
Auburn Pastors Conference 2002—Covenant Series

III. Covenant Hearing

by Steve Schlissel

In the book of Ephesians Paul tells the church of Jesus Christ about what has happened as a result of the work of Christ.

¹¹ Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision” (that done in the body by the hands of men)—¹² remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.

¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, ¹⁵ by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶ and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. ¹⁷ He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸ For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

¹⁹ Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. ²¹ In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. ²² And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit. (Eph. 2:11-22 NIV)

It seems rather plain from this passage that the one people of God has attained a newness in Jesus Christ, chiefly characterized by the fulfillment of the Christ of all the types, promises, ordinances, and the engrafting of the Gentiles into this people called Israel. The Gentiles along with their children and with the believing Jews are co-heirs of all the promises; therefore, the Old Testament Scriptures are an heritage of the people of God, who now call themselves Christians and comprise the church of Jesus Christ. That means that we should read the Old Testament as our book, which was certainly the assumption of the apostles when they were writing the New Testament.

The whole Scripture assumes that what we have is the *norm* for us. These are the Scriptures that Timothy was told to preach. When Paul would say, “As the law says...” or “As it is written...” the people did not have yet the compilation of the apostolic writings. The first Christians read the Old Testament Scriptures, which was sufficient until the apostolic writings were bound together to form our complete revelation known as the Holy Bible (the Scriptures of the Old Testament and the New Testament).

There was never a question that the Scriptures of the Old Testament guided and informed the consciousness of the early church. Actually, the early church should be called the *bar mitzvah church*. It was the church that had reached puberty, not its birth, at Pentecost; it attained maturity and was able to leave home and to reproduce, as is consistent with the celebration of a young man’s bar mitzvah.

We have lost that consciousness of the church being Israel and having the Old Testament Scriptures as our possession along with the New Testament Scriptures; rather, we have this idea that New Testament Christianity is altogether different from the Old Testament. As a result of such thinking, we have made a great deal of trouble for ourselves.

At one time this nation was manifestly Christian. In fact, less than a hundred years ago an associate justice of the Supreme Court delivered a series of public lectures entitled, “America: A Christian Nation” without getting his head shot off or being put up for impeachment. Not the most evangelical of believers, he nevertheless said that the objective evidence or our history—the Sabbath laws as they came to be codified in the various states, the assorted state constitutions that made adherence to the Protestant Christian religion, in several cases, a necessity for office (an individual couldn’t take an oath unless he first believed in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and in the Bible as the inspired Word of God) and assorted other evidences—clearly demonstrated that we were, in fact, a Christian nation. Since that time we have become an anti-Christian nation, and many of us are left scratching our heads. At one time we all basically confessed the same God of whom we were speaking, but now when we speak about God, He is the one who is self-consciously excluded. We can speak about any other god but the true God. How did this come to be?

Covenant Consciousness

I want to suggest that a failure of covenant consciousness in our churches has led in large measure to this condition of widespread anti-Christianity today. A historian of note has written that the “great missionary expansion of the nineteenth century was everywhere based upon the principle of individual conversion, and this was marked by an introspective psychological approach and an intensely personal view of conversion and salvation. There is a fundamental contrast between this approach and the collective or communal [or what we would call covenantal] form of expression, which had dominated the Christian world for upward of one thousand years.”

Western Christendom was not built up by the method of individual conversions; rather, it was a way of life that the people accepted as a whole, often by the decision of their rulers. When accepted, Christianity affected the whole life of society by the change of their institutions and laws. It is easy to condemn this type of corporate Christianity as superficial, external, or even sub-Christian, but at least it means that Christianity is accepted as a social fact affecting every side of life and not merely as an opinion or a specialized group activity or even a hobby. If we want to know how a nation that was largely uniformly Christian in its self-understanding has become anti-Christian, we need look no further than this individualized conception of God’s dealings, which was heavily promoted in the nineteenth century.

Compounding this evil (i.e., every man for himself) has been the notion that God doesn’t want to save anyone and the idea that “me, myself, and I” are the only ones who can truly read and interpret His Word. Not only do I have to come to an understanding of His Word by myself, I must develop a conversion testimony—while the credibility of someone else’s conversion becomes suspect, to say the least.

