

OUR COVENANT WITH THE LORD



Bird's Eye View of Lesson

A covenant is a promise made between two or more people. At Mount Sinai the people agreed to obey the Ten Commandments and enter a covenant with the Lord by declaring, “All that the Lord has spoken we will do.” The laws of the covenant are given in the form of actions that should be taken or not taken. Then when the Lord came on earth, He established a new covenant—that people should love one another as He loves us. The message of the new covenant is primarily one of the mind and spirit. The teachings for the New Church focus on the goal of the Lord’s conjunction with the human race. Conjunction means joining together. From His infinite love, the Lord wants to be joined or conjoined with each of us. But this can only happen if we individually respond to His love and receive His love.

READINGS FROM THE WORD

A covenant with the Lord is a sacred promise to follow Him. As you read these passages from the Word, think about your own covenant with the Lord.

A Covenant with Israel

Exodus tells the miraculous story of the children of Israel escaping from Egypt. The Lord guides them across the Red Sea and into the wilderness. When they reach Mount Sinai, the Lord makes a new covenant with them. Their leader, Moses, is called up onto the mountain where the Lord delivers this message:

“You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to Myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people...” (Exodus 19:4-6).

Moses carries these words to the people, and the people unanimously agree, saying:

“All that the Lord has spoken we will do” (Exodus 19:8).

And so preparations for the new covenant begin. The people spend three days purifying themselves and getting ready. On the third day, thunder and lightning appear and a thick cloud settles on the mountain. Moses goes to the top of the mountain and receives the Ten Commandments. To the extent that the people obeyed the Ten Commandments, the Lord would be with them and bless them.



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A New Christian Covenant

During His ministry Jesus gave people a new covenant. He extended the ideas of the Ten Commandments from the realm of bodily acts (e.g. killing or stealing) and gave a new covenant for the mind or spirit. For example, He told His disciples:

“[D]o not worry about your life, what you will eat; nor about the body, what you will put on. Life is more than food, and the body is more than clothing.... Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; and yet I say to you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. If then God so clothes the grass, which today is in the field and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will He clothe you...? And do not seek what you should eat or what you should drink, nor have an anxious mind.... But seek the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added to you.... For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Luke 12:22-23, 27-31, 34).

The new covenant is further explained with the Lord’s words in the gospel of John:

“This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends. You are My friends if you do whatever I command you” (15:12-14).

What the Heavenly Doctrine Says About Our Covenant with the Lord

The Heavenly Doctrine expands our concept of covenant, teaching that a key factor is receiving the truths of the Lord’s Word into our hearts and lives. This is “conjunction” with the Lord—a joining together of our mind with His mind (see *Apocalypse Explained* 701). The Lord wants this relationship with us but He cannot bring it about unless we freely return His love.

Loving the Lord in return and loving the neighbor as oneself brings about conjunction, and this makes up the very essence of a covenant. When there is conjunction, the Lord is present (see *Arcana Coelestia* 1038).

It is the essence of love to love others outside of one self, to desire to be one with them, and to make them blessed from oneself (*True Christian Religion* 43).

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It is an essential of love not to love self, but to love others, and to be joined together with others by love. It is an essential of love, moreover, to be loved by others, for in this way conjunction is brought about (*Divine Love and Wisdom* 47).

The essence of all love consists in conjunction. This, in fact, is its life, which is called enjoyment, pleasantness, delight, sweetness, bliss, happiness and joy. Love consists in this, that its own should be another's. To feel the joy of another as joy in oneself, that is loving. But to feel one's own joy in another and not the other's joy in oneself is not loving. For this is loving self, while the former is loving the neighbor (*Divine Love and Wisdom* 47).

When a person's mind is joined with the Lord's mind, He can bring true happiness. This is the joy of heaven with which the Lord wishes to bless all people.

OPTIONAL READING

“Covenant” means being joined with the Lord through the reception of Divine truth by the understanding and will, or by the heart and soul, that is, by love and faith, and this conjunction is takes place on both sides (that is with the Lord and with people) (*Apocalypse Explained* 701:4).

A person does not conjoin himself to the Lord, but the Lord alone joins a person together to Himself, and this He does by a person's knowing, understanding, willing, and doing these commandments (*Apocalypse Explained* 1027:2).

While the Lord is present with each individual, that presence is closer or more remote, depending on how close the person is to love or distant from it (*Arcana Coelestia* 1038).



FOCUS POINTS

1. While traveling in the wilderness, the children of Israel entered into a covenant with the Lord. What did they agree to do? What did the Lord promise to do?

