



A Covenant of
Peace

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“What life have you if you have not life together?”

— T. S. Elliot

Covenants are not just contracts, exchanges of property or actions. Covenant are about binding two parties together in a way that creates a new identity. God’s covenant with us is rooted in a promise of peace, since from the very beginning humanity was created to live in covenant partnership with God.

What is a Covenant?

Covenant is one of those words that many people use but few people really take the time to understand. We know that a covenant is something like a contract, but perhaps more religious. The truth is that contracts and covenants are only similar in that they are both agreements made between two parties. Unlike contracts, covenants are not just about the exchanging of goods— funds, property, actions, etc. Covenants create new families, new communities, new nations, new identities. Entering into a covenant changes how you understand who you are.

Covenant is one of those central concepts in the Bible. God is said to have made a covenant with humanity through Noah called the Noahic or Noachide covenant, that the world would not again be destroyed by a flood. God made a covenant with Abraham called the Abrahamic covenant, that Abraham’s descendants would become a great nation and that God would bless the world through them. God made a covenant with Moses to make the Israelites into a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” Then later, God made a covenant with King David called the Davidic covenant, that God would make Israel a united monarchy with a messianic king that would rule forever. You can see why it is common to teach the story of the Bible as a series of covenants.

In my own theological framework, I think what these various covenants throughout the narrative of scripture teach us is that covenants are different from contracts in one specific and important way: they have to be reaffirmed regularly. In order for them to work, they need to regularly be revisited and renewed. Since covenants are about our relationships, how we live, and how we understand who we are, they cannot be settled just by signing a contract that can be broken, separation arrangements then made, and the contract then dissolved. Covenants don’t just create relationships, they shape our identities. They can be ignored or forgotten, abused or violated, but they are not so easily ended.

Thus, the story of scripture is the story of a covenant making God. Here what biblical scholar Walter Bruegemann says about God’s covenant with humanity:

What emerges [from God’s covenant making relationship with God’s people] is a theological revolution. This God is not marked by power but by faithfulness and vulnerability. This God resolves to be with and stay with and depend upon the resources, judgements, and capacities of God’s new covenant partner. Covenant means to locate the power for life, not in self, but in the commitment, giving, and caring of the other ones...¹

The United Church of Christ: A Covenant Body

Covenants play a central role in our own faith tradition. One of the key tenets of the United Church of Christ is autonomy. Each person has their own “freedom of personal conscience.” But we understand this to be a “covenant autonomy,” we can make our faith our own, but we are

covenanted to live out our faith together. We are intentionally nonhierarchical. Each congregation has its own freedom and responsibility to govern itself, to decide for itself how it wants to shape itself. Yet, in larger associations, each congregation is covenanted with other congregations to deal with important issues, to respond to the needs of our communities, to share resources, to help respond to situations of need and conflict. There are many associations and conferences around the country, and each association has its own sense of autonomy. And yet, they are all in covenant with each other. This relationship between covenant and autonomy is at the heart of our theology and the way we govern ourselves as a people of faith.

Just like any covenant, it is important to listen deeply to our covenant partners. In our autonomy, we have the freedom not to be forced, coerced, or manipulated. We can accept or reject the decisions made by others. But we have a covenant responsibility to listen to our covenant partners, a promised commitment to listen and prayerfully consider the things that are considered most important.

A Covenant of Peace

Based on the prophetic language of the Bible, especially Isaiah (Isaiah 54) and Ezekiel (Ezekiel 34:25; 37:26), some theological traditions have placed a heavy emphasis on the notion of God's "Covenant of Peace." In this theological framework, God created the universe out of a deep love with a vision for peace and wholeness that all of creation would share together. The notion of a "people of God," then, is nothing more than a people who commit their lives to participants with God in a covenant of peace, to live in such a way that the world will be full and whole. Baptism, then, is the moment of being initiated into this covenant (that is why we make baptism vows). The Eucharist, then, is a regular reminder of this "new covenant," that God has entered with us, to empower us to live out Jesus' teachings for the sake of the world.

While you may not be familiar with the "covenant of peace" language, the idea should not seem foreign. Some of the other related ideas of Sabbath rest, Jubilee, Redemption, The Kingdom of God, these are all various ways of referring to God's promise of peace and the covenant of peace we have chosen to enter with God and each other

The Just Peace Resolution

In 1985, the General Synod of the United Church of Christ passed a resolution declaring the UCC to be a Just Peace Church. The Just Peace vision is known as the hallmark of the UCC's theological identity. Many congregations, however, have not even heard of it, much less taken the initiative to engage in what it would mean to be a Just Peace congregation in their own contexts. In short, by failing to practice our covenant with the larger UCC, we have not made the most of our relationship with the church and its call for us to be a Just Peace people.