

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE COVENANT OF GRACE

(1) The Idea of the Covenant

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Introduction

We live in an age of doctrinal indifference in which it is considered obsolete to discuss problems of the truth of the Word of God, and old-fashioned to speak of doctrinal questions. Practical questions and matters of life are considered of primary importance, while questions of what is the truth fade into the background as being irrelevant and insignificant.

The result of this is that the whole truth concerning God's covenant of grace is one that has been considered of little significance for the time in which we live that it is neither worth our while nor important for our life to speak of it. Consequently, one hears very little concerning this question today. Along with other important matters of doctrine, this truth has been pushed into the dark background as being too outdated to occupy our attention. When someone does have the courage to bring up the subject, either in private discussion or in public writing, he is almost certain to find little or no interest in this matter. He is usually faced with the prospect of being accused of living in an ivory tower of contemplation far removed from the practical problems of life, spending his time in fruitless theological discussion, expending his energies in unimportant dogmatic reflections; and all this while the crucial problems of the day are lost to him, so that he does nothing of relevance for modern man living in a modern world, faced with a host of modern problems. And he must therefore expect to hear the accusation that he deals with matters that are of concern to none other but himself, and that he speaks to an audience that is not interested in what he has to say.

This is a sad state of affairs, a situation and a reality to be deplored by those who still love the truth of the Word of God. For, while it is indeed true that men must face life and live in the stream of life in the time and age in which God calls them to

spend their years, there is no better way to face life with its host of problems than to be armed with the abiding and eternal principles of the truth which are relevant for every age and can satisfy the child of God with answers to the questions that trouble his soul. Among those truths which have such tremendous bearing on the problems of the age is the truth of God's covenant of grace. It is, no doubt, the key that opens to us the mystery of life itself. It is the glass through which we see clearly the nature of our life, the character of our calling and the solution to the problems of the times. It is the truth that quiets the troubled soul and gives peace and rest to one perplexed with the vanity and turmoil of life. And indeed, only when one is firmly grounded in the abiding principles of this truth, can he be expected to find the correct answer to man's problems and be successful in solving the mystery of life.

Matters of Secondary Importance

There are, however, those who still speak of the doctrines of the covenant of grace, and the covenant is indeed a matter of some concern to them. They look at the matter of the covenant from the practical viewpoint of their children. They are concerned about such problems as whether they should baptise their children, or whether it is more proper for them to wait until their children come to years of maturity and express a personal commitment to Christ. They are faced with the problem of the salvation of their children, or more generally, the salvation of all children. They are eager to find an answer to the question of whether children who die in their childhood go to heaven, and in a more general sense, of whether all children who die in infancy go to heaven. Perhaps even the question of the instruction of their children enters their minds, whether that instruction be given them in the Catechism and the Sunday Schools of the church, or whether that instruction should also come through private education in parental or church controlled schools, in distinction from education in schools operated and financed by the state. Even occasionally, the whole question of the nature of the covenant is discussed in connection with the calling of the church to preach the gospel to all countries and nations, and the character of the covenant is determined by the character of missionary endeavour.

It is to be regretted that the whole problem of the doctrine of the covenant is viewed from the narrow aspect of these practical and often personal problems. It is true no doubt, that these

practical questions are questions which will be solved only on the basis of the doctrine of the covenant. But it is regrettable that the doctrine of the covenant is often formulated with these questions in mind so that the predetermined answers to the questions determine the character and nature of the doctrine. The questions and their resolutions are the basis for the formulation of the doctrine, and the doctrine is not the foundation for the proper answers to the questions. The result is usually that people are led astray into the devious and winding ways of false doctrine and are left in doubt and hopeless despair with answers to their questions that are neither satisfactory nor edifying, to say the least.

This is the more regrettable, because this reveals a clear misunderstanding of the emphasis of Scripture. It is characteristic of the modern church world that its concerns are completely centred in *man*. The church begins with *man* and ends with *man*. It is concerned with man's well-being and man's happiness. Man stands at the centre of all the church's thinking and man becomes the sole object of consideration. The interest of the church is absorbed with man and its energies expended on man.

The Primacy of God

While it is certainly true that Scripture deals with men, it is also true that men are not the chief concern of Scripture. It is characteristic of today that a form of religious humanism with all its grave evils has become the object of theological reflection. This is a sad and dangerous error. Man is not the chief concern of Scripture at all. Nor ought he to be ours. The emphasis of the church upon humanity is not the emphasis of the Bible. Scripture has to do with *God*. Scripture starts with *God* and ends with *God*. All of Scripture is the revelation of God and, therefore, has its chief concern in God. God is foremost and of supreme importance. God is first and last. All things must begin with Him and end in Him. God is central and transcendently important in the discussion of any truth or practical problem that we face.

