

Reformed Theology – Class 6

COVENANT THEOLOGY & SACRAMENTS

“It is important to remind ourselves that we are not treating the covenant motif as a central doctrine. In other words it is not a matter of reducing everything in the Bible to the covenant, but of recognizing the rich covenantal soil in which every biblical teaching takes root.”

Michael Horton – *God of Promise*

THE COVENANT OF GRACE

1. It must first be understood that the distance between God and man is so great that there could be no relationship between them without God’s voluntary condescension which He expresses by way of covenanting with men.
2. The Bible presents a series of covenant relationships, those made with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and the new covenant. The question to be resolved is how these covenants relate to each other. “I will be your God and you shall be my people,” (Genesis 17:7; Exodus 6:6, 7; Leviticus 11:45; Deuteronomy 4:20). The heart of the covenant is the declaration that “God is with us.”
3. The theme “I shall be your God and you shall be my people” is developed particularly by God’s actually dwelling in the midst of His people. In Immanuel, God’s incarnate son tabernacles with His people (John 1:14). God’s people become the temple of the Lord (Ephesians 2:19-22). The great multitude of the redeemed ultimately serve the Lord day and night in His temple (Revelation 7:15).
4. God’s relationship to men before the fall is called the covenant of works or the covenant of creation.
5. Due to man’s fall, which rendered him unable to meet the conditions of the covenant of works, God established a second covenant we call the *covenant of grace* or the *covenant of redemption*.
6. The Bible often speaks of God’s bond with men prior to Christ’s work as the old covenant and after Christ as the new covenant. The old covenant is not replaced by the new, but fulfilled in it. The old covenant is promise, shadow, prophecy; the new covenant is fulfillment, reality, and realization.
 - Romans 11:17-21: Those who have come to Christ in the new covenant are grafted into the line of Israel, the ancient people of God.
 - Galatians 3:26-29 says if you belong to Christ you are Abraham’s offspring. One people of God.

- Romans 4:1, 12: Abraham is the father of all who follow in the steps of faith.
- Ephesians 2:11-14, 19: Jesus broke down the barrier wall between Jew and Gentile.
- Luke 24:13-32; 44-45: Jesus telling the disciples that it is all one story and he is the fulfillment of the covenant of grace.

7. The various covenant manifestations had different emphasis:

Noah Preservation
 Abraham Promise: land, people, blessing
 Moses Law
 David Kingdom
 Christ Consummation

8. The structure of Old Testament covenants is similar to the ancient Hittite Suzeran treaties.

- Sanctions.
- Ratification or Inauguration. With the shedding of blood the parties swear malediction upon themselves if either fails to abide by the covenant. Genesis 15; Matthew 26:28.
- Sign or Seal. The identifiers which would mark the individual as a participant in the covenant. In the O.T., this sign and seal was circumcision (Genesis 17:10-13). (Deuteronomy 30:6; Romans 2:28, 29).

DISPENSATIONALISM

A System Antithetical to Covenant Theology

1. In 1909 with the advent of the Scofield Bible a system of theology began which failed to recognize the unity of the Bible but signified a different way that God related to man during that age. Scofield defined them as: "A period of time during which man is tested in respect to obedience to some specific revelation of the will of God." The seven dispensations are:

- Innocence. Pre-fall
- Conscience. Post-fall - Flood. Man was responsible to do all known good, abstain from all known evil, and approach God by sacrifice.
- Human Government. Noah - Man was to rule righteously.
- Promise. Abraham
- Law. Moses
- Grace or church.
- Kingdom.

2. Objections to Dispensationalism

Dispensationalism has “evolved” throughout the years, and many of its adherents have changed their theological views on key points. However, Reformed Theology would still have significant differences with some views.

- In the past, this system taught a different way of salvation for those in the Old Testament, though most do not believe this today. Old line adherents taught that those in the Old Testament were saved by keeping the law, and it is only in the New Testament age that we are saved by grace.

“...the dispensation of the Mosaic Law, the present dispensation of grace, and the future dispensation of the millennial kingdom. We believe that these are distinct and are not be intermingled or confused, as they are chronological successive.”

“We believe that the dispensations are not ways of salvation nor different methods of administering the so-called Covenant of Grace. They are not in themselves dependent on covenant relationships but are ways of life and responsibility to God which test the submission of man to His revealed will during a particular time.

We believe that according to the “eternal purpose” of God (Eph. 3:11) salvation in the divine reckoning is always “by grace through faith,” and rests upon the basis of the shed blood of Christ. We believe that God has always been gracious, regardless of the ruling dispensation, but that man has not at all times been under an administration or stewardship of grace as is true in the present dispensation (1 Cor. 9:17; Eph. 3:2; 3:9, Col. 1:25; 1 Tim. 1:4).

We believe that it has always been true that “without faith it is impossible to please” God (Heb. 11:6), and that the principle of faith was prevalent in the lives of all the Old Testament saints. However, we believe that it was historically impossible that they should have had as the conscious object of their faith the incarnate, crucified Son, the Lamb of God (John 1:29), and that it is evident that they did not comprehend as we do that the sacrifices depicted the person and work of Christ. We believe also that they did not understand the redemptive significance of the prophecies or types concerning the sufferings of Christ (1 Pet. 1:10–12); therefore, we believe that their faith toward God was manifested in other ways as is shown by the long record in Hebrews 11:1–40. We believe further that their faith thus manifested was counted unto them for righteousness (cf. Rom. 4:3 with Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4:5–8; Heb. 11:7).”
<https://www.dts.edu/about/doctrinal-statement/>

- Dispensationalism does not recognize the distinction between the nation of Israel in the Old Testament, and the “New Israel”, the church of the New Testament. It teaches that the church is merely a parenthesis, a sort of divine plan “B”, when God deals with Christians today until he once again can return to his people, the nation of Israel when He returns to earth at the end of the world.
- The reformed view of salvation is by faith alone, but not by faith which is alone

(previously referred to under Sanctification). Faith in Christ is never alone, but bears the fruit of good works. Dispensationalism teaches that faith should produce good works, but if it doesn't, it isn't fatal. (Matthew 7: 16-23; 16:24; Luke 6:46; James 2:14, 17).

