

The Revitalization of Grace Covenant Church

“Covenant Making”

Scripture

Nehemiah 9:38; 10:29–32, 35–37, 39

³⁸“Because of all this we make a firm covenant in writing; on the sealed document are the names of our princes, our Levites, and our priests.

²⁹join with their brothers, their nobles, and enter into a curse and an oath to walk in God’s Law that was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the LORD our Lord and his rules and his statutes. ³⁰We will not give our daughters to the peoples of the land or take their daughters for our sons. ³¹And if the peoples of the land bring in goods or any grain on the Sabbath day to sell, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or on a holy day. And we will forego the crops of the seventh year and the exaction of every debt. ³²“We also take on ourselves the obligation to give yearly a third part of a shekel for the service of the house of our God:

³⁵We obligate ourselves to bring the firstfruits of our ground and the firstfruits of all fruit of every tree, year by year, to the house of the LORD;

³⁶also to bring to the house of our God, to the priests who minister in the house of our God, the firstborn of our sons and of our cattle, as it is written in the Law, and the firstborn of our herds and of our flocks; ³⁷and to bring the first of our dough, and our contributions, the fruit of every tree, the wine and the oil, to the priests, to the chambers of the house of our God; and to bring to the Levites the tithes from our ground, for it is the Levites who collect the tithes in all our towns where we labor.

³⁹For the people of Israel and the sons of Levi shall bring the contribution of grain, wine, and oil to the chambers, where the vessels of the sanctuary are, as well as the priests who minister, and the gatekeepers and the singers. We will not neglect the house of our God.”

Sermon Guide

“No changes ever take place unless you want them”

There must be commitment to something different or bigger or grander than ourselves if we are to make progress in our lives.

Revival

Things changed radically in Jerusalem under the governorship of Nehemiah and the pastoring of Ezra. Revival means coming to spiritual life again. The people had been spiritually dead. Now they revived, and the changes that came transformed their nation and culture permanently. Some of these changes lasted more than four hundred years, until and even beyond the time of Jesus Christ.

The Steps of Revival

Stage One

The reading, teaching, and hearing of the Word of God. It was led by Ezra the priest, who was the spiritual head of the nation. The people were awakened to their sin, which they showed by weeping. They also were awakened to the wonders of the Law. They showed this by their continuing attention to the Word of God.

Stage Two

Following another reading of the Law, the people spent three hours in formal confession. Then the Levites led them in a formal prayer of confession, the longest recorded prayer in the Old Testament.

Stage Three

A formal commitment to change, expressed in a covenant. The text refers to it as “a binding agreement”

Four different categories of people signed the document.

- At the head of the list of signatories are Nehemiah and Zedekiah (v. 1). The legal documents were normally attested by a scribe and witnesses and that a high official’s secretary often signed with him in second place.¹
- The second category of signatories contains the names of Israel’s priests (vv. 2–8).
- The third category contains seventeen names of Levites (vv. 9–13).
- The final category contains the names of forty-four of the noble families of Israel (vv. 14–27).

These signers of the covenant were meant to represent the entire people. This was a formal agreement on the part of the people and an intense commitment to forward spiritual change.

Characteristics of the Covenant

Change for the sake of mere change means nothing. What matters is the direction of the change.

1. The authority of the Bible. Everything in this formal commitment by the people is in response to what they understood to be the demands of the Old Testament Law. The people were responding to the authority of Scripture. The issue for us is whether the Bible is God's Book, rather than man's, and whether God is going to be acknowledged as the sovereign Lord he is. If God is God, and if God has spoken to us in the Bible, as the church has always confessed he has, then this Book is supreme over us. We must be bound by it, and this means we must order our lives accordingly.

2. The importance of the temple.

"The temple ... provided the religious and social cement to bind members of the community to each other, and preeminently to God and his service."²

3. The responsibility of the people. The third striking characteristic of this covenant is the people's strong sense of responsibility. The dominant word is *we*, referring to the whole people together. It was as one whole people that they took it upon themselves to keep God's entire law. The responsibility is ours alone.

Six Essential Commitments

The people had obligated themselves to keep the whole Law, according to verses 28 and 29. But a general promise without specifics does not mean much. Therefore, the people expressed their intentions in a series of specific commitments. Their choice showed clearly it was these items that needed their attention.

1. The family (v. 30). Wisely they began with the family, promising not to intermarry with the peoples of the lands roundabout. There is a reason the defense of godly families comes first in this list of concerns: the family is the basic unit of society, godly or otherwise. In fact, all great social institutions have come from it.

2. The Sabbath (v. 31). The second specific commitment of the people on this great covenant day was to keep the Sabbath by abstaining from all commercial activity and to observe the seventh-year Sabbath of the land, in which the fields would not be worked. The requirement has precedent in God's resting from creation on the seventh day and goes back to the Ten Commandments, which say, "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy" (Exod. 20:8). We have not been commanded to observe an inactive Sabbath. But we have been given a new day, the Lord's Day, to enjoy. Our day is not a sober day of withdrawal. It is a day of active, joyful worship. But do we actually enjoy it as such?

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3. The temple tax (vv. 32–33). The third matter in which the people of Jerusalem made a formal commitment was the paying of the temple tax. Having a fixed place where the people could meet together and worship God mattered to them. It matters that we can come together as one people and give visible demonstration of their common beliefs and experience.

We need similar focal points for Christian faith today.

4. Additional provisions for the temple (vv. 34–35). The people of Jerusalem seem not to have been content merely with paying the temple tax. They recognized that the temple service required other things that they also could provide. There are things we can give to Christian work aside from money. Service organizations need donations of food and clothing. We can offer our expertise in certain areas. Most important, we can contribute time.

5. Dedication of the firstborn (v. 36). The Law declared that the firstborn of every household, as well as the firstborn of all the flocks, belonged to the Lord. All life is a gift from God and is owed to him. Our lives also belong to God, first because of creation (he made us) and second because of redemption (God bought us for himself by the blood of Christ). This is why Paul said, "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Phil. 1:21) and "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me" (Gal. 2:20).

6. The tithe (vv. 37–39). Christians are not under the specifics of the Old Testament legislation, but where ethical issues are concerned, it is always the case that when you pass from the Old Testament to the New, the standard goes up rather than down.

What is our principle today?

It is higher, as I indicated. It is not 10 percent but 100 percent. All we are and have is the Lord's. Our question is not how much we are required to give but rather how much it is proper to keep for ourselves for our maintenance.

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.... No one can serve two masters.... You cannot serve both God and money. Matthew 6:19–21, 24

Covenants Today

Formally covenant to put God first in everything you do: order your marriage or family according to the Bible's standards, set aside one day in seven to worship and serve God in the company of other Christians, tithe your income for the Lord's work—and do whatever else God puts it upon your mind to do for him. And make it a lifetime commitment.³

¹James B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), 219–23.

²Howard F. Vos, *Bible Study Commentary: Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 125.

³Boice, J. M. (2005). *Nehemiah: an expositional commentary* (pp. 105–114). Grand Rapids, MI: BakerBooks.