

October 7, 2012

Chapter 5 – New Commands and a New Covenant

A Biblical “covenant” is not a contract in which two equal parties make a legal agreement. A covenant between God and a group of human beings is a relationship initiated by God in which people are invited to participate. The first covenant was the covenant with all humankind that was given to Noah; it was completely one-sided in that it was only a promise from God that never again would the earth be returned to the watery chaos out of which God had created it. The sign of this promise was the rainbow.

The second covenant was the covenant with Abraham; God chose Abraham and promised to make a great people out of Abraham’s descendants; the sign of this covenant was circumcision--a permanent mark on all males to show that God had chosen all of Abraham’s descendants as a demonstration to all humankind of what it looks like to belong to God.

This chapter is about the third covenant relationship that God establishes. This time the covenant is based on God’s saving act in delivering the people out of slavery to the Egyptians. The sign is Torah, God’s teaching or instruction about the ritual and ethical distinctives that mark their community (not just the bodies of their males) as belonging to God. Notice the order: First God delivers, then God commands: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. [Therefore,] You shall have no other gods before me,” etc. (page 49). God does not send Moses to the people while they are in Egypt to say, “God is offering you a covenant. If you will keep these Ten Commandments faithfully, then God will deliver you out of slavery and you will be God’s people.” No, God says, “You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” The Torah (teachings/commandments) is a gift. Living by Torah makes them who God intends them to be by contrast with the rest of humanity who choose, like Adam and Eve, to make their own decisions about good and evil and who live out the consequences of those choices.

What do you see in the “Ten Commandments” on page 49 that is particularly useful in maintaining stable, positively focused community?

Why do you think there is so much detail in the prohibition of images of God and in the emphasis on the Sabbath (every seventh day)?

Is there a commandment that is unclear to you or that requires some effort to state in terms easily understood today?

The first commandment given is the first broken (page 51).

What are some “gods/idols” worshiped in our society today?

Which false god/idol (tangible or intangible) are you tempted to give allegiance to in addition to the Biblical God?

Whose people are these anyway?

Notice the pronouns in the amusing, but deadly serious dialog between Moses and God on 51-52. The verb translated “relented” on the last line of the first paragraph on page 52 is the Hebrew verb translated “repented” when it refers to human beings.

Page 54 continues this dialog. What did Moses insist was essential for the people to be able to count on? What does this remind you of?

What was the significance of the cloud and fire in the sky over the tent (tabernacle) that housed the box (ark) containing the written commandments and other ritual objects?

Thoughts on Christian maturity

Down through the centuries Christians have regarded the “Ten Commandments” as the principal enduring commands to be obeyed. We have regarded the ritual purity regulations (sex, death, and blood convey impurity that requires ritual cleansing, etc.) and the dietary regulations (no pork, etc.) as having been made irrelevant by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. The fact that no saying of Jesus cancelling circumcision made it into the Gospels caused the first major controversy among Christians, as we will see when we get to Acts. After that one was dealt with, Christians used other commandments whenever a perceived problem arose. Over time each perceived problem has been replaced by a new one and a new prohibition discovered in the Old or New Testament and used against a new group of sinners in the name of the authority of the Bible.

What if our commitment to Biblical authority focused on what Jesus called the summary of all the commands and all the prophetic insights:

Love God with everything we are, all the time, subordinating everything else to God,

Love other human beings as much as we love ourselves.

And what Jesus called “a new commandment” to his disciples in John’s Gospel:

Love one another in the same way that I (Jesus) have loved you.

What if, instead of looking for definitions and qualifications that would indicate that we are doing pretty well after all, we assumed that the life Jesus calls for is impossible for us? What if we understood ourselves to be constantly in need of filling and changing by the power of God through the Holy Spirit? What if we prayed and lived as though God could and would do that?