

## **THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE COVENANT OF GRACE**

### **(2) The Idea of the Covenant [cont]**

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#### **Man's Overriding Sin**

When the devil came into the beautiful garden of Paradise to tempt our first parents, Adam and Eve, he persuaded them to eat of the forbidden tree by means of the tantalising lie, "Ye shall be as God." This lie has been perpetuated through the ages in the lives of men as the devil prompts them to sin and follow his devices. Ever and again, man has followed the lie of Satan and has striven with all his might "to be as God." This is the sin of pride. Pride is the curse of mankind, the one sin which lies at the root of all man's iniquity. In pride man exalts himself to the throne of God and makes himself equal with the Most High. He seizes for himself attributes which belong to God alone, gives to himself honour which is due to God, and boasts in himself while completely ignoring his Creator. The apostle Paul describes the Antichrist who shall come at the end of time when he says, "Let no man deceive you by any means: for the day shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin be revealed, the son of perdition; who opposeth and exalteth himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped; so that he as God sitteth in the temple of God, shewing himself that he is God" (2 Thessalonians 2:3-4). But this sin of Antichrist is not an isolated sin characterising but one individual throughout history; it is rather the complete culmination of a sin which has afflicted mankind since time's beginning. It is the complete fulfilment of the lie of the devil in Paradise, a lie which men always strive to attain. Pride is the one principle of all sin.

There is perhaps no other way in which men have shown their pride and haughtiness more than by robbing God of his sovereign power. In their arrogance and vicious hatred of humility before the Lord, they make themselves equal with and often greater than God, when they make themselves powerful beyond the power of

the Almighty. They rob the Most High of sovereignty that belongs to Him alone, and claim for themselves that which belongs to their Creator. Nowhere has this evil of man become more apparent than his beliefs of the doctrine of salvation. Rather than humbly confess that God alone saves and that all the power to save belongs to Him, man claims for himself a power equal with or even greater than the power of God; a power which is capable of frustrating the purpose of the Most High; a power of man's will which can do something which God cannot do – save a sinner; a power which must first come into action by man's initiative before the work of salvation can be accomplished. God, so it is said, waits for man. Man, so it is said, must accept Jesus Christ as his personal Saviour; must make a personal commitment to Christ and demonstrate a willingness to belong to Christ before it is possible for Christ to save him. And should he refuse to accept Christ, refuse to yield to the earnest entreaties with which men assail him, God is completely unable to save him and to bring him into the blessedness of life eternal.

Consequently, there has been a terrible travesty of the ministry of the gospel. Those who claim they preach the gospel of redemption do not preach any longer the sovereign power of the cross, but rather assail the ears of any audience with earnest pleas and heart-rending cries that do nothing less than present the Almighty God as a beggar, Who must stoop so low from His lofty throne, that He must plead with men to accept His salvation. Their efforts, so they seem to think, are only crowned with success when they have moved men so intensely that in a spasm of emotional passion they answer the 'altar call.'

This is the terrible sin of pride, and has come to be known in our day as Arminianism.

### **The History of Arminianism**

To trace the history of Arminianism in the church, one must go back to the days of St Augustine. It was during the times of Augustine that a man arose by the name of Pelagius who taught that all men who come into the world are free from any sin or moral blot. Their natures and their lives are clean and spotless; they have even no tendency to sin and are capable of living a life of perfect and unblemished holiness. The stark fact that men do actually sin is not to be ascribed to some defect in their nature, but only to the bad example of their fellow men with whom they come into contact and whose habits they readily pick up and learn.

Sin is therefore not rooted in the corruption and depravity of man at all, but is a mild sickness that pervades man's nature with habitual tendencies towards moral wrong, but is comparatively easily curable. Such being the character of sin, man is able to overcome these habits and defects of his nature by repeated attempts to walk in holiness, occasionally assisted somewhat by divine grace. Then indeed man can earn his own salvation. But it stands to reason that in such a conception there is no room for the guilt of sin and the depravity of a fallen human race. There is no real room for grace. There is no need for the cross.

To this view, Augustine was a staunch opponent. He held, on the basis of Scripture, that such a superficial view of sin and the iniquity of mankind is not the view of the Bible, nor in harmony with reality. Quite the contrary, the sin of our first parents Adam and Eve in Paradise was a sin so grievous in the sight of God that He immediately punished that sin with death, as He had warned. This death which came upon Adam and Eve was spiritual death, which can best be described by the well known words 'total depravity.' Their death made them entirely incapable of doing anything good in the sight of God. This death was passed on to all men so that it is the state of the human race to live in a condition in which it is impossible to do anything but sin from life's first breath until the expiration of that breath at death.