<i>The Children of Israel's Part</i>	<i>The Lord's Part</i>

2. In what ways did the children of Israel think of their God? Look at this list and circle any words that you think apply.

with fear — with respect — with trust — as a friend — as loving — with good will

3. The Ten Commandments are spiritual laws to help us follow the Lord. How do teachings in the New Testament deepen our understanding of these commandments? (Hint: Think of how Jesus extended the ideas from the realm of the body into the realm of the spirit.)

4. In Luke 12 what did the Lord tell His disciples to seek? What does the Lord promise will be given to us if we seek this?

5. Jesus gave His disciples a new commandment. What is it? Who are the Lord's friends? (see John 15)

6. How did the disciples think about Jesus? Look at this list and circle any words that you think apply.

with fear — with respect — with trust — as a friend — as loving — with good will

7. What is the basis or foundation of a covenant with the Lord?

8. How might you describe your covenant with the Lord?

<i>Your Part</i>	<i>The Lord's Part</i>

Activity 1

SIGNS OF COVENANT



Covenants are often sealed with signs or tokens to help people remember them.

- When a couple is married they exchange rings as a sign of their commitment.
- God gave Noah a rainbow as a sign that there would never again be a flood that would destroy the earth (Genesis 9).
- Joshua set up a stone under an oak tree to remind the children of Israel of their covenant to follow the Lord (Joshua 24:26-27).

Making a Covenant with the Lord

Some special sacraments and worship services help us make a covenant—a sacred promise or contract—with the Lord. These include baptisms, confirmations, weddings, home dedications, and holy supper services. During an adult baptism service, a person answers these questions:

- Do you acknowledge the Lord Jesus Christ to be the one God of heaven and earth?
- Do you acknowledge that the Lord reveals Himself in the Sacred Scriptures and in the Heavenly Doctrine of the New Jerusalem?
- Do you acknowledge that evils are to be shunned as sins against Him, and that a life of good is to be learned and lived?

How is each of these questions part of a covenant with the Lord?

Symbols of Commitment

1. What are some of the symbols that people wear to symbolize their faith in the Lord?
2. What are plusses or minuses about people using the sign of the cross as a necklace, lapel pin, brooch, bumper sticker, in church, *etc*?
3. Which of the following signs and symbols best fits the New Church? Explain why you think this is a good choice.

Rainbow	7 lamp stands	Open Word
Picture of the Lord	Crown	2 tablets of 10 Commandments
Alpha and Omega	Lamb	Bride

4. What kinds of things can serve as “witness stones” to help us remember our covenant with the Lord at home?



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Process

- Read the statements for discussion and decide whether or not you agree with or favor them. The Teachings from the Word can help you make up your mind.
- If you favor it, then go to the right side of the room. If you disagree, move to the left side of the room. You must take one side or the other, but you will be allowed to switch sides.
- On each side of the room is a speaker's chair. Only the person sitting in the chair can speak. Each side takes turns speaking.
- As speakers make their points, you may change sides. In fact, you may change sides as often as you like.

Teachings from the Word

The essence of God's love consists of three things, namely, to love others outside of Himself, to desire to be one with them, and from Himself to make them blessed... (See *True Christian Religion* 43).

Loving the Lord in return and loving the neighbor as oneself brings about conjunction, and this makes up the very essence of a covenant. When there is conjunction, the Lord is present (see *Arcana Coelestia* 1038).

All Divine truth proceeds from the Lord, and when this is received by a person, he or she is joined together with the Lord. This conjunction is what is meant by "covenant" (see *Apocalypse Explained* 701).

Statement for Discussion

To enter a true covenant with the Lord and be conjoined with Him, love is the most important thing a person needs. Truth is not really that important.

If you think that love is more important for being joined with the Lord, please go to the right side of the room. If you think that truth is more important, go to the left side.

Further Discussion

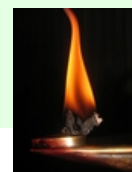
If you would like to continue the discussion, you could consider one of these statements:

If truth is most important, we should be doing more to share New Church teachings with others.

If love is more important, we should focus more on love in the New Church.

The New Church should develop new symbols or "witness stones" to help us remember the importance of our covenant with the Lord.

OBEYING THE LORD'S COMMANDMENTS



Introduction

Do you think the teachings about the spiritual meaning of the Ten Commandments make it easier or harder for us to keep the Lord's covenant?

