



BIBLICAL COVENANT AS BASIS FOR ETHICAL PRINCIPLES

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ABSTRACT

Covenant as basis for ethical principles is the title of this paper. After the initial introduction, clarifications of terms are made by the writers. The terms clarified are Covenant and ethics; covenant as bedrock for ethical principles is as well considered. The paper discovered that covenant is simply agreement between two parties. It also found out that covenant involves obligations and commitment, when it becomes bilateral covenant. On the other hand, the paper explains that ethics deals with rightness or wrongness of actions. It also has to do with the principle or law guiding our moral conduct. The paper adopted a phenomenological / philosophical approach of research methodology, cum descriptive method of research reportage. The paper further discovered that man was created a moral being by God, and he is responsible for his actions. And by way of conclusion as well, God's covenants are basis for ethical principles in that they help man to discover himself in God's will in relation with behavioral code and conduct. The paper further concludes that the observance of divine covenants is an act of righteousness on the part of



man. Righteousness, the Scripture says exalts a nation; by implication to be sound ethically and morally by our citizens will make our nation better.

Keywords: Covenant, Ethics, Ethical Principles

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Examining Biblical covenant as basis for ethical principles is the objective of this paper. The issue of covenant is conspicuous in most religions of the world; but the writer examines this from the Christian perspective of covenant. When the writer talks about Christian covenant, he refers to Biblical covenant, as found in the Christian Scripture. The subject of covenant could be found in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. Whenever God enters into covenant with a people, He requires them to behave in a certain manner, in order for such covenant to remain valid. This demonstrates that religious beliefs are not merely theological affirmations but also function as mechanisms for shaping moral conduct and regulating acceptable patterns of behaviour within society (Edem & Udom, 2024; Ntebono, Oko, Olusakin & Ahamuefule, 2025). This requirement brings about ethical principles, which deals with wrongness and rightness of behavior or action. This moral demand is comparable to cultural institutions that transmit communal values and acceptable conduct across generations (Edem, 2022; Afahakan, Ekanem & Oko, 2023). Moreover, this paper intends to consider the two principal terms of this study under clarifications of terms. The two terms are covenant and ethics, and then subsequently

This paper is aimed at solving the problem of wrong behavior and action by our public office holders, who may belong to one Christian church or another. If we check what is happening in the society, we discover that the so called corruption eating deep into our economy is carried out by people who we see in our Christian worship centers often. The question comes, what can we do using the agency of the Christian church to bring this menace to a stop? The Christian church can be used by God, when she begins to teach and inculcate ethical principles in the lives of the members; teachings from both the Old Testament and New Testament Scriptures. Nigerians are religious people; if this teaching goes on in all the mega churches in this nation, change will



inevitably come. It has been informed earlier on that this paper is investigating the topic from a Christian perspective, yet there is need to also encourage other religious group in the country to do the same, by inculcating similar principles into the lives of their members.

Moreover, this paper intends to consider the two principal terms of this study under clarifications of terms. The two terms are covenant and ethics, and then subsequently Old Testament covenant as the bedrock for ethical principles shall be considered; not leaving out the relevance of New Testament covenant to morality. There shall be recommendations and conclusion thereafter.

CLARIFICATIONS OF TERMS

The writer hereby intends to define the principal terms of this paper, in order to aid comprehension. The terms to be defined are Covenant and Ethics. Ethical principles imply the rules of ethics or what ethics demands from individuals as the way we ought to act or behave.

(A) Covenant: This simply means agreement reached between two persons. According to Vine (1996), covenant primarily signifies “a disposition of property by will or otherwise.” In its use in the Septuagint, it is the rendering of the Hebrew word meaning “Covenant” or agreement (from a verb signifying “to cut or divide,” in allusion to a sacrificial custom in connection with “Covenant making,” e.g., Genesis 15:10 “divided,” Jeremiah 34:18-19).

