

COVENANTS AND DISPENSATIONS

Part V

by Thomas Ice

Since I have identified the biblical covenants and classified them as conditional or unconditional, I want to now look at each one and see if they are still in force today and if they are, how they relate to the church age believer. These covenants provide a framework by which we can know how God wants us to behave in every area of life.

THE EDENIC COVENANT

The Edenic Covenant (Gen. 1:28-30; 2:15-17) provides the pre-Fall basis that God employs to establish His rule and relationship to mankind in this conditional covenant. The prohibition against eating the forbidden fruit was a one-time test given only to Adam (Gen. 2:15-17) and thus is not a ban that we can transgress today (see also Rom. 5:13-14). However, the Cultural Mandate (Gen. 1:26-28) was not just for Adam. It provides the basis for areas of individual human responsibility, social, political and economic duties, as well as accountability before God for all humanity down through subsequent history. It is through this covenant that God defines man's role for cultural activity in history. It is mankind's job description in shorthand.

DIVINE INSTITUTIONS

The divine institutions are conventions that function within the biblical covenants that relate to mankind's social life. I first learned about the biblical teaching relating to divine institutions from a pastor named Charles Clough¹ about 35 years ago. He says, "Divine institutions are real absolute structures built into man's social existence."² "The term 'divine institution' has been used for centuries by Christians, particularly in Reformed circles, to describe the fixed, basic social forms," according to Clough.³ Divine institutions were created by God (thus divine), but apply to all mankind from the time of Adam and Eve. Man's basic social structures did not just evolve over time but were part of God's creation.

The first divine institution is responsible dominion (Gen. 1:26-30; 2:15-17; Ps. 8:3-8), which is the area that an individual is responsible to God. Man was created to be God's vice regent over planet earth in order to manage it under God's authority. The fall resulted in a perversion of man's responsibility but it was never taken away.⁴ This means that each individual human being is responsible before God for creative labor, which is designed to glorify God. God designed it so that through the individual choices one may demonstrate in history a record of obedience or rebellion against their Creator. After the Fall, Clough notes: "Instead of peaceable, godly dominion over all the earth under God and His Word, man fights and claws his way to a counterfeit dominion built of his own works (cf. Jas 4:1-4)."⁵ Individual choice is seen as the area in which one either trusts Christ as his Savior or rejects Him. No one else can do it on behalf of an individual.

The second divine institution is marriage (Gen. 2:18-24). This institution is deduced from the original marriage of Adam and Eve in Genesis 2. It is within this realm that sexual relations are to be experienced and together the husband and wife are to fulfill the cultural mandate to rule over the creation. We see that the woman is called a "helper" who was brought by God to Adam who needed a helper corresponding to himself in order to help him in his calling to rule over nature. "Unlike animals, mankind's so-called sexual differentiation is not merely for procreation; it is also for

dominion.”⁶ “Later the extreme importance of the structure of marriage appears in the NT when Paul reveals that it typifies the union between Christ and the Church (Eph. 5:22–33).”⁷ Clough makes the following helpful comment:

Mankind cannot express God’s image except as both “male and female” together (Gen. 1:27). This is because God has certain characteristics that are “feminine” in nature (e.g., Matt. 23:37). Moreover, the woman’s role as “helper” in Genesis 2:18 is not meant to be a demeaning, secondary one. The term used for “helper” elsewhere is used of God Himself (Exod. 18:4; Deut. 33:7). . . .

Undeniably, however, the Bible places emphasis upon the man as the one who receives his calling from God which then shapes his choice of wife. . . . Together in a division of labor man and wife separate from their own family, in contrast to an extended family, does a young man have to face full leadership responsibility directly under God.⁸

The third divine institution is built upon the first two and is that of family. “In the Bible it is the family, not the individual, that is the basic unit of society (property, for example, is titled under Mosaic Law to families).”⁹ “Family exists for training of the next generation (cf. Exod. 20:12; Deut. 6:4–9; Eph. 6:1–4).”¹⁰ Family is the institution that is responsible for continuing each family legacy by being responsible for education and wealth. Even if a family chooses to use surrogate teachers, the family is responsible for seeing that a child is properly educated. Clough tells us:

Family and marriage cannot be separated from dominion. Where dominion is perverted and the environment ruined, starvation and poverty follow. Where marriage is dishonored and where families are broken, society collapses. No amount of laws, programs, or “redefinitions” of marriage and family can save the day. God designed the divine institutions to provide dominion and prosperity.¹¹