- This system of doctrine fails to recognize the significance of Christ's present reign over His kingdom.

CONCLUSION

God's people should recognize the unity of the scriptures and read the whole Bible as the unfolding of God's redemptive plan, thankfully rejoicing that the purpose of the covenant of grace was to make a people to be His very own forever.

THE CHURCH

"The beauty of the Church is not its beauty but that it is loved as though it is beautiful, in spite of its ugliness, messiness, imperfections, scandals, troubles, lousy messages, long services, needless programs and failed ventures." Mike Khandjian

1. Jesus loves the church and gave Himself up for her. The Bible describes the church as His Bride, His Body, the Temple of the living God and the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit (I Corinthians 3:16; II Corinthians 6:16; Ephesians 1:22, 23).
2. The church is the apple of God's eye, His earthly habitation, and His appointed agent for carrying out His will on earth (Matthew 18:15-20; I Corinthians 12:27, 28; Ephesians 4:11-13).
3. The invisible church consists of the whole number of the elect from all ages. The visible church consists of all those who profess faith in Christ and their children.

-

4. Some churches have so degenerated so as to no longer be churches of Jesus Christ.

-

-

THE SACRAMENTS OF THE CHURCH

1. Sacraments: The word 'sacrament' is not found in the Bible. Sacrament is a Latin word which described the fidelity oath of Roman soldiers to their leader, including a pledge not to desert when under attack.

-
2. The sacraments are rich gifts of Christ to His church. They are signs and seals of the covenant grace.
 - *In the sacraments, Christ and His benefits are represented to us. In this way, they are a sign because they declare the saving grace of Christ.*
 - *In the sacraments, our relationship with Christ is affirmed. Thus they are a seal to us that the promises of Christ in the covenant are true and belong to us.*
 - *The sacraments separate those who are in the church and those who are not.*
 - *The sacraments encourage us to serve Christ sacrificially and diligently.*
 3. The sacraments are not instrumental causes of grace; the sign is not the thing signified.
 -
 -
 -
 4. The sacraments are to be always united with the preaching of the Word, practiced in the presence of the congregation, and administered by the elders of the church alone (Hebrews 5:4; I Corinthians 4:1). These are signs and seals of the body of Christ and are not to be dispensed privately.

BAPTISM

ITS ORIGIN

1. The scriptures command God's children to be baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost (Matthew 28:19; Acts 2:38).
2. Baptism has its origins in O.T. ceremonial cleansings. Hebrews 9:10 says that the law required different kinds of baptisms and the author of Hebrews goes on to mention three. There were sprinkling of water alone, water and ashes, oil, and blood (Hebrews 9:13, 19, 21; Numbers 19:17, 18; Exodus 24:6, 8; Leviticus 8:19, 16:14).
3. Jewish missionaries in the inter-testamental period were proselytizing Gentiles and requiring circumcision of the men and ritual baptisms (by sprinkling) of the whole family for admission into the faith.

•

ITS MEANING

1. Water baptism is the outward sign representing the baptism of the Holy Spirit, or regeneration (Matthew 3:11; Acts 11:15, 16). It is for our admission into the visible church.

-
-
-
-

ITS MODE

The biblical mode of baptism from apostolic times has been pouring or sprinkling. The Baptism of the Holy Spirit is always portrayed in scripture as pouring or sprinkling and never as immersion (Joel 2:28-29; Ezekiel 36:25-28; I Peter 1:2; Hebrews 10:22). Though not preferred, immersion is recognized as a legitimate mode of baptism.

1. When the heresy hunting Pharisees went out to inspect what John was doing and wondered if he was the Christ, they did so because Isaiah 52:15 tells us that the Messiah would come baptizing by sprinkling.

2. While it is widely believed that Jesus was immersed, a closer look at Matthew 3:16 and Acts 8:38 shows otherwise.

-

3. When John resisted baptizing the Christ, Jesus ordered it in fulfillment of the Law. The law in view is found in Numbers 8:6, 7.

-

4. Immersionists' argument that John 3:23 mandates their mode because John needed "much water" to baptize may be a case of shooting themselves with their own gun.

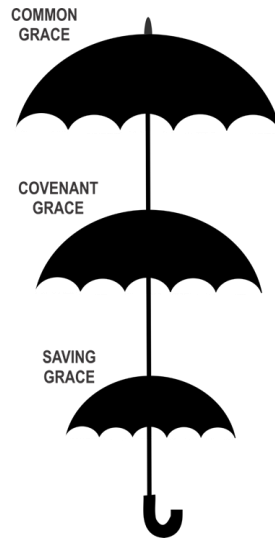
-

5. If immersion is the only mode of baptism, then the UNIVERSALITY of the sacraments is destroyed.

-

ITS PARTICIPANTS

1. When God established His covenant, He appointed with it a distinguishing SIGN to mark those in the covenant. This sign in the O.T. was circumcision (Genesis 17:7-10). This sign was to be given to all the men in God's visible family and their children.
 - This covenant was everlasting and IMMUTABLE. It is clear from the beginning of Biblical revelation that God regards the children of those who believe in Him as the expected heirs of His covenant promises. So it was with Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:15), Noah (6:18), Abraham (17:7, 10-12), Moses (Deuteronomy 29:29), and David (II Samuel 7:11-16, 25). There is no evidence in the N.T. that God has changed His mind. In I Corinthians 7:14, Paul tells us that the children of the believer are HOLY (Acts 11:14).
2. In the N.T., the covenant sign becomes baptism. In Acts 2:39, Peter orders this sign for *"the promise is for you and your children"*. The church continued to circumcise and baptize until the Jerusalem Council made it clear that circumcision was no longer required. Colossians 2:11, 12 makes it clear that our baptism is Christian CIRCUMCISION, it is the outward representation of an inward faith.
 -
 -
 - Acts 16:14-15: Lydia's household baptism.
3. Church history tells us that infant baptism has been practiced from the time of the apostolic church on.
4. Baptism brings our children into a special relationship with God.
 -
 -
 -



