

A Biblical Defense Of Covenanting And The Solemn League And Covenant #8

Numbers 30:1-5

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Because a National Covenant sworn to the Lord is a type of vow, there is at least one objection that has been raised which appeals to the scriptural warrant that a father has to render null and void certain vows made by an unmarried daughter living under his roof. The connection of this objection to the Solemn League and Covenant may be stated in this way. Just as a father in the family is given rule by God over his unmarried daughter so the father of a nation (a king) is given rule by God over his people. And just as one aspect of that lawful rule of a father over his daughter includes rendering certain vows either effective or non-effective (according to Numbers 30:1-5), so likewise the father of a nation (by extension) may render the National Covenant of his people either effective or non-effective.

As it relates to the Solemn League and Covenant, it has been proposed by some who oppose the Solemn League and Covenant that Charles I, Charles II and any other British king had the scriptural right to render null and void the Solemn League and Covenant because of the father-like authority invested in him by God. And having that right (as the objection goes), Charles II did (in fact) render the Solemn League and Covenant null and void in January 1661.

What should we make of this objection? The Scripture is used in this objection, but is the Scripture properly interpreted and applied to the National Vow called the Solemn League and Covenant? Let us then consider the following objection.

I. A National Vow May Be Rendered Null And Void By The National Father—The King.

A. Let us first consider the context and teaching found in Numbers 30:1-5. The Lord gave through Moses instruction concerning vows made unto God (“This is the thing which the LORD hath commanded” Numbers 30:1). Vows are indeed binding upon the moral person making the vow (whether individually or collectively) provided the vow is lawful. However, there are specific circumstances in which even lawful vows made by those under the authority of a father may be rescinded (as we shall see).

B. What are the circumstances in the case under consideration?

1. This situation specifically relates to a daughter living under the roof and authority of her father (“being in her father’s house” Numbers 30:3). However, the same is commanded in regard to a wife as well (Numbers 30:6-16).

2. A further qualification is made by the Lord about this specific case as well: this daughter is in her minority (“in her youth” Numbers 30:3; “being yet in her youth in her father’s house” Numbers 30:16). It would appear that the Lord was concerned that such young daughters (and perhaps young sons as well) be of sufficient maturity to make vows to God that were both lawful and reasonable. That seems to be why we see women who live at home in their minority distinguished from women who are apparently older and either widowed or divorced (Numbers 30:9). Those women in their minority and living at home under the authority of their father may have certain vows rescinded, whereas older women who are responsible for themselves and are either widowed or divorced may not have their vows rescinded (unless of course they are unlawful vows).

3. Another circumstance commanded by the Lord in this specific case is that the father cannot unnecessarily delay in objecting to the vow made by the daughter. He must express his dissent or objection “in the same day” that he hears it (“But if her father disallow her in the day that he heareth; not any of her vows, or of her bonds wherewith she hath bound her soul, shall stand” Numbers 30:5). If the father needs a little time to carefully consider what the daughter has vowed, at least he must

state to her that what she has vowed to the Lord is under consideration by him and that he will very soon come back to her with a decision. The father cannot silently let the matter pass for a day upon his hearing the vow without voicing any objection or without expressing some intention to more carefully study the vow (or seek advice concerning it). If the matter of the daughter's vow to the Lord should pass without a firm objection or without some stated need for further study, then the vow stands as it was made by the daughter. No changes may be made to the vow if the father says nothing in the day that he hears it ("And [if] her father hear her vow, and her bond wherewith she hath bound her soul, and her father shall hold his peace at her: then all her vows shall stand, and every bond wherewith she hath bound her soul shall stand" Numbers 30:4). Of course, some degree of allowance must be made for the father who cannot object to the vow within the day that he hears it due to necessities that might arise: suppose he is involved in a car accident and is rendered unconscious, or suppose he intends to object but he immediately receives a phone call to the effect that his parent has tragically died and he must immediately leave etc.

4. When the father does object to the vow upon hearing it (at which time hopefully he lays out his objection to his daughter), then the Lord grants to the daughter forgiveness so that she is not obligated to keep it (perhaps the forgiveness is for having made such a vow rashly before coming to her father) as we see in Numbers 30:5: "and the LORD shall forgive her, because her father disallowed it."

