

OUR COVENANT GOD: FRIEND, HUSBAND AND FATHER (1)

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Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology

The doctrine of the covenant occupies a central place in Reformed theology. This holds true in part because covenant theology is derived from the teachings of Scripture. In addition, Reformed theology emphasizes the doctrine of the covenant because this doctrine developed within the Reformed tradition. For example, Heinrich Bullinger, the Swiss Reformer and successor of Ulrich Zwingli in Zurich, wrote the first book about the doctrine of the covenant. In his treatise on the covenant of God, he declared,

The entire sum of piety consists in these very brief main points of the covenant. Indeed, it is evident that nothing else was handed down to the saints of all ages, throughout the entire Scripture, other than what is included in these points of the covenant ...²

Thus, Bullinger viewed Scripture and dogmatics through the lens of covenant theology. In addition, Herman Bavinck, in his *Reformed Dogmatics*, writes, “For dogmatics as well as for the practice of the Christian faith, the doctrine of the covenant is of the greatest importance.”³ In summarizing the Reformed tradition, Heinrich Heppe asserts that “the doctrine of God’s covenant with man is thus the inmost heart and soul of the whole of revealed truth.”⁴

More recent theologians affirm the central place of the covenant in Reformed theology. John Murray, longtime professor at Westminster Theological Semi-

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² Heinrich Bullinger, “A Brief Exposition of the One and Eternal Testament or Covenant of God,” in Charles S. McCoy and J. Wayne Baker, *Fountainhead of Federalism: Heinrich Bullinger and the Covenantal Tradition* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1991), p. 112.

³ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004), p. 212.

⁴ Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007), p. 281.

nary, viewed the covenant as “a distinguishing feature of the Reformed tradition because the idea of the covenant came to be an organizing principle in terms of which the relations of God to men were construed.”⁵ Michael Horton, a contemporary theologian, conveys the same message: “Reformed theology is synonymous with covenant theology.”⁶ In addition, David McKay writes, “The theme of God’s covenant with his people runs all the way through the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, and relates in one way or another to every area of theology.”⁷ These represent only a few examples demonstrating that Reformed theology emphasizes the importance of the covenant. Thus, it can rightly be said, as John Hesselink asserts, “Reformed Theology is covenant theology.”⁸

Due to the importance of the covenant in Reformed theology, the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) have emphasized this doctrine throughout their history. Herman Hoeksema, a founding member and leading theologian in the Protestant Reformed Churches, emphasized the importance of the covenant. He writes, “The covenant idea occupies a central place in any Reformed system of dogma. Reformed theology is federal theology.”⁹ More recently, David Engelsma, professor emeritus at the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary (PRTS), asserts, “The covenant of grace is one of the most prominent, most important doctrines of Holy Scripture, if not that grand reality which is the very heart of the whole biblical revelation.”¹⁰ In addition, while developing what it means to be Reformed, Barry Gritters, professor at the PRTS, singled out the doctrine of the covenant as the heart of the matter: “Central to understanding what it means to be Reformed is God’s covenant of grace. The heart that pumps with life in a Reformed church is the reality ... of God’s

⁵ John Murray, “Covenant Theology,” in *Collected Writings of John Murray: Studies in Theology*, vol. 4 (Edinburgh: Banner, 1982), p. 216.

⁶ Michael Horton, *God of Promise: Introducing Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006), p. 11.

⁷ David McKay, *The Bond of Love: God’s Covenantal Relationship With His Church* (Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2001), p. 7.

⁸ I. John Hesselink, *On Being Reformed: Distinctive Characteristics and Common Misunderstandings* (New York City, NY: Reformed Church Press, 1988), p. 57.

⁹ Herman Hoeksema, *The Triple Knowledge: An Exposition of the Heidelberg Catechism*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: RFPA, 1971), p. 506.

¹⁰ David Engelsma, *The Covenant of God and the Children of Believers: Sovereign Grace in the Covenant* (Grandville, MI: RFPA, 2005), p. 3.

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everlasting covenant.”¹¹ Thus, in harmony with the Reformed tradition, the Protestant Reformed Churches view the doctrine of the covenant as central to Reformed theology.

While the Protestant Reformed Churches maintain the same *emphasis* on the covenant as the Reformed tradition, they differ with respect to their *conception* of the covenant. Specifically, the Protestant Reformed Churches do not view the covenant as a pact or agreement, but maintain that it is a bond of love and friendship.

