

2. WHAT IS A COVENANT?

Having seen how the covenant comes about by God's sovereign initiative, we shall now seek to understand wherein it exists and what it involves. The word *covenant* itself simply means an official agreement or arrangement into which two (or more) parties enter and by which they are from then on bound. A covenant is intended to be beneficial to all parties involved, and it includes besides responsibilities also specific privileges. It is the special blend of promises and obligations which makes the covenant of God such a wonderful relationship.

It is important to remember that it pleased God to enter into a covenant with us and bind himself officially to certain obligations. Our gracious God is not afraid of personal commitment. He asks the same commitment from us.

A covenant is a binding agreement

The first and basic covenant in the Bible is the one between God and his people. We read also about covenants which are made among men, but these are reflective of the covenant that God has made with us. The origin of the Hebrew word for covenant, *berith*, is unclear, but it has a very strong connotation of loyalty towards one another. The Greek word *diatheke*, which the Septuagint consistently used to translate *berith*, denotes a legal arrangement to which the two sides are bound by oath. It should be noted that the New Testament does not use the common Greek word for covenant, which is *syntheke*, but to avoid the idea that the partners in the covenant are equal, it, too, uses the word *diatheke*. God makes his covenant sovereignly with those whom he has called.

An important example in this respect is marriage, the most intimate human relationship, which is called the "marriage covenant" in Malachi 2:10. The unity of husband and wife is later called by Paul "a profound mystery," in that it shows us something of the unity between Christ and the church (Eph 5:32). God considers a covenant to be an agreement which must be honoured. We learn from him how our relationships are to be regulated.

As a binding agreement between two (or more) parties, the covenant establishes a certain order. It puts an end to uncertainty and leads to a situation of

loyalty and trust. At least, this is its purpose. Specific privileges and duties are *officially* acknowledged. It is important, when speaking of the covenant, to recognize this legal, official character. Sometimes the adjective *forensic* is used in connection with the covenant in order to show that it has been judicially (lawfully) established and is fully binding for all the partners.

Among people a covenant is made to settle disputes between two parties, or to confirm loyalty and trustworthiness. So Jacob and Laban, for example, make a covenant to resolve whatever differences exist between them, and they pledge never to harm one another (Gen 31). David and Jonathan, to use another example, make a covenant so that in the deepening crisis with king Saul they can always count on one another. They do not really need this covenant, for their mutual love speaks for itself, but more binding than their love for each other is their vow before God.

Entering into a covenant is an important and solemn occasion. We find the following main elements. Firstly, a clear sign is given or a memorial is officially erected to mark the occasion. It is important to note that the function of the sign is always to point to the legal and official character of the covenant. Secondly, stipulations (or agreements) are made to which each partner in the covenant is from then on bound. Thirdly, an oath is sworn in the name of the LORD. This means that God himself is a witness to the event and will see to it that the covenant is kept. As Laban says, "...remember that God is a witness between you and me (Gen 31:50)." Finally, a sacrifice is brought and a meal is eaten to seal the fellowship which the partners now have.

A covenant may not be broken

A covenant is meant as a lasting bond which may not be broken. When covenants are routinely broken, the very fabric of society is becoming unraveled and chaos is imminent. The social aspect is all the more important because a covenant is not generally made with relatives but with those with whom one has no natural ties. A covenant is usually not necessary between family members, for there already exists a blood relationship. A covenant is typically made with those with whom there was previously no bond.

The framework of a covenant determines many aspects of society. Mutual obligations, indeed the entire structure of life, are governed by the covenant(s) which have been made. We have to be able to trust one another in accordance with the given promises. When this is not the case anymore, society enters into a situation described as follows, "When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?" (Ps 11:3).

A covenant is so strong that it transcends death and remains valid *through the generations*. This is not incidental but central to the whole notion of covenant. The obligation and privileges of the previous generation are recognized and claimed by the next generation. Indeed, a covenant binds the generations together and is a constant factor in an ever-changing world.

An example of the strength of a covenant – through the generations – is the treaty made between Israel and the Gibeonites. The Gibeonites rightly concluded that they would not be able to withstand Israel by force. Their existence as a people was threatened. So they resorted to a ruse (Josh 9:3ff.). They managed to mislead Joshua and the elders of Israel into making a treaty (literally, a covenant) with them. Later, when it became clear that the Israelites were fooled and the people grumbled against their leaders, the elders responded, “We have given them our oath by the LORD, the God of Israel, and we cannot touch them now” (Josh 9:19). The covenant with the Gibeonites and their descendants had to be honoured. The fact that it was made by deception apparently did not nullify it. The Gibeonites were not to be blamed for their deception, for they acted in self-defense; Israel was held responsible for its carelessness, for they “did not inquire of the LORD” (Josh 9:14). The given oath stands (Num 30:2; Eccl 5:4, 5).

