

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE COVENANT OF GRACE*

(3) THE COVENANT A BOND OF FRIENDSHIP

Herman Hanko

The error of Arminianism is undoubtedly the gravest doctrinal error to afflict the church world of today. It promotes the sinful desire of men to exalt themselves and their own power in opposition to God. It robs God of His sovereign grace in the salvation of His people, and makes the cross of Jesus Christ little more than an empty sham.

As we noticed in the preceding article, when this evil of Arminianism is applied to the doctrine of the covenant, the result is that the covenant takes on the nature of an agreement between God and man. God promises on His part to save all those who hear the gospel, if man will on his part accept the conditions of the covenant and receive Christ as his own personal Saviour.

If Arminianism is condemned by the whole of Scripture, it stands to reason that Scripture's conception of the covenant is far different from an agreement between two parties. Arminianism begins with man and ends with man. On quite a different note, Scripture begins with God and ends with God. So it is also with the doctrine of the covenant.

Covenant Life Within the Godhead

If we begin with God in our discussion of the nature of the covenant, then we must maintain first of all that God lives a covenant life within Himself. He is the Triune God who is three in person and one in essence. In this trinity of persons and unity of essence, God has perfect fellowship with Himself. He enjoys perfectly, completely and eternally the happiness of fellowship within His own life. He has no need of man to make His joy and happiness complete; He has no need of the praise of men or their honour to fill the cup of His glory. He is God! He is completely and eternally full of praise and glory that belongs to Him alone. His communion with himself; His love for Himself; His life within

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Himself; His own speech to Himself; His rest within Himself as Father, Son and Holy Ghost is sufficient for His complete enjoyment of His own covenant.

This fellowship and complete joy is the very essence of God's covenant life. He lives a covenant life within Himself. In this life He has communion – a communion of perfect and eternal life that belongs to Him alone. The essence of the covenant of grace is this same covenant fellowship. So it always is in all the works of God.

All God's works are a reflection of what He is in Himself. All His works reveal Himself, His life, His attributes, His glory, His praise, His wondrous majesty. All that He does, He does in order that there may be revealed who He is and what He does. Originally, when He formed the heavens and the earth and all that they contain, He formed them in such a way that they revealed perfectly the glory and the power of His own divine being. "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth His handiwork" (Psalm 19:1). As Augustine long ago expressed it so eloquently: "And what is this? I asked the earth; and it answered me, 'I am not he;' and whosoever are in it, confessed the same. I asked the sea and the deeps, and the living creeping things; and they answered, 'We are not thy God, seek above us.' I asked the moving air; and the whole air with his inhabitants answered, '... I am not God.' I asked the heavens, sun, moon, stars; 'Nor (say they) are we the God whom thou seekest.' And I replied unto all the things which encompass the door of my flesh, 'Ye have told me of my God, that ye are not He; tell me something of Him.' And they cried out with a loud voice, 'He made us.'" The beautiful confession of the Reformed Churches, *The Netherlands Confession*, speaks in the same vein when it remarks in Article II: "We know (God) by two means: first, by the creation, preservation and government of the universe; which is before our eyes as a most elegant book, wherein all creatures, great and small, are as so many characters leading us to contemplate the invisible things of God, namely, his power and divinity."

But if the works of God in the creation of the universe are revelations of Himself and His glory, the same is true of God's work of salvation. The highest possible and most gloriously beautiful revelation of God is through Jesus Christ His Son in all His works and His suffering, death, resurrection and glorification. The central aspect of this work of salvation is the establishment of the covenant of grace. This covenant of grace is therefore also a revelation of God's own covenant life which He lives in Himself.

Covenant Life of the People of God

We would expect, therefore, that this covenant of grace is also a communion of friendship and fellowship. No agreement between God and man can possibly be called a covenant, but rather a gracious bond of friendship and fellowship between God and His people in which God reveals the blessedness of His own perfect and eternal covenant life. This is properly the covenant of grace!

