

Making Covenants/Contracts in Biblical Times and Now
Bruce Brunner
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This 1st Sunday of Lent, we remind ourselves of God's covenant with us, restored through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Through sin, humans keep breaking the covenant God seeks to establish with them. Undeterred, God takes on the pain of sin to open the way for the covenant to be restored.

Covenants are often sealed with a sign; in the case of the covenant God made with humanity, the sign is a bow (traditionally a weapon of war) in the clouds; in the case of our own covenant with God, the sign is baptism.

In 1 Peter, in fact, the washing of the earth with the waters of the flood foreshadows the washing of baptism. In the Gospel reading, Jesus is baptized as a sign of his obedience to God. As we will see through the rest of the Gospel readings in Lent, like God, whose rejection of judgment and violence is symbolized by the rainbow Jesus takes on the pain of our sins rather than consigning us to the punishment. The restoration of our covenant relationship with God requires something from us too: acknowledging our sin and taking responsibility for the pain born by Jesus on the cross.

For my part, I'd like to talk about how hearing about God's covenant and promise to us relates to me in my everyday life as a businessman, someone hopeful of having a nest egg for retirement, as a husband and as a follower of Jesus.

Signing on the dotted line is a phrase that we use in our culture to signify the commitment, covenant, or promise that we agree to keep. Unlike the days of the Old or New Testament, where your word was a bond and it could be held up under examination, we now have put other types of warranties in place to insure that we keep the promises we make. Some are legal, some are professional, some are symbolic, and some are personal. Several thousand years ago, your word was your bond. It was something everyone could count on. People knew their neighbors better and towns typically were smaller and you dealt with someone you knew. Now a days, we have access to just about everything we could think of but in most cases, have no idea who we are dealing with. It has gotten so sophisticated that we can just order something on the internet and not leave home or even talk to a person and we can get what we want.

As a person that has dealt in the business world most of my life, I have learned through experience of the reality as they say of "the good, the bad, and the ugly of people's promises and covenants. I have worked for companies in the United States, Brazil, the Dominican Republic, Sri Lanka, China and Hong Kong. What I have learned is we all have an intrinsic knowledge of what is right and what is not. In business, I've taken my sense of right and wrong that has been impacted by my upbringing, my relationships with others, my culture and my faith. All of these come to bear on the decisions of how I will act, what my word is worth, and how I honor my covenants and promises. I am

accountable for what I do and how I do it. In many of my dealings, I have “signed on the dotted line” for contracts, agreements, letters of understanding and more. Just the act of signing isn’t ever enough though as we all have learned. It is a two way street as there are two parties that hold each other accountable. In different countries and cultures, the fact of giving your word or even signing a contract is sometimes just the beginning of the negotiating process for some people. Their understanding of the promise they made is only in spirit and not really what they are agreeing to. It comes as a surprise to many when in some of these places, the promise of contract is corrupted. In some other places, their word is as good as gold. There are places I have been that business can’t even get started until both parties get to know who each other is and what their personal story is. This bond becomes something more important than the actual legal document as they become dependent on each other to act according to what is agreed and right. It almost sound like a novel approach to those that are a little cynical after going through wall street double dealing and political scandals of all sorts.

In my personal life, I have also “signing on the dotted line We have decided we don’t have trust in what Wall Street is selling and don’t trust the complexity of what they are trying to convince us to do. ”. In the the last 2 years, Donna and I have bought 3 duplexes. We live in one and rent the others out as part of our retirement plan. You see, we want something tangible, something we can touch. Something that is real to know we have something to rely on.. In these purchases, we have signed on the dotted line and they have legal ramifications for resolve if the parties signing them don’t live up to the agreements. In our first purchase, the seller did not live up to them and we had to take him to court. It took a year but in the end, the legal system worked and we prevailed. We did not become cynical as we both have a belief that 99% of people have best intentions on doing the right thing and we just found the person who fell into the one percent. It’s because in our culture, we have different ideas of whether we have to honor our covenants or not that we actually have to make our promises so explicit that it has to be put into a contract to guarantee each party does what they say.. When I reflect on the readings and notice that God didn’t ask his people to sign a contract. He accepted when they said they would follow the covenants they agreed to follow

A covenant that is very important to me is the promise that Donna and I made when we got married. We all understand the seriousness of getting married and the commitment people make when they decide to get married. This symbolic promise to love, cherish, and be there under every circumstance is something Donna and I take very serious. We know that this promise can be fragile as we all know people that with even with the best intentions have made this same promise but through many circumstances have not been able to keep it and have each experienced in a previous relationship. In our case, we made a covenant in front of our friends and family at our wedding but we still had to sign on dotted line for the state.

Thankfully, In the Bible, covenants are usually made not between people but between God and people, like the covenant God made with Noah never again to destroy the whole world with a flood. God has made many covenants we we hold dear to those promises.

Covenants are a two-way street' both God and we sign on together. We sign on in faith and not on the dotted line because as I have learned, getting to know the person you making the covenant or promise with is a better indicator that it will be honored than signing your name. God's covenant with Noah is a commitment to give up violence as a way of "solving" the problem of sin. But covenant making also requires something from us-usually more than once. As I have heard my wife Donna say when people ask if she is born again, her response is yes every day. She is making the point that it is not just a one time promise but rather one that takes a commitment and recommitment daily.

In most covenants, something is needed from everyone; that is, all the people who make the covenant have to agree on what it is, and each person involved in the covenant has to hold up their part. In our society, we have many rules that you have to adhere to. When you get your drivers license, you have to sign on the dotted line that you will follow the rules of the road. You can see the problem if people didn't keep their part of the agreement to drive on the right side of the road, and instead sometimes drove on the wrong side or in the middle We would have chaos.

When I was about 21 years old, I came to a cross roads in my life. I had a faith walk but was not fully committed to my relationship with God. I was holding out. I was in college and was having fun. I understood the price of a promise or commitment to accept the promise God had given me through Jesus but I wasn't ready to fully accept it. I wasn't ready to hold up my part of the agreement. The reason was because I knew it had to be a two way street. I had to give something up to get receive the full gift God was offering in his son Jesus . I wasn't ready for some level of personal sacrifice because I had begun to understand the responsibility that came with the covenant God was asking for. As I think back to this time, I actually give myself some credit for understanding that this was not just an easy thing to do. If I was going to commit my life to Jesus's way, the walk of faith that he set out for us to follow, I would have to give up some of the things that I was doing that temp us and steer us away from what Jesus asked us to do. There are many temptations in life that veer us off course and I realized even then that I was signing up for something that went against what society and our culture held up as what we "should" be shooting for. Instead of finding peace in simplicity, our culture pushed extravagance and excess. Jesus preached sharing of resources instead of hoarding and working to acculmulate wealth for wealth's sake. I realized if I accepted God's promise of life with him, I would have to follow what he asked me to do instead of what our culture asked. This went on for several months. I am hopeful that as I talk about this, you realize while I delayed my decision, I did in fact choose to make a commitment to God. I've found many slips and detours have occurred over the years but even though I didn't sign a contract and have to put my signature on the dotted line, God and I have a commitment that we each have agreed to honor.