A contemporary theologian has written a book on assurance, and in this description we find just about everything that is wrong in the world:

One of the greatest struggles of the theologian and pastor of the post-Reformation churches lay with the area of personal assurance of faith and its relationship to saving faith. Their labor for theological precision in this area gave rise to a rich technical vocabulary in which they distinguished between assurance of faith and assurance of sense; the direct, *actus directus*, and reflexive, *actus reflexus*, acts of faith; assurance of the

uprightness of faith and assurance of adoption; the practical and mystical syllogisms; the principle and acts of faith; objective and subjective assurance; assurance of faith, understanding, and hope; discursive and intuitive assurance; the immediate and mediate witness in assurance; and the being and well being of faith. [Ohhh... There ain't enough Excedrin in the room!] Such terminology was used within the context of a series of correlative issues such as possibilities, kinds, degrees, foundations, experiences, times, obstacles, qualifications, and fruits of assurance—all placed within a word regulated, Christologically controlled, and Trinitarian framework. With such scholastic distinctions the modern church and most scholars have little patience.

Thank God that the scholars are losing patience! Would that we had even less patience than to abide for a moment, because this whole view is built upon presuppositions that are patently erroneous and anti-biblical.

Many times we use the word *presuppositions* without knowing what presuppositions are. Tricky but important things, they determine *what* facts and *how* facts are entertained by us. Presuppositions function like preferences or tastes. To illustrate, just as we never go near some foods, regardless of how well they may be prepared, so presuppositional biases can steer us away from certain approaches. We can actually find ourselves filtering out truths as we read the Bible. We don't see certain truths because they don't conform to our presuppositions. As another illustration, presuppositions function like teeth and like a mouth, since all potential nourishment must first pass through our presuppositions to be made fit for personal consumption. They function like a digestion system in which a nearly miraculous function occurs out of sight—detecting, sorting, and cataloguing the ingredients while we go about our business. Presuppositions also function like a “tushy”—they are behind and under everything we do, and we do our life-long best to keep them hidden and protected. Generally, we never talk about them in polite company (though occasionally we must).

The presuppositions governing the above-quoted view on personal assurance and saving faith reveal certain ideas about God and His Word that are, basically, false. In this approach to assurance we find a God who is manifestly reluctant to save and is looking for excuses to forbid people entrance into His kingdom. The presupposition is that the Bible's word and promises cannot be trusted. Salvation is now based upon *internal* works. Instead of the Pharisaical building of a house made of external works, which are relatively easy to perform, we have the reversal—an internalization of this house, which

is virtually impossible to achieve. And this religion of impossibility, requiring a new technical vocabulary, is brought to us by people who think that Romanism is bondage!

The presupposition is that the people of God are unknown and unknowable. The presupposition is that life should be lived on hold, because in order to live one's life fully for the glory of God we have to have some sort of confidence of who we are in Him—whether we are His and accepted in the Beloved or whether we have to wait until we can become accepted and then begin our works that would be acceptable to Him.

In all these ways we are looking at the wrong presuppositions. God in Christ has shown Himself to be anything but reluctant to save. The Gospel that Christ commanded to be proclaimed is one that is wide open—even broader than that which we read in Ezekiel:

O house of Israel, I will judge you, each one according to his ways, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. ³¹ Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, O house of Israel? ³² For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent and live! (Ezek. 18:30-32)

The most overwhelming overture of grace comes to His people through Ezekiel, and yet this good news has not been curtailed or minimized but magnified through Christ to proclaim to the entire world.

God is not reluctant to save. We have a trustworthy Bible that we should teach our children to believe in everything that God has told us about our identity in Him. We should not accept for one moment the notion that Christianity is only legitimate when we first pass through the waters of internal torture. We should realize that the people of God are not few but many, and everyone who is baptized is to be regarded as belonging to Christ with obligations to live in accordance with the covenant in which he has been placed by the grace of God.

We do not honor our mothers when we doubt that they gave birth to us; we do not honor our fathers when we doubt that we are their offspring; and we do not honor our country when we doubt our citizenship. Why do we not accept God's testimony in baptism? Look at how the Scriptures uniformly address the churches to whom the letters are written. Paul's epistles are prodigious in describing that the people in these churches are, in fact, heirs of the kingdom, belong to Jesus Christ, and sanctified by Him; they will

persevere and continue, and they have the Holy Spirit. Yet in our day we have been waylaid by *introspectionists* to the point that some ministers cannot even pronounce a benediction upon the congregation without a string of qualifiers. “Blessings be upon you, but I don’t mean you... or you... or you. Now go in peace.” Go in peace? Pieces is more like it.

These assurance hawkers remind me of good marketers who first create the desire and then are ready to fill the need. These so-called ministers create jobs for themselves by making the people so miserable and unsure that they can come along and dangle assurance as a commodity that keeps them in business. Now I don’t believe that marketing is the true motive for most of these ministers. Many of them think that they are being faithful to the Word. However, the net result is that they are creating a need that keeps people on a string, coming back as insecure Christians rather than having confidence in the living God as our Savior. These assurance hawkers actually become confidence men themselves, con men taking away the people’s calling and knowledge of their calling in Christ.

