

Professing Christians are Externally in Covenant with God

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We come to the third thing intended, and that is: the holiness of the Covenant under which all pass that outwardly profess God to be their God and accept of Jesus Christ to be their Lord. This is the highest holiness next to that of sanctification and true godliness. Now because this is a controverted point, and many who confess an outward Covenant-holiness that was typical among the Jews yet deny any such federal holiness in the New Testament and therefore say all the holiness in the Gospel is a moral, real holiness, we must be the more tender what we deliver herein.

1. Consider that God who is the supreme Lord and Governor of all, that might deal with man only in an absolute way as a Lawgiver (man being his creature), yet such is his gracious goodness that He enters into a familiar Covenant-way with us. God might have commanded us to do such and such things but never have entered into a Covenant to promise and engage Himself to be thus and thus and to do thus and thus for us. This Covenant of Grace is that which the scripture does so often speak of and admire, the substance of it being to become our God and to make us his people. Now what tongue can express the privilege and great glory of this condition, to own God for our God so that thereby his wisdom, his power, his goodness, all is for our advantage, and we come in all duties unto God not upon absolute terms, but Covenant terms, and that of grace, whereby God does as it were lay aside the glory of his majesty and his terrible severe justice and becomes like one of us, condescending to us?

2. This Covenant is dispensed in an external and visible administration by the Word and sacraments. The preaching of the Gospel is the solemn promulgation of this Covenant and invitation to enter therein. The sacraments are seals to ratify and confirm this holy and sacred agreement. Now because all know not the work of grace to whom this Covenant is externally administered, hence arises that necessary distinction of an external Covenant and an internal. The external Covenant is that whereby, in an outward visible manner, God does own a people and they externally profess their owning of Him, but yet in their hearts and souls they do not steadfastly cleave unto God and faithfully keep this Covenant in the conditions thereof. The internal, or inward Covenant, is that whereby God does in a spiritual, powerful manner take a people to Him, working in their hearts all those gifts and graces promised in the Covenant, as regeneration, remission of

sin, adoption, and the like. And in this sense only the truly godly are in the Covenant and they are only God's people, and He their God.

This distinction of a Covenant into outward and inward, is not a distinction of a genus into its species so much as a distinction of a thing into the several administrations and dispensations of it. If Adam had stood firm in that state of integrity, there had not been this distinction of an external and internal Covenant. For all then would have been godly and the outward dispensation of God's love would have been to none but those that were indeed his. But since the fall, even in God's own garden there are weeds as well as flowers, there is chaff as well as wheat in his floor. And therefore some are partakers of the Covenant only externally, some both externally and internally also.

3. By reason of this external and visible participation of the Covenant, all those who live under it and do not apostatize or absolutely revolt from it, have a kind of external Covenant-holiness and in opposition to heathens and pagans or apostates may be called holy. This is indeed greatly doubted of by some, but if we consider the scripture, God does own a people for his, though not inwardly godly, as long as they externally own Him and do not plainly renounce his worship and service. It is true indeed, if we speak of spiritual and gracious communion with an enjoyment of God, so they are none of his. But we now relate to [speak of] an external society only.

Thus the Jews, though they were false and hypocritical in their hearts, yea full of many abominable impieties, yet God owned them as his people till the conjugal bond at last was willfully and perfidiously violated by them. Hence, in that they were circumcised and solemnly worshipped the true God, God owned them as his people though He did also at the same time reprove them severely for their sins. Hence the heathens (Eph. 2[:12]) are said to be strangers from the Covenant and commonwealth of Israel, implying, that all the Israelites by birth and education (till they made a manifest revolt) were under the Covenant. Therefore consider what the apostle says of all the Jews (Rom. 9:4) 'Who are Israelites to whom pertains the adoption, and the glory' (i.e. the ark and outward testimony of God's presence) 'and the covenants, and adoption'. They were all in Covenant, and so outwardly the sons of God. And therefore God by the prophet complains that they had taken his sons and his daughters (which they had brought forth to Him) and offered them up to Moloch. Thus you see in the Old

Testament, that even unregenerate men were in some sense under the Covenant, and so had an external holiness, and therefore sometimes they are all called saints (Deut. 33:3) in opposition to the world that was destitute of the knowledge and true worship of God, and some again that were the children of the Kingdom, should yet be cast forth, Matt 22:12.

Under the New Testament, that such an external, visible enjoying of the ordinances does also bring a kind of external holiness (which heathens and pagans have not) is apparent first by that place, 1 Cor. 7:14, 'Else were your children unclean, but now they are holy'. What holiness can this be?

First, it cannot be a civil holiness, as some would expound it. That is, they are legitimate children and not bastards. For in that [civil] sense [even] the children of heathens are holy, i.e. they are not bastards because [their] marriages are lawful and valid amongst them.