And if we patiently turn to Scripture, this will be exactly substantiated by the Bible's description of the covenant. Scripture describes the relation between God and His people in the covenant as being a relation in which He reveals His secrets to man, gives to His people the fellowship of life, causes them to walk in the truth and do good. He describes His covenant as dwelling with His people by putting His own dwelling place in their midst and taking them under one roof with Him. Always, covenant fellowship with God is the intimacy of walking and talking with God in perfect communion.

In Psalm 25:12-14 we read: "What man is he that feareth the LORD? him shall he teach in the way that he shall choose. His soul shall dwell at ease; and his seed shall inherit the earth. The secret of the LORD is with them that fear him; and he will shew them his covenant." Isaiah spoke more than once of this, as did the other prophets: "Incline your ear, and come unto me: hear, and your soul shall live; and I will make an everlasting covenant with you, even the sure mercies of David" (Isaiah 55:3). "For I the LORD love judgment, I hate robbery for burnt offering; and I will direct their work in truth, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them" (Isaiah 61:8). "And I will make an everlasting covenant with them, that I will not turn away from them, to do them good; but I will put my fear in their hearts, that they shall not depart from me" (Jeremiah 32:40). "Moreover I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them: and I will place them, and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in the midst of them for evermore. My tabernacle also shall be with them: yea, I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And the heathen shall know that I the LORD do sanctify Israel, when my sanctuary shall be in the midst of them for evermore" (Ezekiel 37:26-28).

But what was true of the Old Testament and of the prophets in that dispensation, was equally true of the New Testament and the apostles who wrote the Scriptures. Jesus Himself expresses the very essence of the covenant of grace when he says in His high-

priestly prayer: "This is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent" (John 17:3). Moreover the apostle Paul uses this covenant idea to show the people of God that they must not have fellowship with the world. In 2Corinthians 6:16 he writes: "And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? for ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people." And to quote no more, what else could the prophet of Patmos be speaking of than the final perfection of God's covenant when he says in Revelation 21:3-4: "And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away."

If we take all these texts together, we cannot help but be left with the very strong impression that Scripture indeed emphasises throughout that the covenant is a bond of friendship and fellowship which God graciously establishes with His people.

Marriage a Reflection of the Covenant

There is an earthly picture of this relationship of fellowship and friendship in the marriage bond. Necessarily, this earthly relation is limited and imperfect, but Scripture does teach that husband and wife live together as a picture of the relation between Christ and His church. We read, for example, in Ephesians 5:22-25, 29-32: "Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing. Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church: For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the Church." In the marriage relation there is an intimate fellowship between husband and wife which grows with the years that they spend

together. There is the fellowship of their mutual love, their mutual life. There is the communion of the problems they face and solve, the burdens they mutually carry, the needs they bring together before the throne of grace. There is the intimacy in their life of the mind and will in which they seek and pursue the same goals, cherish and desire the same ideals, reveal to each other the secrets of their hearts and the thoughts of their souls. They become indeed "one flesh" in their life together.

So also, in Scripture, and particularly in the prophets, the relation between God and His people is described as a marriage relation which God's people have broken. They are now an adulterous people who live in fornication because they have forsaken their God and turned to another spouse to whom they give their allegiance. They sin against their God and walk in all the lusts of their own carnal and wicked lives. They are wilful and perverse, constantly breaking the bond of marriage, trampling underfoot His covenant and blaspheming Him to His face. Nevertheless, as a faithful husband, God maintains His covenant. In His infinite and eternal love for them through Jesus Christ, He comes to them to save them. And when He reveals to them His love, He makes them to be His own chosen bride, His covenant people. He embraces them with the arms of His love, speaks to them comforting words of His grace, tells them of the forgiveness of all their sins, makes known to them the glorious life which He has graciously prepared for them in the life to come, and takes them into His fellowship once again.

In this intimacy of covenant fellowship and communion, He reveals to them all the secrets of His heart, makes them to know and taste of the power and glory of His own covenant life that He lives within Himself. In their trouble He cares for them; in their sorrows He comforts them with His promises; in their sins He forgives them wondrously and graciously; in their distress He points them to His power to sustain them in every need; in their cares He cares for them; in their wickedness He whispers in their hearts of His love and assures them that all things work together for their good, for they are all the called according to His purpose. When they cry to Him He always and again hears them. His ears are never closed to their anguished sobs, their heart-rending pleas. He walks by their side. He preserves them from evil and temptation. And even though they walk through the valley of the shadow of death they need fear no evil, for His rod and His staff comfort them. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow them

all the days of their life till finally they dwell in the house of the Lord for ever!