Calling is a key to understanding the covenant. Paul says to the Ephesians, “As a prisoner for the Lord then I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.” Such a calling is objective and rests upon every baptized person. When we bring our children to the font for baptism to receive the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, it is because the children are under a calling from God that is as real as death, as real as a heart, as real as blood, and we teach them to grow up and live in terms of that calling and to seek to honor God in it.

The Scripture’s teaching about is covenant calling vitally important and applies to everyone. It tell us what our status is and what our obligations are. Paul writes to the Thessalonians that he constantly prayed for them, “that our God may count you worthy of his calling, and that by his power he may fulfill every good purpose of yours and every act prompted by your faith” (2 Thess. 1:11). He wrote to Timothy about God who saved us and called us to a holy life. The writer of Hebrews said, “Holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess” (Heb. 3:1). Peter tells us about the God of all grace who called us to His eternal glory in Christ. In Philippians we read about Paul’s testimony: “I press on toward the

goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.” Peter tells us, “His divine power has given us everything that we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness” (2 Pet. 1:3). We were called to live a life worthy of the Lord, to please Him in every way, to bear fruit in every good work, to grow in the knowledge of God. We were not called to come day after day, week after week, month after month, and year after year to doubt Him but, rather, to believe Him and to bear fruit for Him—encouraging, comforting, and urging one another to live lives worthy of God, who called us into His kingdom.

Those who reject their calling have the covenant curse resting upon them. Concerning Israel God says, “All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and obstinate people.” The great speech of Stephen in Acts 7 concludes when he says, “You stiff-necked people with uncircumcised hearts and ears. You are just like your fathers. You always resist the Holy Spirit. Was there ever a prophet your fathers didn’t persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the righteous one. Now you have betrayed and murdered him. You have received the law that was put into effect through the angels but have not obeyed it.” Remember, Israel’s problem was not the law but their disobedience. It was not that they didn’t have the Holy Spirit but that they resisted the Holy Spirit. It was not that they didn’t have a calling that they didn’t want their calling. They proceeded as if they could be justified by their own works. “As if...” Paul says in Romans. Justification by works was never the case then, and it is not now. Paul and Barnabas told the Jews,

We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles.

⁴⁷ For this is what the Lord has commanded us:

“I have made you a light for
the Gentiles,
that you may bring salvation to
the ends of the earth.” (Acts 13:46-47)

Here is the calling that has come upon us and our children—a calling that tells us who we are in the pursuit of righteousness, in the pursuit of holiness, and in living in accordance with the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

According to the Word of God, Gentiles have been grafted into Israel through Jesus Christ. They have an identity that is given to them throughout His Word. In

Deuteronomy 4 God spoke to Israel about what the other nations would comment about them:

What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the LORD our God is near us whenever we pray to him? ⁸ And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today? (Deut. 4:7-8).

Concerning their existence and emergence as a nation, we read:

³² Ask now about the former days, long before your time, from the day God created man on the earth; ask from one end of the heavens to the other. Has anything so great as this ever happened, or has anything like it ever been heard of? ³³ Has any other people heard the voice of God speaking out of fire, as you have, and lived? ³⁴ Has any god ever tried to take for himself one nation out of another nation, by testings, by miraculous signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, or by great and awesome deeds, like all the things the LORD your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes?

³⁵ You were shown these things so that you might know that the LORD is God; besides him there is no other. ³⁶ From heaven he made you hear his voice to discipline you. On earth he showed you his great fire, and you heard his words from out of the fire. ³⁷ Because he loved your forefathers and chose their descendants after them, he brought you out of Egypt by his Presence and his great strength, ³⁸ to drive out before you nations greater and stronger than you and to bring you into their land to give it to you for your inheritance, as it is today.

³⁹ Acknowledge and take to heart this day that the LORD is God in heaven above and on the earth below. There is no other. (Deut. 4:32-39)

You are His people, His *segullah* (“treasured possession”). Again and again God tells Israel, “I set you apart as My very heart. I bestow upon you all My graces, all forgiveness, and all My love. You are mine.” When Israel proved themselves unbelieving in the time of Christ, God said, “Now I will go to the Gentiles and call a people with a foreign tongue and incorporate them into My covenant.” God understands all languages and, therefore, He has called people from all languages to give praise to Him as He has engrafted them into the people of God.