ITS ADMINISTRATION

1. The confession is clear that baptism is to be but once administered.
 -
 -
 -
2. Baptism should not be administered to those individuals making profession of faith but who do not intend to become members of the requested congregation. *“Baptism is not to be administered to any that are out of the visible church...”* (Larger Catechism #166).
 - Ordinarily infant baptism should be administered only to covenant children of persons who are members of the requested congregation.
 -

THE LORD’S SUPPER

1. On the night of His betrayal, at the Passover meal, Christ instituted the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. He instructed the church to celebrate this “gospel drama” until His return.
 -
 -
2. In the Lord’s Supper we commemorate Christ’s death. Christ is present spiritually and in no way is He present physically:
 - The Roman Church’s doctrine of trans-substantiation, which teaches that God

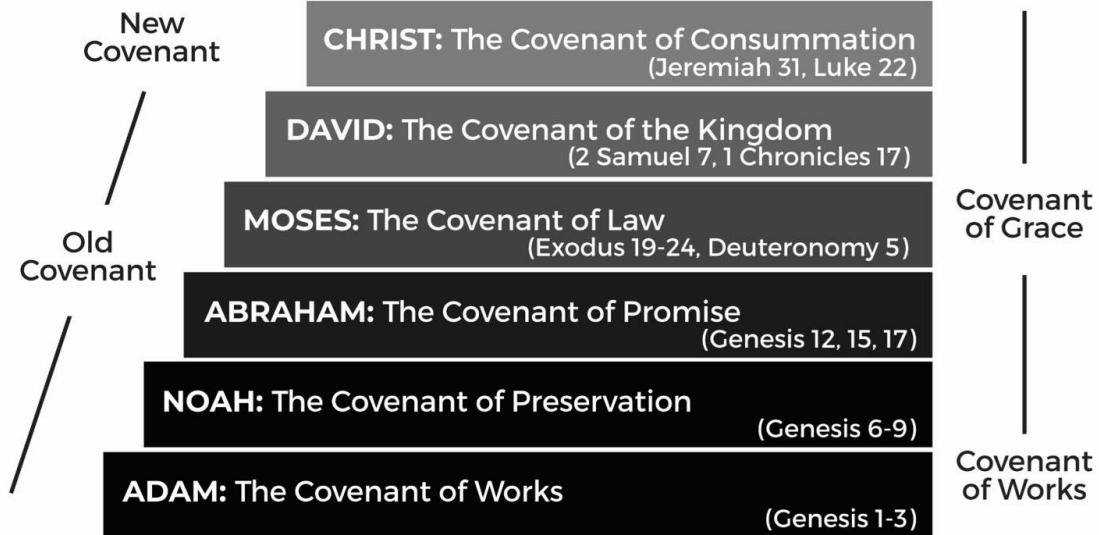
transforms the common elements of bread and wine into the actual body and blood of Christ and then offers His body as a sacrifice on the church's altar is an error of the most serious nature.

- They believe that *"The mass is the same sacrifice as the sacrifice of the cross, because in the mass the victim is the same, and the principal priest is the same, Jesus Christ."*
 - (Hebrews 7:27, 10:14; John 19:30).
 - The Lutheran doctrine of con-substantiation also falls short of the scriptural teaching. The Lutherans teach that the physical substance of Christ's body is present at the supper "in, with, and under" the bread and wine.
3. Great care should be exercised by those who partake of the sacraments. Paul says that the guilt of those who participate in an unworthy manner is to be considered tantamount to the guilt of Jesus' crucifiers.
- Covenant children (I Corinthians 11:28-34).
4. Examination and Reconciliation:
- -

ASSIGNMENT

1. Read Essential Truths of the Christian Faith, (Sproul), sections 5; 21-24, and 75-83.
2. Read the Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapters 7 & 8, and 27-29.

COVENANT THEOLOGY



WHAT IS THE COVENANT OF GRACE?

Question

Can you give me a very concise (preferably one sentence) definition of the Covenant of Grace?

Answer

The *Covenant of Grace* is that arrangement whereby God planned to save elect man from the just consequences of his sin; namely, immorality, misery, death, and damnation.

While that is a very concise rendering of the definition of the COG, it would be wise to unpack this sentence somewhat:

- The word "covenant" means a disposition or an arrangement. This arrangement was made by God alone. This covenant was made in eternity. Man had no part in its making.
- The word "grace" essentially means undeserved favor. The grace of God is divine favor manifested to sinners who deserve just the opposite: his disfavor and wrath.

So, the *Covenant of Grace* is that arrangement whereby God planned to save elect man from the just consequences of his sin; namely, immorality, misery, death, and damnation.

The Westminster Confession of Faith states:

VII.3. Man by his fall having made himself incapable of life by that covenant (the Covenant of Works), the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the covenant of grace: wherein he freely offered unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ, requiring of them faith in him, that they may be saved, and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto life, his Holy Spirit, to make them willing and able to believe.

VII.4. This covenant of grace is frequently set forth in the Scripture by the name of a testament, in reference to the death of Jesus Christ, the testator, and to the everlasting inheritance, with all things belonging to it, therein bequeathed.

VII.5. This covenant was differently administered in the time of the law, and in the time of the gospel: under the law it was administered by promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the paschal lamb, and other types and ordinances delivered to the people of the Jews, all fore-signifying Christ to come, which were for that time sufficient and efficacious, through the operation of the Spirit, to instruct and build up the elect in faith in the promised Messiah, by whom they had full remission of sins, and eternal salvation, and is called the Old Testament.

