

The Solemn League and Covenant:
The Making and Breaking of a Weighty Bond

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Introduction

The Solemn League and Covenant was a treaty between sovereign nations in order to achieve a set of common civil and religious goals. It originated a point in history wherein it was both expedient and ideal for the Scottish and the English Parliament to form an alliance for the purposes of mutual defense and mutual encouragement in religion. The Covenant would result in the overthrowing of a king and the creation of documents which continue to edify and guide many Presbyterian Churches to this day, and yet it ultimately fell far short of the ideals set forth within. Though it did ultimately serve to further cause of ever closer union between the Kingdoms of England, Scotland and Ireland, this was only achieved through much conflict and war, both internally and internationally as a result of competing ideas about best to interpret the obligations of the Covenant and indeed if the Covenant applied at all. If the hopes of the civil portions of the Covenant were eventually realized, the religious portions almost immediately failed. The Reformation of the national churches of Ireland and England did not proceed as the Scottish would have hoped. Eventually the very idea of the Covenant would be repudiated and criminalized.

Historical Background: National Covenant

The Immediate historical background for the signing of the Solemn League and Covenant begin with the religious policies of the Stuart Kings starting with King James VI of Scotland. In 1585 he was able to pass the so called, Black Acts, which established the power of Bishops, made opposition to prelacy treasonous, made meeting in presbyteries, synods, and general assemblies illegal unless called by the King, and broadly asserted the King's supremacy in religious as well as civil matters. These acts were considered by committed Presbyterians to be tyrannical and at least twenty ministers fled to England for year of losing their lives to the new policy.¹ James' heavy handed policies towards the Scottish church, or Kirk, continued, as he attempted for political, religious and personal reasons to eliminate Presbyterianism in Scotland. In 1618 the King furthered this policy when he imposed the Five Articles of Perth on the General Assembly. The Five Articles were a further attempt to make the Church of Scotland more episcopal, and in the eyes of the Scottish Presbyterians, more Catholic, they called for kneeling

¹ W.M. Hetherington, *History of the Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh: Johnstone and Fairly, 1842), 156-57.

at communion, the observance of holy days, confirmation by Bishops, private baptism and private communion. The fact that the King bothered with calling a General Assembly to approve the Five Articles should not be seen as deference to the Presbyterian form of government. A later historian, Hetherington, describes that Assembly saying that

“every possible device had been used to prepare such an Assembly as would be sufficiently subservient; and when the Assembly met, nothing was left undone to ensure a prelatic triumph...the arrangements of the meeting were such as to confuse and overawe the ministers, surrounded as they were by the half-armed retainers of the nobility, and jostled and overborne by haughty barons and more haughty prelates.”²

James would become James I of England and Ireland, having inherited the crown upon the death of the childless Queen Elizabeth I of England. His son, Charles I, continued the religious policy of his father and now could do so under the guise of bringing the Church of Scotland into greater conformity with the church of England. In 1634 Charles ordered Scottish Bishops to impose upon the church a new liturgy and a new form of Church Government embodied in the Book of Canons.³ In 1637 this was expanded to include a Book of Common Prayer, the prayer book being more or less identical to the one in use in England at the time. Opposition to the Prayer Book by Presbyterians was strong, partially because of the perceived Catholicism contained in it and partially because it was being forced on a church that had not wanted it.⁴ This opposition resulted in the signing of the National Covenant, first, in 1638 at Greyfriars Church in Edinburgh and subsequently by a large segment of the population. The Covenant appealed to King James VI's agreement in 1580 to maintain Presbyterianism as well as to various acts of Parliament which had declared the Reformed Faith and Presbyterianism to be the law of Scotland, and most importantly while acknowledging the king's authority it committed the signers to defend the true religion and oppose false religion.⁵ They committed themselves explicitly to resist “...the practice of all innovations already introduced in the matters of the Worship of God...till they be tried and allowed in free Assemblies and in Parliament...”⁶ This commitment to resist and the reasserting

² Ibid., 220.

³ James King Hewison, *The Covenanters Volume I* (Glasgow: John Smith and Son, 1913), 226.