The above definition contradicts the English word “covenant” or agreement (literally a coming together) which signifies a mutual undertaking between two persons or more, each is bound to fulfill obligations. It does not signify the idea of joint obligation; such obligation is undertaking by a single person, (Vine, 1996).

Covenant is one of the fundamental theological motifs of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. Eventually. The expressions “Old Covenant” and “New Covenant,” which once referred to two eras (Jere. 31:31-33) or dispensations (2 Cor. 3:4-11), come to designate the two parts of the Christian Bible, the Old Testament (covenant) and the New.



The Hebrew term for covenant (Bērit) seems to have the root meaning of “bond, fetter,” indicating a binding relationship; the idea of “binding, putting together” is also suggested in the Greek term *syntheke*. Another term used in the New Testament is *diatheke* (will, testament), pointing more to the obligatory or legal aspect of a covenant.

The Hebrew term Bērit “Covenant,” or “contract,” covers a range of agreement among people or between God and a person or group of persons. Among the covenants with God are: one with Noah, several with Abraham (mostly in connection with circumcision), with Israel through Moses, with David, with Aaron and Phinehas (Priesthood), with Joshua, Josiah and Ezra, (Alafah, 2022).

Jeremiah speaks of a lasting covenant in the context of the restoration of Israel and Judah to their land: “This is the covenant that I will make with the people of Israel after that time declares the LORD. I will put my Law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbor or say to one another “know the LORD,” because they will all know me from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD, for I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.

Agus (1981) in Alafah enthused that the prophets were not comfortable with the idea of setting conditions for and limitations on God’s will. God’s relations with Israel were due to God’s love, goodness and compassion; hence the Biblical authors often qualify “Covenant” with such terms as *hesed* (love) and *shalom* (peace).

Alafah (2022) opined that: A covenant is an agreement; usually between two parties. In the ancient Near East, it was a kind of treaty by means of which rulers enter into a covenant relationship with their subjects. There are certain similarities in style between these secular covenants and the biblical covenants, but the content is surely different. Some covenants were bilateral; in that there were obligations and commitments for both sides. We see such a covenant between Abraham and Abimelech in Genesis 21:27, 32. Marriage is described as bilateral covenant in Malachi 2:14 both husband and wife make covenant promises which they obligated to keep.



And Abraham took sheep and oxen, and gave them unto Abimelech; and both of them made a covenant.... Thus they made a covenant at Beersheba; then Abimelech rose up, and Phicol the chief captain of his host, and they returned into the land of the Philistines, (Genesis 21:27, 32).

“Yet ye say wherefore? Because the LORD hath been witness between thee and the wife of thy youth, against whom thou hast dealt treacherously: yet is she thy companion, and the wife of thy covenant,” (Malachi 2:14).

Furthermore, the Mosaic Covenant was a bilateral Covenant: “And now, if you will diligently listen to me and keep my covenant, then you will be my special possession out of all the nations, for all the earth is mine,” (Exodus 19:5).

God promised to bless His people when they keep His Covenant (Deuteronomy 28:1-14), and He promised cursing when they failed to keep His Covenant, (Deuteronomy 28:15-68).

There is another kind of covenant found in Bible in which binds Himself to do certain things, which is not conditioned upon the actions of others. In the case of Abrahamic covenant, God promised to make a great nation of Abram, and to bless His seed greatly, and thus he and his offspring would become a blessing to others. This was unconditional covenant and it was confirmed by God’s oath. Thus, this covenant was unchangeable. In this sense, both the Abrahamic Covenant and the New Covenant are made up of promises.

“But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises,” (Hebrews 8:6 ESV).

The New Covenant is a series of promises that God made to Israel and Judah, promises which are unchangeable and irreversible, since they are sealed by God’s oath. These promises make the New



Covenant vastly superior to the old Covenant, so much so that the New Covenant replaces the old, making it obsolete, (Alafah, 2022).

(B) Ethics: This deals with rightness and wrongness of actions. It has also to do with principles guiding our conduct. Ethics is the principles which determine our moral conduct. It goes on to determine rightness and wrongness of behaviour.