VII.6. Under the gospel, when Christ the substance was exhibited, the ordinances in which this covenant is dispensed, are the preaching of the Word, and the administration of the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper; which, though fewer in number, and administered with more simplicity and less outward glory, yet in them it is held forth in more fullness, evidence, and spiritual efficacy, to all nations, both Jews and Gentiles; and is called the New Testament. There are not, therefore, two covenants of grace differing in substance, but one and the same under various dispensations.

Thomas Watson in his *A Body of Divinity* unpacks this even further saying:

Q-20: DID GOD LEAVE ALL MANKIND TO PERISH IN THE ESTATE OF SIN AND MISERY?

A: No! He entered into a covenant of grace to deliver the elect out of that state, and to bring them into a state of grace by a Redeemer.

'I will make an everlasting covenant with you.' Isa 55:5. Man being by his fall plunged into a labyrinth of misery, and having no way left to recover himself, God was pleased to enter into a new covenant with him, and to restore him to life by a Redeemer.

The great proposition I shall go upon is, that there is a new covenant ratified between God and the elect.

What is the new covenant?

It is a solemn compact and agreement made between God and fallen man, wherein the Lord undertakes to be our God, and to make us his people.

What names are given to the covenant?

(1.) It is called the covenant of peace in Ezek 37:26, because it seals up reconciliation between God and humble sinners. Before this covenant there was nothing but enmity. God did not love us, for a creature that offends cannot be loved by a holy God; and we did not love him, since a God that condemns cannot be loved by a guilty creature; so that there was war on both sides. But God has found out a way in the new covenant to reconcile differing parties, so that it is fitly called the covenant of peace.

(2.) It is called a covenant of grace, and well it may; for,

- It was of grace, that, when we had forfeited the first covenant, God should enter into a new one, after we had cast away ourselves. The covenant of grace is *tabula post naufragium*, as a plank after shipwreck.' Oh the free grace of God, that he should parley with sinners, and set his wisdom and mercy to work to bring rebels into the bond of the covenant!

- It is a covenant of grace, because it is a royal charter, all made up of terms of grace; that God will cast our sins behind his back;' that he will love us freely;' Hos 14:4; that he will give us a will to accept of the mercy of the covenant, and strength to perform the conditions of the covenant. Ezek 36:67. All this is pure grace.

Why should God make a covenant with us?

It is out of indulgence, favour, and regard to us. A tyrant will not enter into a covenant with slaves, he will not show them such respect. God's entering into a covenant with us, to be our God, is a dignity he puts upon us. A covenant is *insigne honouris*, a note of distinction between God's people and heathens. I will establish my covenant with thee.' Ezek 16:60. When the Lord told Abraham that he would enter into a covenant with him, Abraham fell upon his face, as being amazed that the God of glory should bestow such a favour upon him. Gen 17:7.

God makes a covenant with us, to tie us fast to him; as it is called in Ezekiel, the bond of the covenant.' God knows we have slippery hearts, therefore he will have a covenant to bind us. It is horrid impiety to go away from God after covenant. If one of the vestal nuns, who had vowed herself to religion, was deflowered, the Romans caused her to be burnt alive. It is perjury to depart from God after solemn covenant.

How does the covenant of grace differ from the first covenant made with Adam?

(1.) The terms of the first covenant were more strict and severe. For,

- The least failing would have made the covenant with Adam null and void, but many failings do not annul the covenant of grace. I grant, the least sin is a trespass upon the covenant, but it does not make it null and void. There may be many failings in the conjugal relation, but every failing does not break the marriage bond. It would be sad, if, as oft as we break covenant with God he should break covenant with us; but God will not take advantage of every failing, but in anger remember mercy.'
- The first covenant being broken, allowed the sinner no remedy, all doors of hope were shut; but the new covenant allows the sinner a remedy: it leaves room for repentance, and provides a mediator. Jesus the mediator of the new covenant.' Heb 12:24.

(2.) The first covenant ran all upon working,' the second is upon believing.' Rom 4:4.

But are not works required in the covenant of grace?

Yes. This is a faithful saying, that they which believe in God, be careful to maintain good works.' Tit 3:3. But the covenant of grace does not require works in the same manner as the covenant of works did. In the first covenant, works were required as the condition of life; in the second, they are required only as the signs of life. In the first covenant, works were required as grounds of

salvation; in the new covenant, they are required as evidences of our love to God. In the first, they were required to the justification of our persons; in the new, to the manifestation of our grace.

What is the condition of the covenant of grace?

The main condition is faith.

Why is faith more the condition of the new covenant than any other grace?

To exclude all glorying in the creature. Faith is a humble grace. If repentance or works were the condition of the covenant, a man would say, It is my righteousness that has saved me; but if it be of faith, where is boasting? Faith fetches all from Christ, and gives all the glory to Christ; it is a most humble grace. Hence it is that God has singled out this grace to be the condition of the covenant.

If faith be the condition of the covenant of grace, it excludes desperate presumptuous sinners from the covenant. They say there is a covenant of grace, and they shall be saved: but did you ever know a bond without a condition? The condition of the covenant is faith, and if thou hast no faith, thou hast no more to do with the covenant, than a foreigner or a country farmer with the city charter.

Dr. Joseph R. Nally

CONCISE THEOLOGY

A GUIDE TO
HISTORIC
CHRISTIAN
BELIEFS

J. I. PACKER



Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.
CAROL STREAM, ILLINOIS

COVENANT

GOD TAKES SINFUL HUMANS INTO A
COVENANT OF GRACE

The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

GENESIS 12:1-3

✚ Covenants in Scripture are solemn agreements, negotiated or unilaterally imposed, that bind the parties to each other in permanent defined relationships, with specific promises, claims, and obligations on both sides (e.g., the marriage covenant, Mal. 2:14).