⁴ Ibid., 234-35.

⁵ Ibid., 265.

⁶ National Covenant of the Church of Scotland

of Presbyterian polity led to the meeting of a General Assembly in the same year, which annulled the acts of several previous General Assemblies as a result of their having been coerced, condemned all of the impositions of James VI and Charles I including the Five Articles of Perth, the Book of Common Prayer and episcopacy.⁷ Charles received this action of the Scottish Nation as an act of rebellion and responded with a substantial invasion force.⁸ This conflict was known as the Bishops' War and eventually ended with the King allowing the decisions of the General Assembly of 1638 to stand. The conflict had been won, but a greater conflict was about to begin.

Solemn League and Covenant

In the years following the end of the Bishops' Wars in 1640, things continued to go poorly for Charles I, which eventually led to the start of the English Civil War. This conflict saw the forces associated with Parliament fighting against those in league with the King. Though the Scottish had resisted to the point of rebellion the policy of bringing the Church of Scotland into conformity with the Church of England when that meant prelacy and Anglicanism, they were not opposed to greater unity with England. Thus when the English Parliamentary party came to the Scottish looking for an alliance, it was seen as a good and proper thing to do for both political and religious reasons. In the words of Robert Baillie talks were carried out for the purpose of

“...framing some bond of union between the two nations, for mutual reformation and defence. The English commissioners at first were for a Civil League, the Scottish members for a religious Bond. A draught was submitted by Henderson of what is now known as Solemn League and Covenant, which embraced both objects; which being read. was formally adopted, with great satisfaction...”⁹

The text of the Solemn League and Covenant explicitly called for bringing the kingdoms to a closer union, for the establishment and protection of the true Protestant religion in England, Scotland and Ireland, and most importantly for the English, a commitment to mutual defense. In its opening lines it states that it is “...for reformation and defence of religion, the honour and happiness of the King, and the peace and safety of the three kingdoms of Scotland, England, and

⁷ James King Hewison, *The Covenanters Volume I*, 306.

⁸ Edward Hyde Clarendon, *The History of the Rebellion and Civil Wars in England Volume I* (Oxford: University Press, 1839) 187.

⁹ Robert Baillie, *The Letters and Journals of Robert Baillie, A.M. Volume I* (Edinburgh, Alex Lawrie & Co. 1841), xlix

Ireland.”¹⁰ The religious effort was to bring about the elimination of “...Popery, Prelacy...superstition, heresy, schism, profaneness, and whatsoever shall be found contrary to sound doctrine and the power of Godliness...”¹¹ and indeed to “...bring the Churches of God in the three kingdoms to the nearest conjunction and uniformity in religion...[and] Form of Church Government...”¹² The English would further the cause of the Reformed Faith in both Scotland and England and the Scottish would take up arms against King Charles I. The framework for this had been laid in the tyranny of the Stuart Kings in their religious policies towards Scotland for the past fifty years.

We can often make the mistake of viewing this document through cynical modern eyes as simply a political treaty which both parties knew would only endure as long as it was expedient, but to do so would be anachronistic. We can get a good understanding of how these men would have felt about the signing of this document by looking at what they believed about swearing of oaths and vows as seen in the Westminster Confession which would be produced by men who agreed with the Covenant in the years to come. They would have viewed it as a deep and weighty promise that they intended to keep. “Whosoever taketh an oath ought duly to consider the weightiness of so solemn an act...neither may any man bind himself by oath to anything but what is good and just...and what he is able and resolved to perform.”¹³ Indeed they would have seen it as a promise to which they were bound regardless of what it might mean for their them personally and from which there could be nothing but plain and honest adherence.

