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Covenant Introduction

What one finds in the pages that follow is a collection of theological essays with subjects taken from the Covenant printed in the front of the *National Baptist Standard Hymnal*. Originally crafted as sermons, they were preached during regular Sunday morning worship at the Mount Level Missionary Baptist Church in Durham, North Carolina. I wondered whether the interest of the congregation could be sustained over the period of time required for such a challenging (or should I say bold) venture. My deepest fear was that somewhere along the way the people would get tired and stop coming or that the deacons would bring me back to reality, saying, "Pastor, don't you think you have dealt with this topic enough?" To my amazement, the interest not only remained high; it increased. While knowing what the next topic would be, the congregants continued to come, and services continued to be times of great celebration. Let me state as clearly as possible the several reasons for undertaking this task.

Pastoral and Teaching Needs

The project began with my efforts in a class offered to new members. Seeing no acceptable instructional materials for them (or, that is, knowing of none), I began teaching directly from the Covenant. I knew the Covenant well but had never

heard exposition on it. In the Baptist church in the community where I was reared, Providence Park in Richmond, Virginia, the reading of the Covenant was a regular part of worship on Communion Sunday. For a youngster like myself, committing it to memory was no difficult task. Rather, it was fun. I was never a formal member of this congregation. Nevertheless my family and the church mutually claimed each other. The members were as much my family as any church family can be, and the pastor was as much a pastor to me as a pastor can be. Indeed, the pastor of some thirty years, Miles J. Jones, came to install me in the church I presently serve.

What I decided to do for catechesis was to take a clause or two from the Covenant (never as much as a paragraph) and find corresponding scriptural references. From there I proceeded to instruct. In my immediate view were issues pertaining to the faith that every believer should know and understand. People need to know the basics of soteriology, or what it means to be saved. In particular, Baptists need to be keen on the relationship between baptism and salvation: the two are neither separable nor identical. The last thing I wanted to do was pull down some metatradition—as in what one finds on the television and in the popular media. The teaching needed to be related to the context in which people live and the tradition of faith in which they make the good confession and purpose to run the race with patience.

On occasion I invited deacons, other officers, and church members into the class. Discussion and interest were constantly high. Quite often the comment was made that this was teaching to which the entire church should be exposed. Some people could not recall being catechized in this manner upon their baptism or being received into the local assembly. Others observed that sessions of this sort would make a good

refresher for everyone. After much thought and prayer, “it seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us” (Acts 15:28) to make this the focus of preaching in the church for a season.

This project, growing out of my experience as the pastor of a Baptist congregation, is very much related to some other factors as well. One is widespread fascination with Word ministries that pride themselves on teaching, as opposed to the traditional preaching of the black church or the caricature of it. Among these teachers there has been identification of the flaw in the sort of preaching that is more style than substance. This preaching is artistic, entertaining, and done in an idiom that is quite appealing to the emotions. Whooping, tuning, toning, and chanting are characteristic features of this style. It can be awesome in its power to move a congregation. Humor is often the byproduct or aftermath when substance is woefully lacking. The joke is sometimes told of persons who exclaimed, “Reverend surely did preach!” When asked what he said, they are reported to have said, “I don’t know what he talked about, but he preached mighty good.” My conviction is that the form of preaching does not make the content bad. Similarly, the form of teaching does not make the content good. Whatever is done under either the label of preaching or teaching is bad if it is careless theologically.

A deliberate decision reflected in this project is to work critically and constructively within the tradition. This approach is an alternative to the attempt of those involved with Word ministries who obscure the tradition informing their theology. The same range of teaching done by others is found among Word teachers: they have their theology, their hermeneutics, their social location, their privileged texts, and their social vision. But it is packaged as the Word in such a manner as to feign a pristine purity that no teaching in our time can possibly have. Some

of the traditions reflected in this teaching are Pentecostal, fundamentalist, Christian Science, old-fashioned racism and white supremacy, and a radically conservative political agenda. Presentation as the Word prescinds any sort of challenge and compels obedience from those who are persuaded.

These essays take clearly recognized issues from the tradition of black Baptist churches as their anchor. I say black Baptist churches fully recognizing that this Covenant is cherished by more than those who are Baptists in the formal sense. I also recognize that covenants are not the unique property of black Baptists—covenants are commonplace among all Baptists and other Christians as well. Using the Covenant as the point of departure reflects the theological move within black churches where the content delivered is adapted (signified upon) to meet the needs of the people. While it is true that in the eyes of some this move may not be Afrocentric, it must be said in response that this is the way the theological task is undertaken in black churches, and finally, this method is more recognizable than others.