The Ten Commandments

Briefly review the Ten Commandments (from Exodus 20:1-17), focusing on the literal meaning:

And God spoke all these words, saying, I am the Lord your God.
 You shall have no other gods before My face.
 You shall not take the name of the Lord Your God in vain.
 Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy.
 Honor your father and your mother.
 You shall not murder.
 You shall not commit adultery.
 You shall not steal.
 You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
 You shall not covet your neighbor's house.
 You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that is your neighbor's.

The Spiritual Meaning of the Commandments

Explore the spiritual meaning of one of these commandments by yourself, in pairs or small groups. *e.g.* stealing literally means taking something that is not ours. Spiritual theft involves actions where you take credit for someone else's ideas, robbing others of opportunities that are rightfully theirs, squandering resources, *etc.*

Note: Resources for researching this topic include *The Swedenborg Concordance*, NewSearch or www.heavenlydoctrines.org, www.kemptonproject.org, the July 2005 issue of New Church Vineyard (www.newchurchvineyard.org) on "Love Me and Keep My Commandments", and *Rise Above It*, a book by the Rev. Ray and Star Silverman.

After studying one of the commandments, share what you found out about the spiritual meaning.

Keeping the Lord's Covenant

Has your study changed your thoughts on whether teachings about the spiritual meaning of the Ten Commandments can help us keep the Lord's covenant? Put an X on the arrow to show whether you think these teachings make it easier or harder to keep the Lord's covenant. Be ready to explain your answer.

easier ←————→ *harder*



Here are a variety of activities that can help you bring this lesson into your life.

Ideas for Journal Entries *(choose one)*

- ◆ Reflect on the promise made during your baptism. Write about some of the ways you hope to keep your covenant this week.
- ◆ Each day is a new beginning. Write about one way you can work on your covenant with the Lord today.
- ◆ Write a personal motto or choose a verse from the Word that highlights the heart of a covenant you want to make with the Lord.

Keeping the Covenant Each Day

The Lord tells us that to love Him and keep His covenant, we must do His commandments. In this way, we respond to His love with a life blessed with the peace and happiness that only the Lord can give us.

To work on doing what the Lord commands, take 10 small stones and write a number from 1-10 on each one. Put the stones in a special bag (a velvet pouch perhaps), a beautiful bowl, or a small box. Without looking, draw one out each day. Then find good ways to make that commandment work in your daily living.

Keeping God's Commandments in Mind

The Lord tells us that the commandments should be written "on the doorposts of your house and on your gates" (Deuteronomy 6:9). Cut out and post these passages from the Word where you will see them as you come and go each day. Use them to help build spiritual doorposts in your mind. By keeping His commandments present in our minds, we can guard the thoughts that enter into our deeper thinking.

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength (Deuteronomy 6:4-5).

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 22:37-40).

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another (John 13:34-35).

Further Reading

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

by the Rev. Patrick A. Rose

“Therefore you shall be careful to do as the Lord your God has commanded you...” (Deuteronomy 5:32).

The Divine love has three attributes, or three essentials. First, the Lord desires to love others outside of Himself. Second, He desires to be one with them. Third, He desires to make them happy from Himself. These are the three things the Lord’s love desires. And His wisdom makes one with these ends or purposes, for from wisdom He created and governs the universe in such a way that these goals of the Divine love might be fulfilled.

There is, however, a fundamental difference between the first of these three essentials and the other two. The first essential, the desire to love others outside of Himself, is fulfilled without the spiritual cooperation of people. As soon as a person is born, the Lord has another human being to love. As far as this first essential is concerned, it doesn’t matter whether the person turns out to be good or evil; the Lord still loves him with the whole of His infinite Divine love, whether that person becomes an angel or a devil.

The other two essentials, though, are not so easily fulfilled. Although the Lord desires to be conjoined with us and to make us happy, He cannot do either unless we cooperate with Him. The conjunction the Lord seeks with us is the conjunction of love, and this conjunction cannot occur unless we love Him in return. As for happiness, this is something we must accept in freedom. The Lord offers us happiness in many ways, but if we are bent upon making ourselves miserable, He can do nothing. He cannot force happiness upon us, for happiness walks hand in hand with freedom.

Because the Lord can neither be conjoined with us nor make us happy without our cooperation, He therefore strives in countless ways to encourage and secure this cooperation. The most obvious way in which He does this is through His written Word.