Yet we continue with this assurance problem and begin our enterprise in Christ with doubt. We never get a footing from which to grow and develop in the consciousness of who we are in Christ. How many times does God have to tell us how much we mean to Him and how much He loves us? We spurn His love and despise His overtures. We don't

believe. We teach our children to doubt. We teach our congregations to doubt.

We are people of the living God. How often we see every people group talking of their pride. There's black pride, white pride, Polish pride, gay pride—every kind of pride on the map except Christian pride. We are the ones who are entitled to be proud, not because of any righteousness in ourselves but because God has reached down out of heaven and taken us to be His own.

In the Passover ritual God said, “Do this in remembrance of Me. Do this in remembrance of what I did for you. I birthed you. I came down from heaven and delivered you from bondage in a way that is irrefutable. I gave you a special status as above all nations to be My nation in whom I would dwell.” When this people proved themselves unbelieving and unworthy, God engrafted people from all nations. You were once foreigners to the covenant of the promise, but now God has drawn you in so that these promises and this history is yours—and even more because Christ came to deliver you not just from Egypt but from the power of sin, Satan, and death. He has delivered you from every foe and every enemy and put you securely to be His own and to guard you on every side. He has given you great and precious promises, which you ought to believe, cherish, and love.

Sadly, we read this claptrap about assurance and how many different new words in our vocabulary are necessary to believe the truth. Why is the Gospel so hard to believe? Of course, in a sense we could ask, “Could it be true? Can it be that I should gain?” Amazingly, the answer to our question is yes! All the assurance we need is that God said it.

Our identity is to be the people of God. God has called us to be His own. “I will rescue you,” he told Paul, “from your own people and from the Gentiles. I am sending you to open their eyes, to turn them from darkness to light, from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in Me” (Acts 26). “You were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light” (Eph. 5:8). Don't we see how simple it is? We are children of light. Let us live that way. What is so hard about this?

I cannot go back to the old scholastic, unbelieving way of reading the Bible, parsing it death so that we miss the sense of it. No one else is the people of God except

those who are in Christ. No one else has an atonement except those who are in Christ. This was the glory of the people Israel. You are the people of the atonement. Your identity is that you are the people of God. Live like God's children. Have pride in whom God has called you to be. Every pastor has to address his people to inculcate this consciousness, develop it, nurture it, and make it grow stronger, not weaker.

Israel had that amazing calendar to testify of who they were in God. While the pagan nations were running after some recycling program each year, trying to do imitative and sympathetic magic to make the earth blossom, God would remind His people, "I am the one who gives life. I am the author of life. I gave you life." At the Pentecost festival (harvest time) Israel would be reminded that their goods and their blessings come from Jehovah. At the Succoth festival (tabernacles) they would be reminded that God is their portion. When all the nations would only rejoice in their material possessions, Israel would rejoice that God loved them and gave them indications of His love through the covenant blessings.

The supreme blessing was found in the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) when access to God was complete in the representative person of the high priest. Bearing Israel upon his chest, one day each year he would go into the Holy of Holies with the blood that would work an atonement in view of Christ's single atonement, which would be affected in time. This feast was meant for the covenanted people who would have an atonement covering them and receive forgiveness of sins—the only ones on earth who had an atonement. Now we are the only ones, because the temple has been taken up in Christ. "Destroy this temple and I will raise it again in three days" (John 2:19). Christ is the priest, the offering, and the temple, and now we are in Him having all these blessings and access to God.

We alone are the people who have been reconciled to the living God. God is now our friend. Jesus Christ, the Mediator, has come from heaven and put one arm around us and the other arm around His Father and said, "Be ye reconciled one to another." The Father has said "Amen" by raising Him from the dead. We are the people who now through Christ have access to God. We can boldly enter into this place and pour out our hearts and make every request known to Him, not fearing that He will turn away His ear from us but, rather, incline His ear. "I love the Lord because he hears my voice, turning

his ear always to me.” And we invent a vocabulary of assurance!

We are the people with the law of God. We know how to live, if only we would open the Bible and read it. He has given us very great and precious ways to conduct our lives. He has told us how to live with our wives and our husbands, how to live with our children, how to live in community and in church, how to organize our civil polity. We are the people who have been given wisdom by God. We supremely above all others have a deposit of wisdom that has stood the test of time, because it comes from the God who created the world. We cannot ever fit together all the pieces that make for society, but God who stands above all things and knows the relationship of everything has given us a way to live and apply His Word. No other people has been given the wisdom that we have been given, and we know that it is the fear of Jehovah that marks its beginning.

