

Preaching the Life of Covenant and Commitment in a Time of Transition

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I.

I want to begin with a set of sweeping, only slightly hyperbolic assertions that I think are nonetheless fundamentally true: for both individuals and communities, the forming, sustaining, managing, and dissolving of commitments is the most important social and personal process in human life.

I am referring to more than “religious” or “faith” commitments though they are included. By “commitment” I mean the practice of forming and nourishing social and cultural involvements that endure significantly over time and generate depths of passionate care, identity, meaning, and value in their participants. Its theological counterpart is “covenant,” which I here define broadly as a *sacred* commitment—a commitment distinguished by a heightened degree of unconditionality, comprehensiveness, and depth of meaning. These definitions are obviously more social psychological than theological, but they may help define the ballpark of this discussion and provide a preliminary sense of what we’re talking about in terms that can be more or less readily identified.

Commitment understood broadly in this fashion may be viewed as a social and psychological *praxis* that gives human life depth, definition, and stability of purpose over time, for both communities and individuals. It is commitment that gives us identity, creates and defines patterns of continuity and connectedness in the flux and conflict of events, and gives our lives whatever trust, security, meaning, and purpose they enjoy. So to whatever extent committing falters or fails, our lives and communities become disordered, insecure, and deprived of meaning and purpose. Theologically, commitment and covenant go to the core of our existence and reflect the very character of God and of God’s covenantal involvement with us and with the entire cosmos. Hence preaching on this problem in all its facets and ramifications is a supremely urgent challenge for contemporary preaching. Our question is: How can preachers help congregations understand its value and importance, and proclaim the good news of God’s forgiving and transforming grace in the midst of the contemporary Christian’s commitment hopes, struggles, and failures?

II.

Preachers should not underestimate the challenge of this topic. Little in contemporary American culture supports or encourages deep commitment or covenanted living, or even understands much about it. We are live in a throwaway, been-there/done-that, hit-and-run world where millions seem eager to switch channels, avoid entanglements, and minimize responsibility. Moreover, everyday social relationships for most middle-class people are specialized, practical, time-limited, and organizationally complex. Such circumstances complicate and frustrate deeper, long-term commitments—as we discover when we try to schedule a committee meeting or even find time for ourselves. Furthermore, the world is continuously and rapidly changing,

and we have become a global community, face-to-face with the world's many cultures and traditions. At the same time new economic and technological currents threaten to sweep away any committed "worlds" we attempt to construct, from work and career to politics, lifestyle, marriage, and faith.

Behind these manifest social patterns, our deeper, historic moral and religious cultures are eroding, impacted by unprecedented public events, the triumph of empirical science and technical culture, the increasingly close encounter with cultural diversity, and the consequences of critical historical research (including biblical criticism) and philosophical skepticism. From these developments we have learned as a society, even at the popular level, to critique and relativize our most sacred institutions and traditions; we have desacralized the normative structures that once formed the framework within which individuals, families, and communities could forge bonds of commitment and common purpose. Thus many now find themselves sailing in a sea of anxiety and uncertainty concerning the deepest questions of life, with only fragmentary spiritual charts to guide their way, and moral compasses whose needles vacillate in an ever-changing field of media-driven popular culture.

One way or another we are all children of a transitional era in human culture, a time of profound change, with a bit of faith and a bit of faithlessness in each of us. "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!" In such a time as this, how can preachers preach the call to covenanted life wholeheartedly, meaningfully, and realistically?

III.

It won't be easy. But I do believe that this complex of issues, with their everyday pastoral expressions, *can* be meaningfully and helpfully addressed from the pulpit if preachers take aim at three broad goals: (1) to speak insightfully about the practical problems people have with commitment and covenanted living in light of biblical, theological, and social psychological understandings, (2) to challenge cultural distortions in the popular understanding and valuation of covenanted living, and (3) to set forth a positive theological and ethical vision of what covenanted life entails, and why it is important, desirable, and essential to authentic human existence. As these headings suggest, I am implicitly making a pitch for something like a "doctrinal" emphasis in preaching on these questions, calling for preachers to assume responsibility as constructive practical theologians in the pulpit.