Those who enter into a covenant with one another owe each other lasting loyalty and must always show kindness and faithfulness to one another. Think of the word *chesed*, which I mentioned earlier. God applies it to himself, but it applies also to us. Time and again those who have made a covenant must deal with each other in mercy, for it is in this way that God has dealt with his people.

Because the covenant is a bond which is not to be broken, God’s people may always put their trust in him. Israel was assured of God’s faithfulness and encouraged to sing of his mercy: “Blessed is the man who makes the LORD his trust...” (Ps 40:4). Also in times when God’s imminent judgment was proclaimed, the prophets could still call the righteous to continued trust in the God who would not forsake his covenant: “...blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose confidence is in him” (Jer 17:7).

Psalms 90 very clearly emphasizes that the covenant of God exists through the ages as a permanent relationship: “LORD, you have been our dwelling place throughout all generations. Before the mountains were born or you brought forth the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God” (verses 1 and 2). It is no wonder that this Psalm is a favourite of God’s children, often read when we are faced with the passing of time, for example, on New Year’s Eve. Everything may change, time flies, but God remains forever the same for his people. We have with him an eternal, unchanging covenant!

In the New Testament this trust gains even greater depth in Jesus Christ: “Let us hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful” (Heb 10:23). We may freely and with confidence draw near to God (Eph 3:12; Heb 4:16), for in Christ we have a perfect High Priest who has made the great sacrifice for sin.

The words “trust” and “confidence” are related in Hebrew to the root of the word AMEN. The covenant is such a strong bond that God’s people may always say AMEN to it and claim in faith whatever God has promised. So the apostle Paul can write, “For no matter how many promises God has made, they are ‘Yes’

in Christ. And so through him the ‘Amen’ is spoken by us to the glory of God” (2 Cor 1:20).

A covenant brings peace

The result of a covenant is that it puts an end to hostility and uncertainty and leads to a situation of peace. The Hebrew word for peace, *shalom*, sums up what the covenant relationship entails. Peace is the all-important condition for the development of life. Only when there is peace can life flourish and be enjoyed.

The word peace means more than just a lack of hostility or the absence of war. Peace has to do with wholeness and wellness, prosperity and abundance. There is only peace when all is well, when everything functions as it should, and when all commitments are being met by everyone.

This element of peace is so important that the LORD in various instances uses the expression “my covenant of *peace*.” When Phinehas, the grandson of Aaron, kills an Israelite man and a Midianite woman who are caught red-handed in their fornication, and so stops the plague that was raging through the camp of Israel, the LORD says: “Therefore tell him I am making my covenant of peace with him. . . because he was zealous for the honour of his God and made atonement for the Israelites” (Num 25:12, 13).

In Isaiah 54:10 we read: “‘Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed,’ says the LORD who has compassion on you.” The term covenant of peace occurs often in connection with situations where the LORD ceases to punish his people for their sins and again shows to them his lovingkindness (*chesed*). The state of hostility between him and his people comes to an end through proper atonement and renewal. God seeks peace with and for his people.

This covenant of peace refers especially to God’s saving work in Jesus Christ. Ezekiel 34, for example, speaks of the termination of a time of exploitation and plunder by false shepherds, and promises that the LORD himself will bring about a new time of prosperity: “I will place over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he will tend them; he will tend them and be their shepherd. I the LORD will be their God and my servant David will be prince among them. I the Lord have spoken. I will make a covenant of peace with them and rid the land of wild beasts so that they may live in the desert and sleep in the forests in safety” (Ezek 34:23-25).

The same element returns in Ezekiel 37, where the full restoration and unification of Israel is described as taking place “under my servant David,” who will be Israel’s prince forever. And then we read in the verses 26 and 27, “I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant. I will establish them and increase their numbers, and I will put my sanctuary among them forever. My dwelling place will be with them; I will be their God, and they will be my people.”

It is important to note how this passage in Ezekiel is later, in John 10, applied by Christ to himself. “My servant David” is here the great Son of David, who will establish the covenant of peace. The angel can therefore say to Mary regarding the child to be born, “The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end” (Luke 1:32, 33).

All this also looks forward to the return of our Lord in glory, when we will witness the full realization of the promise, “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God” (Rev 21:3). The expression *the covenant of peace* ultimately directs us to the new heaven and the new earth, where we shall enjoy perfect peace and bliss forever. In the Bible there is a consistent direction to the new Jerusalem. In any event, it is clear that both the terms “everlasting” and “peace” apply to the covenant of God throughout all time. The covenant anticipates and awaits the great and final peace which will be brought about by Christ and enjoyed forever by all God’s people.

