

Consensus

Volume 22

Issue 1 *Canadian Lutherans and Social Justice:
Sampling of a Heritage*

Article 7

5-1-1996

A New Contract

Michael Mills

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus>

Recommended Citation

Mills, Michael (1996) "A New Contract," *Consensus*: Vol. 22 : Iss. 1 , Article 7.

Available at: <http://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol22/iss1/7>

This Sermons is brought to you for free and open access by Scholars Commons @ Laurier. It has been accepted for inclusion in Consensus by an authorized editor of Scholars Commons @ Laurier. For more information, please contact scholarscommons@wlu.ca.

A New Contract

Michael Mills

Pastor, St. Philip Lutheran Church,
Kitchener, Ontario

Text: Jeremiah 31:32–34a (B - Lent 5)

The world of agreements, contracts, and corporate legislation does not often provide us with stories of God's love, or examples of how God works in our world. This is particularly true for those of us in the Lutheran tradition for whom business and religion have often been viewed as distant enemies. Have we not at times labelled economic enterprise 'self-serving' or even 'idolatrous'? And have we not at times been labelled 'utopian' or 'unrealistic' in return? Since the Reformation, at least, the kingdoms of the world and the Kingdom of God have been separate.

Now there are good reasons for the church not wanting to equate itself with business. For one, *profit* can never replace *compassion* as the criterion for Christian action in the world. For another, knowing what people can *contribute* to a community is never a truly satisfying alternative to knowing *who they are*. But a consequence of excluding business from church also means that religious ideals are seldom included in business practice. So it is not unheard of for the Royal Bank to make a decision like the one it made in the Ottawa Valley in 1994. On the fourteenth of January the bank pulled its branch out of the village of Crysler *despite repeated pleas* from the townspeople, who feared, not only the inconvenience of driving 18 kilometers to Casselman to do their banking, but who "feared people would do their shopping there too—hurting Crysler merchants. And without a bank...feared they would never lure new developments to their town..."¹

So we have come to a place in our history where a corporate decision which affects the future of an entire town can be made without concern for the people who live there. We have come to a place where religious principles can be omitted from business decisions.

Considering then how easy it is to live as if religion and business have little to do with each other, we are somewhat surprised to find God talking as if the two are actually very important to one another. Follow with me in the book of Jeremiah. Chapter 31, verse 31: "*Behold the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.*" Here, through the prophet Jeremiah, God alters the course of history. Here a new covenant is introduced— a new contract, if you will. An alternative way of doing business which incorporates religious beliefs so that fair play and compassion become a part of the way the children of earth live and work together. Please do not underestimate the importance of what you see before you. This is the only time the term 'New Covenant' will appear in the Old Testament. "*Behold the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.*"

Now, if you remember your history lessons, Israel and Judah were a divided house for one reason: forced labour (1 Kings 12:11), so any covenant worth its salt has to address the issue of work and wages. But there is more: the inclusion of these opposing houses also means that God's new contract extends to all people! So the new contract has something to do with *justice* among all people. Listen to Kelly Blair of Caldwell Partners International in Toronto. Blair is sometimes called a 'headhunter' because her job is to entice top executives from one company into the employment of a rival company. "[That perks such as health club memberships are *no longer* as attractive in compensation packages reflects today's business practices.] People are working *harder* and *longer* and they're *not on the golf course.*"² The new covenant understands that oppressive economics touch everyone's life.

Perhaps this is why we hear in verse 32: "[*The new covenant will not be*] like the covenant which I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was their

husband, says the Lord.” Do you remember the old covenant—the one beginning with the 10 Commandments and continuing, “When you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, and in the seventh he shall go out free, for nothing” (Exodus 21:2). And “When a pit is left open or when a pit is dug and not covered and an ox or an ass falls into it, the owner of the pit shall make it good; giving money to the owner [of the beast], and the dead beast shall be considered sold” (Exodus 21:33–34). Likewise “If an ox or a sheep, is killed, the one at fault shall pay five oxen for an ox, and four sheep for a sheep. Restitution shall be made...If the stolen beast is found alive in the thief’s possession, whether it is an ox or an ass or a sheep, the one who took the beast shall pay double” (Exodus 22:1). And “For every breach of trust, whether it is for ox, for ass, for sheep, for clothing, or for any kind of lost thing... the case of both parties shall come before God; the one whom God shall condemn shall pay double to the neighbour” (Exodus 22:9). And again, “If you lend money to any of my people amongst you who is poor, you shall not act as a creditor and from any of my people you shall not extract interest” (Exodus 22:25). “You shall not pervert the justice due to the poor in their lawsuit. Keep far from a false charge, and do not slay the innocent and righteous, for I will not acquit the wicked. And you shall take no bribe, for a bribe blinds the officials, and subverts the cause of those who are in the right” (Exodus 23:6–8).³