“An oath is to be taken in the plain and common sense of the words, without equivocation, or mental reservation. It cannot oblige to sin; but in anything not sinful, being taken, it binds to performance, although to a man's own hurt. Nor is it to be violated, although made to heretics, or infidels.”¹⁴

We tend to think of nations as independent of the people who make them up, this concept would have been entirely foreign to the people of England and Scotland in the seventeenth century. For many this was not a treaty of realpolitik, but rather a duty to which both parties would have felt

¹⁰ “The Solemn League and Covenant,” Constitution Society, <http://www.constitution.org/eng/conpur058.htm> (accessed April 26th, 2013)

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ “Westminster Confession of Faith.” Center for Reformed Theology and Apologetics. http://www.reformed.org/documents/wcf_with_proofs/ (accessed April 26th, 2013)

¹⁴ Ibid.

themselves personally obliged and solemnly committed to maintain and uphold, regardless of the outcome. Yet, for all those serious and devout men who entered into the Covenant there were those who did indeed enter into it lightly. In listing the sins of the nation, Guthrie, in 1653 writes

“In pursuing of necessary Duties of renewing the National Covenant, and entering into and renewing the solemn League and Covenant, the way of many men's taking these Covenants was without the knowledge of the necessary things contained therein, and without reality and sincerity of heart..some being induced thereto by example, some by fear, and not a few by principles of policy, following their own carnal and corrupt ends.”¹⁵

Westminster Assembly

The most enduring consequence of the Solemn League and Covenant was that it set the stage for the calling of the Westminster Assembly. The Assembly was originally called

“...to prove the catholicity of the doctrine of the Church of England, to illustrate the identity of its teaching with that of other Reformed Churches, and to reconstruct the system of worship and the form of government of the Church of England, so that it might come more into line with the Church of Scotland, and with the Reformed Churches abroad.”¹⁶

There had long been conflict between the Anglican and Puritan parties within the Church of England, so the calling of the Assembly was a victory of the Puritan party over the Anglicans.¹⁷ It was ordered by the Parliament and forbidden at the same time by the King, this meant that Anglican party of the Church of England, who tended to support both episcopacy and the king were not represented at the assembly.¹⁸ The original goal was simply to revise the 39 Articles, which served as the doctrinal standards of the Church of England, but this goal was quickly expanded and they were charged with the production of four documents: a confession of faith, a directory for worship, a catechism and a form of church government.¹⁹ They ended up producing two catechisms, one longer and more in depth and a shorter one more suitable for children, because in words of Samuel Rutherford, Scottish Commissioner to the Assembly, that it was hard

¹⁵ “Causes of the Lord's Wrath Against Scotland,” The Internet Archive, <http://archive.org/details/CausesOfTheLordsWrathAgainstScotland> (accessed April 26th, 2013)

¹⁶ James King Hewison, *The Covenanters Volume I*, 391.

¹⁷ Samuel Macauley Jackson (Editor), *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge Volume XII* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1912), 322.

¹⁸ Hetherington, W.M. *History of the Westminster Assembly of Divines*. Pg. 102

¹⁹ Hetherington, W.M. *History of the Church of Scotland*. Pg. 327

“to dress up meat and milk in the same dish.”²⁰ It was intended that these documents would be used to govern the churches of Scotland, England and Ireland. Though ultimately these documents would prove almost immediately irrelevant for England and Ireland, they remain in some form the official documents of the Church of Scotland and have filtered down from the established church to many non-established churches in Scotland, America and across the English speaking world.

The Breaking of the Covenant

Despite the seriousness which which the Scottish and English signers of The Solemn League and Covenant would have understood it, it was soon broken and ignored. The effort to bring the Church of England into conformity failed almost immediately, with the English finding themselves ill disposed to the Presbyterian form of church government. This half-hearted commitment to true reformation of religion left the Scottish uncertain about their English Parliamentary allies.²¹ Following the victory of the Parliamentary forces in the first phase of the English Civil War, a group of Covenanters, called Engagers, believing the King to have been sufficiently chastened, supported King Charles in opposition to the Parliamentary party. The Engagers would have viewed this as being in line with both the text and the spirit of The Solemn League and Covenant, as what was opposed in the Covenant was “the yoke of antichristian tyranny,” while affirming the intention to fight for “the good of the kingdom, and the honor of the king.”²² The Covenant was seen by them not as alliance between the Scottish and English parliaments, but as an alliance between the Scottish and English nations, they fought against the King because the King had been acting contrary to liberty and needed to be brought into line. Thus now that the king had been corrected in his error, it was only fit and proper to restore him to his proper place as the highest civil magistrate. This understanding of the Covenant was thoroughly opposed by those who believed it to be a violation of the alliance with the English Parliament. This, as well as the presence of non-covenanting Scottish Royalists led to a series of conflicts within Scotland during this period. In 1649 the English Parliamentary party executed

²⁰ Samuel Macauley Jackson (Editor), *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge Volume XII*, 328.