Many within the Reformed tradition understood the covenant as a pact or agreement. For example, again in an effort to summarize the Reformed consensus, Heinrich Heppe quotes Johannes Heidegger:

God’s covenant is the pact or convention of God with man, by which in view of the eminent right He has and of His singular goodness God makes with man on fixed conditions a pact of eternal life in heaven and seals it with sure signs and pledges.¹²

Protestant Reformed theologians believe that Heidegger’s definition accurately portrays the broader Reformed understanding of the covenant. After describing several different views of the covenant, Herman Hoeksema summarizes those other views: “Always the covenant is essentially a means to an end, a pact or agreement, and the essential elements are always the promise of eternal life and the condition of faith and obedience.”¹³ So also David Engelsma briefly summarizes the Reformed thought on the covenant, stating, “The Reformed tradition has been hindered ... by its view of the covenant as essentially a pact or agreement between God and the elect humanity.”¹⁴ Thus, the prevailing view of the covenant within Reformed theology is that of an agreement.

In contrast to this view, the Protestant Reformed Churches view the covenant as essentially a bond of love and friendship. This covenantal conception

¹¹ Barry Gritters, “What It Means to be Reformed (2): Covenantal,” *Standard Bearer*, vol. 91, no. 11 [March 1, 2015], p. 245.

¹² Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, p. 282.

¹³ Hoeksema, *The Triple Knowledge*, vol. 2, p. 512.

¹⁴ David Engelsma, *Trinity and Covenant: God as Holy Family* (Jenison, MI: RFPA, 2006), p. 111.

is derived from an understanding of God as a covenantal God. That is, He enjoys communion and fellowship within Himself as the Triune God. Due to this, the covenant which God established with the elect in Jesus Christ has the same character. Herman Hoeksema gives expression to these elements when he defines his conception of the covenant:

The idea of a covenant is not understood as being a contract or an agreement, but it is conceived as being a living, spontaneous relation in communion of friendship that is given with the very nature and relation of God and man in the covenant.¹⁵

More specifically, concerning the covenant of grace, he writes, “The covenant is the relation of the most intimate communion of friendship, in which God reflects his own covenantal life in his relation to the creature.”¹⁶ Elsewhere, he defines the covenant of grace as follows:

We would emphasize this idea by insisting that the covenant itself is essentially a relation, a bond, of friendship. Accordingly, we would define the idea of the covenant as that living bond of fellowship between God and man that assumes the particular form of friendship.¹⁷

This represents the accepted view among the ministers and theologians of the Protestant Reformed Churches: the covenant is a bond of love and communion of friendship.

Three Earthly Symbols of the Covenant and Doctrinal Development

In order to support this view, theologians within the Protestant Reformed Churches have argued that the earthly symbols of the covenant are themselves relationships of love and friendship.¹⁸ God reveals the nature of His covenant to His people by means of earthly analogies or symbols. Three of these earthly analogies of the covenant are the relationship between two friends, the re-

¹⁵ Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1 (Grandville, MI: RFP, 2004), pp. 453-454.

¹⁶ Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, pp. 459-460.

¹⁷ Hoeksema, *The Triple Knowledge*, vol. 2, p. 518.

¹⁸ This is one of the reasons, among several others, for the Protestant Reformed conception of the covenant. Explaining the others is beyond the scope of this paper.

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relationship between husband and wife, and the relationship between father and children.¹⁹ As Protestant Reformed theologians point out, these are all relationships of love. Thus, since these serve as symbols of the covenant, they indicate the covenant is not a pact or an agreement but a bond of love.

Throughout the history of the Protestant Reformed Churches, ministers have recognized these three earthly relationships as analogies or symbols of the covenant of grace. For example, Herman Hoeksema noted that marriage serves to represent the covenant of grace. He writes,

It is well known that the covenant relation between God and Israel is presented as a marriage relation, that most intimate of all human relationships, and the unfaithfulness, too, and transgression of the covenant is called adultery.²⁰

By this statement and its context, Hoeksema contended that marriage serves as a picture of the covenant of grace. Therefore, the covenant must be conceived of as an intimate relationship of love between God and His people.