1. *Acknowledging and Illuminating Pastoral Issues.* At the ground level there is clearly a need for sermons to recognize, name, and bring a hopeful, redemptive word to the concrete pastoral struggles people experience today in matters of commitment, especially in the primary spheres of marriage, family, work, lifestyle, civic participation, and religious faith. By "pastoral struggles" I am thinking of these fictional but true-to-life examples:

Patterson is thirty-five, highly educated, spiritually interested and serious about Christianity, a sometime participant in the church, but hesitant to commit himself to membership. Nor does the church take steps to discuss this matter with him. . . . Pastor Stevens can't decide if Patterson is less—or more—committed than the Kangeses, who sign up each year to help with the youth but only show up half the time. *How can preachers help individuals understand and evaluate their own reluctance to invest in*

committed relationships and involvements when these seem to be appropriate next steps? And what lies behind anyone's attempt to evade, subvert, or fail to carry through on worthy commitments once made? What is the proper role of the community in developing individual commitment?

Carol's life is more than filled with worthy and demanding commitments for a woman of forty-five; a professional career, church and family responsibilities, and community volunteer work consume her every minute. Everyone loves her and depends on her skilled leadership, but she can never say no and seems to be running herself ragged. *How can preachers help congregations understand theologically (not just psychologically) that "covenanted life" does not necessarily mean a life "totally tied up in commitments," a life of relentless moral and religious seriousness about everything? What is the proper theological significance of "noncommitment" in human life—of free spheres of play, rest, and sheer foolishness, as distinguished from the serious work of maintaining committed involvements? Can the concept of God's Sabbath rest be helpful in gaining perspective on these important questions for ourselves?*

Alfred, a machinist, is never without his Bible. He prays during breaks on the job, witnesses to fellow employees, and attends church functions five or six times a week. His sister Rita, alienated from Alfred, rejects religion entirely. A militant animal rights crusader, Rita has been arrested several times trying to break into a local research facility to rescue animals that are being subjected to cruel experiments for the cosmetics industry. *Can one be too "zealous for the Lord"? Can one have, as it were, too much commitment, to the point of fanaticism, rigidity, and intolerance, and how do you draw the line? Are there moral limits to the value of commitment and covenant even when pledged to worthy causes? When do good commitments and covenants become idolatrous? How can we be both seriously committed and yet tolerant, open, and inclusive?*

Bob and Alice have been married twenty-four years and the kids are grown. Their friends at church all think they're happy, but inwardly their marriage is a hollow shell of propriety; each is angry, empty, and miserable. *How can we understand theologically the tendency for commitments and covenants to run down, become routine, boring, ossified, and in the extreme, deadly? If all commitments and covenants must evolve and change in some way to remain life-enhancing, when does such change represent unfaithfulness or failure, and when is it a sign of vitality, growth, and fidelity? When is it consistent with biblical covenanted living to break or end a covenant or serious commitment?*

Harriet and Sam have just returned from a Cursillo (spiritual renewal) weekend and feel that their lives have changed; they have never felt closer to God. They want the entire church to go to the next Cursillo weekend. *By what spiritual disciplines can significant commitments and covenants be sustained and developed in the modern (and now "postmodern") world? What is the theologically proper role of community support and pressure in sustaining individual commitment and covenant? Of prayer and worship?*

The Reverend Loving is a true saint—self-effacing, kindly, totally devoted to his ministry. Why, he came back from his own vacation last year just so Jenny could have a June wedding, and the poor man must work eighty hours a week. His commitment puts the rest of us to shame. But I wonder how Ruth and the boys feel about it. *What is the proper meaning and role of sacrifice in the life of Christian commitment, especially as distinguished from loving one's neighbor as oneself (a so-called "ethic of equal regard")? How can sacrifice and self-denial, as enjoined by the gospels, be distinguished theologically from savior complexes, failure to love and care for oneself, or low self-esteem and emotional isolation masquerading as a life of sacrificial devotion?*

