
There's Two Ways We Can Do This

Genesis 9:8-17

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on February 26, 2012 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

Let's suppose you're a student in a campus ministry. You really care about another student in the group, and they seem friendly and approachable. Before you know where you are, you've started dreaming of a long term future with them, maybe marriage, maybe children, maybe joy and companionship – and of course eternal happiness and plenty else beyond. But quickly it becomes clear that there's another person who has similar designs on the object of your affections, and, in what seems like no time, there's pain and recrimination and misunderstanding and grief and bad feeling. And all along you feel, "This is a Christian group. We should have better ways of resolving these things than if we were just another group." But somehow you don't. In fact it feels like exactly the opposite. The goodwill looks like hypocrisy and the kind words sound like manipulation, and the next time someone says "Let's pray about it" you want to punch them in the mouth. Maybe you feel you have to stay away for a while, it's all too personal and humiliating and public.

Or let's imagine that you're in an apartment and there's water dripping through the roof. You don't want to get your neighbor upstairs in trouble but you can't allow the house and your furniture to be damaged. You get on well with the landlord but you think it's unreasonable to wait seven days to get the problem seen to. You keep wondering, "What's the Christian way to behave right now? Should I be a doormat and say, 'No, really, that precious rug I brought back from my year abroad is all the better for being moist and damp'? Or should I protest my rights and talk about justice and attorneys and compensation?" A conversation goes through your head that says, "I want to be generous, and understanding, and patient, and forgiving. But I don't want to be stupid and taken for a ride. I know that people can be worse off than me, and under a lot of pressure, and in financial trouble, and have nowhere to turn. But I also know that people can be lazy, and mean, and thoughtless, and selfish."

Situations like these are microcosms of a huge question. The huge question is, what does it mean to be God's companions but at the same time to live in the world? Must we live a double life, inhabiting in two worlds simultaneously? I don't believe so. Instead, we live in one world; but we must learn to speak two languages.

Here's the first language. It's rooted in philosophers from 300 years ago like Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. This language imagines a time when human beings had no way of trusting one another, no way of making binding agreements, and no way of holding one another to promises. This condition is sometimes described as the "state of nature." It's not a happy condition to be in. Everyone is at war with everyone else, and no one lives very long. So Hobbes supposes an original agreement by which everyone once upon a time gave up some of their individual rights to a sovereign in return for peace and security. This is called the "social contract." The state exists, for Locke, to protect the people's rights, and to arbitrate disputes.

This kind of thinking is at the heart of America's founding documents and in the fabric of our culture. It's so foundational to our lives that we scarcely notice it. The dominant word is "contract." A contract is a voluntary agreement between two free agents that creates an obligation that can be enforced. If a contract is broken, compensation can be expected. When you're sitting in your damp apartment with water dripping through the ceiling, and you don't know what to do, and you call a wise friend, what does your wise friend say? Most likely, "Have you got a contract? What does it say about maintenance in the contract?"

If you have a contract, in normal circumstances you shouldn't have to feel guilty about holding the other party to their side of the bargain. With a contract, you know where you are. Most contracts are built out of previous contracts, with language and stipulations derived from experience over generations. They're a residue of

accumulated wisdom. While contracts can be pretty dull to read, they also evoke a kind of relief. It's reassuring to realize that someone's thought in advance about all the things that could go wrong and worked out a fair way of naming responsibilities and anticipating solutions. You really can begin to imagine almost all the complex parts of your life in terms of contracts. When in the 1994 Congressional election campaign the Republican Party issued its "Contract with America" the phrase had a certain rightness about it. You thought, "That makes sense. Yes. We can rely on that." That feeling of security is everything a contract can give you. By contrast when you're in the campus ministry and you're heartbroken over the relationship that never came to be, a contract is useless. There's nothing a contract could give you that could come anywhere close to what you truly want.

And that brings us to another, older, language that goes back before the language of contract. And that's the language we find in our reading from Genesis this morning. Genesis isn't too worried about moisture dripping through the ceiling of your apartment. It's worried about floods covering the earth. It's not so bothered about whether you can go on a date with the companion you fancy in your campus ministry. It's rather more preoccupied with the eternal destiny of humankind. This is the language of covenant. Genesis 9 describes the covenant God makes with Noah and with every living creature. The covenant says that never again will God cut off all flesh by the waters of a flood. This is the foundation of the whole of the Old Testament. God will have to resolve the shortcomings of creation by some route other than destruction. Henceforth God is no longer in the construction business. God is only ever in the restoration business. This is the covenant of life.

A few chapters later God makes a covenant with Abraham that says through Abraham's line, through the people that came to be known as Israel, and we know as the Jews, will all nations find a blessing. This is the covenant of the land. Then in Exodus God makes a covenant of holiness with Moses that sets the bounds within which Israel must live and keep the land. This is the covenant of the law. Finally God makes a covenant with David to bless him and his descendants with kingly authority. This is the covenant of the lineage.

Life, land, law, lineage. All the parameters of the Old Testament are set by these covenants. The whole dynamic of the Old Testament story is of whether God will be faithful to these covenants even if Israel breaks them. How will God restore Israel when the covenant is in tatters? That's the question on which the whole Bible rests.

