

CHAPTER SEVEN: GOD'S COVENANT

The General Necessity of the Covenant

1. *The distance between God and His creature man is so great that, although men, endowed as they are with reason, owe obedience to Him as their creator, yet they could never have attained to life as their reward had not God, in an act of voluntary condescension, made this possible by the making of a covenant.*

Man as a creature, and more so man as a creature who has sinned (see paragraph 2 below), can do nothing to bring himself to God. If sin and its punishment is to be removed then it is God, and He alone, who must do it. The sinner is totally dependent upon God's initiative. This is what God has done in the "covenant". All of God's dealings in salvation with sinners are by way of covenant. The Bible is divided into two parts, the Old and New Testaments (= covenant). Think of the most important men in the Bible and the fact that God made covenants with them and through them: Noah (Genesis 6:18, 9:9-17), Abraham (Genesis 15:18-21, 17:1-22), Moses (Exodus 19:5-6, 24:7-8), David (2 Samuel 7:12-16, Psalm 89:1-4), and of course Christ and the new covenant (Mark 14:24, Hebrews 8:6-13, 9:15-20).

What is a "covenant"? It is *not* a contract or agreement between two parties as a result of negotiations. It is a contract, and therefore something legal, but it is established by God alone, unilaterally. For example, in the covenant made with Noah and every living creature it was obviously God's idea (and not the animals'!). Also the Greeks had two words which we may translate 'covenant', the first meaning an agreement between two parties (suntheke), and the second meaning a last will and testament (diatheke). The latter is always used in the Bible for God's covenants with men, because a man's *will* is always something he decides himself and it is never as a result of bargaining with another. God's covenants all take the form of a 'sworn promise', that is a promise guaranteed with an oath – this is the meaning of the symbolism of Genesis 15:8-17 which introduces the covenant with Abraham (see also Genesis 22:16-18, Hebrews 6:13-14). God neither needs to make a promise, nor to swear, because He is faithful. He does these things for our benefit, to give complete assurance. Note that once the covenant is given, then it does demand a response from those with whom it is made (see Genesis 17:1, Exodus 19:5, and especially Ezekiel 36:27).

The Essential Character of the Covenant

2. *Furthermore, since man, by reason of his fall into sin, had brought himself under the curse of God's law, it pleased the Lord to make a covenant of grace, in which He freely offers life and salvation by Jesus Christ to sinners. On their part He requires faith in Him that they might be saved, and promises to give His Holy Spirit to all those who are elected unto eternal life, in order that they may be made willing and able to believe.*

In this section the Confession answers the question: How does God bring men out of wrath and into grace so that they enter into a covenant relationship with Him? The answer is: by a covenant of **grace**. Based upon the redeeming work of Christ, the mediator of the covenant, God does two things:

- He "freely offers life and salvation by Jesus Christ to sinners" by the preaching of the gospel, and requiring the response of faith, and
- He "promises to give His Holy Spirit to all those who are elected unto eternal life".

Is it Biblical to refer to *one* covenant of grace, when this is not the actual language of the Bible? It is a proper theological idea because in the Bible in all the divine covenants there has only ever been *one* way of salvation. This is supported by:

(a) Divine covenants possess an **organic** unity. They depend upon one another and grow out of one another, so that they are phases of the growth of the same 'plant'. The covenant with Noah is the foundation for all the other covenants, guaranteeing the continuance of the earth and so the possibility of the coming of the Saviour. The covenant with Moses was made as a fulfilment of the covenant with Abraham (Deuteronomy 7:6-9, see Galatians 3:15-19). Obedience to the law of Moses was necessary for the promises made to David to be fulfilled (1 Kings 2:2-4). Christ's coming is in fulfilment of the promise made to Abraham (Luke 1:55,72-73).

(b) Divine covenants possess a **thematic** unity. They are all about the one promise of salvation (Ephesians 2:12), summarized in the words, 'I will be your God, and you shall be my people' (Genesis 17:8, Exodus 6:7, 29:45, Deuteronomy 29:12-13, 2 Samuel 7:14,24, 2 Corinthians 6:16, Revelation 21:7). There are not different promises made to different peoples (Jews & Gentiles), as is taught in Dispensationalism.

The Significant Features of the Covenant

3. *God's covenant is revealed in the gospel; in the first place to Adam in the promise of salvation by 'the seed of the woman', and afterwards, step by step, until the full revelation of salvation was completed in the New Testament. The salvation of the elect is based upon a covenant of redemption that was transacted in eternity between the Father and the Son; and it is solely through the grace conveyed by this covenant that all the descendents of fallen Adam who have been saved have obtained eternal life and a blessed immortality; for the terms of blessing which applied to Adam in his state of innocency have no application to his posterity to render them acceptable to God.*

(a) It has been **progressively revealed**.

- The first revelation was immediately after the fall of *Adam* into sin (Genesis 3:15), a "promise of salvation by 'the seed of the woman'".
- The promise made to *Noah* was of the preservation of the earth so that salvation could come.
- To *Abraham* the promises of the covenant were made concerning the seed and the land. The fulfilment is finally in Christ the "seed" (Galatians 3:16), so that in Christ all believers are sons of Abraham (Galatians 3:29).
- Through *Moses* the seed of Abraham were established into a nation and were given a comprehensive revelation of the will of God for them in the commandments. This was to guarantee the fulfilment of the promises made to Abraham (Galatians 3:19) and to point forward to Christ who fulfils all the laws (Matthew 5:18, Hebrews 10:1).
- In *David* God established the true king, on whose throne Christ sits (Luke 1:35), and Jerusalem as the place of rule.
- Finally *Christ* came as the fulfilment of all these promises and established the eternal and new covenant.

(b) It is based upon a **covenant of redemption**. The Bible indicates that God's purpose to be gracious to sinners originates in an agreement made between the Persons of the Trinity in eternity that we call "the covenant of redemption". See the following evidence:

1. The Father is reported as having spoken to the Son of the work He is to perform (Psalm 110:1, Isaiah 49:6).
2. The Son comes, having been sent by the Father with a specific work to do (John 5:30, 6:38-40, 17:4, Hebrews 10:7-9).

Our salvation is only possible because the blessed Trinity covenanted together in eternity to save us from our sins, for it is now impossible for sinners to obey the 'covenant of works' that was given to Adam at the beginning.