Source of Theology and Instruction in Baptist Churches

Phrasing the issue another way: I have seen Baptist students in theology become no less than frustrated when asked to pursue a theological issue (or do theology) from within their tradition. This is not to say that Baptists don't do theology. There are no believers or other religious persons in such a category. One could go so far as to say that such a position is fictitious. Theology, or reasoning about God, is an activity in which any person devoted to God participates. What one is hard pressed to find among Baptists is theology as a scientific discipline. By this I

mean theology that discloses its sources in Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience and attempts to give an account of how these sources are utilized in the process of reflection.

The essays contained herein are in large measure illustrative of a way of doing theology that takes seriously the immediate and long-standing tradition in which believers stand. This is an attempt to correct the problem wherein tradition is shorn from its roots in Scripture and the reflective life of the church. The result is that some content of tradition is regarded as tradition alone, with no sense of how it is rooted in Scripture. This is surely the case with much of the Covenant among those who know it but are scripturally illiterate. Another way of putting the matter is this: I have juxtaposed factors crucial to life within a covenant community and the Scriptures that give authority to that covenant. Phrases from the Covenant supply topics, and reflection upon the appropriate texts of Scripture supplies the discourse.

This book addresses a further problem in this regard. Baptists represent a wing of the Reformation that had little regard for creeds, dogmatic treatises, and systematic theology. This was understandable due in large measure to the persecution suffered under the auspices of established religion. The history of Baptists was painful under the Roman Catholics during periods of inquisition and the stamping out of so-called enthusiasts, who were accused of being heretics. Essentially these were the persons who dared to challenge the authority of the hierarchy and magisterium. Persecution was similarly suffered at the hands of Protestant reformers who became established in the sense that they received protection through the might of the princes and the army. The memory of such persecution lives long.

The problem is that Baptist roots within the larger Reformation tradition are often obscured. This vital link severed,

no connection can be seen with the larger history of interpretation within the church. Insistence is on believers' baptism, what constitutes ordinance (rather than sacraments), and the form of government (ecclesiology) and differentiating marks of Baptists. However, on a host of other issues (the Trinity, the place of Scripture, soteriology, etc.) Baptist faith is Reformed faith. There is tremendous value in viewing and tracking the church within this historical tradition.

The writing contained herein is written intentionally as a theology for African American Baptists. It is a theology of Covenant and community. Its deliberate intent is to make explicit the factors that are essential for living together as people of the Covenant—people who have no authority other than the Covenant to hold them together. It is done in the style of earlier theologies, such as those of Augustine, Calvin, Luther, Wesley, and Richard Allen, where the argument is rested in Scripture. Or, one may speak even more historically of the catechetical style of the early church, where a series of lectures was presented to those who offered themselves to be united with the church. Here I specifically have in mind Cyril of Jerusalem, whose catechetical lectures are something of a model within the church for how persons are instructed in the faith.

The Christian Right and the African American Church

Another vexing issue, which may be even more crucial, is the increasing influence from the Christian Right on African American Christians. Conservative by nature, the black church is easily enamored of those who use the same soteriological (having to do with the theology of salvation or how we are saved) language and appear to possess the same or sim-

ilar spirituality. Unknown to many is the extent to which this brand of conservative evangelicalism is the bearer of contemporary racism that has black people working against their best interests and the best interests of others who are poor or marginalized within the culture.

To a large degree, the Christian Right carries over the tradition that defended slavery, redeemed the South, inaugurated Jim Crow, and upbraided the Declaration of Independence as an “infidel pestilence.” In many ways, this is the religion of the lost cause. This gospel, in summary, is that God did not make all people equal: some were created by God to be the hewers of wood and the drawers of water, and seeking to change one’s station is a violation of eternal decree. In the twentieth century, America has been in one long liberal funk that is bringing the nation to the precipice of destruction. A new redemption is required that will conserve the moral fabric. Returning black people to their right place is surely a part of the scheme that promises to carry the nation back to a time of pristine purity—a time preceding the New Deal, the Great Society, the civil rights movement, and social equality for women.

Specific issues that remain atop this political agenda are the fights against abortion, homosexuality, sex education, and the like. The support is for prayer in schools, the right to carry guns without restriction, capital punishment, reforms that devastate the poor, and an end to affirmative action. There is opposition to nearly every form of social program that would assist the downtrodden. Returning America back to God is not separable, these leaders would have one think, from the conservative agenda.

The leaders of this movement (television preachers are perhaps the most well-known of the lot) define salvation so as to

produce robotlike repeaters of the party line. Invariably this nurture is productive of defense of the status quo and palliative for those who are not comfortable with the content of the spoon feeding. As in slavery, salvation is construed as the remedy for the “unruly Negroes” who could not otherwise be brought in without a tragedy of sorts. Language and forms of worship endemic to the black church can be heard coming from the lips of those who would prefer seeing the historic black churches shut their doors.