C. What is the nature of the vows that are under consideration here in Numbers 30? On the one hand, does the content of these vows in Numbers 30 consist of moral duties that God requires in His holy Law (e.g. not giving way to the fear of man/circumstances, or worshipping only the one true God as He has prescribed in His Word, or not uttering any profane speech, or respecting and obeying the lawful commands of one's parents, or up-rooting all unsound doctrine according to one's own particular station and calling, or not getting drunk, or not looking at pornography etc.)? Or on the other hand, does the content of these vows in

Numbers 30 consist of matters that are indifferent in themselves (such as drinking wine, eating certain foods, watching TV, or exercising the body regularly etc.)? For I cannot understand how a father could annul a vow that engaged a daughter to worship the one true living God and to be chaste in her conduct. In such a case she is only binding herself to do what God already requires her to do in His Law. However, I can understand how a father could annul a vow that engaged a daughter to walk one mile a day. For it is not a moral duty to walk one mile a day even if it might be beneficial to her health. Walking for exercise is a thing that is indifferent in itself rather than a moral duty. She may strive to walk a mile a day, but it is not prudent to make such a vow regarding a thing indifferent for she does not know what circumstances may appear in her life that would prevent her from keeping that vow.

D. Having considered the context and circumstances of the vows made in Numbers 30:1-5, let us now look more closely at the specific objection brought against the Solemn League and Covenant wherein it is alleged that Charles II (as a national father) made null and void the Solemn League and Covenant by his Act and by the Act of Parliament in January 1661. As we consider the actions of King Charles I and his son King Charles II, we shall see that Charles I was officially silent in regard to any official dissent from or objection to the Solemn League and Covenant (for several weeks) and that Charles II actually swore the Solemn League and Covenant—not just once, but twice.

1. King Charles I was ruling in 1643 when the Solemn League And Covenant was adopted and sworn by the Parliaments of England, Ireland, and Scotland. If Numbers 30 is going to be used as a reason why the Solemn League and Covenant can be made null and void by the executive order of the king, then we must ask, “Did King Charles I officially express dissent from or objection to the Solemn League and Covenant on the day that it was sworn by Parliament?” Or, “Did King Charles I officially ask for a period of time in which to study the document on the day that it was sworn by Parliament before rendering his official position?”

a. First, there is nothing stated (of which I am aware) wherein King Charles I officially dissented from or objected to the Solemn League and Covenant (on the specific day that it was taken by Parliament or on the day that he heard that Parliament had sworn it). Listen to the following testimony.

(1) Charles I specifically approved the National Covenant of Scotland in August 1639 (through his commissioner at the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland) which was the predecessor to the Solemn League and Covenant and was based upon the same moral principles found in the Solemn League and Covenant. Both the Parliament of Scotland and the King approved it in 1640 (An Apologetical Relation, John Brown of Wamphray, pp. 40,41,79).

(2) Charles I did issue a Proclamation declaring it unlawful for anyone to enter into the Solemn League and Covenant, but not until October 9, 1643 weeks after it was taken by the Parliament of Scotland August 17, 1643 and by the Parliament of England September 25, 1643. If Charles I was a national father (by way of Numbers 30), he waited too long to dissent and to object to the Solemn League and Covenant.

b. Charles II not only did not officially express dissent from or object to the Solemn League and Covenant, he officially swore it (not only once, but twice—at Spey, June 23, 1650, and at Scoon, January 1, 1651). The first time he swore it before entering Scotland and the second time he swore it at his coronation. Clearly, his Act to rescind the Solemn League and Covenant some ten years later could not make null and void a lawful vow to God. Again, the Scripture in Numbers 30 will not run to the aid of Charles II even if he is viewed as being a national father (in the same sense mentioned in Numbers 30).

c. Finally, it may be legitimately questioned whether the Numbers 30 passage can be strictly applied to a kingdom as it is directed toward a family. For even if a king should refuse to allow a lawful National Covenant (and even in the day that he hears of it), does not Parliament (also being a lawful branch of the civil government and therefore also a national parent viewed collectively) have the moral and

scriptural right to swear a National Covenant on behalf of themselves, the kingdom, and all posterity? Yes, it does!