The Fall did not change any of the divine institutions, instead it corrupted man who misuses them. Clough explains:

When faced with the corruption in each of these social structures, fallen man responds in several ways. One way is to reinterpret the struggles with sin in terms of economics (Marx’s “class war”) or of race (white and black racists) or of psychology (Freud and others). Another cope-out is to abandon the institutions themselves as outdated, arbitrary social “conventions” that need “re-engineering”. All such responses, however, are costly failures to the societies that try them. In the end, they reflect the pagan mindset that denies the responsibility of the fall and the abnormality of evil.¹²

POST FALL DIVINE INSTITUTIONS

At least two more divine institutions were established after the Fall of man into sin. Both were instituted after the Flood and were designed to restrain evil in a fallen world. The first three divine institutions are the positive or productive ones of society, while the last two are negative, designed to restrain evil in a fallen world.

The fourth divine institution is civil government whereby God transferred to man through the Noahic Covenant the responsibility to exercise kingdom authority in order to help restrain evil after the Flood (Gen. 9:5–6). Before the Flood man could not execute judgment upon evil as seen in the way in which God commanded man to deal with Cain’s murder of Abel (Gen. 4:9–15). This divine institution is based upon capital punishment (Gen. 9:5–6) and if for the purpose of restraining evil (Rom. 13:3–4). Lesser judicial authority is implied in the God-given command for civil institutions to exact a life for life. Even though capital punishment has grown distasteful to apostate Western culture, it is still the basis for God’s establishment of civil government.¹³

The fifth divine institution is tribal diversity, which was also established after the Flood in order to promote social stability in a fallen world (see Gen. 9:25–27 and compare with Gen. 10—11 and Deut. 32:8). Notice this is not racial diversity but tribal diversity. This divine institution does not involve race but tribes or families. “Throughout the postdiluvian period,” explains Clough, “God preserved man’s social stability and health by playing off one group or tribe against another to maximize true progress and retard the influence of evil (cf. Acts 17:26–27).”¹⁴

Tribal diversity was implemented through the confusion of languages at the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1–9). Why did God want to separate mankind? Many believe that mankind should come together in unity. Genesis 11:6 explains why God confused human language as follows: “And the LORD said, ‘Behold, they are one people, and they all have the same language. And this is what they began to do, and now nothing which they purpose to do will be impossible for them.’” Thus, the only reason why humanity wants to unite itself is in order to more effectively rebel against God, as seen in the Tower of Babel incident. This is why currently history is moving toward globalism as we move further from God and is why the goal of Antichrist in the tribulation is to forge together a one-world government set against the plan and purposes of God. The tribulation will end with God’s direct intervention and judgment, as at the Flood. In the mean time, God slows down man’s collective rebellion through civil government and tribal diversity.

The purpose for tribal diversity can be illustrated by differences between large boat hulls. Until about 100 years ago, all large sea going vessels had a single large hull. If a large enough hole developed in the hull then often the ship would sink as it filled up with water. Then ship builders started building multiple compartments in large ships with the belief that if there developed a hole in one compartment then the other compartments could keep the ship afloat. So it is with mankind! If one tribe became corrupt then God did not need to judge the whole world. He could use other peoples to judge that tribe without needing worldwide judgment. This is one way God manages the nations between the Flood and His second coming. Maranatha!

(To Be Continued . . .)

ENDNOTES

¹ For anyone interested in listening to the mp3 audio series by Charles Clough on “The Biblical Framework” can download it at www.cclough.com.

² Charles A. Clough, *Laying The Foundation*, revised (Lubbock: Lubbock Bible Church, 1977), p. 36. An updated version of this can be found on www.cclough.com.

³ Clough, *Laying*, p. 36, f.n. 36.

⁴ Charles A. Clough, *A Biblical Framework for Worship and Obedience in an Age of Global Deception*, Part II, p. 39. From the following internet address: <http://www.cclough.com/notes.php>

⁵ Clough, *A Biblical Framework*, p. 60.

⁶ Clough, *A Biblical Framework*, p. 40.

⁷ Clough, *Laying*, p. 37.

⁸ Clough, *A Biblical Framework*, p. 40.

⁹ Clough, *A Biblical Framework*, p. 41.

¹⁰ Clough, *Laying*, p. 37.

¹¹ Clough, *A Biblical Framework*, p. 41.

¹² Clough, *A Biblical Framework*, p. 61.

¹³ See Clough, *Laying*, p. 83 and *A Biblical Framework*, pp. 97–98.

¹⁴ Clough, *Laying*, p. 84.