Here Morality runs up into religion, and indeed since all duties are in their final analysis duties towards God, Kant and other Moralists have objected to the admission into ethics of a special class of religious obligations. It has been well remarked that the genuine Christian cannot be known by particular professions or practices, but only by the heavenly Spirit of his life. Hence religious duties cannot be formulated in a number of precise rules. Love to God finds expression not in mechanical obedience, but in the spontaneous outflow of the heart. The special duties to the Divine Being may be briefly described under the main heads of Recognition, Obedience and Worship, (Archibald, 2007).

As citizens and adherents of one religion or the other; we are involved in three spheres of duties: duties in relation to self, in relation to others and duties in relation to God. It is obvious that without one having respect for self, such cannot have respect for others. It is very pertinent to know that we belong to others, as others belong to us. Both of us are alike parts of a larger whole. (Alumona, 2013 p.2).

Ethics establishes the law according to which we ought to act or behave. Ethics is the science of moral duty; broadly considered, it is the science of the ideal human action.

Maxey, citing Hyslop states: ethics is the science of the phenomena of human character and conduct, and the art of directing the human will toward the ideal order of life. Springer in Maxey



talks about Christian ethics and states that it consists of the study and practice of moral conduct, positively or negatively, as set forth in the Bible...

There are many ideologies aboard in the land – various systems of thought with regards to life on this planet. Each includes ethical elements and is confronted with such questions as: “what is the good life?” “What is the purpose of our lives?” “To whom or what do our ultimate loyalties belong?” “Which attitudes and values are most important in determining our relationships with others?” “How am I to act in the role of life in which I find myself, (Maxey, 1987 p.21)?

Webster’s New International Dictionary defines ethics as the science of moral duty; more broadly, the science of the ideal human character, and the ideal ends of human action. The major problem that ethics confronts is the nature of summum bonum, or highest good, the origin and validity of the sense of duty, and character and authority of moral obligation.

Ethics is a branch of study which investigates the laws of morality and formulates rules of conduct. It deals with the rightness and wrongness of man’s conduct and the ideals towards which man is working. What is the basic moral obligation? What do we mean by right action? How may we distinguish a right action from a wrong one? These are some of the questions with which ethics concerns itself, (Appadorai, 2004).

In its simplest aspect, ethics has to do with the rightness or wrongness of any human course of action. An individual discovers that certain contributions he has made are being misappropriated. Should he react by saying something about it? Or should he ignore it? To know what to do or not to do involves a problem and such is an ethical problem, (Maxey, 1987)

Ethics is the science of the value of human life, it deals with conduct and character that is approved or disapproved. “Moral science” and “Moral philosophy” are commonly used synonyms of ethics. According to some writers moral philosophy is more definitely concerned with the ultimate implications of morality in a scientific and in a spiritual view of the word, (Emuka, 2021). Okon



in Emuka enthused that, any society where there is no ethics is said to be in dark. Hence, ethics is commonly a way of conduct which shows light to a particular society. This is all aspects of ethics in its entirety.

Ethics as well deals with what is morally right and wrong. While Christian ethics deals with what is morally right for a Christian. Since Christians base their beliefs on God's revelation in Scripture, the Bible remains the basic source of Christian ethics. Yet, God has not limited himself to revelation in Scripture; he has also general revelation in nature (Romans 1: 19-20; 2: 12-14), (Geisler, 2010).

When men thus begin to reflect on the origin and connection of things, three questions at once suggest themselves – what, how and what? What is the world? How do I know it? And why am I to answer these three inquiries. What exists is the problem of Metaphysics. What am I, and how do I know is the question of Psychology? What is my purpose, what am I to do, is the subject of ethics. These questions are closely related, and the answer given to one largely the solution of the others, (Archibald, 2007 p.27).