In the 16th century, one Arminius appeared on the scene of history who virtually adopted the views of Pelagius, only in a somewhat modified form. He spoke of man, although afflicted by the results of sin in his nature, as still possessing the ability to will the good. He could, if he chose, turn to God and accept Jesus Christ. He could, if this was his desire, forsake his sin and cast himself upon the cross of Calvary. But, in fact, the salvation which was prepared in the cross was a salvation which could only come into the possession of a man if he first of all would exercise his will in such a fruitful way. The initial step was left to man. Salvation had to be begun by man. God stood helpless in his work until man had agreed to come to God and reach out his hand to that which was offered him.

Such have been the subtle attempts to undermine the truth of God's sovereign power and grace. Such have been the terrible results of the pride of sin as applied to the truth of Scripture.

### **The Arminian View of the Covenant**

This Arminianism and Pelagianism has also afflicted the

doctrine of the covenant. It is not simply that these errors have affected the truth concerning salvation, but they have crept their way into the truth concerning the covenant of grace - a truth so closely related to the whole of our salvation that it can never be separated from it. And so these errors have become grievous boils on the body of the church, sapping her strength and rendering her altogether unfit to represent the cause of Jesus Christ in the world.

Those who under the influence of Arminianism speak of the doctrine of the covenant, speak of it as being essentially an agreement between two parties. There may be some disagreement as to the exact character of such an agreement, but all are agreed that an agreement it is. They point to the fact that a covenant between men is such an agreement. When a husband and wife enter into the covenant of marriage to be realised and consummated, there must of necessity be an agreement between them. Likewise, when two nations enter a covenant of peace, this must necessarily take the form of an agreement between them. Each nation agrees to certain stipulations and provisions; each nation makes certain promises and assumes certain obligations to which it binds itself; and only when this is done can a successful and lasting covenant of peace become a reality.

In like manner men speak of the covenant of grace. Men speak of this covenant as being an agreement between God and man. Both enter into mutual consultation and arrive at an agreement satisfactory to them. It is true that God takes the initiative and comes to man with the first propositions, but the covenant is not in force nor obligatory on both parties until both have entered into the agreement according to which they bind themselves.

If you ask how this works, the answer is as follows. God comes to man with the proposition, through the preaching of the gospel, that He will save man and give to man all the blessings of salvation merited in the cross of Jesus Christ. But this promise of God is of no effect until man agrees to it. There are certain conditions attached to this promise which must be fulfilled before it can actually be realised. These conditions are obligatory on man and are, primarily, that man must agree to accept the promise as his own and must agree to walk faithfully in the midst of the world keeping fidelity to God's covenant. Only when these conditions have been agreed to and successfully met can the covenant be realised and the blessings of the covenant become the possession of man.

To whom is this promise made? Different answers have been

given to this question. Some say that the promise is made to all who hear the preaching of the gospel. The gospel as preached is then described as being an offer of salvation which comes to all who hear. Wherever the gospel goes, to whomever it comes, there comes also the promise of God that He will certainly bless them provided they accept the conditions of the covenant and enter into this agreement. Others complain that this makes the promise of God too general and insist, therefore, that the promise only comes to those who in their infancy are baptised, baptism being the statement of the promise given to the one upon whom the sacrament is administered. If, however, the promise is ever to become the treasured possession of the one being baptised, this can only come about when such a child grows older and accepts that which once was offered to him in his infancy. There is, admittedly, some difference of opinion on this point. There are those who are insistent that the sacrament of baptism can only be administered after a child has agreed to the stipulations of the covenant, and therefore only when he has come to years of discretion. But beyond these various differences, all are agreed that the covenant is nevertheless an agreement; and that this agreement is between God and man with mutual stipulations, promises, conditions and obligations.

### **Objections to This View**

Against this view many and serious objections can be brought, not the least serious being that the covenant becomes quite Arminian in character and therefore is not found at all in Holy Writ. This view is nothing short of an attempt to introduce into the doctrine of the covenant the age-old errors of Pelagius and Arminius.

This can perhaps be best demonstrated by pointing to several implications of this idea.