This Life Only a Shadow

It stands to reason that this is imperfect and incomplete on this side of the grave. For even believers do not lose the last vestiges of their sin as long as they live here below. But the night is soon enough over. The day comes ere long when they lay down the weapons of their warfare to exchange them for the palm branch of victory; when the noise of the battle that they must fight against sin and temptation ceases in the quiet of death, and they awake to hear only the beautiful song of Moses and the Lamb sung by the choirs of heaven. It is but a short time here below that they travel as pilgrims and strangers; for ere long they fold up their tent for the last time and go to the home of their Father in heaven. And the end of life is but the last triumph over their last enemy - death. Then they shall change their dismal and filthy rags of sin and iniquity for the white robes of the holiness of Jesus Christ. There in glory shall the covenant be perfectly realized. There shall be life and joy and happiness for ever.

The tabernacle which Moses built and the temple which Solomon built were symbols to Israel of this covenant fellowship. The tabernacle, placed as it was in the middle of the camp and filled with the bright cloud, was a perpetual symbol to the people that Jehovah their God dwelt in their midst in fellowship with them. The beautiful temple of Solomon built on the heights of Zion spoke to the faithful people of God who congregated in its courts that their Lord was in their midst; that the temple was a visible symbol of His presence; that when God was with them, all was well.

But these were only visible *symbols* - types and shadows which were not intended to be the perfect reality. Presently Jesus Himself, the true temple of God, came in the flesh. Jesus made this very clear when He told the Jews, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19). He was not speaking of the temple that Herod built but the temple of His body which He would raise up unto perfection in the resurrection from the dead. Jesus is the true temple of God, for God dwells in Him. But also all the church which is Christ's body dwells in Jesus their Head. And in Jesus Christ, God and His people have fellowship and communion perfectly.

This is the covenant of grace! Nothing more beautiful and blessed is revealed in all of Scripture.

Conclusion

To be a partaker of this covenant is the greatest blessing which can befall a man. To represent God's covenant in the midst of the world is a privilege and calling of which there is none higher. To look forward in eager anticipation to the day when this covenant is finally perfected is the hope that sustains the people of God in all of their life. This is the hope which inspires them to press on faithfully to their eternal goal. When the vision of that glorious day shines in their eyes they suffer persecution and mockery, the taunts and derision of wicked men. This blessedness sustains them in the hours of their need, in their weary pilgrimage here below. For the high calling of this covenant they march unwaveringly and unflinchingly to the stake, the cross, the scaffold and the lions, daring all the powers of men to rob them of their faith and hope. With the sweet song of the promises of God ringing in their hearts, they face privation and hardship; and with the blessed knowledge that death is their gain, they lay down their weary heads upon death's bed, so that with joy in their souls they can pass on to their eternal rest.

Such is the wonder and glory of the covenant of grace!

JIREH CHAPEL, LEWES *(Continued from page 34)*

4. Ibid, p236.
5. Report of the Commissioned Architect, 1985.
6. Jireh Chapel Trust Deed.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. *Westminster Confession of Faith*, Free Presbyterian Publications, 1990, p390.
10. *Brief Memoir of Rev John Vinall*, nd, pp5,6.
11. *Select Articles of the Church of England*, Sussex Press, 1822.
12. *History of Providence Chapel, Chichester*, 1961, p20.

Our next British Reformed Fellowship

HALF-DAY CONVENTION

*will be held (DV) in LEWES, EAST SUSSEX
on Saturday, April 23rd 1994*

Speaker: REV RON HANKO (Ballymena)

Subject: "Evangelical Religion"

3.30 pm in Christian Alliance Hall, Mount Place

7.15 pm in Cliffe Church Hall, Cliffe High Street

Reformed preaching - Bookstall - Refreshments

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