Morals and morality come from the Latin word mos meaning custom or usage, while ethics comes from the Greek word, ethos whose meaning is roughly the same. So it is hardly surprising that today, as earlier, these words are often used interchangeably. When a distinction is made, “morals” nowadays refer to actual human conduct viewed with regard to right and wrong, good and evil, “ethics refer to a theoretical overview of morality, a theory or system or code. In this sense, our morality is the concrete human reality that we live out from day to day, while ethics is an academic view gained by taking a step back and analyzing or theorizing about (any) morality, Kunhiyop citing (McClendon, 2002 pp.45,46).

THE SOURCE OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS



The fact that God requires something of man, and stands ready to reward obedience and punish violation, is not nearly so important as the question to what sort of God man has obligation and what are his commandments. Religious conviction concerning God's dealing with man affects the basic meaning and content of Biblical ethics. God has something to do with the very meaning of obligation; he is no merely external threat standing behind morality, Kunhiyop citing (Ramsey, 1993).

In response to the question of Ramsey, which sort of God determines man's ethical obligation; the Triune God is the one. At the heart of Christian ethics lies this essential reality, not just any god, but the Triune God; He has made himself known to us as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, (Deuteronomy 6:4; Matthew 28:19; 2 Corinthians 13:14).

(A) The Norm for Christian Ethics: Christians should endeavor to mirror their characters after God's character; hence it is very imperative for us to know our theology very well. The Father tells us to "be holy" in the Old Testament "because I, the Lord am holy, and I have set you apart from the nations to be my own," (Lev. 20:26). We need to get very deep in God, in order to understand what these commands mean and what it means to be holy and perfect. Therefore, God the Father is the norm for Christian ethics.

(B) The Model for Christian Ethics: People are not just Christians because they believe in God or some supernatural power; they are Christians because they believe that Jesus is the son of God who died and rose from the grave and gives every believer power to live a moral life. As the son of God Jesus is the complete revelation of who God is. He is thus our ethical paradigm, in other words, our example of how we should live. Paul tells the Philipian Christians that "your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus" (Philip. 2:5) and he commends the Thessalonians for having become "imitators of us and of the Lord" (1 Thess. 1:6), (Kunhiyop, 2008, p.54). So, by implication Christ is the model for Christian ethics.

(C) The Power of Christian Ethics: The Christian ethics demands power for it be appropriately observed; the very power in question is to be discussed here.



OLD TESTMENT COVENANT AS BEDROCK FOR ETHICAL PRINCIPLES

As earlier pointed out, some covenants were bilateral in nature, because there were obligations and commitments for both sides. A reference was made earlier to the covenant between Abraham and Abimelech in Genesis 21:27, 32. The obligations or commitments attached are what furnish the ethical principles. Every covenant relationship without obligations and commitments will be very porous and valueless. The value or validity of such covenant relationship is that someone has been made to behave or act in an accepted manner. Abraham and Abimelech related cordially without further rancor among their servants, on the basis of the covenant they entered into. Therefore, the covenant they made was the basis or bedrock for the ethical principle of cordiality, which both of them maintained.(Oko, 2017)

A lot of people find it difficult to live in an orderly manner; they often behave the way they like. For instance, if you are a Christian, then you should behave in a way that none Christians could see Christ through your character and be attracted to be converted into Christianity.

Some people break covenant today, not minding the consequences thereof. When covenants are broken by those who entered into them, then ethical principles in that regard are also lost. From the Christian point of view, we all know what the Holy Writ demands from us as how we ought to behave both privately and in public, but the wherewithal to do the right thing becomes very difficult. Why do we struggle nowadays to observe ethical principles? Christians often sing this song: “Covenant keeping God, there is no one like you....” Yes, the writer agrees with this, God is a Covenant keeping God, but why can’t we as His children keep our own little part of the covenant and the society would become a better place for all of us ethically.

The foundation of right ethics is a right condition of being. Ethics should be the outgrowth or product of an inner state of normal rectitude and uprightness. Inner consecration, inner purity, the presence of divine personality within the heart filled with the love of God must constitute the background of that standard of ethics God presents to mankind as an ideal for him to strive to reach in this present life. No one could scripturally deny the power of God to make the heart right; no one would argue that Christ is unable to fill the soul with His own love. These facts being admitted,



we assert that man should endeavor to make his outward life conform in every particular to that glorious inner life and inner power divinely bestowed, Yocum citing (Williams, 1968).

