

COVENANT

bĕrît

When I was in graduate school in Southern California, I served in our ward's Primary presidency. It was my responsibility to visit children as they were turning eight years old to help them learn more about baptism and the gift of the Holy Ghost. The presidency had put together a small packet of visual aids to explain how we experience the Holy Ghost—a little birthday candle for the light we feel, a tiny little blanket for the comfort we feel, and so on. It was harder to explain covenants, but the language used in the presentation to talk about the covenant of baptism made sense to an eight-year-old: We make promises to God, and he makes promises to us. We know that we have obligations to him, and we know that he has obligations to us. He binds himself to us based on our obedience (see Doctrine and Covenants 82:10).

As we get older, this simple concept of promises gets layered with our adult life experiences. We sign contracts for phones, apartments, cars, mortgages, and so on. We have obligations to make payment in exchange



We begin to take Christ's name upon us as we start on the covenant path.

for goods and services. We do our part, and we expect the other party to do their part. We make contracts. We break contracts. Others break contracts. We are penalized for breaking contracts, but that's part of life.

This contractual model can and does easily color our sense of what *covenant* means. But in the ancient world, making a covenant wasn't a matter of commerce. In ancient Israel the term for *covenant* was *bērit*. The concept behind *bērit* is a relationship, understood as a family relationship. Making a covenant in scriptural terms can best be understood as forming a new relationship.

When we get married we create a new relationship. When we adopt a child we create a new relationship. There are promises that we make to each other, but this is not a contract. We are creating new families. We are different people in these new relationships. We become husbands and wives, parents and children.

Covenants create family relationships. Covenants change who we are because they change our relationship with those around us and their relationship to us.

We intuitively understand the changes in identity that come with marriage and parenthood; that is shown in part by the change of name that often accompanies marriage and adoption. We are in a new relation-

ship, and we are different than we were before. There is a new sense of family identity.

NEW FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

In ancient Israel this sense of covenants as creating new family relationships not only brought people together with each other but also brought them together with the Lord. They became his people, and he became their God. In the Old Testament we also see names change as part of making a covenant relationship with the Lord. For example, when the Lord appeared to Abram, he told him that he was “the Almighty God” and that he had expectations for Abram: “walk before me and be thou perfect [“whole, without blemish”],” but these expectations were part of a new relationship that he was establishing. “*I will make my covenant between me and thee, and will multiply thee exceedingly. And Abram fell on his face: and God talked with him, saying, As for me, behold, my covenant is with thee, and thou shalt be a father of many nations. Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made thee*” (Genesis 17:1–5; emphasis added). To emphasize the new relationship of covenant, the Lord said again, “*I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed . . . to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee*” (Genesis 17:7). A new name was given and a new relationship established.

Abram became Abraham. Sarai became Sarah. Jacob became Israel. In the ancient world, names were serious business. They were understood to reflect something of a person’s true nature as well as their relationship to others. So, changing names would be a natural extension of creating a new relationship by covenant. The word for *name* in Hebrew (*šēm*, pronounced *shem*) can also be translated as “remembrance” or “memorial.” It is a marker to oneself and to others. This new name pointed to a new reality. Abram, “exalted father,” became Abraham, “father of a multitude,” through covenant promise. While it took years for that reality to appear,

this covenant name and promise was the foundation for his faithfully continuing on the path.

We can see the Lord using covenants to create a new family relationship with individuals in the era of the patriarchs and also with all of Israel through the covenant made at the time of Moses. By making a collective covenant with the Lord at Mount Sinai, the people of Israel entered into his family and protection. We can see the language of adoption being used when the Lord tells Moses, “I will take you to me for a people, and I will be to you a God” (Exodus 6:7).

In the Book of Mormon, we see these same ancient patterns. The people of King Benjamin are told that they have also entered into a new family relationship because of their willingness to covenant with the Lord. King Benjamin explained that “because of the covenant which ye have made ye shall be called the children of Christ, his sons, and his daughters; for behold, this day he hath spiritually begotten you; for ye say that your hearts are changed through faith on his name; therefore, ye are born of him and have become his sons and his daughters” (Mosiah 5:7). They likewise received a new name in association with their new covenant relationship. “I would that ye should take upon you the name of Christ, all you that have entered into the covenant with God that ye should be obedient unto the end of your lives” (5:8). Covenants create family relationships that are marked by a new name, reflecting a new nature.

For King Benjamin’s people, taking the name of Christ as a covenant name indicated a new relationship, a new identity, and the promise of a new nature created by their covenant. Just as Abraham did not become a “father of a multitude” immediately upon entering into the covenant relationship, taking upon us the name of Christ is part of the covenant promise of what we can become through covenant faithfulness.