²¹ Samuel Macauley Jackson (Editor), *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge Volume III* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1912), 290.

²² The Solemn League and Covenant

King Charles I and established a new form of government, the Scottish Parliament responded by declaring his son King Charles II of England, Ireland and Scotland in protest against what they considered the unjust murder of the King.²³ In May of 1650 Charles II signed the Treaty of Breda, wherein he promised, amongst other things, to accept the Solemn League and Covenant.²⁴ In June of the same year the King subscribed to the Covenant at Spey. This alliance was almost immediately seen as questionable because in the words of the Historian, Hetherington, "His [Charles'] loose, licentious habits, and depraved heart, were not likely to conciliate the affections and respect of the Covenanters."²⁵ The new English Commonwealth under Cromwell invaded Scotland and annexed it, dismissing their Parliament and ruling it as a part of England. As time went on the Covenant would become increasingly less relevant as a religious and political reality. Episcopacy was again imposed on Scotland starting from the year 1660. The Covenant itself would be declared illegal by the Sedition Act of 1661 declared that "That the Oath usually called the Solemn League and Covenant was in it selfe an unlawfull Oath and imposed upon the Subjects of this Realm against the Fundamentall Laws and Liberties of this Kingdome..."²⁶ This led to a period of conflict between the British Government and the Scottish Covenanters known as the Killing Time, wherein those who spoke out against episcopacy or in favor of the Covenant were executed for doing so. This as well as many other grievances led to the Glorious Revolution of 1688, wherein James II, son of Charles, was replaced by William and Mary as joint monarchs at the request of parliament. Part of this settlement included the declaration for Scotland "That Prelacy and the superiority of any office in the Church above presbyters...ought to be abolished"²⁷ Unfortunately, this was not a restoration of Covenant as in England the Anglican party had gained supremacy in matters of religion and thus the best that could be hoped for was a toleration of those who could not conform to Anglican piety.

Conclusion

²³ James King Hewison, *The Covenanters Volume I*, 454.

²⁴ Samuel Rawson Gardiner, *History of the commonwealth and protectorate, 1649-1660 Volume I* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1894), 227.

²⁵ W.M. Hetherington, *History of the Church of Scotland*, 355.

²⁶ "Charles II, 1661: An Act for Safety and Preservation of His Majesties Person and Government against Treasonable and Seditious practices and attempts," British History Online, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=47285> (accessed April 29th, 2013).

²⁷ "Claim of Right 1689," Legislation.gov.uk, <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/aosp/1689/28/contents> (accessed April 26th, 2013)

Though the Covenant would be broken and the hopes contained within never fully realized, it would be unfair to say that it was not a significant moment in the history of the church. Parties from two separate nations got together in order to bind their two nations in solemn covenant with each other for the purpose of ever closer civil union, mutual defense and the cause of the reformation of the church. It is true that this weighty oath was not taken with the utmost seriousness by all parties involved and may indeed have been sworn to unwisely, this does not undermine its significance. In the words of the historian, Hetherington, “If the Solemn League and Covenant was premature, that detracts not from its real value; it only proves that it was promulgated in ignorant and evil times, with darkness and with dangers compassed round.”²⁸ It was a treaty entered into when tyranny was the law of the land and the church was being suppressed, so like minded men joined together to oppose, not lawful authority, but unjust abuses of power. In doing so they laid the ground work for the calling of the Westminster Assembly and the creation of the Confession of Faith and Catechisms which continue to guide and bind Presbyterian churches in Scotland and abroad.

²⁸ W.M. Hetherington, *History of the Westminster Assembly of Divines*. Pg. 127.

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