Pentecostal-Charismatic Internal Critique

There is a deliberate attempt in what follows to highlight the pneumatocentric (Holy Spirit–centered) character of historic Baptist faith. This applies especially to the doctrine of salvation (soteriology) and the doctrine of the church (ecclesiology). Each of the four major paragraphs in the Covenant begins by referencing the Spirit as the power that makes compliance with the Covenant possible. One is “led” by the Spirit to receive the Lord Jesus and enter into Covenant. One “engages” by the aid of the Spirit to walk together in Christian love. The Spirit is the antecedent for those matters wherein the covenanting person “also engages” and “further engages.” Without the Spirit the Covenant falls apart, salvation loses all its meaning, and the church disintegrates into a collection of individuals. Indeed, the history of the church is littered with the corpses of those who, for forgetting the Spirit, brought this doom on themselves and their offspring. This utter reliance on the Spirit is easily lost in the establishment of the church or in those hegemonic contexts where there is overreliance on the culture for legitimacy and sanction.

Black Baptists and most African American Christians have been forced to rely on power not derived from the formal sources of authority within the culture. The power works from within—like dynamite (*dunamis*). This is charismatic power—the power of the Spirit. Where churches remain vibrant and healthy, there is utter and complete reliance on the Spirit. When this reliance is forgotten, it is soon relearned where churches remain in viable competition for the souls sought by the drug lords.

What one will find in these essays is sensitivity to issues of pneumatology (theology of the Holy Spirit) raised in Holiness-Pentecostal-charismatic circles. This move accomplishes two purposes: it makes the pneumatology within the Baptist tradition explicit, and it offers a critique from within the larger tradition of the church for some of the untested claims of newer, more radical positions. Repeatedly the discussion follows the Scriptures closely and scrupulously. Even where there is reference to tradition, the Scripture gives the grounding.

The Regenerate African American

The question that haunts me in this project is the one with which I have been wrestling for years: What does the regenerate African American look like as we enter the twenty-first century? This is not a moot or idle question. It is clear that from the early days of American civilization this was an issue over which there was considerable debate. For some, the regenerate African American was one who was persuaded by the gospel to become the best slave the master could own. The Christian slave was to be the model. Most of all, he or

she was not to take baptism and admission to the Lord's Table as an occasion to sue for political and social freedom. The claim of the New Testament that there is neither Jew nor Greek, bond nor free, in Christ was taken to mean that the gospel of liberty in the Spirit had nothing to do with one's temporal condition. God was said to have ordained the states in which persons were historically found, and to tamper with those states was a violation of providence.

African American Christians saw the matter in the opposite way. Indeed, they were more in line with the tradition of the church, that Christians do not and must not hold one another in bondage. Confessions of faith in Christ meant automatic release from physical bondage.

Sadly, it must be acknowledged that the clarity of previous generations concerning the vocation of African American Christians has been lost to a large degree. Few forums exist for hammering out a behavior consistent with emancipated persons—that is, a liberative praxis. Sainted forbearers who served God while they or their fellows were in chains understood the vocation clearly. They were to struggle against the avaricious demon with all the power God gave. The struggle could take the form of preaching and protest, it could consist of escaping bondage and manumitting others, it could be a physical struggle with the oppressor, or it could be quiet prayer while passing the torch of resistance to another generation.

Similarly, in the epochs following emancipation and reconstruction, Jim Crow, civil rights, and black power, there was a more or less common wisdom concerning what was our calling under God. This common wisdom informed the way parents and communities nurtured children, the way people were prodded to live productive lives, and the way codes of respect were set in place and observed. Boundaries of decency existed

within even the “roughest communities.” With the collapse of these structures and the erosion of their foundations, there must be deliberate attention to the details of living in community. Assumptions can no longer be made concerning what people ought to know when it comes to issues of ethics, morality, courtesy, kindness, and honor. This truth applies even within the church. A new era of teaching—much like the one that followed emancipation—is in order. This extended essay intends to be part of that project.

Focused by Reality

It should also be noted that these lessons were developed during a normal cycle of life within the church—and within a black Baptist church, specifically. It could be argued that the focus in these essays is too narrow. I have already spoken to the possible value they may have to non-Baptists. But what might be their value to non-African Americans? Here I invoke the Les McCann principle—if you are trying to make it real, you must answer the question “Compared with what?” Too often in doing theology the particular “what” has been obscured, leaving a universal fuzziness.

My experience as a teacher of theology, preaching, and black church studies convinces me beyond any doubt that focusing on the what of African American experience does not limit the value of the reflection or instruction. Applications from the life of the African American church make some of the best data for studying theology in North America. If anything, a focus on African American experience broadens the range and relevance. It reveals the suppressed self-consciousness of the larger culture and exposes the self-knowledge of African Americans.