The full priestly blessing

The word peace describes a harmonious society where everyone does his duty diligently and in love, and all of life is blessed. This peace is the blessing that comes by way of the covenant of God. In this light we understand why the choir of angels in the night when Christ is born sings of *peace on earth*, for now the Prince of Peace has come! The great gift that Jesus Christ will give is eternal peace between God and his people through the one sacrifice on the cross. It is Christ who after his unique sacrifice can appear to his disciples and say, “Peace be with you!” (John 20:19, 21) I will come back to this passage later.

For the same reason the apostolic preaching can state unequivocally, “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ...” (Rom 5:1). It is a peace “which transcends all understanding” (Phil 4:7). The climax of the priestly blessing of old, “The LORD turn his face toward you and give you peace” (Num 6:22-26) is echoed strongly and fully in the apostolic salutation and benediction, “Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (Eph 1:2).

The covenant: a definition

All this allows us to define the covenant which God makes with his people. It is not first of all a formal contract, but a *living relationship* in which two parties, God and his people, constantly interact. Perhaps the clearest biblical terms are found in Deuteronomy 26:17-19: “You have declared this day that the LORD is your God and that you will walk in his ways, and that you will obey him. And the LORD has declared this day that you are his people, his treasured possession as he promised, and that you are to keep all his commands. He has declared that he will

set you in praise, fame and honour high above all the nations he has made and that you will be a people holy to the LORD your God, as he promised.”

The New Testament speaks in similar terms about the church as “God’s possession” (Eph 1:14), “a holy nation” (1 Pet 2:9), and a “kingdom of priests” (Rev 5:10). The apostle Paul writes that Christ “gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good” (Titus 2:14). The church is Christ’s very own people, God’s possession, a people who indeed want to be God’s people, a kingdom where everyone is a priest, subject to God and dedicated to him.

Therefore (to enlarge on a previous definition), *the covenant is a living relationship of love between God and his people, in which the LORD declares that He is our God who will care for us, and we declare that we are his people who will joyfully serve him according to his word.* The covenant has this content: I am your God; we are your people!

The above is only a simple definition. Many important aspects, especially from a Christological viewpoint, could be added and need to be filled in to complete the picture. But we must begin in all simplicity: the covenant is a living relationship of love between God and his people.

I am your God. The LORD must be recognized, loved, and served as the living God by those who have been placed within his covenant.

We are your people. We must live in such a way, in accordance with his commandments, that he is truly and fully honoured by us.

It must be a *living* relationship. Then it will also be a *lasting* relationship.

Christ in the centre

In the 1940s a definition of the “covenant of grace” was given by Dr. S. Greijdanus, professor of New Testament at the Theological Seminary in Kampen, The Netherlands. It may be useful to take note of this definition. Greijdanus writes, “Under God’s covenant of grace we understand the gracious decree of God concerning, for, and with fallen man with a view to his restoration in a state of eternal salvation, through the giving and sending of his only-begotten Son in our nature and in our state of guilt and condition of misery. He proclaimed it in paradise, gave it as a covenant to Abraham, confirmed and ordained it again for Israel at Sinai, maintained it through the ages for this people in the unbreakable relation of promise and demand, and finally established it as irrevocable in the work of reconciliation and redemption by the Mediator of this covenant, whom he gave, the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who came in our flesh, died for our sins, was raised for our justification, and obtained for us all the salvation of this covenant, which he also distributes or applies through his Holy Spirit” (quoted by J. Kamphuis, *An Everlasting Covenant*, pp. 73, 74).

Written in the typical style of that era, this definition today seems rather long-

winded, but there are certain elements which Greijdanus had to include because they played a role in the debates of that time about the covenant (and Holy Baptism). I wonder, incidentally, whether it is proper to speak about the covenant in formal terms as a *decree*. True, it does rest on a divine decree, but I prefer the word *relationship*, because it does more justice to the dynamics of the covenant.

Be that as it may, Greijdanus' definition is important for two reasons. First, we should note how it stresses the glorious position of Christ as Mediator. At the heart of covenant history is Christ, who unites God and his people. And second, we see how Greijdanus stresses both continuity and progression in the history of the covenant. It is one and the same covenant, but in that covenant are various dispensations, each new one being richer than the one preceding it. In a following chapter we will look further at these important aspects.

A covenant people

It is to be noted once again that God does not make a covenant with a single person or with select individuals. When it is made with someone it always expressly includes his family, his relatives, yes, all his descendants. In the beginning already, God said to man, "Be fruitful and multiply..." and it is clear that the promises and demands given to Adam also apply to future generations. Man is to serve God and exercise dominion over the earth, and God will provide for man and his children. In this respect God's covenant is a far-reaching agreement: it transcends personal limits and temporal boundaries.