(1) In February 1644, the Parliament of England issued an Order commanding the Covenant to be taken throughout the kingdom of England by all persons above the age of eighteen years. The Westminster Assembly was asked to write an Exhortation to accompany the Order of Parliament. In it one will find the following justification for swearing the Solemn League and Covenant even without the king's consent:

“That scruple, That this is done without the king's cosent, will soon be removed, if it be remembered, that the protestation of the fifth of May [1641—GLP], before-mentioned, was in the same manner voted and executed by both houses [of the Parliament of England—GLP], and after (by order of one house alone) sent abroad to all the kingdom, his majesty not excepting against it, or giving any stop to it, albeit he was resident in person at Whitehall. Thus Ezra and Nehemiah (Ezra x Neh. Ix) drew all the people into a covenant without any special commission from the Persian monarch (then their sovereigns) so to do, albeit they were not free subjects, but vassals, and one of them the servant of Artaxerses, then by the conquest of Judah also.

Nor hath this doctrine or practice been deemed seitious or unwarrantable by princes, that sat upon the English throne, but justified and defended by Queen Elisabeth of blessed memory, with the expense of much treasure and noble blood, in the united provinces of the Netherlands combined not only without, but against the unjust violence of Philip, king of Spain; king James [I—GLP] followed her steps, so far as to approve their union, and to enter into a league with them as free states; which is continued by his majesty now regning, unto this day; who both by his expedition for relief of Rochel in France, and his strict confederacy with the prince of Orange, and the states general, notwithstanding all the importunity of Spain to the contrary, hath set to his seal that all that had been done by his royal ancestors, in maintainance of those who had so engaged and combinded themselves, was just and warrantable” (“Exhortation By The Westminster Assembly”, *The Covenants And The Covenanters*, James Kerr, pp. 309,310).

(2) We have now observed the scriptural examples of Ezra and Nehemiah swearing National Covenants without the express approval of the king, but also note that many strangers from the northern kingdom of Israel engaged themselves in a covenant renewal without the express consent of the king of Israel (under Asa in 2 Chronicles 15:12,14 and under Hezekiah in 2 Chronicles 30:1,11). Thus, it must be clear that it is not simply King Charles I of England that was in some sense a national father, but also the Parliament as well. And in this case, the national father (namely, both houses of Parliament swore and approved the Solemn League and Covenant for the nation and all its posterity).

By way of application, dear ones, we should be ever so careful in making vows unto the Lord (Ecclesiastes 5:2-5). Making a vow unto the Lord is a most serious act of worship, and therefore, it is always wise to seek out some mature Christian leader (whether father, husband, pastor or elder) who can advise you about a vow you intend to swear unto the Lord. Likewise, you can also write the vow out so that you can prayerfully look it over. By taking these steps you will be less likely to engage in taking a vow rashly, and more likely to take a vow with all due reverence and diligence. Once you have entered into a lawful vow that cannot be rescinded by the conditions stated in Numbers 30, then it is your obligation to keep it (by God's power) as an act of worship (a spiritual sacrifice that you are offering up to the Lord) and as a means of grace to you. Dear ones, we must not look for reasons to excuse ourselves from lawful vows into which we have entered. We profane the name of the Lord in doing so. We teach others by our covenant-breaking that we cannot be trusted and that our God is not to be taken seriously if we treat Him with such disrespect and dishonor. The Lord will avenge those covenants and vows made unto him and those oaths made in His great and mighty name that we ignore, neglect and disregard. We are daily guilty (in various ways) of covenant-breaking (whether it be our baptismal vows, our marital vows, our contracts, our Church covenants, or the Solemn League and Covenant), but when we know and realize that we have sinned against these covenants, may we look to Christ as our perfect Covenant-Keeper and rest in His glorious righteousness seeking His forgiveness and endeavoring by His grace to obey Him anew in keeping all of our vows, covenants and promises.

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"Brethren, I speak after the manner of men; Though it be but a man's covenant, yet if it be confirmed, no man disannulleth, or addeth thereto" (Galatians 3:15).