It makes you wonder doesn’t it? When a Christian businessmen’s [sic] association can send out invitations to a prayer breakfast to invoke God’s blessing on the wealth they have received and not utter a word in that invitation about how those who have not been so “blessed” feel, it makes you wonder why God even bothers with a new covenant (the *old* covenant has not even been fulfilled).

But bother God does. For it is the business of God to put religion back into the business of people. Verse 33: “*This is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord; I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God and they shall be my people.*” Listen again: This is the covenant which I will make with them: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts, and I will be their God and they shall be my people.

Perhaps the most important thing here is that the law of God does not change! The new covenant is still God's initiative. It is still about God and the people of God. It still concerns justice. And in it obedience to the law is not overlooked. The old covenant and the new covenant are the *same covenant*. What changes is the way the covenant will be lived. This time it will not be broken (as the old was repeatedly). This time all people will be faithful. This time conversion will not be needed (as the people who first received the covenant at Sinai had been taught).

This is not just another splashy advertisement like a *Saturn* campaign which boasts 'A New Kind of Company—A New Kind of Car' when that is really just a slogan masking 'business-as-usual'. What is NEW in the new covenant is God's action after the ink dries. "I will put my law within them, [says the Lord] and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people." The old contract had previously been written on stone tablets (Exodus 31:18) or in a book (Exodus 24:7). The new covenant is given to each and every person anew. And what is more, its fine print is written on our hearts.

- I will give them a heart to know that I am the Lord (Jeremiah 24:7a).
- And they shall return to me with their whole heart (Jeremiah 24:7b).
- I will give them one heart and one way (Jeremiah 32:39).

"No longer will they teach one another (reads verse 34) saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord." Which means there are no more high paid go-betweens. Someone recently said, "Lawyers are the new priests of our society". I think this is because we have set up a system whereby professionals are needed to mediate almost every transaction that people make with one another these days. Well, no longer. With God's intervention each person is responsible for his or her own part of the contract. Which is not to say that we must all become like professional law makers, but rather that the laws must necessarily become more human.

My wife's brother-in-law, Robert, started a small company a few years ago. During difficult times he often went without

a paycheque so that the other employees would not have to. Sometimes the entire management team postponed its pay, so that the workers on the assembly line would not miss their cheques. The going was not easy, but no one went hungry either. When Robert was dealing with other companies he always let them know that his operation was just starting out—that it was small. He saw no point in giving potential partners false hopes. And I think people respected him for his honesty. With the tough economics of the recession, however, it became inevitable that shares be sold to generate capital. With new capital came new partners who were not of the same mind. Top salaries increased, and a policy of secrecy subtly crept in. When potential partners visited, casual workers were called in to give the appearance of a bigger operation. When money became tight again, lay-offs began down the line. They were called temporary lay-offs. Which meant that severance did not have to be paid. And while the letter of everybody's contract was followed without violation, the spirit of the original contract was not. Morale suffered because people knew that things had changed. Now, this may not sound like a success story, but it is worth mentioning that during the week of the final lay-offs, when others were studying sales prospects and investments and worrying about all the money things, Robert was quietly working to find jobs for all those who had been let go.

Is this not also how God operates? Quietly working behind the scenes writing a new contract—writing it on people's hearts? And because it is written on people's hearts, it is a contract set free from corruption. Indeed, it is a contract with *integrity* and *character*, and most importantly, it is a contract which understands that religion and business have more than a little bit to do with one another.

In the economy of God's Kingdom the religion of God's people and the business of God's people have *everything* to do with one another.

Amen.

Notes

- 1 "Banking Battle: Small town wins fight to get a new bank," *Kitchener-Waterloo Record*, Saturday, March 5, 1994, Section B, page 4.
- 2 "Hard Times Tone Down Executive Bells and Whistles," *Kitchener-Waterloo Record*, Saturday, March 5, 1994, Section B, page 4.
- 3 Excerpts from the Sinaitic Covenant (Exodus 19: 1 through 24:18).