

What's in a promise? Living by covenant, not contract

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In a sparse living room, just off a busy street, a young man kneels on a hardwood floor, his head bowed, oil dripping from his hair. Standing around him with their hands on his head, his back, his shoulders, a small group is praying. They are asking God to bless the promise this young man has made “to persevere with these people in this place.” Minutes ago, one of them read from Psalm 133: “How good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity! It is like precious oil poured on the head, running down on the beard, running down on Aaron’s beard, down on the collar of his robe.”

This oil of anointing is like the oil that marked Aaron as a priest and like the perfume that Mary of Bethany poured on Jesus’ feet, signifying that he is one who was set apart for God’s service. This oil is precious not so much for its market value as for the commitment it marks.

“Do you promise to submit to the Holy Spirit as discerned in this community?” a leader asked the young man as he presented himself for membership. His “I do” was echoed by the community, who pledged their commitment to him. Now they are touching, united in prayer, the oil of these promises on each of their hands. This is a solemn vow before their God.

A passerby in this low-income, inner-city neighborhood peeking in the window and witnessing this scene would probably be suspicious. Who besides gangs and cults perform ritual acts of initiation, asking members to commit their whole life to something? Anyone who knew this young man would likely be concerned. Has he been brainwashed by this group? We are leery of organizations that ask too much of people. We worry about friends who submit to extreme demands. Vows can be dangerous.

Yet for most of the history of the church, small groups of monks and nuns have welcomed members in ceremonies like this, making lifelong promises in the service of God and the church. In his Rule, St. Benedict of Nursia instructs communities to test those who come seeking membership, having them knock at the door for four or five days. Only if these seekers are persistent should they be invited into the community for a short time, after which the Rule is to be thoroughly explained to them. Then, if they want, they can practice living this way of life.

Through various stages, this testing continues. For those who are finally ready to join, the commitment is total: they declare their intent to the group, bow at their feet in prayer and leave everything, even the clothes on their backs, for the new life they have chosen in community.

Extreme as this may seem to the modern observer, monastic vows sound somewhat familiar to anyone who has been to a wedding ceremony or themselves said “I do” before God and community. In the practices of both marriage and celibacy, the church calls its members to make promises about who we will be faithful to in our daily living. Our lives are not our own. We have been made living members of the body of Christ. Our new life gets fleshed out in terms of particular relationships and the promises that make them possible. To learn to live “in Christ” is to learn to make promises and keep them.

But we live in a world marked by infidelity, each of us debilitated in our incapacity to do what we say we will do. While we may suspect others of simply lying when they do not keep their promises, we know from our own experience that we often fail to do things that we fully intended to do when we said we would do them. Indeed, we may never have consciously chosen not to do them. We just forgot. Or got distracted by other things. Yet these broken promises add up, creating walls of mistrust on the already fragmented landscape of our shared existence. We learn to confess both the evil we’ve done and “the things we have left undone” because we know that our will

is weak from the start.

Infidelity is a tendency deep within us. But it is also encouraged by the constant barrage of powers at work in this world's broken systems. Because sex sells we are inundated daily by the suggestive poses of women and men to whom we're not only not committed but whom we do not even know. Their images come to our senses not as icons in which we might glimpse the divine but as products to be consumed. This pornographic imagination is extended to real estate, destinations, entertainment events and even educational opportunities. Our broken economy does not invite us to ask how we might be faithful to our people and place but rather how we might use them to satisfy our base desires. Infidelity is sold to us as a good.

St. Augustine of Hippo made an important distinction between something that is to be enjoyed for its own sake and something that is to be used for the sake of enjoying something else. Unlike the modern philosopher Immanuel Kant, who argued that human beings are ends in themselves, Augustine claimed that all creatures—even fellow humans—are to be “used” for the sake of enjoying God. Everything God has made is good, and people are very good, according to the creation story. But every good thing is meant to point us toward the greatest Good, the Giver of all good things.