These concepts about covenants are simple but have profound implications. The restoration of priesthood keys in this last dispensation occurred precisely to enable us to make covenants with the Lord. A covenant can’t be just a promise to him to be good. Throughout millennia,

many people have tried very hard to be good and to follow God as best they can. A covenant is a new relationship created by one who has authority to speak for the Lord, whose covenant it is. A covenant binds us to God and binds God to us. A covenant makes us part of Christ's family; we become "the children of Christ, his sons, and his daughters" (Mosiah 5:7).

Covenants speak to the question of identity, something that we may struggle with throughout our lives in different times and contexts. We try to understand ourselves and our nature. We first look to our parents to find out who we are. This can be a struggle as we grow up and come to recognize their weaknesses as well as their strengths. We want to hope that we can measure up to the good in preceding generations and escape from the traps that we may have inherited. We may, however, feel trapped in multigenerational patterns of pride or fear or anger, family patterns that can often feel as though they define us and lock us into a way of being.

When we meditate on the covenant relationship and promises of baptism, the endowment, and temple marriage, we should see ourselves becoming more and more connected to the Lord. Our covenants with God open us up to new potential and new identity. We need to recognize that through making these covenants we become his. We are part of his family. Covenant promises give us the vision that our reality is bigger than our past choices or our present self-assessment. Covenant promises show us that we are not who we thought we were. Because we have entered into these covenant relationships with the Lord God of Israel and taken his name upon us, the question of who we are cannot be separated from who he is.

THE NAME OF CHRIST

I was preparing to go on a mission during President Ezra Taft Benson's presidency. In addition to encouraging all Church members to read the Book of Mormon every day, he said that he had a vision of missionaries

going into the field having hundreds of verses of the Book of Mormon memorized. I took up the challenge and started writing out important Book of Mormon scriptures on 3x5 cards. I carried them around in my pocket, memorizing them between classes or when I was walking to or from BYU campus.

In the process of memorizing and pondering these scriptures, I changed. The Spirit helped me to understand the words I was studying, and I came to see things I had never seen before. These insights helped me have the courage to make changes in my life.

The scripture that had the deepest effect on me was from 2 Nephi 31. Through the language of this scripture, I began to understand that the baptismal covenant represented a profoundly different sense of myself and who I could become. I didn't learn the academic background of covenants as new relationships until after my mission, but the language and spirit of this verse brought the core truth into my heart.

In verse 13, Nephi thinks closely and seriously about the kind of life that is possible because of our covenant relationship with Christ and taking his name upon us.

Wherefore, my beloved brethren, I know that if ye shall follow the Son, with full purpose of heart, acting no hypocrisy and no deception before God, but with real intent, repenting of your sins, witnessing unto the Father that ye are willing to take upon you the name of Christ, by baptism—yea, by following your Lord and your Savior down into the water, according to his word, behold, then shall ye receive the Holy Ghost; yea, then cometh the baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost; and then can ye speak with the tongue of angels, and shout praises unto the Holy One of Israel. (2 Nephi 31:13)

Nephi isn't just saying we have to be really good. In saying that we must "follow the Son" into the waters of baptism and be "willing to take upon [us] the name of Christ," Nephi is saying that we need to take our covenants seriously. We need to really believe that we have taken Christ's name upon us.

His point about our needing to *want* to be in the covenant relationship is so important that he says it four different ways. We have to follow the Son (1) with full purpose of heart, (2) acting no hypocrisy and no deception, (3) with real intent, and (4) *willingly* taking the name of Christ upon ourselves. We have to really want to be like him.

When we make covenants, the actions of being baptized, receiving the endowment, and being sealed in the temple are the external ordinances we perform, but unless they are joined with our heart in making the covenants, the full effect of the new relationship is limited. Nephi is trying to help us understand that this new covenant relationship, enacted in the immersion of baptism (“following your Lord and your Savior down into the water, according to his word”), can bring us into an entirely new relationship with God. In this new relationship we are full of the Spirit—“then cometh the baptism of fire and of the Holy Ghost.” It is not just being immersed in water or having the baptismal prayer recited that makes the relationship living. The ordinance and authority are necessary but not sufficient.

A relationship is real and alive when we live in that relationship. If we get married but then don’t spend time together, we are not married the way we could or should be. If we adopt a child but then give her to someone else to raise, we are not living out the new relationship formed by the adoption.

Living out our covenant relationship starts by believing that we can be different and better people in and through Jesus Christ. It starts by believing that he has promised to help us become those people, people that have his character and attributes. This faith is what produces repentance. When we trust that we have access to the power of Christ in this new relationship, we can start to change and grow to become more like him. We can go forward, trusting that through our covenants he has given us his name and his power to do good and be good.