When God makes a covenant with his creatures, he alone establishes its terms, as his covenant with Noah and every living creature shows (Gen. 9:9). When Adam and Eve failed to obey the terms of the covenant of works (Gen. 3:6), God did not destroy them, but revealed his covenant of grace to them by promising a Savior (Gen. 3:15). God's covenant rests on his promise, as is clear from his covenant with Abraham. He called Abraham to go to the land that he would give him, and he promised to bless

him and to bless all the families of the earth through him (Gen. 12:1-3). Abraham heeded God's call because he believed God's promise; it was his faith in the promise that was credited to him for righteousness (Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4:18-22). God's covenant with Israel at Sinai took the form of a Near Eastern suzerainty treaty, that is, a royal covenant imposed unilaterally on a vassal king and a servant people. Although that covenant required obedience to God's laws under the threat of his curse, it was a continuation of his covenant of grace (Exod. 3:15; Deut. 7:7-8; 9:5-6). God gave his commandments to a people he had already redeemed and claimed (Exod. 19:4; 20:2). The promise of God's covenant was made stronger through the types and shadows of the law given to Moses. The failure of the Israelites to keep the Mosaic covenant showed the need for a new redemption and covenant if God's people were to be truly his and he theirs (Jer. 31:31-34; 32:38-40; cf. Gen. 17:7; Exod. 6:7; 29:45-46; Lev. 11:44-45; 26:12).

God's covenant with Israel was preparation for the coming of God himself, in the person of his Son, to fulfill all his promises and to give substance to the shadows cast by the types (Isa. 40:10; Mal. 3:1; John 1:14; Heb. 7-10). Jesus Christ, the mediator of the new covenant, offered himself as the true and final sacrifice for sin. He obeyed the law perfectly, and as the second representative head of the human race he became the inheritor of all the covenant blessings of pardon, peace, and fellowship with God in his renewed creation, which blessings he now bestows upon believers. The typical and temporary arrangements for imparting those blessings were done away with through the realizing of that which they anticipated. Christ's sending of the Spirit from the throne of his glory seals God's

people as his, even as he gives himself to them (Eph. 1:13-14; 2 Cor. 1:22).

As Hebrews 7-10 explains, God brought in an enhanced version of his one eternal covenant with sinners (13:20)—a better covenant with better promises (8:6) based on a better sacrifice (9:23) offered by a better high priest in a better sanctuary (7:26-8:6; 8:11, 13-14), and guaranteeing a better hope than the former version of the covenant ever made explicit, that is, endless glory with God in "a better country—a heavenly one" (11:16; cf. v. 40).

The fulfillment of the old covenant in Christ opens the door of faith to the Gentiles. The "seed of Abraham," the defined community with which the covenant was made, was redefined in Christ. Gentiles with Jews who are united to Christ by faith become Abraham's seed in him (Gal. 3:26-29), while no one outside of Christ can be in covenant with God (Rom. 4:9-17; 11:13-24).

The goal of God's covenantal dealings is, as it always was, the gathering and sanctifying of the covenant people "from every nation, tribe, people and language" (Rev. 7:9), who will one day inhabit new Jerusalem in a renewed world order (21:1-2). Here the covenant relationship will find its fullest expression—"they will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God" (21:3). Toward this goal God's shaping of world events still moves.

The covenant framework embraces the entire economy of God's sovereign grace. Christ's heavenly ministry continues to be that of the "mediator of a new covenant" (Heb. 12:24). Salvation is covenant salvation: justification and adoption, regeneration and sanctification are covenant mercies; election was God's choice of future members

of his covenant community, the church; baptism and the Lord's Supper, corresponding to circumcision and Passover, are covenant ordinances; God's law is covenant law, and keeping it is the truest expression of gratitude for covenant grace and of loyalty to our covenant God. Covenanting with God in response to his covenanting with us should be a regular devotional exercise for all believers, both in private and at the Lord's Table. An understanding of the covenant of grace guides us through, and helps us to appreciate all the wonders of God's redeeming love.

SACRAMENTS, NOT JUST SIGNS, Answer by Ra McLaughlin

QUESTION

Regarding the sacraments, how would one use the Scriptures to teach a skeptic that communion and baptism are more than just signs, but a means of grace as well?

ANSWER

Insofar as the sacraments are not just signs but also seals, they really promise/offer to us the benefits they depict. That promise/offer is a gracious one. Because the seal is the means by which God promises/offers the same thing to us over and over again, it is a means of grace.

Of course, the Bible doesn't explicitly say that baptism or communion are seals, but systematic theology implies it. For example, the Bible does say that circumcision is a seal (Rom. 4:11), and insofar as we see baptism replacing circumcision (Col. 2:11-12), baptism is by extension also a seal. The Lord's Supper does not specifically claim to be a seal, but the logical relationship between them implies that if one sacrament functions as a seal, so does the other. Besides this, there is the typology of the Passover, the first covenant meal that served as one means by which the Israelites were saved from the Angel of Death. Then too, a systematic study suggests to us that God would not have given the sign if the thing it signified were not true, again implying a seal aspect.

Moreover, the Bible specifically tells us that both sacraments actually accomplish things. The Lord's Supper is mentioned less frequently, but in 1 Corinthians 10:16-21 it seems clear that to partake of the Supper involves a sharing in the body and blood of Christ, as well as a mystical union with other believers in one body. Just as we would be sharers in demons (not just worshipers, but sharers, in some form of union with them) if we partook of idolatrous meals, we share in Christ when we partake of the Lord's Supper.

Baptism is mentioned frequently as a means to such things as regeneration, salvation, union in Christ's death (through which we obtain forgiveness of sins, etc.), including such places as Romans 6:3-4; Colossians 2:12; 1 Peter 3:21. We don't claim that baptism does these things on its own merit or by its own power. But the Bible does seem to indicate that it is the means by which these things take place. This really isn't any different from saying that prayer or reading the Bible is a means of grace. God uses the action of the sacrament as a way to do these things for us, or to strengthen our faith.