We deny this fundamental emphasis or ignore its existence at our peril.

How often does the apostle Paul break forth into a mighty and soul-stirring doxology of praise when he contemplates the truth revealed to him – a doxology of praise to God, Who alone is worthy of all praise and glory. After discussing the profound truths of election and reprobation and the mystery of the olive tree in Romans chapters 9–11, he concludes by saying: "O the depth of

the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counsellor? Or who hath first given to him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again? For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen." And what is true of the apostle Paul is equally true of all the other authors of Scripture. David, in the Psalms, seems as if he cannot speak often enough and long enough about the great glory of God. Taken up in the ecstasy of God's greatness, he calls upon the heavens and the earth, the sea and the stars, and all the vast creation to join in a song of praise to Him Who is greatly to be praised. The book of Revelation heaps doxology upon doxology and anthem upon anthem of praise and glory to Him Who alone is worthy of the honour of all the universe. Indeed the whole of Scripture can rightly be called one beautifully glorious hymn of praise to God alone!

This must be uppermost in our minds when we attempt to solve the problems that confront us or attempt to determine the truth of God's Word. There is perhaps nothing quite so difficult for sinful man than to lose sight of himself and see only the glory of God. But such is nevertheless essential. And this is predominantly true of the doctrine of the covenant of grace.

It is only when we have a proper understanding of the greatness of God and our own insignificance, when we understand that all things are of God and that to His Name belongs all praise and glory for ever and ever, that we can also with humility approach these all-important questions. Then and then only, will we be able to come to a correct understanding of their importance and significance. It matters not primarily what happens to us or what benefits us. It matters above all whether God is given the honour that is due to Him. To place man on a pedestal and allow our attention to be so completely absorbed with him and with his problems that the glory of God is lost from view, will lead to grievous errors that cannot be overcome. On the other hand, to catch a vision of the glory of God and its importance for our life, to hold it before us as our goal and inspiration and to follow it in our quest for the truth, will invariably bring us to the blessing of Christ's promise: "This is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent" (John 17:3). This must be our approach in discussing the doctrine of the Covenant of Grace.

We must begin with God. As it is in God's glory that we hope to end, so with God we must begin. This is not merely a rather abstract principle that has no application to what we are doing, but it must be our exact starting point.

When we start with God's covenant, we start with God.

God: a Covenant Being

First of all therefore, we must notice that God is a covenant God. The deepest ground for the covenant of grace must be found in the truth that God lives a covenant life in Himself, even apart from the creatures He has created.

God is triune. That is, He is one in essence and three in person. This central and all-important doctrine of the Church has stood as the immovable rock upon which all truth is based. This trinity of God is the deepest reason why God is a covenant God and lives a covenant life within Himself. Without the reality of the trinity, this would be impossible.

That God is one in essence means that there is only one God, one divine Being, one divine Essence. There is in God only one mind and one will, one divine nature, one divine life. All the attributes of the Godhead are attributes of the essence of the one God and, therefore, of God Himself.

Yet, while there is only this one divine essence, there are nevertheless three persons within the Godhead, three distinct egos, three that say "I." There is the Father; there is the Son; there is the Holy Spirit. But we must not be left with the false impression that these three are indistinct from each other, as far as their personal characteristics and attributes are concerned. The Father is personally distinct from the Son and the Holy Spirit, and the Son is personally distinct from the Father and the Holy Spirit. And what may be said of the Father and Son may equally be said of the Holy Spirit. It is true that they have together but one mind and one will. But the Father thinks as the Father; the Son thinks as the Son; the Holy Spirit is personally distinct from Father and Son in His thinking and willing. And yet they think and will the same thoughts and desires. Their life is one; their joy is one; their purpose is one; there is only one God.

On this truth of the trinity, rests the truth of the covenant life within the Godhead.

If we enquire into the nature and character of the covenant on the basis of this truth of the trinity, then the answer must be that God's covenant life is the fellowship and communion which He

enjoys within Himself in this unity of essence and in this trinity of persons. There is and can be perfect fellowship only because there is a perfect unity of essence underlying God's life. But, at the same time, there is and can be fellowship and communion only because there is a trinity of persons. If God were one in essence and one in person, such communion would be impossible. Likewise, if God were three in persons and three in essence, the fellowship of His covenant life in the unity of the divine essence would be forever impaired. But, on the contrary, each of the three persons knows the other two perfectly and completely. And in this unity of essence there is a fellowship of life and love, a communion of essence and nature, a transcendent happiness that characterises their fellowship as they rejoice in their mutual communion. This fellowship, this happiness, this communion of life and love, is God's own covenant life.