Brenda's husband drinks and beats her regularly; then he repents, they cry, and they make up. She loves him, forgives him seventy times seven, they try again, and he drinks and beats her again. Brenda's pastor tells her it's her duty to forgive him when he repents. *Is it always loving and just, in covenanted relationships, to forgive violation and betrayal ("seventy times seven")? How can we distinguish between true or authentic forgiveness and its premature and perverted forms, as when "forgiveness" substitutes for truth, justice, and appropriate self-regard?*

It was simply unbelievable to everybody when Boyd, the most distinguished, respected and committed man in the church, deserted Kathy and their three little children for Phil's wife, Susan, breaking up Susan's little family as well. The hurt and anger that Kathy and Phil felt, and the pain and confusion of the children and the congregation, were indescribable, and the wounds will be carried for a lifetime. Boyd and Susan have applied for membership in another church. *What is the appropriate psychological and theological place for judgment and rejection (or "condemnation"), and feelings of anger and outrage, in covenant betrayal, whether between pastor and people, husband and wife, or politician and electorate, and how does such "judgment" relate theologically and psychologically to redemption?*

Sister Marie Caroline, who had toiled sacrificially for sixteen years in the remote jungle hospital to care for the poor, was raped and hacked to death by drunken rebels on a rampage. The same day her beautiful six-year-old niece, her brother's only child, died of leukemia back in the States. *How can it be said that God is covenantally faithful to us as promised, given the evil and unfairness of so much human suffering and the unchanging moral and spiritual ambiguity of history? What is the meaning of divine covenantal faithfulness, really? Is there a theologically legitimate place for disputing God's alleged covenantal fidelity in the life of committed faith?*

Such issues, and many more, are living pastoral concerns, not merely abstract questions. As such they need to be discussed honestly, pastorally, and theologically from the pulpit. I say "discussed" because I believe that authentic pastoral preaching on such topics must recognize and articulate what we do not know and do not understand as well as what we profess to be true and reliable, perhaps in about equal doses. In some respects it is perhaps more important that preachers give theological voice to these questions than that they utter definitive pronouncements. At the same time there is surely a role for a vibrant spiritual affirmation of whatever one

appropriately regards as theological truth, not perhaps as specific answers to every question, but as framing principles with which, and within which, congregations can wrestle meaningfully with the issues.

I should add that social and psychological understanding is essential (though not sufficient) in such preaching as a means of articulating the problems and framing realistic theological and ethical responses. Surely it is important to know, for instance, that one's ability to form and sustain commitments and covenants is to some extent generated developmentally through the whole history of fiduciary relationships from childhood, including the history of loss, grief, and failure in those relationships (thus grief work and forgiveness are essential to commitment). Or that every commitment itself has a kind of developmental history, moving from early, romantic and passionate phases to late stages of quiescence, including at each step the possibility of reversal or "decommitment." Or that according to some well-established theories, we develop our *subjective sense* of commitment first through freely undertaken *actions*, usually in small incremental steps; an internal feeling or attitude of commitment is more the *product* of committed action than its *cause*. Or that, to some extent, *pathological* committing can be distinguished from *healthy* committing regardless of what the commitment is about.

Of course one does not properly "preach psychology," but one should not be deterred from making judicious use of psychological insights such as these within a biblical and theological perspective. The church has always made use of one kind or another of "wisdom about the soul" (psychology is a *logos* of the *psyche*), and cannot really do otherwise, Karl Barth notwithstanding. The only question is whether it is done openly and responsibly or covertly and uncritically.

2. *Challenging Distorted Conceptions and Beliefs.* At a second level, there is a need to clarify and dispel popular misconceptions about covenantal living. One of these is the idea that covenantal living in family, work, civic life, and faith is essentially a matter of obligation and duty, a coercive arrangement constricting personal vitality and fulfillment. In this distorted view, to be committed is to be bound, tied down, trapped; to be happy is to be free from constraint, able to fulfill one's desires and goals without hindrance or obligation to the needs of others.