Finally, it is worth noting that sacraments are means of grace because of the simple fact that they are visual representations of the gospel and of God's covenant. When we see them or participate in them, we remember the truths they represent just as if we had heard them read from Scripture. Hearing and seeing God's Word is a means of grace because it reminds us of the truth and strengthens our faith by that remembrance. It can also be the means the Holy Spirit uses to teach us, to rebuke us, to bring us to repentance, etc. All believers ought to be able to

say that the sacraments are means of grace, at least in this sense.

AGE OF ACCOUNTABILITY

QUESTION

Is there an "age of accountability"? If so, how would you define it?

ANSWER

The "age of accountability" is a concept that appears in some Reformed arguments (it is part of the "old Princeton" view), as well as in many non-Reformed arguments. It is generally considered to be the age at which God begins to hold a child accountable for his or her actions, such that the child is capable of committing sin that God reckons to the child's account.

There is some merit to this position: For one thing, those who have been given greater "light," that is, who have more knowledge of right and wrong, are judged more severely when they sin. One place we see this principle is in Romans 7:7ff. where Paul teaches that knowledge of the Law causes us to sin more (cf. Rom. 3:20: "Through the Law comes the knowledge of sin"). Correspondingly, those with no knowledge of the Law whatsoever do not sin as greatly. Second, those who sin unwittingly or unknowingly are less culpable than those who sin knowingly or defiantly (e.g. Num. 15:22ff.; Josh. 20:1-9). Certainly the younger a child is, the more he or she lacks knowledge of what is and is not sin, so that at least some of the bad things he or she does are done without the knowledge that these things are sins. This also reduces the culpability of children. Third, God himself seems to show compassion even on the children of unbelievers on the basis of their ignorance. We see this in Jonah 4:11 where God explains his compassion on Nineveh partly in terms of the fact that there were more than 120,000 people who did not know their right hand from their left. Probably, this should be taken as a reference to children who are too young to distinguish between right and left.

While I agree that the culpability of children is much less than that of others in light of these points, in my opinion the argument does not seem sufficient to demonstrate that children have no sin or guilt whatsoever. For example, even though Paul teaches that knowledge of the Law inspires sin, he still believes that those who do not have the Law are sinners who will die without the Law (Rom. 2:12). Further, in the places in Scripture where people are less guilty because they lack knowledge, they still bear some guilt, and thus must still repent, render an offering for it, etc. (e.g. Lev. 4:2ff.; Num. 15:22ff.). Moreover, while God spared Nineveh with its children, he elsewhere commanded the deaths of infants (Deut. 20:13-18; Josh. 6:17ff.; etc.).

It is my understanding that there is no "age of accountability," *per se* (unless we place it at the moment of conception). Rather, it seems to me that in Scripture all people start with guilt and accountability by virtue of Adam's imputed sin. Each person then gradually increases his guilt and accountability as he grows in knowledge and understanding.

Answer by Ra McLaughlin

UNBREAKABLE

QUESTION

Concerning the topic of baptism, in Jer. 31, is the main point that the new covenant will be unbreakable? And if so, why, as in the PCA book of church order, do we say when baptizing our children that they will grow up to either be covenant breakers or covenant keepers?

ANSWER

No, the new covenant is not unbreakable -- at least not yet. The "new covenant" is better translated "renewed covenant" (both the Hebrew and Greek words for "new" in the phrase "new covenant" may be translated either way). The point that Jeremiah makes in Jeremiah 31:31-34 is that since the covenant has been broken, it needs to be renewed. That's why the mention of "which they broke." Nevertheless, through Jeremiah God does offer that he will forgive all his people and make sure they all know him.

We are currently in the new covenant (cf. Heb. 8), but we have not yet received all the blessings of that covenant. For example, we still have to teach people about God. It is not the case that everyone knows him, or that all the elect have been converted. Only when this happens will we be able to say that everyone knows the Lord and is forgiven. As with all the covenant blessings, we await Christ's return for the ultimate fulfillment of this great hope. At that time, Christ will purge the wicked from his people and glorify believers. This is how we will end up with a people of God in which it can be said that everyone knows the Lord.

The PCA BCO speaks of baptizing in these terms because it rightly understands that the visible church is in covenant with God and that our children are part of the visible church. When we baptize anyone, including our children, one of the things we signify is that the person baptized is in covenant with God. If that person rejects Christ, he/she is accountable to fulfill all the stipulations of the covenant on his own (one of which, of course, is to receive Christ!) -- this is the same as being without Christ outside the church, except that being in covenant with God places us in line for greater judgment. If the person baptized receives Christ, he/she is counted a covenant keeper in Christ and inherits the full covenant blessings (in due time).

Regarding the new covenant, it may be helpful to mention that the Hebrew and Greek words for "new" may also be translated "renewed." Being Reformed, I prefer this second translation because it highlights the fact that there is one covenant under various administrations rather than multiple covenants. In the Bible we see covenant renewal taking place at such times as when God reaffirms his commitment to his people and when he restores his covenant people to a good relationship with him after they have been disciplined. So in one sense, the covenant in the Old Testament was regularly being "renewed."

When Jeremiah spoke of the coming "new covenant," he was looking forward to the time when God would restore Israel to a right relationship with himself after having disciplined them in exile. When the restoration began (at the Cyrus Decree), God did begin to renew his covenant with Israel in some very significant ways: he allowed the people to return to the Promised Land; he allowed the temple to be rebuilt; he began blessing the works of their hands; he offered to install Zerubbabel as Davidic king. But because the people did not remain faithful even in the midst of this renewal process, God did not follow through with all of the blessings that he had offered to give them in the renewal. As a result, while some renewal and blessings were realized, the restoration effort ultimately failed and renewal was not finally had. The restoration continued the pattern of Israel's history: God was faithful, God was merciful, God gave and blessed; but the people rebelled and thus did not receive the full covenant blessings.