While Hoeksema focused on marriage as a symbol of the covenant, David Engelsma also included the relationship between parent and child as a symbol of the covenant:

The fundamental earthly analogies to, or symbols of, the covenant are relationships—relationships of the most intimate friendships known to humans. If a person had any doubt whether the covenant is a relationship, these biblical analogies should settle the matter. *The Bible requires us to think of the covenant as a marriage and as a father-child relationship.*²¹

This is a clear statement that both the husband-wife and father-child relationships serve as representative analogies of the covenant that God has established with His people. Just as with Hoeksema, Engelsma uses these two analogies to argue that the covenant is a relationship of love and friendship.

¹⁹ Of the Protestant Reformed theologians who have written on this matter, not all of them include earthly friendship as a *symbol* of the covenant. Rather, most speak of friendship as the *essence* of the covenant. However, no one has disagreed with the notion of also including it as a symbol.

²⁰ Hoeksema, *The Triple Knowledge*, vol. 2, p. 520.

²¹ Engelsma, *The Covenant of God*, p. 5.

That the earthly bond between close friends also serves a symbol of the covenant, along with the bond between husband-wife and father-child, has been explicitly stated. For example, Russell Dykstra, professor at the PRTS, has defended the view of the covenant as a relationship by drawing from all three pictures of the covenant:

God not only teaches in His Word that the covenant is a relation of friendship, He causes us to know the nature of that friendship, namely, that it is close, intimate, and unbreakable. He has given three human relationships as pictures of the covenant life. By means of these, God not only drives home the truth that the essence of the covenant is friendship; He also gives His people a foretaste of the eternal covenant of grace.

This friendship God illustrates with the figure of friends like David and Jonathan, whose souls were “knit together” in love. We read that “Jonathan and David made a covenant, because he loved him as his own soul” (I Sam. 18:1-4); Proverbs 18:24 hints at the same—“There is a friend that sticketh closer than a brother.”

The family is also a picture of God’s covenant with us, for He is our Father for Jesus’ sake. God adopts us as His children, even sending the Spirit of Christ into our hearts crying, Abba, Father (Rom. 8; Gal. 4). Recreated in the image of Christ, God’s covenant people bear even spiritual resemblance to their elder brother. They very obviously belong to the family of God. And as children they have the right to live in His house, sit at His table, and have communion with each other and with God in Christ. To them is the inheritance promised, namely, eternal life.

Thirdly, the Bible describes the relationship of God to His people in terms of a marriage—the most intimate relationship experienced on this earth! In the Old Testament, Jehovah betrothed His people Israel to Himself (Ezek. 16; Hos. 2). In the new dispensation, Christ came as the long awaited bridegroom who would lay down His life for His bride, in order that He

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might present her “to himself a glorious church ...” (Eph. 5). The end of the ages ushers in the consummation—the eternal marriage feast of Christ and His bride, the church, in the new heaven and earth (Rev. 19).²²

This quote serves as a summary of the Protestant Reformed conception of the covenant of grace. In contrast to the view of the covenant as an agreement or pact, the Protestant Reformed Churches understand the essence of the covenant as a bond of love and friendship, as portrayed by Scripture’s earthly symbols of the covenant.

While the earthly symbols of the covenant have been used to support this conception of the covenant as a bond of love and friendship, the particular aspects of the covenant emphasized by each symbol have yet to be developed fully. In his summary of the Protestant Reformed doctrine of the covenant, Dykstra does not exhaust what can be said about each symbol of the covenant. Instead, it stands to reason that each one of these relationships underscores different covenantal truths. In other words, each God-appointed symbol of the covenant emphasizes different aspects of the covenant. Thus, while the writings of Protestant Reformed theologians have largely used the symbols as proof for viewing the covenant as a relationship rather than as a pact, studying the symbols themselves presents an opportunity for further development. God deliberately gave His people these three distinct symbols in order to reveal the full reality of covenant life with Him. Importantly, this implies that no one earthly picture can adequately represent the spiritual reality. In other words, no single relationship can fully encapsulate and express the essence of covenant communion with God. Thus, each one must provide a unique viewpoint to a right understanding of the different aspects of the covenant. Exploring these points of emphasis is a worthwhile task.