Much popular American culture, especially masculine culture, is built on this premise. Free markets, independence, individualism, and the rest of our popular mythos seem to appeal to a reactionary tendency against accepting responsibility for neighbor and society—to be free of social commitments beyond those that one negotiates in self-interest. This feature of American civic culture has been much remarked upon by cultural analysts, but it needs to be identified and critiqued from the pulpit as a distorted understanding of fiduciary relationships.

In particular it distorts the meaning of freedom and fulfillment. It is widely believed, for example, that covenantal living sacrifices freedom to obligation. If I get committed (say) to the church, that will limit my Sunday morning options and discretionary time. But it would be more accurate to say that covenantal relationships limit one kind of freedom—the freedom to choose—in the interest of enabling a more complex, rich, and fulfilling kind of freedom—the freedom to *be and to become* within continuous, secure structures of relationship. Such freedom is not meaningful, and not even possible, apart from commitment, like a musician who by practice and discipline

becomes able to perform with a freedom and expressiveness unavailable to the undisciplined or “uncommitted.” In American culture we are tempted to twist the idea of covenantal fidelity into a prescription for oppressive obligation, and to equate freedom with mere choosing; we think we are free when we can choose, however trivial our choices (“honey mustard or barbecue sauce?”). However the Bible and our theological heritage know better. God’s gracious Spirit forgives, frees, and empowers us to live appropriately ordered, committed, and covenanted lives that give form to our freedom and develop rather than express or repress our natural energies.

In Psalm 1 we read that those who live in obedience to God’s law will prosper “like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither.” Superficially we might be tempted to dismiss such sentiments as the work of a naive religious consciousness unaware that the rain falls alike on the just and the unjust and that the righteous often suffer while the wicked prosper (if not indeed *because* the wicked prosper). But it is better, I say, to credit the psalmist with common sense, and devote ourselves to pondering the possibility that a significant spiritual insight may be expressed here: when life is meaningfully structured in trusting openness to God—truly and not idolatrously covenanted and “obedient”—one is delivered from the chaos and tyranny of impetuous, ego-driven desires and set free for loving and just relationships. One is thereby able to “focus,” engage life deeply, and live creatively—to stay rooted and to flourish like a tree planted by streams of water, good for all seasons.

The nature of freedom and its relation to covenantal “law” and “obedience” provide only one example of popular misunderstandings of covenantal issues that should be addressed from the pulpit as practical theological concerns. Other possibilities include the distorted notion that covenanted life is entirely the work of individuals and not, in some deep sense, a shared, communal process; the idea that commitment and covenant are principally matters of feeling and attitude rather than concrete action; that commitment once formed must persist changelessly, without a history or development of its own; and the idea that covenanted life, if authentic, will maintain itself spontaneously, without disciplines of practice.

3. *Articulating a Positive Theological Vision.* I began by noting the difficulties involved in commending a covenanted life (much less living one) under present social circumstances, hence the need for practical theological leadership on this topic from the pulpit. All of this may sound like a pretty heavy trip. In one sense it is. Christian life is not formless or effortless; it requires us to change and, in a sense, to practice our faith and to work at change in ourselves and our communities, not unlike the way we might “work” at psychotherapy or “practice” the piano—for the love of life or the joy of music—precisely so we can express ourselves and our common life more fully, freely, and artfully. In this connection grace is misunderstood if it is taken to mean the elimination of any kind of work or practice, as if the “gracious God” to whom we now so frequently address our prayers had nothing greater in mind than for us passively to bask in the Deity’s endless loving indulgence. Grace, rather, means the freedom to enter wholeheartedly and freely into the transformative *praxis* of the Christian life without guilt, shame, or fear.