Then secondly, holiness cannot be understood of true inherent holiness, for so all the children of believing parents are not holy. How many godly parents have wicked and ungodly children?

Therefore thirdly, it must be meant of an external Covenant-holiness, whereby believers were in outward manner owned by God and by that their children also had a right to baptism and so are not born as children of heathens in the outward power of Satan and wrath. For although by nature they are children of wrath, yet being born within the Covenant they have a holiness, that is, a right to such ordinances [that] they are capable of, which the children of pagans have not.

Thus Heb. 10:29. The apostle speaks there of an apostate who never had true inward grace and sanctification in him, yet he is said to be sanctified by the blood of the Covenant. How was that? Not really and in truth, for then he could never fall into that unpardonable sin, but externally and in respect of the outward enjoyment of the Gospel with their profession of obedience thereunto.

And hence it is that the apostle writing to all believers, to all churches which he had planted, he gives them the title of saints. Especially we are to take notice of that expression, 1 Cor. 1:2, 'To them that are sanctified,

called to be saints'. The Corinthians (you know) were many of them taxed for grievous and dangerous crimes, both in doctrine and manners. Yet he stiles them sanctified and saints. As for the exception that some make [that] he speaks thus in respect of the better part [that is, of the majority of them]. I grant that to be true in part. Yet because the other [part of them] did not willfully renounce Christ, they might in some sense be said to be sanctified, for they voluntarily owned that holy profession and name of Christ, though in works they denied Him. Besides, those titles showed what they ought to be and what obligations were on them to walk holily. But this requires a more large and exact handling. Some reject the translation 'called to be saints' because in the Greek it is, 'called saints'. But this is needless, for in the first verse Paul is said to be 'called an apostle', which necessarily denotes his apostleship to be the end of his calling, as saintship is the end of ours.

4. The offer and tendering of this Covenant is not enough to make a people outwardly holy, but there must be an outward and visible accepting of it. The Gospel has been preached to many people who yet rejected it and therefore, not taking the Covenant, continued still in their natural pollution and uncleanness.

And this is necessarily to be pressed upon you, for most Christians know not or attend not to what they do. There is none of you who are baptized and own the title of Christians but ye have entered into a Covenant with God, you have promised to be his, you have resigned up yourselves unto Him as your Lord, whose laws you will obey. Thus as many as are baptized are said, 'To put on Christ Jesus' (Gal. 3:27), that is, their external profession and sacramental obligation. 1 Pet. 3:21, that 'answer of a good conscience' is an allusive expression to covenants and contracts which are mutually made between parties.

Oh then, that all you who glory in your baptism and Christianity, and thereby in a kind of holiness, would remember what those stipulations were? Were not those engagements to renounce the devil, to forsake all wicked ways and to cleave only to Him? Because you entered into such an agreement and made such an external profession, therefore you are in a sense under the Covenant and so have a Covenant-sanctification. But all this will not avail without true, real, and practical holiness, and amendment of your life.

First, this holiness is but titular [in title] and nominal [in name]. And although it be of some dignity and privilege, as it was to the Jews to have the oracles and promises belonging to them, yet it is not advantageous to the chief and most necessary good, which is the enjoyment of God and eternal happiness. Now as in all other things, the name does not satisfy without the reality: the name of riches without riches, the name of health without health. So neither may the name of sanctification, without the thing itself. Put not then any confidence in this, that you are under God's Covenant, you have given up yourself to Him in baptism, you wear this badge and mark. For all this is but a shadow and no substance till your affections and conversations be made really holy.

Secondly, this Covenant-holiness will not serve because it does but aggravate and heighten the wickedness of those who being under this bond, yet walk contrary to God. God will proceed against you as a perfidious violator of that holy Covenant you made with Him. For you who have thus entered into Covenant with God and brought all your children under this relation, to perform no Covenant-duties, how unpardonable is it?

Therefore God does greatly complain when his people are no better and walk no more holily than those that never knew Him nor drew near to Him: 'But they like men, have dealt treacherously' (Hos. 6:7). Some expound it thus: 'they like Adam transgressed the Covenant', that, as Adam placed in Paradise, continued not faithful to God. So the Israelites, brought into a rich and plentiful land flowing with milk and honey, brake those holy bonds they were tied in to God. But we rather take it as Rivet,¹ 'they, like men'. That is, as if they were none of my people, as if they had never covenanted with me, but were like the common men of the world that live without the knowledge of God, so opposite and rebellious are they against Me. Oh how truly may this text be verified of too many Christians: Like men they transgress God's Law.

¹ Andrew Rivet (1572-1651) was a French Huguenot theologian who was a professor of theology at Leiden, Netherlands.