We defile the holy when we love good things for our own sake, deadening our sense of intimacy and connection with God. When we use people and places to serve ourselves, we are not only untrue to our fellow creatures. We also distance ourselves from the Creator and from the part of ourselves that cries out for connection with the divine. Infidelity unravels the intricate fabric of the universe.

To make promises is to proclaim that a culture of mistrust has been interrupted by One whom we can trust. It is to live as a sign of God's faithfulness, even as we struggle to grown into fidelity ourselves. We make promises because we've glimpsed a picture of hope and know that it points us toward the life we were made for.

The ring I wear on the fourth finger of my left hand is a public sign of the promises my wife Leah and I made in marriage. When I turn it with my thumb, as I often do by habit, I think of Leah, our kids, and the commitments that make our shared life possible.

Traditional monasticism has likewise featured signs to mark the commitments of those who make vows. As early as the era of the Desert Fathers, the habit was worn by monks as a sign charged with meaning. In his *Praktikos*, the Desert Father Evagrius Ponticus explains how the cowl (or hood) symbolizes God's charity and the cross-shaped scapular symbolizes faith. The monk's belt marks rejection of impurity, and his staff is to lean on as he leans on the Lord.

"We see then," Evagrius concludes, "that the monk's habit is a kind of compendious symbol of all that we have described." In a sense, it sums up his life. As the mark of monastic vocation, a habit points beyond itself to a way of life that finds its end in God.

We make promises because they mark us as people who are turning from the rebellion of original sin to life with God in the membership of a new creation. To say "I do" in a world marked by infidelity is to stand out as a living sign that faithfulness is possible. It is possible because we know a God who makes promises and keeps them. We know this because we know the story of this God's relationship with the people called Israel.

The tradition of vows in monastic community has always been tied to a rule of life. Monks and nuns do not promise poverty, chastity and obedience in the abstract as ideals that they would like to live out in whatever circumstances they happen to find themselves. Monastic vows are always promises made to God and a community under a particular rule. These promises have concrete meaning within a way of life that is shared by a people. Poverty doesn't mean holding money loosely or owning things without letting them own you. It means giving away the money and possessions you have inherited and earned, joining a group of others who have done the same and trusting God to provide for you in that particular community for the rest of your life.

In the same way, the promises that Christians make in marriage make sense only within the way of life we learn by being part of a people called church. We know what it means to give our body to another only to the extent that we have learned what it means for a community to claim our bodies in baptism. This will be a journey filled with joy as husband and wife delight in one another's bodies and welcome children as a fruit of that delight.

But Christian marriage is about more than what feels natural and good. Because we have died with Christ, we know that giving our body to another will mean bearing with that person through afflictions—“in sickness and in health,” as the traditional vows have it. Because we are members of God’s family by adoption, we know we may have children who do not look like us. Because we follow a Lord who was executed, we know that we won’t be able to make everything work out alright for our families in this world.

We know these things, as the monastic witness reminds us, because we are the spiritual descendants of the people called Israel. Both God’s promises and ours in return find their content in the particularities of a shared way of life. We cannot find our way with God alone. While intimacy with God is always deeply personal, it cannot be private. “Me and Jesus” will not work. We’re in this together, or we’re not in it at all.

Since September 11, 2001, we in the West have become painfully aware of the fact that Islamic extremists do not make a distinction between personal convictions and political imagination. But if we listen to the millions of Muslims who are not extremists but fellow children of Abraham with whom we have much in common, we will learn that they are equally confused by the separation of faith and politics in the West. To speak of “my personal religion” makes no sense to them. They know it is a contradiction of faith to say, “Let’s live together and keep our faith to ourselves.”

We can learn from our Muslim neighbors what Israel learned at Sinai: to trust God is to join a community of people who make promises. Our promises find their meaning in the patterns and habits of the way of life we share together. Because this Way has been revealed to us, it is as much a gift as the promise that first inspired our faith. But because it is what makes us a people, this Way is not optional. To trust God is to pay attention and keep the commandments that make us a people set apart in this world.

