

Remove Not the Ancient Landmark

Proverbs 22:28

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*“Remove not the ancient landmark, which thy fathers have set.” –
Proverbs 22:28 (23:10, 11).*

This is one of those verses in Proverbs that, as Solomon wrote it, conveyed the general sense of one who would understand it in the context of one who lived at the time and in the society he lived in. The **“landmark”** he uses to give the beginning reference to was the boundary stone which sense was drawn from Deut. 19:14; 27:17:

The first place we see any categorical reference to it is having to do with what we can call “Property Boundaries”

¹⁴ “You shall not remove your neighbor’s landmark, which the men of old have set, in your inheritance which you will inherit in the land that the LORD your God is giving you to possess. (Deuteronomy 19:14)

Moses is referring to the markers that defined the inheritance that a person had, either which he received himself or coming down through his family.

A bit later in Deuteronomy 24:17 Moses said:

¹⁷ “You shall not pervert justice due the stranger or the fatherless, nor take a widow’s garment as a pledge.

The point Moses made and that Solomon was seeking to reinforce was that it was not allowed to do anything that could be seen as one changing the markers that defined a property essentially was defined as to steal a man’s real property as well as his ancestral heritage.

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The reference to “...*thy fathers have set*” is just as we have said... the property in the land was dispersed at the time of Moses and Joshua taking the people into the land and dividing it up into personal and family properties. When that was done, it was known that it was not sufficient to rely on anything that was not definite as a marker and that would last a good long time and define that giving of an inheritance by God to be possessed until He, very definitely relieved the individual of it. Our conclusions, then, must be that this refers to stealing land by moving the boundaries, most likely, in secret and with the aim of stealing the land or expanding their own present possession. To do so, in any place where we see it in the OT, portrays it as equivalent to stealing.

Just to think for a moment, this was not so much an issue because the boundaries of the land we set by human agreement. Rather, the boundaries that

were established by the forefathers were to be preserved, but no law would stop such violations if people lacked integrity (e.g., Deut 19:14; 27:17; 1 Kgs 21:16–19). Boundaries in Israel were sacred because God owned the land and he apportioned the property to the tribes. To extend one’s property illegally by moving a neighbor’s boundary marker was a violation of covenant and oath. Of course, disputes could arise when both sides claim their ancestors established a boundary.

To think a bit more of our interpretation of the passage... the possession of land in Israel was secured by severe penalties to be inflicted on him who removed the landmark. One of the curses of Mount Ebal, as we see it in the Bible, was directed against this sin. Even a bought piece of ground was to return to its original possessor at the year of jubilee. That these laws were infringed is certain; the tendency to greed of acquisition - to adding land to land - would assert itself. The year of jubilee was allowed to fall into abeyance. Hence the double warning of the wise king was not unneeded. And though he meant it only in its literal sense, it has been and may be figuratively applied as a “counsel” against rashly or insidiously changing the ancient laws and customs, whether of Church or State (Deut. 19:14; 27:17; Hos. 5:10; Lev. 25:13; 2 Chron. 36:21).

As usual, there are a couple illustrations to help us to see just what is meant here:

- When Naboth solemnly refused to give or sell the inheritance of his fathers to the king, this was no churlish refusal, but in obedience to the divine law, which forbade an Israelite to alienate his paternal inheritance.
- And Ahab, by ruthlessly taking possession of it, violated this law, and entailed upon himself and his posterity a fearful retribution (1 Kings 21).

Thinking by way of application - God has constituted Himself the protector of the unprotected. Hence, to encroach ever so little upon their rights is to beard the Almighty so to speak, and enlist against the usurper His mercy as well as His justice. Every inch of land, every fraction of money, acquired unjustly, has His curse upon it. A poor man’s livelihood is his life. God therefore, who loves to pay oppressors in their own coin, will have life for life. But more, the precept is violated in spirit by encroachments upon the rights and privileges of the subject, on the Churchman as secured by charters unrepealed, when these are not opposed to God’s Word. The Church has suffered alike from a morbid apprehensiveness of change and a restless craving for it. Either is to be avoided. Those of us who live in a society where we are allowed some good benefit of gaining goods and blessing MUST take care that we both take care not to take advantage of the poor or lacking about us. Likewise, we must do whatever is made possible to by our Lord and Master to see to it that, as much as we are able, we seek to offset the lack and poverty of those around us.

Traditional error cannot be transmuted by the alchemy of time into truth. On the other hand, whatever is new in theology is wrong. Our own reformers carefully guarded themselves against being supposed to forsake or reject either

doctrines or ceremonies held by the ancient Church (Canon XXX.). To adhere to this principle is a duty she owes to God and to her children. My care should be to inquire diligently what is the true antiquity, and to follow their testimony who retain that which has the genuine stamp. But always “holding the truth in love.” And this, if a true worshipper, I shall be able to do; for as worship rises to heaven, justice radiates on earth. If faith go foremost charity will follow.