1) If it is true that the promise of God to establish His covenant comes to all who are baptised or, in the broader sense of the word, to all who hear the gospel, then it follows that all the blessings of salvation merited by Christ on the cross are promised to all whoever come into contact with the gospel in any form. And this is exactly intended to be the idea by those who promote the above views. Now it is a patent fact that many, and in reality most, of those who hear the gospel are not saved. What does this mean? It means that God promises to a certain man something which he never receives. And the only reason he does not receive

it is because he himself is able to frustrate the eternal promises of the Almighty Lord of heaven and earth.

2) But the question is not merely whether the promise of God comes to all men; the question is also whether or not Christ died for all these men to whom the promise comes. If God promises the blessings of the cross of Christ to all men, Christ died for all men! Indeed, this would certainly be the solution to the problem, for how could God promise something – the blessings of the cross of Calvary – to men for whom these blessings were never intended? But then we are forced into the heresy of universal atonement, a heresy which the Arminians willingly espouse, but which has always been denied by those who believe the Bible. For if Christ died for all men and all men are not saved, the cross of Christ is of none effect. Calvary is a sham. There is then no power in the blood, nor efficacy in the cross. Christ's intense sufferings under the wrath of God were futile for a great number of men for whom He died but who are never saved.

3) It may, however, be objected that Christ indeed died only for His people, while the promise of the blessings of the cross come to all men. Is it then true that God promises something to mankind which was never merited by Christ? Can God promise heaven to one for whom there is no room beyond the gates of the new Jerusalem? Can God offer the magnificent blessings of a place in His house of many mansions when no place actually exists? And how can such a place exist for a man if Christ did not actually merit that place for him? This is the grossest mockery of the cross imaginable and, in fact, borders on the blasphemous.

4) Again, it may be objected that although the promise of the covenant of God hinges upon these conditions and the acceptance of certain obligations, nevertheless God gives the grace to fulfil the conditions and meet the requirements which He makes. But this answer will never do. It sounds rather pious to introduce at this point some statement to the effect that the conditions are fulfilled only by grace, but this cannot change the whole matter. If the covenant is an agreement, man must have his place in such an agreement. If the promise comes to all who hear the gospel, the fulfillment of the promise hinges upon man's work alone.

This is the awful dilemma from which there is no escape. Either mockery is made of the promise of God, or a retreat must be ordered into the camp of the Arminians. The latter has usually been the sad result in the church of Jesus Christ.

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## The View of Scripture

Overagainst all this, the clear teaching of Scripture is quite different. Scripture nowhere speaks of the covenant as being an agreement between two parties. As true as this may be with respect to a covenant made between men, it is far from true with respect to the covenant of grace. It may be that any covenant between men is an agreement between two parties; but after all, men are equals. God's covenant is not an agreement between equals, as much as men would like to have it so. God is God. There is none like Him. He is infinitely great and glorious, and far exalted above all His creation. What is man, when all the nations of the earth are only a drop in the bucket and less than nothing? And if God is so infinitely exalted above us, it is incredible that we should ever attempt to place man on an equal [footing] with God by making him a party in an agreement with the Most High.

Scripture nowhere speaks of such a covenant. Scripture nowhere utters a word about a promise that comes to all men. Scripture nowhere even suggests that there are conditions which must be met by man before the covenant can be realised and consummated. Quite the contrary, Scripture is one long and gloriously beautiful anthem of praise to the sovereign Lord of heaven and earth. And in keeping with this, Scripture emphasises over and over again that Salvation, and the Covenant of Grace, is the absolutely sovereign work of a sovereign God.

This then, is the covenant – a work of God's grace; a work in which there is no co-operation of man; a work that in itself is always a revelation of God as the God of our salvation through Jesus Christ. To Him belongs all praise and glory for ever!

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"It is gratuitous to say that Christ is the Saviour of some, for whom he has purchased salvation, but to whom it will never be applied. It is to take for granted what ought to be proved. The very expression *to save* denotes the actual communication of salvation. Christ is Jesus, not only because he is willing and able to save, and because he removes all obstacles out of the way of salvation, but because he does in reality save his people, both by meritoriously acquiring salvation for them, and effectually applying it to them... To say that Christ, by his death, intended to save (all men), will not solve the difficulty, for we do not call a man a saviour who *intends* to save another, but him who does it actually"

[*Turretin on the Atonement*, Willson edition, pp 129–130]