When Christ came, his work achieved what Israel's past's works had not. He kept the terms of the covenant and thus secured full covenant renewal. The prior "renewals" had all been partial and ephemeral because the people had never managed to keep the covenant. But Christ's work was different. His obedience was complete, and his administration of the covenant is lasting. Thus, the covenant renewal under his administration will be a complete renewal. I say will be because it isn't finished yet. We have begun in earnest the final process of restoration and covenant renewal, but we have yet to realize many of the blessings offered in the new covenant (such as the resurrection of our bodies, our glorification, the final judgment and destruction of Christ's enemies, the new heavens and earth, etc.). It is right to say that we are now in the new or renewed covenant, but it is also important to realize that we still need Jesus to come back before the renewal will really be complete.

Answer by Ra McLaughlin

INFANT BAPTISM

QUESTION

I'm studying the paedobaptism issue, and I'm using many traditional and popular works from both credobaptists and paedobaptists. To date, I find the Reformed Baptist stuff to be the most biblical. It just seems to fit better than the paedobaptism reasoning, but I'm open to change. How one understands the covenants and their fulfillment, etc., would appear to be crucial. Any thoughts?

ANSWER

I know this can be a really tough subject -- I myself was a Baptist for 25 years or so! In fact, most Presbyterians I know used to be Baptists. I also agree that much of what has been written over the years fails to address some of the concerns that I thought were most important when I was a Baptist. For example, R.C. Sproul basically argues from church history. While I love R.C. (I used to work for him at Ligonier), I just don't find this argument very compelling from a *sola Scriptura* perspective. Many other authors argued from assumptions carried over from the old covenant, but I had not yet come to the solid conclusion that the old covenant was the same covenant as the new covenant, and most authors do not present or defend this fact. Then too, they nearly all mentioned the probability that infants were present in the household baptisms.

For me, the most critical interpretive questions that I needed answered were:

1. Why doesn't the Bible explicitly teach either paedobaptism or credobaptism?
2. What would the assumptions of the original audience have been in the absence of any explicit teaching on this subject?
3. Does the Bible anywhere demonstrate what the original audience assumed?

The most critical theological questions that pertained to the issue were:

1. What does baptism symbolize?
2. Can the new covenant be broken?

What finally turned me into a Presbyterian were the answers to these questions. First, I came to conclude that the new covenant was simply a renewal of the old covenant, not a completely different covenant. I also came to conclude that the Bible taught that the new covenant could be broken (from many of the same texts from which people erroneously argue that salvation can be lost). Since salvation cannot be lost, and since the new covenant can be broken, then there must be people in the new covenant who are not saved. For me, this removed the objection that any covenant sign ought only to be applied to believers. The implication became that it ought to be applied to all covenant members. Then, it became easy to assume that the same covenant rules which applied to the old administrations of the covenant still applied in the new administration of the covenant. (There is a related point on which I still differ from many Reformed thinkers: I do not believe that any portion of the law has been abrogated, but that Jesus continues to fulfill on our behalf those portions which we are no longer to do ourselves, such as animal sacrifice,

etc. My view of the Law presents an even stronger case for paedobaptism than some of the more traditional statements on the Law do.)

As I looked at the New Testament for help, I was a bit surprised to find that it nowhere explicitly teaches that baptism is "an outward sign of an inward change." I still believe this is one valid aspect of its symbolism (implied in texts such as Rom. 6:4; Col. 2:12; 1 Pet. 3:21), but not that its symbolism is limited to this. Colossians 2:11-12 was a text I thought the Presbyterians used unfairly at first, but in time I came to agree that the implication of that text is that baptism now accomplishes what circumcision used to accomplish, and thus that it really is the new covenant sign. As a covenant sign, I came to believe that baptism symbolizes the entire covenant, not just one particular covenant blessing, and not even all covenant blessings alone. Rather, the implication would be that, like circumcision, it symbolizes both covenant blessings and covenant curses.

Finally, on the hermeneutical front, I was struck by Lydia's household baptism in Acts 16:14-15. This was not because I assumed there were children present (though it does seem odd to me to think that there were no children present in any of the households that were baptized), but rather because of Luke's choice of words. That is, Luke says that Lydia believed, and indicates that on that basis her household was baptized. In saying that the household was baptized, Luke never differentiates believers from unbelievers. Regardless of the age of those in the household, they were apparently all baptized. Because Luke does not distinguish between believers and unbelievers in the household, it indicates to me that he assumed that their belief or unbelief was immaterial to the question of whether or not they should be baptized. The important issue was the belief of the head of the household.

Two more theological points that impact the discussion, particularly with regard to breaking the new covenant, are the way the new covenant and its blessings are revealed and applied to believers, and the conditionality of all covenants. Ultimately, the covenant will become unbreakable, but only when Jesus returns and gives us all the covenant blessings. Until then, we partake of blessings only partially, and the covenant remains breakable. A good book on this idea is *The Coming of the Kingdom* by Herman Ridderbos.

On the point that all covenants are conditional, there has been much confusion because of the unfortunate teaching that has existed within the Reformed tradition that some covenants were unconditional (Noahic, Abrahamic, Davidic) while others were conditional (Adamic, Mosaic). Meredith Kline popularized this view, but did so on faulty data. As is reflected even in good study Bibles, for many years research seemed to indicate that in the ancient Near East there was such a thing as an unconditional "royal land grant treaty." The conclusion that these were unconditional, however, was based on covenant boundary marker stones that sounded unconditional and contained no curses. More recently, though, they dug up these stones to study them further. What they found was that on the portions of the stones buried under the ground by time, these treaties contain stipulations and curses, indicating that these treaties really were conditional. But this is perhaps a point that will continue to be debated as people

discover more data, reinterpret existing data, etc.