A postcollege group from a local church is gathered in the living room, just off that busy street, sitting on the hardwood floor where a young man knelt to promise his life to this community. This group is trying to make sense of his commitment and those of others like him. Why would anyone promise one’s life to God in community? They are young professionals and graduate students, all of them shaped by a low-commitment culture that nevertheless has lofty ideals. They graduated from schools that told them they were to either work hard and run the world or work even harder

to change it. They are ambitious young people who have somehow been fascinated by Jesus.

One of them, an accountant, tries to name the tension. “So you’ve committed to stay here. How long are we talking?”

“We’re here for life,” one community member says.

The accountant tries to clarify: “Is this like a five-year commitment? Ten years?”

“We don’t know how long we’ll live, but we plan to die here.”

For the young accountant, this doesn’t compute. She has worked hard to calculate possibilities, to manage futures, to keep her options open in pursuit of the best possible outcome. Ours is a broken world of sharp edges and hard breaks, she knows. She has read of the millions who are dying from poverty, of the wars that are raging in a dozen countries, of the exploitation in human trafficking, of the global environmental crisis. “For God so loved the world,” she remembers reading also, and she knows she cannot sit idly in the comfort of her middle-class existence. Surely God wants her to do something. But in a world of so many possibilities, how could anyone commit to one place—and for their whole life?

Saturated as our story is in covenant, the truth is that all of us—even committed, churchgoing Christians—are steeped in a culture that is deeply suspicious of promises. The collective legal codes of cultures all around the world attest to the fact that this tendency to infidelity is not a recent shortcoming in human history. Yet with the increasing individualism that has emerged from a modern notion of rights and freedom, community safeguards against selfishness and abuse have deteriorated, leaving us with the sole defense of our current legal system—the contract.

The contract is excellent at clarifying the terms of commitments. Parties to a contract know what they are expected to do and what they can expect from others. It is written out in black and white. And because we know that people do not always do what they say they will do, contracts also spell out terms for what will happen if any party fails to keep his or her promise. Ultimately, every contract has a dissolution policy that outlines from the very start what the relationship will look like if it ultimately falls apart. Every contract, then, is conditional.

God's story of covenant is an interruption to this logic. God's promise to Noah and to Abraham—to all creation and to all the children of faith—is not conditional. It is a promise that reveals something about who our God is—"gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity" (Joel 2:13).

Though the Mosaic covenant, which fleshes out life with God under a law, does depend on God's people following the good Way that is given to us, the hope of the story is not that we will buckle down and achieve faithfulness, but that a Messiah will come who can establish God's reign and that, as the Lord says through the prophet Jeremiah, he "will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts" (31:33). We will make promises and keep them because God is great enough to make faithfulness possible, even among broken people like us.

For the apostle Paul, the Christian life is possible only because it is a life "in Christ." Jesus matters to those who know the story of covenant because Jesus bridges the divide between Creator and creation, fulfilling in his two natures both sides of the covenant that makes us who we are.

Do those of us who have been baptized into Christ's body always keep the promises we make? No, we have not been made perfect.

Abba Macedonius, another one of the Desert Fathers, said, "It is the property of men to fall, and to rise again as often as this may happen." We make promises not because we will always be able to keep them, but because we trust a God who is faithful enough to always help us get up again.

This falling down and getting up, as undramatic as it may seem, is what the story of covenant teaches us to see as the most important thing any of us can ever do. If the God who created the world has indeed redeemed it in Christ, no task is more important than for each of us to grow up together in Christ. We do this by making promises to particular people, learning to forgive as we are forgiven and trusting that there is enough grace to sustain us, even when we're not sure how it's all going to work out. We make promises in the hope that the God who made covenant with Abraham has made faithfulness possible for the whole world in Jesus.

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