The Reformed understanding of the different manifestations of the covenant in the Old Testament serves as a proof of principle for this approach. Throughout Old Testament history, God established His covenant with different important figures in the Bible. Specifically, Scripture records God’s covenant

²² Russell Dykstra, “God Dwelling with His People in Covenant Fellowship (2): A Summary of the Covenant Theology of the Protestant Reformed Churches,” *Standard Bearer*, vol. 77, no. 13 [April 1, 2001], p. 300.

with men such as Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and David. Reformed theology understands that each one of these unique manifestations of the covenant underscores a different aspect of God's one covenant of grace. Thus, while the covenant of grace is a unity, nevertheless, the many manifestations of this covenant each emphasize a different aspect of it.

The specific points of emphasis highlighted by each Old Testament manifestation of the covenant have been developed. God's covenant with Adam demonstrates the need for salvation. God's covenant with Noah underscores the cosmic nature of the covenant. God's covenant with Abraham reveals the truth that God establishes His covenant in the line of generations. God's covenant with Moses emphasizes the importance of the law in connection to the covenant. God's covenant with David emphasizes the kingdom nature of the covenant.

God uses different manifestations of the covenant to reveal the full reality of the covenant of grace. If God excluded any one of these from His revelation in the Scriptures, believers could not fully grasp the covenant. So too, God uses earthly symbols to enable the believer to understand the essence of covenant communion. One might object that there is a qualitative difference between the Old Testament manifestations of the covenant of grace and the earthly symbols—they are not equivalent. Nevertheless, these three earthly symbols still provide insights into covenant life with God. Thus, in order to comprehend fully the covenant as a relationship, the points of emphasis that each earthly symbol underscores must be understood.

Since no lengthy treatment on this subject is readily available, the points of emphasis must be determined directly from Scripture. This will require evaluating the teachings of Scripture regarding each earthly relationship. Indeed, Scripture has much to say concerning friendship, marriage and parenting. In each of the following sections, first, proof from Scripture will be provided to show the legitimacy of viewing each of these three relationships as a symbol of the covenant. Next, the instruction of Scripture on each picture of the covenant will be surveyed in order to determine the major themes that arise from Scripture concerning each. These themes will then be applied to the covenant relationship that God has established with His people. For by analyzing Scripture's teachings on these relationships, one can learn a con-

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siderable amount about what it means that God is the Friend, Husband and Father of His covenant people in Jesus Christ.

In a certain sense, this approach works backwards from the figure to the reality. In each of these three analogies, God's relationship with His people is the reality. As David Engelsma states, "the covenant is the real marriage and the real Parent-child relationship."²³ Thus, the earthly relationships are the figures that flow out of the reality. Typically within Reformed theology, details concerning the figure are drawn from the reality. However, in this work, Scripture's teachings on the earthly relationships will first be determined and then applied to God's covenant with men. The key word in the previous sentence is *Scripture's* teachings. This essay does not take into account mankind's own understanding of these relationships. Rather, this work draws from God's own revealed will for each of these three relationships that serve as symbols. This is appropriate, for when God gives instruction in the Scriptures regarding friendship, marriage and parenting, He reveals Himself to us in that instruction. Thus, by studying God's design for each of these relationships, one learns about God Himself and the covenant of grace He has established with His people.

Finally, three points of clarification must be noted. First, this work will focus on what each symbol *uniquely* underscores. Put negatively, this work will not focus on love as the overarching and all-embracing theme of friendship, marriage and parenting. An analysis of Scripture's teachings on each of these relationships clearly reveals the central importance of love in all three. Each one, at heart, is a bond of love and communion. Rather than noting this truth for each symbol, the focus will fall on the unique points of emphasis of each. Nevertheless, even this approach produces some overlap in themes. These will be noted.

Second, this work will focus on the *major* themes of each of these symbols of the covenant. Put negatively, the treatment provided for each earthly relationship will not be exhaustive. In each case, only three or four aspects of the covenant will be highlighted. Nevertheless, many other points could be made. Unfortunately, these go beyond the scope of this work, which will instead focus on the major points of emphasis.

²³ Engelsma, *The Covenant of God*, p. 5.

Third, this work will integrate established points of doctrine into the doctrine of the covenant of grace. Put negatively, this work will not introduce any new concepts or points of doctrine. Instead, this work will urge the reader to view readily acknowledged biblical concepts as aspects of the covenant of grace. In this way, the umbrella of the doctrine of the covenant is extended to include well-defined doctrinal points that one might not associate with the covenant.