COVENANT IDENTITY

Covenants are there to give us confidence. This connection, as explained in Alma 7, jumped out at me during my mission in France. My missionary companion and I were standing in a long line at the post office, and I was passing the time by reading the Book of Mormon. I can still remember the excitement of seeing how faith not only precedes repentance and making covenants, but it also follows them. Alma spoke to the people of Gideon and explained baptism to them. He said, “Now I say unto you that ye must repent, and be born again; for the Spirit saith if ye are not born again ye cannot inherit the kingdom of heaven.” So far it sounds like the basic, familiar pattern. But see what Alma explained can happen after they come and are baptized. He continued, “Therefore come and be baptized unto repentance, that ye may be washed from your sins, *that ye may have faith on the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sins of the world, who is mighty to save and to cleanse from all unrighteousness*” (Alma 7:14).

Part of the reason we are baptized is so we can have increased faith and confidence in the Lamb of God. He has taken away the sins of the world. He is mighty to save and to cleanse from all unrighteousness. Our covenant relationship allows us to have confidence that he has and will take away *our* sins and cleanse *us* from all unrighteousness.

We often turn this on its head and describe a covenant as a super-promise that we make but can never live up to. It is true that in all our covenants we promise to obey God, but that promise is part of a relationship in which Christ is giving us his name—if we are willing to receive it. Remember, names in the ancient world describe nature. Christ is promising to give us his nature. “We ask thee, Holy Father, that thy servants may go forth from this house armed with thy power, and that thy name may be upon them” (Doctrine and Covenants 109:22). At baptism we promise that we are willing to take his name upon us, and that is more fully realized in the temple endowment. Part of the dedicatory prayer of the Kirtland Temple was a plea that the gift of the Holy Ghost that we receive at baptism would be magnified and intensified: “[Grant] that they may grow up in thee, and receive a fulness of the Holy Ghost” (Doctrine

and Covenants 109:15). As we receive his name more fully we can also receive his nature and his Spirit more fully. The Lord is promising to fill us with his Spirit and change our hearts so that we want to obey as he obeyed the Father.

We are reminded of this dimension of our covenant relationship most clearly in the sacrament prayers. We covenant weekly that we are “willing to take upon [us] the name of” Christ so that we “may always have his Spirit to be with [us]” (Doctrine and Covenants 20:77). Our willingness to live in this covenant relationship opens the door for him to pour out his Spirit. When we receive the Spirit, we have access to his enabling power. With this increased ability to live out this covenant relationship with him, we can become more and more like him.

But *we* have to want it. That is the absolute, foundational key to living in a covenant relationship. It is based entirely on our agency. The Lord wants to give us everything that he has and everything that he is. He wants us to be joint heirs with him of “all that [the] Father hath” (Doctrine and Covenants 84:38). He wants to give us desires to do good and hate evil. He wants to give us forgiveness when we are weak and power to become strong.

We must believe in the reality of those covenant promises. To trust these promises we must believe in the reality of the covenant relationships that we make in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. We need a testimony of God the Father, his Son Jesus Christ, and of the restoration, through the Prophet Joseph Smith, of priesthood keys that continue to be held by the current President of the Church. Without this witness, we will not have confidence in the words that were said by a priesthood holder when we were baptized: “Having been commissioned of Jesus Christ, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost” (Doctrine and Covenants 20:73). Without this witness, we will not have confidence that we can accept the gift that was offered in our confirmation when we were told by an authorized Melchizedek Priesthood holder, “Receive the Holy Ghost.” Without

faith, there will be no repentance. Without faith in Christ, we will not live the covenant life that is being offered us in this new relationship.

Often we feel so trapped in our own weakness that we think we can never live up to what we have promised. Our experience with our own fears, inclinations, and weaknesses leaves us feeling imprisoned. Sometimes we have done things that we regret. Sometimes our lack of desire to do good leads to letting opportunities pass us by, leaving us with guilt and regret. We become more hopeless about our ability to change or live up to what we have promised. We think, "I'm not strong enough. I'm not celestial material. This is just the way I am." Our sense of self in itself can be the bondage that binds us down and keeps us from moving forward and becoming what we have been promised we can become.

Even when we are weak, the Lord is strong. We must remember that we are not alone and not abandoned. Having hope in our own ability to live up to the lofty promises and expectations of our covenant relationship is based on faith in ourselves. But faith in ourselves will never get us out of the depth of our captivity. Hope in a gospel sense is not tied to confidence in our own strength, but to better understanding the nature of our covenant relationship and who we have covenanted with. When we understand and begin to trust the One who has made covenant promises, then we will look to him for help.

We have promised so much. But what we often fail to appreciate is that in these new relationships we are promised far more by the Lord. Just as the ancient concept of covenants as relationships opens up a new way to think about who we are and who we can become, the world of the ancient Israelites offers additional clues as to how the Lord will help us get there when we so often feel trapped by weakness and sin. The concept of redemption becomes clearer when we understand who the Lord is and what his covenant relationship with us means.