reformation period Geneva, Switzerland, in fact, Reformers found ways of circulating resources so all could benefit. This included both works of economy and works of charity. We imagine a society in which there is a shared obligation to the poor, the young, and those who are marginalized—where there is justice beyond fairness.

Block, McKnight and Brueggemann call this shared obligation “disciplines of neighborliness,” where habits of hospitality, welcome, and tolerance guide us and cooperation keeps competition healthy. That is the great gift of Reformed Christians to the wider world, and one that might be harder and harder to advocate. It might be our mission today to keep talking about it.

Through this election season we've been fighting about character, policy, and party, and about who's included in the American vision and who isn't. We've argued about the implications of mass migration and how to balance justice with safety, and who deserves which. We've wrestled over terror and over what makes for a good society and what doesn't. These struggles will continue well beyond the election. As we work through these issues as Reformed Christians, we should never forget the questions the idea of covenant ask of us: What do we owe others, regardless of what they do for us? How do we embody the character of the God we worship as we order society? What is the common good—beyond race, nation, class, or creed? How do we treat each other in response to how God has treated us? For what do we hope, for others as well as for ourselves? These are the great questions of covenant, and they are questions that give life. Let's ask them!

## “Covenant Living in a Contractual World”

### Conversation starters: Discussion Questions

Michelle Bartel

1. According to “Covenant Living in a Contractual World,” covenant is based on a particular understanding of God. What are the characteristics of God that lead us to understand that God makes covenants with us?
2. The author makes a distinction between “covenant” and “contract.” Based on this essay, what is a covenant? What is a contract? How does this difference help you understand the relationship between God and ourselves?
3. The author uses two particular examples that help us see the differences between covenant and contract. One is how one gives someone an orange, and the other is how one relates to wait staff. In which ways do these examples help us understand covenant and contract? What examples of covenant and contract does this highlight in your life?
4. The author asks us to consider how covenant deepens our Christian discipleship in four different spheres of life: faith, family, church, and the world. Can you name one particular action in each of these spheres that would deepen your covenant with God and others in your life?
5. “Covenantal Living in a Contractual World” suggests that the Christian understanding of “covenant” may help deepen our witness to Christ within society. What issues in society do you think are in particular need of the Christian understanding of covenant? What differences would covenant make?
6. As the author points out in the final paragraph, the issues that have been raised in our current 2016 election will continue way beyond November 8th. How does covenant help us talk about—and act on—the hope we have for ourselves and the United States?