In the end Jesus is God's answer to this question. Jesus is the representative human being, the new Noah, the new Abraham, the new Moses, the new David, the embodiment of Israel, with whom God makes a covenant that won't ever be broken. And Jesus is at the same time the God who won't ever break the covenant. Jesus is the Lamb of God who in his body suffers the pain of all the broken covenants. But at the same time Jesus is the shepherd who goes and fetches the lost sheep to bring them into the fold of the new, unbreakable, covenant.

Let's pause and look for a moment at these two languages. Let's consider the difference between a contract and a covenant. Contracts cover limited matters and are a way of keeping them under control. By contrast covenants are about powers that we can never truly hope to control. And that's why, when we look at the most precious things in our lives, we find they're run by covenants, not by contracts. Who will be holding your hand when you die? That's not something you can put in a contract. That's all about a covenant. Who do you turn to when you're at a crossroads in your life and you've searched your soul and you don't know what to do for the best? Someone you know and trust in a way no contract can ever guarantee. What gives you a sense of community and belonging and of being understood and at home? A group of people and a place with whom you share a covenant. No contract can give you that.

One of the differences between a contract and a covenant is that signatories to a contract always have a third party to whom they can appeal. There's always a law court lurking in the shadows of every dispute. But parties to a covenant have no court of appeal. There's no compensation for the breaking of a covenant, because the

covenant wasn't a means to some more useful end. A covenant, be it between friends, or family members, or churches, or neighbors, is an end in itself. If it's over, there's no consolation prize to put in its place to make it better. But if it lasts, it's maybe the most tangible sign of God's abundant provision we can experience.

The idea of governing all our lives by contracts is superficially attractive. But on closer inspection it turns out to be the road to hell. By turning every relationship into a contract we end up regarding everyone as a stranger, and we come to live as if trust and community are bonus items that we generally factor out – while God's provision becomes something we exclude altogether. Eventually we find we've factored trust and community out so many times that we wake up and discover that they've ceased to exist, and God's provision becomes a hypothetical we never have time to dwell on. That's pretty much the process that our culture finds itself in the middle of.

Sometimes people in business ask me what they should aim for in their dealings. After all, business is all about contracts. It's about driving hard bargains and maximizing profit margins. I usually say, the sign of doing business well is that you can have cordial relations not just with your colleagues but with your suppliers and your customers. That indicates you haven't exploited the one or taken advantage of the other. In other words, good business is a process of gradually turning contracts into covenants. In fact, that's a pretty good aspiration for all our lives: turning contracts into covenants.

Now you may be expecting me to say contracts are worldly and covenants are heavenly and we should be wary of the one and aim always for the other. But I've been a pastor for 20 years and hung around churches all my life and I've seen that kind of thinking go wrong too many times. Here's the mistake Christians often make.

We start by assuming a covenant and we don't take the time and care to get the contract right. We hire a friend as an employee or we hire a congregation member on the church staff and it quickly turns out they're a hopeless fit for the job and their work habits fall well below the reasonable and our desire to keep the covenant inhibits us from facing the truth about the breaking of the contract. What we should have done was be more modest and set the contract out explicitly and hope and pray (but never assume) that a healthy covenant would in time blossom.

I always say to new colleagues, "We don't have to be friends. That may come in time, and in fact it most often does, but we mustn't let our need or desire to be friends get in the way of the more important work we have to do together for something bigger than us and our personal needs." That's my rather blunt way of saying, let's get the contract right and not rush into a covenant.

Look at your life for a moment and the painful relationships that get you down. Think of an in-law or a boss or a colleague or a person you're still vainly trying to pretend is a friend. I wouldn't mind guessing that this confusion between contract and covenant names a big part of your misery: you're going through the motions of relating to one another as if you're in a covenant but the reality is you feel the other person isn't even keeping the terms of a contract. I bet it's driving you crazy. And all the talk of being in a loving family or a Christian organization just becomes a smokescreen that makes a mockery of the covenant and leaves you finding it almost impossible to have a long overdue conversation to straighten out the contract. The result is public confusion and private fury.

On a macro scale this can be a problem for whole denominations. Think about the response to the clergy sex abuse scandals. The judicatories want to act in a covenantal way of love and forgiveness, but they find it hard to see that they and their representatives have broken basic contractual obligations in regard to safeguarding the vulnerable. The general public gets very angry when it sees Christians talking piously about covenants if they're meanwhile not even keeping their contracts. Here's the critical point: we should always aspire for every relationship to become a covenant, but we should never let any relationship fall below the level of a contract.

So here's the good news for Christians trying to speak both languages, the language of contract and of covenant. *Take contracts seriously.* Care and detail over contracts is a form of love towards those we don't know very well. It's a recognition that life is full of unexpected pitfalls, and a way of holding one another to honesty and honor in the face of temptation and distraction. *Never assume we can run our whole lives by contracts.* If we do, we'll find ourselves unprepared for the deepest and most beautiful things God has to give us. Instead, *try to turn contracts slowly but surely into covenants.* Contracts can give us security and trust, but only covenants can bring joy and delight.

And most of all, *never treat our relationship with God as a contract.* We never made a deal. God owes us nothing. We aren't God's equal. There's no court of arbitration we can go to if we get it into our head that God's not keeping the divine side of the bargain. In time everlasting there is no contract. What we have with God is a covenant. A covenant of grace that we did nothing to earn or deserve.

In the end, all contracts will fade away, and our covenant with God will be all we have. Forever.