Hastily, we must add to this that this covenant life of God is complete and perfect just as God is complete and perfect in Himself. God is perfectly and transcendently glorious and happy. For this reason He has no need of the creation, or man as a creature, to add in any way to His own divine happiness and joy. Man cannot enrich the life of God. God is not incomplete without man. God is transcendently perfect and fully glorious. It would be the height of folly and the apex of sinful pride to say that the only true and living God, the sovereign of heaven and earth, the only One Who is infinitely glorious and eternal, has need of man to complete or perfect His glory. His happiness is full; His life and love are complete; His glory is all-comprehensive without insignificant man. God has no need of us; we only have need of God.

"Who hath measured the waters in the hollow of his hand, and meted out heaven with the span, and comprehended the dust of the earth in a measure, and weighed the mountains in scales, and the hills in a balance? Who hath directed the Spirit of the LORD, or being his counsellor hath taught him? With whom took he counsel, and who instructed him, and taught him in the path of judgment, and taught him knowledge, and shewed to him the way of understanding? Behold, the nations are as a drop of a bucket, and are counted as the small dust of the balance: behold, he taketh up the isles as a very little thing. And Lebanon is not sufficient to burn, nor the beasts thereof sufficient for a burnt offering. All nations before him are as nothing; and they are counted to him less than nothing, and vanity. To whom then will ye liken God? or what

likeness will ye compare unto him?" (Isaiah 40:12-18).

Man in Relation to the Covenant

If we should ask ourselves at this point, why it is that God created man and established His covenant with His own people, then we touch on the very heart of our relationship to God in all of our life. The answer to which we come is an answer that can only prostrate the child of God in dust and ashes before the greatness of the Almighty. It is only because of the deepest sovereign goodness of God – that can never be adequately explained in human language or understood by a mere finite mind – that God has seen fit, not only to create the worlds, but also to create a people to love Him and to participate in His glory and goodness. God willed to do it! More than this we cannot say.

But here we touch upon an essential point in our understanding of the doctrine of the covenant of grace. God cannot be known in and of Himself. Because He is so great and so infinitely exalted above all His creation, He is unknown to any man apart from revelation. The infinitely deep and wide chasm that separates God from man is a chasm that cannot possibly be bridged by man nor crossed by the efforts of the creature. God dwells in a light to which no man can approach. He is the invisible One, Who alone is greatly exalted. If therefore, He is known by the creature, He is known only because He makes Himself known through divine revelation. If it is possible for us to know Him at all, it is only because He has revealed Himself to us in a way that we can both understand and appropriate for ourselves.

In other words, if God is to be known at all, it can only be by the amazing wonder of a revelation that reveals the truth of the infinite God and yet reveals it in such a way that it can be understood by man. Not by our powers of reason and intellect, nor by the strength of man, nor by man's scientific investigation, nor by man's best efforts, can God ever be known. The only way is for man to bow in humility before the Word of God and pray that his earnest efforts to penetrate the wonders of that Word may be blessed by His Father in heaven. In that Word is contained all the truth of the trinity, the truth of all God's glorious perfections, the truth of His own glorious covenant life and the truth of the everlasting covenant of grace.

So to speak of the covenant of grace is to speak of revelation. When God reveals His own covenant life to man, then and then only is there the reality of the covenant of grace.

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although the future is uncertain. Will God maintain the cause of truth, or will our congregation go the way of so many others, that of compromise and then denial? We cannot remain standing still. We know that a Reformed church must be always reforming. There is a need for growth and development in the truth, both in our individual lives and in the life of the congregation.

Our calling is clear: To stand firm in the truth, to preach the truth and to contend for the truth. May the God of all grace be pleased to keep us faithful to our calling. We lift up our heads, looking for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ in glory and longing for that Day when all the ransomed church of God shall be saved to sin no more.

SIN AND ITS CONSEQUENCES *[Continued from page 1]*

It is further true that God's Word must be preached to all nations (Matthew 28:19), so that where God has given new life there would be seen the proper response: true conversion. The Word of God declares: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved..." (Acts 16:31). That is the promise of the gospel which has never yet failed, nor ever will!

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And we must certainly bear in mind that this is not a mere revelation in words; but it is indeed a living reality for man himself. When God establishes His covenant with His people, He does not simply tell them about it, but He takes them into His own covenant life. He causes men to share in the joy and happiness of His own fellowship. He gives to man the taste of the greatness of His own communion and friendship. And when this is accomplished through the wonder of divine grace, then and then only is there the reality for us of this glorious covenant of which we speak.

To enter into God's own life of fellowship will stand eternally as the incomprehensible wonder of our salvation!

[To be continued]