We are the people who alone have a fellowship that the world only talks about and crows about but knows nothing of. We have a fellowship that spans past every cultural divide and every language and every nation. No matter where we go in the world, we can find believers who are like-minded and like-hearted, and we can bond with them and know that we are brothers and sisters in Christ to the amazement, and disgrace, of all other people. The people of the world try to institute it by legislation, and they fail. They can only fail, because true fellowship is one of the Holy Spirit’s greatest gifts to us. The late Dr. Bob Cook from The King’s College (NY) used to talk about a trip he once made to Japan. As he was riding a train and reading his Bible, he noticed that a Japanese man sitting across from him was also reading a Bible. The Japanese man saw that Dr. Cook had a Bible. They looked at each other and recognized that they were Christians; but Dr. Cook did not speak Japanese, and the Japanese man did not speak English. So, in an effort to communicate with Dr. Cook the Japanese man said, “Hallelujah!” Then Dr. Cook said, “Hallelujah!” They went back and forth with their *hallelujahs*, fellowshiping in terms of the most universal word on earth.

We have fellowship on the local level with brothers and sisters in Christ. Nothing compares to the beautiful fellowship of the local church, where people from different backgrounds, races, and ages get together to worship and praise God, sing with their whole hearts and souls, learn with their minds, and serve each other with their strength. The local church is the most beautiful and visible manifestation in the world of the

coming kingdom in heaven. Surely, in this world and in our history the church is not yet perfect. We only have a foretaste, not the banquet, but we see in the local churches, organized according to His Word and in the principle of faith that God would have us live by, that this is truly a fellowship like no other.

We have a history like no other. Our history goes back to the Garden of Eden. We have an understanding of what life is about. We know about God, our Father Almighty, creating the world. We know about the sin of our first father and our shame and disgrace. We also know that Christ was standing there; at the moment that our first Adam fell the Second Adam appeared by promise and by sacrament, and in time He came into our world. We know that since that time God has done great and amazing things—converting nations to Himself, as He had promised, and causing kings to be nursing mothers to His people and protecting them and giving their lives for the kingdom of God. People who had once been pagan and devoted to every sort of evil converted to the living God and lived in devotion and whole-hearted service to Him—nations, one after the other, being brought into submission.

Is the history of the church, the new Israel, perfect? It is not. Are there things of which we are ashamed? There are many. Nevertheless, it is a glorious history, unmatched by any other—and the future is even more glorious. We alone have a future of hope, as the Christian family will outlast all families—as we see recovery of covenant consciousness.

The Yiddish word *kweln* means to swell with pride. Grandparents sit in the audience and *kweln* as they watch their grandchild play at the violin recital. “Listen to this child! You call it screeching? I call it beauty!” Likewise, Christians are entitled to *kweln*, because God has called us to be His *segullah*, His treasured possession. We are entitled to boast in a godly way that we are the people of God and can pursue righteousness in a way that pleases God. He has accepted our deeds through Jesus Christ and is pleased with our good works, which should abound because He is pleased with them. He is not looking and saying, “You and your works are so tainted with sin—get out My sight!” When your child draws a picture for you, the first thing you do with that *meshungina* piece of art is to stick it on the refrigerator for everybody to see. You don’t you play art critic and say, “Oh, no! The line here is a little off! The colors are not quite

coordinated!” No, you say, “My kid drew this work of art for me because she loves me.” God treats our stumbling good works likewise. As our Father, He is pleased with them.

“What does He need to do, O man, to prove that He loves you?” How many sons does He have to send and kill in our behalf? How many sons does He have to raise from the dead and bring to His right hand and give all power in heaven and on earth? Isn't *one* enough? Your Savior has made Himself known to you. It is an affront of the first and capital sort to doubt this God and develop into this mindless nonsense about assurances of various sorts. God has spoken. Let the world be silent and tremble before Him. He has told us who we are, and we say Amen. He has told us what our portion is, and we say Amen. He has told us what our future is, and we say Amen. O God, we don't deserve it, but, O God, we thank You that it is true.

We have *kwelning* rights as the people of the atonement, the people who have forgiveness and reconciliation. We have access to God, to His law and wisdom, to fellowship with Him and one another. We have a history like no other, and a future like no other.

People of God, cast away your doubts; they are unbecoming to you. Pastors, don't encourage your people to doubt; that is unbecoming of your calling. Let's listen closely to the whole Word of God to recognize who we are. We are the people of the living God. He has called us His own. We honor Him in the same way that Abraham did. When God spoke, he Amen'd God, and it was credited to him as righteousness. Let's hear the Word of God together and say Amen!