This conception is rooted in the biblical understanding of commitment itself. In my understanding—and I shall speak frankly and confessionally here—what the

Bible's various covenant traditions fundamentally affirm is that God's love is like a promise that we can count on, hence it is strong, enduring, faithful, and ultimately reliable even when confronted with the powers of sin and death. Divine covenant is concerned with the *strength* of God's love—the power to see it through, God's long term, “eternal” trustworthiness and reliability. The biblical covenant theme is a great drama of divine and human covenantal struggles over fidelity, our own and God's, in which God's love is ultimately revealed in Christ as the eschatological covenantal fidelity that triumphs over the trials of life, that will not finally be defeated by principalities and powers, by heights or by depths, by sin or by death.

A life of covenantal living is a life that trusts in the faithfulness of that love and participates joyfully in its power by seeking to be faithful over time and circumstance in every social relationship and work of culture. That God is like this is the inexhaustible good news for us: for it means that we can live in the power of God, in ordered and secure involvements, freed *from* the tyranny of chaotic desire, freed *for* creative and transformative intercourse with God, neighbor, and world. This is truly a “blessing beyond compare.” To live with covenantal freedom in all appropriate relations and involvements of life is our gracious destiny as daughters and sons of God; it is the true goal of life, the joy of our living.

The first, and the last, order of homiletical business on this topic is therefore to articulate this vision of things, both the good news of God's covenantal faithfulness and the open human possibility of living lovingly and joyfully in the liberating and transforming power of the covenanting God in the midst of every trial and temptation. Within this perspective one can then take up the urgent pastoral problems of committed and covenanted living with hope, and critique the pervasive distortions of our religious and public culture's understanding of committed life with courage and gracious care. In this way preachers may hope to offer a qualitatively different vision of personal and social order than “the world” knows by its own lights. At least we can pray that such a vision will still enable us to live, in a time of profound cultural and social transition, as children of the covenant and heirs of the everlasting grace of life.

Reading Suggestions

For the contemporary social and cultural context of commitment see Robert Bellah et al , *Habits of the Heart Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York, Harper and Row, 1985), Christopher Lasch, *The Minimal Self Psychic Survival in Troubled Times* (New York and London W W Norton & Company, 1984), Philip Rieff, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic Uses of Faith After Freud* (New York Harper and Row, 1966)

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For biblical, theological and ethical discussions see Margaret A Farley, *Personal Commitments Beginning, Keeping, Changing* (San Francisco Harper & Row, Publishers, 1986), Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *Faithfulness in Action Loyalty in Biblical Perspective* (Philadelphia Fortress Press, 1985), Gabriel Marcel, *Creative Fidelity* (New York Noonday Press, 1964), H Richard Niebuhr, *Faith On Earth An Inquiry Into the Structure of Human Faith* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1989), Paul Tillich, *The Courage To Be* (New Haven, Connecticut Yale University Press, 1980 [1952])

For pastoral discussions and the relation of commitment to spirituality, see Walter Brueggemann, “Covenanting As Human Vocation A Discussion of the Relation of Bible and Pastoral Care,” *Interpretation* 33 (April, 1979) 115-129, Elizabeth O'Connor, *Call to Commitment An Attempt To*

Embody the Essence of the Church (Washington, D C Servant Leadership Press, 1994 [1963]), and *Journey Inward—Journey Outward* (New York Harper & Row, 1968), Edward Thornton, *Theology and Pastoral Counseling* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey Prentice-Hall, Inc , 1964), Howard Thurman, *Disciplines of the Spirit* (Richmond, Indiana Friends United Press, 2d ed 1987 [1963])

For broad interdisciplinary overviews of this topic, see J C Haughey, “Promising,” and R J Hunter, “Commitment,” in *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, Rodney J Hunter, gen ed , Liston O Mills, John Patton, and H Newton Maloney, assoc eds (Nashville Abingdon Press, 1990, 1996) See also John C Haughey, *Should Anyone Say Forever? On Making, Keeping, and Breaking Commitments* (Garden City, New York Doubleday, 1975)