This is clear in God's dealings with Adam and Eve in paradise. In the days of the flood it becomes evident in the promises given to Noah. We see it again in the covenant made with Abraham, also as it is renewed at Sinai. God gathers unto himself a *people*, chosen out of all others, who have obligations towards him and towards one another, who share a common bond and have the same rights and duties before God. Every generation shares in the riches of the fathers and is obliged to keep the precepts given to the fathers.

The covenant is made with a people who are called by a collective name: the inheritance of the LORD, the vineyard, the congregation, the flock of Jesus Christ. Certainly, this people is made up of individual persons – and everyone must personally respond to God's covenant calling – but the covenant itself encompasses all who belong to the people of his choice, are born within it, and live in the midst of it.

This does not mean that those who are born into this people are thereby automatically saved. But it certainly indicates a solid basis on which to *address* all covenant children, exhorting them to become more and more what they are, God's covenant children.

Because the covenant is made with a people, and includes a fellowship with other children of God, covenantal teaching and thinking is always *corporate and federative* in nature: the individual finds his or her place within the body of God's

people. We are therefore responsible for one another and can motivate each other. At all times the *unity* of God's people must be stressed, preserved, and experienced, not as a formality, but as a reality, one that regulates our actions.

Covenantal thinking, while far from denying the need of personal faith, avoids the individualism that is rampant today.

The covenant: an intimate relationship

All this brings us to an important observation: the covenant of God is not a formal and cold relationship; it is one in which one recognizes and experiences God's nearness. Immanuel: God has come to us. The relationship with the LORD, the contact with him from day to day, are deeply personal and very close. We may speak of covenantal *intimacy*. Those who are in this covenant and profess the LORD as their covenant God are his children, his friends.

Something of this closeness we note in Genesis 18, when God visits Abraham on the way to Sodom. As they walk on, the LORD says (to himself), "Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?" (verse 17). Then the LORD tells Abraham about his plans, and solicits Abraham's input and intercession. A wonderful conversation ensues, in which God truly interacts with Abraham.

It is amazing how close and open the LORD is with Abraham. Although Abraham is often referred to as the LORD's *servant*, he is also known as the LORD's *friend*. "But you, O Israel, my servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, you descendants of Abraham my friend...." There is between God and his covenant children a bond so close that it transcends earthly limits. See also James 2:23: "and he [Abraham] was called God's friend."

In Psalm 25:14 we read remarkable words about the intimacy between God and his children. "The LORD *confides* in those who fear him; he makes known his covenant to them." This leads us to expect everything from the LORD: "my eyes are ever on the LORD" (verse 15). The LORD confides in us and we trust in him. The relationship is experienced in a deeply personal manner. The expression "making known his covenant" means that the relationship with God is constantly deepened and confirmed. There is growth; we come ever closer to the LORD.

Friends, sons, and heirs

Again, it is no different in the New Testament. In fact, through Christ's work of atonement and the outpouring of his Spirit, the bond has become even closer. In Christ's last conversations with his disciples, the closeness becomes apparent: "You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you..." (John 15:14-16).

Does this mean that the disciples are no longer servants of the Lord? Of course

not, but the service is rendered in friendship, in a deeply personal and loving commitment. Christ has not hidden anything from them and has opened his heart to them, as God once did to Abraham. The covenant relationship does not allow for secrets. Both parties are open and honest with each other in a close fellowship of love and friendship. An old hymn expresses properly the essence of this covenantal bond, “What a *friend* we have in Jesus.” He is always there for us, and we may always go to him.

The ultimate proof of this friendship is seen in Christ’s death on the cross. “Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). This is the very heart of God’s covenant with us: the deepest love and friendship evident in the ultimate sacrifice.

The New Testament tells us that through Christ we are even more than friends of God. The Holy Spirit has been poured out. We have received “the Spirit of sonship” and we have been enabled to cry, “Abba, Father.” We are sons and daughters of God because we have been given the Spirit of Christ.

Paul writes, “The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children” (Rom 8:16). Every child of God knows and trusts that he is God’s child; as we found in Psalm 25, he makes known to them his covenant. And Paul adds, “Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ...” (verse 17). All God’s gifts and treasures are lawfully ours, for we are like the Israel of old, the heirs of God’s kingdom. This is implied in the forensic nature of the covenant also in the New Testament: God gives us rights as his children and heirs.

There is in Romans 8 also typically the covenant *caveat*. If we claim the inheritance, we must indeed act as heirs. If we wish to be treated as children of God, we must live accordingly. Paul writes in Romans 8:9, “You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you....” Paul does not write this to lead us to question God’s promises, but to promote proper self-examination and true zeal. This is the other side of the covenantal coin: “Therefore, brothers, we have an obligation – but it is not to the sinful nature, to live according to it” (Rom 8:17). Promise and obligation go together in the covenant, both in the Old and the New Testament.