God as Our Friend

This section will explore the aspects of the covenant underscored by friendship as a symbol of the covenant. While many understand friendship as the essence of the covenant, earthly friendship also serves as a *symbol* of the covenant of grace. Thus, analyzing Scripture's instruction on friendship will provide insights into what it means for believers to stand in a covenant relationship with God. Such an analysis reveals that the earthly symbol of friendship emphasizes the need for similitude, the importance of communication and the prominence of spiritual encouragement within God's covenant of grace with His people. However, before expounding each of these, it must be proved that believers can rightly call God their friend.

First, Scripture reveals that God walks with His people, thereby implying a bond of friendship. Those accustomed to walking and talking with each other are typically friends. Indeed, the figures in Scripture with whom God walked cannot be considered as merely His acquaintances. Enoch stands as an example of this: "And Enoch walked with God: and he was not; for God took him" (Gen. 5:24). The New Testament provides proof that God walked with Enoch as a friend, rather than an enemy or a mere acquaintance. Hebrews 11:5 states, "By faith Enoch was translated that he should not see death; and was not found, because God had translated him: for before his translation he had this testimony, that he pleased God." Two things from this verse indicate that Enoch was more than a mere acquaintance. First, Enoch had faith, which is the gift of God to those whom He loves. Second, Scripture explicitly states that Enoch pleased God. Thus, Enoch can rightly be considered the friend of God.

Scripture teaches that Noah, with whom God established His covenant, also walked with God as a friend. In addition to Enoch, Scripture records, "But Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD. These are the generations of

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Noah: Noah was a just man and perfect in his generations, and *Noah walked with God*" (Gen. 6:8-9). Again, Noah was not a mere acquaintance but rather one who found grace in the eyes of the Lord. This too implies that God viewed Noah as a friend. Significantly, Scripture expressly states that not only did God walk with Noah, He also established His covenant with Noah: "And God spake unto Noah, and to his sons with him, saying, And I, behold, I establish my covenant with you, and with your seed after you" (Gen. 9:8-9). This implies a connection between friendship and the covenant. Specifically, we may say that the members of the covenant are God's friends.

The strongest proof that God views the members of His covenant as friends lies in Scripture's revelation concerning Abraham, the friend of God. As with Noah, Scripture records that God established His covenant with Abraham. For example, "In the same day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, Unto thy seed have I given this land" (Gen. 15:18). Also, "And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee" (Gen. 17:7). Abraham was one of the patriarchs of the Old Testament with whom God established His one covenant of grace.

As a member of God's covenant, Abraham was considered the friend of God. Scripture teaches that not only did God establish His covenant with Abraham but God also viewed Abraham as His friend. In a prayer for deliverance from the Ammonites and Moabites, King Jehoshaphat prayed under divine inspiration: "Art not thou our God, who didst drive out the inhabitants of this land before thy people Israel, and gavest it to the seed of *Abraham thy friend for ever?*" (II Chron. 20:7). The prophet Isaiah, proclaiming God's own words, also speaks of Abraham as the friend of God: "But thou, Israel, art my servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, the seed of *Abraham my friend*" (Isa. 41:8). In addition, the New Testament confirms this truth: "And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and *he was called the Friend of God*" (James 2:23). Thus, Scripture clearly teaches that Abraham was the friend of God. Again, a connection can be made between God's covenant and friendship. Specifically, the members of the covenant stand in a relationship of friendship with God.²⁴

²⁴ While it goes beyond the scope of this paper, Reformed theology typically distinguishes

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Having established that membership in the covenant of grace results in friendship with God, it is necessary to determine the aspects of the covenant highlighted by the earthly relationship. Here, main themes are drawn from Scripture's teaching regarding earthly friendship. Since the bond between two friends represents a symbol or picture of the covenant, these main themes can be applied to God's covenant of grace with His people. This then will reveal the unique aspects of the covenant of grace emphasized by the earthly symbol of friendship. This excludes the overarching element of love in friendship. For, while love represents the essence of friendship, as seen clearly in the friendship between David and Jonathan, nevertheless, love stands at the foreground in all three earthly symbols. However, in a unique way friendship requires similitude, involves communication and provides spiritual encouragement. These three themes concerning friendship thus represent three aspects of the covenant of grace underscored by friendship as a symbol of the covenant.

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between God as friend-sovereign and man as friend-servant. This distinction prevents an irreverent and casual attitude toward Almighty God. However, for the sake of space and flow, this distinction will be assumed throughout this work, rather than explicitly stated.