More importantly, the Bible itself lists explicit stipulations and curses in conjunction with the supposedly unconditional biblical covenants (e.g. uncircumcision results in being cut off from Abraham's people in Gen. 18; death penalty for murderers in Gen. 9; fidelity to God in 2 Chron. 6:16; etc.) Thus, there really is no good case that any biblical covenant was unconditional. This is most obvious in the case of the new covenant, where Jesus himself had to die in order to receive the covenant curses due us in order to gain the covenant blessings for us. To me, it is somewhat curious that the view that some covenants were conditional (Adamic, Mosaic) and others unconditional (Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic) has become ingrained in a tradition (Reformed) that claims there is really only one covenant in various administrations. How does the same covenant ping-pong between being conditional and unconditional?

Anyway, baptism is certainly an issue that is not so clearly presented in Scripture that believers cannot reasonably disagree on it. And you can see from what convinced me that my own views are not entirely identical to those of others in the paedobaptism camp. Different arguments convince different people. The ones I have mentioned are just the ones that convinced me, and are largely based on implication and assumption (as are, by the way, credobaptism arguments). I still know, respect and love a great many Reformed Baptists, and it seems to me that the same issues that prevent them from being paedobaptists are things like the assumption that the new covenant cannot be broken and that baptism is only an outward sign of an inward change. I also know a great many paedobaptist who seem to hold to paedobaptism for insufficient reasons, but I love them too.

Answer by Ra McLaughlin

BAPTISM VS. DEDICATION

QUESTION

How would you answer a Reformed Baptist concerning the following question: I have a newborn and I want to better understand paedobaptism. What is the difference between dedicating your child in the Sunday morning service and baptizing your child? If I am a covenant member and my child receives certain blessings because of my faith in Christ, what is she "missing out on" because she is not baptized?

ANSWER

There are a couple important differences between dedication and baptism in general.

First, the Bible instructs us to baptize people but it does not instruct us to dedicate them. There are examples of people dedicating themselves to the Lord, as in Exodus 32:29 where the 3,000 Levites who killed their idolatrous brothers dedicated themselves to God. Notice, though, that this dedication was a specific call to a particular job or life. The same is true in the example of Samuel's "baby dedication" in 1 Samuel 1: Samuel was given into the priest's care for his upbringing, so that he grew up in the temple rather than in his parents' home (1 Sam. 1). This is not to say that Reformed Baptist baby dedications are wrong - they don't violate anything in Scripture, and the sentiment is a godly one. Rather, it is to say that there is no scriptural basis for the practice as a distinct rite.

Second, baptism is a covenant sign that ratifies, as it were, the covenant between God and the individual (this is generally admitted by Reformed Baptists when it comes to credobaptism). In the Bible, dedications also function as a form of vow or covenant, obligating the individuals dedicated to a particular course of action. But dedications obligate people to lesser vows or covenants, whereas baptism obligates one to *the* covenant, that is, to God's covenant with his people.

So, dedications (regardless of the age of the one dedicated) are not bad, and they can be good. But they cannot replace baptism because they are neither commanded in Scripture nor an aspect of God's overarching covenant with his people.

Now, for the specific question of the unbaptized covenant member, it is important to look at circumcision in the Old Testament in order to understand the modern Presbyterian position. In the Old Testament, circumcision was the sign of covenant membership. Those males who were not circumcised were to be cut off from their people, estranged from the covenant blessings and subject to its curses (Gen. 17:14) - heavy stuff for an infant who didn't have a say in it, but still the way it was. Also, the parents who failed to circumcise their children were in grievous sin - God almost killed Moses for failing to circumcise his son, but Zipporah's intervention saved Moses (Exod. 4:24-26). Moreover, God did not allow the adult Israelites to inherit the Promised Land (a covenant blessing) until they had been circumcised (Josh. 5:2ff.). These facts indicate

that circumcision in the Old Testament was very serious business, and that the blessings of the covenant hung in the balance. With such a severe attitude toward the covenant sign in the Old Testament, we should expect baptism to be a serious issue for the church in the New Testament era, both for adults and for children.

Reformed Presbyterians do not generally teach that an unbaptized person cannot receive the covenant blessings and must be doomed to hell - that conclusion is inconsistent with the doctrine of salvation by faith alone in Christ alone. However, we do teach that it is now a sin not to be baptized just as it used to be a sin not to be circumcised, and most Reformed Baptists I know agree with this position with regard to believers. That circumcision was treated as such a serious sin in the Old Testament, and that realization of the covenant blessings was tied explicitly to it, implies that failure to be baptized is now a serious sin and that the realization of some covenant blessings in this world is tied to baptism.

Reformed Presbyterians argue that the same significance and obligation attaches to infant baptism that attaches to believer baptism. If it is a sin not to be baptized as a believer, it is also a sin not to be baptized as an infant and not to have your infant baptized. Of course, this conclusion is based on the idea that the children of believers are in covenant with God, which many Reformed Baptists deny. We might say that the difference between Reformed Baptists and Reformed Presbyterians is many times an issue of ecclesiology rather than of sacramentology.

From a Reformed Presbyterian perspective (which I believe to be the correct perspective), an unbaptized child of a modern believer is in a similar position to an uncircumcised infant in the Old Testament - he or she has broken God's covenant (Gen. 17:14). Christ keeps covenant perfectly for believers, so that all our sins are forgiven and we are ultimately blessed in him. But at the same time, our actions of covenant breaking and covenant keeping also have repercussions in this life (cf. Ps. 1). God is more inclined to bless us in this life if we keep his covenant, and less inclined to bless us if we do not (all other things being equal). So, an unbaptized child of a believer "misses out" by being less likely to receive some of God's covenant blessings in this life. The parents are in a similar position, just as Moses was in Exodus 4:24-26, being less likely to be blessed in this life and more likely to be disciplined.

Answer by Ra McLaughlin