The Written Word

The Old and New Testaments speak of many things, but their overall purpose is simple. They teach about the Lord and His love for us so that we might love Him in return, and they teach and encourage us to live a life of good, so that we might be happy rather than miserable. In other words, the Old and New Testaments have as their essential purpose the fulfillment of the second and third essentials of the Divine love.

It is the same with the Heavenly Doctrine for the New Church, for it is equally the Lord’s Word. The Heavenly Doctrine is long—there are about 18,000 pages—and it speaks of many things, for it contains a wealth of heavenly wisdom for all time. But still, its overall message and purpose is simple. It tells us about the Lord, so that we can love Him, if we choose to. And it tells us how to live so that, if we want to, we can be happy. The New Church, based upon these teachings, is also very simple in essence. This church is nothing else than loving the Lord, and living the life that leads to heaven and happiness.

Now to reduce all the Heavenly Doctrine and the whole of the New Church to these two things might seem to be making things too simple. Obviously there is more to them than this, for otherwise the Heavenly Doctrine might have consisted of two simple sentences, rather than many volumes. Still, all the many things the Heavenly Doctrine says, and all the things involved in belonging to the New Church, have nevertheless a simple purpose—they are given so that we might love the Lord and live a life which leads to happiness. And these two issues are the two most profound and far-reaching in the whole of human existence.

Two Questions the Lord Asks

When the Lord asks us to love Him and asks us to live a life which will make us happy, He is asking us to make the most important and momentous decision we will make to all eternity. The Lord asks us whether we believe in Him. And He asks if we will follow Him in our lives. The way we respond to these questions will determine the nature of our existence forever and ever.

There may be two questions, but there can be only one answer. Both questions must be answered the same way—either yes or no. Obviously we cannot say that yes, we will follow the Lord, if we have said that no, we do not believe in Him. But neither can we say that yes, we believe in the Lord, if we refuse to follow Him. If a person really believes in the Lord, not only with his mind but also with his heart, then it is impossible for him to refuse to follow the Lord. If a person really believes in the Lord, he will follow Him. If he doesn't follow the Lord in his life, then he doesn't really believe in Him.

Living in such a way that we can receive happiness from the Lord makes one with believing in Him. The life leading to happiness, conjoined with a belief in the Lord, who is the source of all happiness, is thus at the very heart of the Heavenly Doctrine, and at the very heart of religion.

The practical application of this is simple. We must know and we must live according to the Decalogue, or Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments are the summary of how we must live if the Lord is to give us happiness. To order our lives according to these commandments should be of the greatest importance to us. All other matters and concerns are almost insignificant when it comes to the question of whether or not we are doing what the Decalogue teaches. These ten rules of life should be at the very center of our lives.

Remembering the Commandments

Because of this, it is wise for us to review the commandments periodically. We all know what they are, and have at least a general idea of what they mean. But even though we may know them, we can at times overlook them. We all know that we shouldn't covet, for example. But we can easily fail to remember this when we are feeling jealous at somebody else's good fortune. We all know that we shouldn't steal, and we also know that a person who doesn't do his work conscientiously is, in effect, stealing his wages. But do we think of this while we are making the mistake of being a little lazy at work? We all know we shouldn't kill even the reputation of someone else. But do we reflect on this when we gossip? The fact is, it is one thing to know the Ten Commandments; it is another thing to have them at the center of our minds constantly, so that we remember them when it matters. And we must remember them. To forget these commandments means to separate ourselves, internally, from the New Church. For to be of the New Church means to strive as hard as we can to live the way the Lord would wish us to live.

The importance of the Ten Commandments is made obvious time and time again throughout the Word. It is obvious from the fact that these commandments were the first part of the Old Testament to be written down. The Lord wrote these commandments on two tables of stone, and He did this before the first five books of the Word were written down through Moses. The way in which the Decalogue was given also bears testimony to its importance. To give the Ten Commandments, the Lord came down in fire upon Mount Sinai, and the mountain smoked and trembled, and there were thunderings, lightnings, a thick cloud, and the voice of a trumpet. Before the commandments were given, the people were sanctified for three days, and then bounds were set around Mount Sinai, lest anybody besides Moses come near it and die. Later, the tables of stone were placed in the ark, and they were kept in the tabernacle in the Holy of Holies. Miraculous powers were associated with these two tables of stone. By means of the ark, the waters of the Jordan were stopped, so that the people could enter the land of Canaan on dry ground. Also, it was by means of the ark that the walls of Jericho came tumbling down.