As writing from a Christian perspective, it would ideal at this juncture to take us back to the beginning. The Holy Scripture begins with God as the world and all that are in it. Man is presented as being made in God's image as the crown of God's creation (Genesis 1:27). As such man was and always remains a moral being, and responsible to God, whose actions can be judged right or wrong, good or evil on the basis of how they conform to or deviate from the demands of the Scripture, (Shields, 2008).

Furthermore, the Mosaic Covenant was a bilateral Covenant: "And now, if you will diligently listen to me and keep my covenant, then you will be my special possession out of all the nations, for all the earth is mine," (Exodus 19:5). There is no gainsaying of the fact that covenant is the bedrock for ethical principle; the above scripture is very explicit about this. The covenant here demands that God's people should behave in a way that pleases God. And such pattern of behavior is the ethical behavioral pattern of the Christian religion. Biblical covenants gear towards setting ethical behavioral standard for Christians, hence the writer is right to enthuse that covenant is the bedrock for ethical principles.

The observance of ethical principles is not by force or religious intimidation; the moment one chooses to hearken diligently unto God, to observe and to do all his commandments, such would immediately begin to observe the ethical principles, which are the obligation and commitment of the covenant. And by the grace of God such person has received, he would begin to live a sound moral life.

Why did God promised to bless His people when they keep His Covenant in (Deuteronomy 28:1-14), and He promised cursing when they failed to keep His Covenant, (Deuteronomy 28:15-68)? He made such promise in order to create ethical principles on the basis of his Covenant. Every right thinking person would want God to bless him or her. For such blessings to come, observance of ethical principles must have been achieved. So, covenant could be considered as the basis for ethical principles.



THE RELEVANCE OF NEW TESTAMENT COVENANT TO MORALITY

The New Testament covenant has a lot to do with morality and ethics. The death of Jesus Christ on the cross made the New Testament covenant possible. So, that covenant is based on the finished work of Christ on the cross. Christ's teachings on ethics and morality are very fundamental to the issues of moral soundness in our contemporary. If those who profess Christ on earth presently adhere and put into practice the teachings of Christ on the subject matter, our contemporary society would become a better place. Therefore, the relevance of the New Testament covenant to morality can never be overemphasized.

According to Alumona, the coming of the Messiah was prophesied and recorded in several Old Testament passages of the scripture. In Genesis 3:15, Jesus was the seed of the woman that was mentioned, to bruise the head of the serpent. That refers to the death and resurrection of Jesus. The Messiah's coming was mentioned in some other Old Testament scriptures, like: Isaiah 7:14; 9:6; 53:1-12. The fulfillment of those passages of the scriptures came in the New Testament. Therefore, the Old and New Testament are inseparable.

CONCLUSION

Having studied covenant as basis for ethical principles the writer hereby concludes that man was created in God's image, and created a moral being; his actions could be considered right or wrong. Man is responsible for all his right and wrong actions; and his behavior changes for good the moment he begins to hearken diligently to God's commands. God's covenant is created in order to help man discover himself in God's will in relation to behavioral code and conduct. God has a standard and he wants all of his children to conform to that standard. He would not like us to believe in him in vain; hence he made those bilateral covenants and encouraged us to observe them. We would be doing righteousness, if we begin to observe those covenants; as the Holy Scripture has it that righteousness exalts a nation. The society will become a better place for us to live in, if we observe the ethical principles enshrined in the covenants under study. This is synonymous to African cultural continuity which depends on preserving practices that promote morality, identity and responsible communal living (Ekpo & Edem, 2026). Thus demands of the



covenants reveal God's set standard on how we ought to act or behave. The writer conclusively maintains that covenant remains the basis for ethical principles. The operational method for this investigation is survey descriptive analysis / phenomenological approach.

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