In these and many other ways, the Old Testament stresses the overriding significance of the Ten Commandments. And the New Testament and the Heavenly Doctrine also do this; they teach the supreme importance of obeying what the Lord says in these ten rules of life.

And yet, for all this, the remarkable thing is that the Ten Commandments are so brief. They are only seventeen verses long. Some of the commandments are only two words long in Hebrew. And altogether there are only ten of these commandments. Human laws by which society is governed are so numerous that they fill volumes and require experts to administer them. But for the government of every conceivable aspect of spiritual life, the Lord has given us only ten simple rules. There is no evil whatsoever that is not forbidden by the Ten Commandments. Conversely, there is no heavenly good which cannot be attained through obeying them. Why, then, are so few commandments necessary?

A Deeper Meaning

It is true that the Decalogue involves more than the literal sense. We must obey not only the literal, but also the spiritual and celestial senses of the commandments. But even then, it is surprising how few commandments there are, and how the whole of heavenly life can be summarized in ten rules.

We all know that there are many different kinds of evils that tempt the human race. And most of us, surely, if we are honest, could list hundreds of different evils we have committed at one time or another. Yet the fact is that all the different evils that people ever have or ever could commit bear relation to only ten basic ones. The ten evils forbidden by the commandments are really the only evils there are, though they may take thousands, indeed millions, of different forms. Therefore, by fighting against each one of these evils in at least some way, we resist the whole spectrum of evil, and make it possible for the Lord to gradually remove from us the desire to commit any evil whatever.

The Ten Commandments, by containing the whole of heaven and standing in opposition to everything of hell, have tremendous power. And we can sense this power in two ways.

The power of the Ten Commandments is most apparent in their majesty. No human prose can be compared with the majestic words of the Decalogue. In them we can sense something of the awesome power and majesty of the Lord Himself, our absolute King, whom we must serve and obey.

At other times we experience the power of the commandments in another way. The Decalogue stands in absolute opposition to evil in any form. And we all love evil in some way or another. None of us can really study these commandments without being made to feel guilty to some degree. They make everybody feel uncomfortable. Yet the fact that we may feel uncomfortable is unimportant. What is important is the way in which we react to this discomfort.

Have Courage to Admit Sins

It is easy to ignore something which makes us feel uncomfortable. It is easy to invent excuses for avoiding something we do not want to face. But if we value our eternal destiny, then we must not ignore any of the Ten Commandments. If our lives do not measure up to these all-encompassing rules of life, and if we are thereby made to feel uncomfortable and guilty, then we must bravely accept that we have done wrong, that we have sinned. To acknowledge our mistakes is not the end of the world. Everybody has faults. Everybody has committed sins. But not all people can admit that they have sinned. Not all people have the courage to say that they have disobeyed the Lord's commandments. They make all kinds of excuses, rather than honestly admitting to themselves and to the Lord that they have done evil.

The reason we like to avoid admitting this is simple. Once we admit that we have done wrong, we must then compel ourselves to bring our lives into order. We must change the way we have been living. We must give up the evils we have been indulging in, even though we love committing them. We must mend our ways. It is as simple as that. No excuses we may dream up will exempt us from obeying the Lord.

The Lord knows we are not perfect. He knows that no person can intelligently and honestly evaluate his life according to the Decalogue and find that he is without sin. He does not demand perfection. As the Psalmist says: "If You, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?" (Psalm 130:3). On the other hand, the Lord expects us not to make excuses to avoid obedience. No person can deliberately excuse himself from obeying these rules of life and expect to be happy.

The Way to Heaven

The Lord wants to make us happy, and therefore He has told us what to do to be happy. The Ten Commandments are nothing else than the Lord showing us the way to heaven and to eternal happiness. Stepping outside of these laws and obstinately seeking our own way to happiness, inevitably brings us frustration and unhappiness. It will bring us hell.

If we want to be conjoined with the Lord, if we want to be happy, if we want to go to heaven, then we must do what the Lord tells us to do in His Ten Commandments. The testimony of all Scripture, the essence of all religion is this: we must believe in the Lord and do what He says. This is the only path to heaven and to everlasting happiness. As the Lord Himself tells us:

Therefore you shall be careful to do as the Lord your God has commanded you; you shall not turn aside to the right hand or to the left. You shall walk in all the ways which the Lord your God has commanded you, that you may live and that it may be well with you, and that you may prolong your days in the land which you shall possess (Deuteronomy 5:32-33).

Lessons: Deuteronomy 5:22-33; John 15:7-14; *True Christian Religion* 287

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