

3. HOW MANY COVENANTS ARE THERE?

The question arises: how many covenants are there? We can speak of God's covenant with Adam, Noah, Abraham, David, and also of the new covenant in the blood of Christ. People have, in addition, written of a covenant of works as opposed to a covenant of grace, and of an inner covenant versus an outer covenant, the inner covenant comprising the elect, and the outer one including all members of the (visible) church. What must we do with such distinctions? Are these covenants different ones, or are they one and the same?

In short, did God make more than one covenant? Must we speak of many covenants, each with its own character and content, or of only one covenant that remains the same? Since God is unchanging, is this not true with respect to his covenant as well? Does it not also remain from age to age the same?

One covenant; various dispensations

The answer is that there is only one covenant, which has existed from the beginning of time. There are in the course of history various *dispensations* in this one covenant, but the covenant itself does not change. (I will devote more attention to this matter in chapters 13 and 14.) The word dispensation refers to the manner in which God's gifts are handed out ("dispensed") during a certain period. That manner may indeed differ from time to time, but the covenant itself is not altered thereby.

When we define the covenant as our relationship with God, we must understand that this relationship has existed since the creation of mankind. No relationship stays exactly the same throughout the years; it grows and deepens (if all is well). So it is also with God's covenant, which grows and deepens in Christ. But according to its character, content, and purpose, the covenant of God stays the same.

I am not the first to defend and promote the position that there is only one covenant. Reformed theologians have insisted repeatedly that "all religion, all fellowship with God is from the beginning rooted in the covenant" (De Graaf, *Hoofdlijnen*, p. 61). The covenant is a relationship of love between two parties, God and man, and this relationship existed from the beginning. The very moment

we were created, God entered into a special relationship with us, and that relationship, with its mutual expectations and obligations, remains.

God does not change

This is so because God does not change. The present world will fade and perish, but God remains, and he remains the same. This is, as we saw, manifest also in the name Yahweh. “In the beginning you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you will remain; they will all wear out like a garment. Like clothing you will change them and they will be discarded. But you remain the same, and your years will never end.” This has consequences for the continuation of the covenant: “The children of your servants will live in your presence; their descendants will be established before you” (Ps 102:25-28).

This is the position also of the Reformed confessions. In Lord’s Day 4 of the Heidelberg Catechism, we are confronted with excuses that are sometimes used to downplay our guilt. One of them is that God is not quite fair. How can he still demand of us today – now that we have fallen from a state of righteousness and holiness – that we keep his law perfectly? The answer is simple: God created us in such a way that we could keep his law; if now by our own foolishness we have lost this gift, we cannot accuse the LORD of unfairness. And so the Lord Jesus could say: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt 5:48). This has always been the demand of the one covenant throughout all time: a perfect Father requires perfect children.

“The covenants...”

But what about the fact that in some instances the Bible itself speaks of covenant in the plural? This happens, for example, in Romans 9, where the apostle Paul in the letter to the Romans sums up the benefits of being a Jew, and thus a member of God’s people of old. He writes of this people, “Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises” (9:4). It is noteworthy that in other places the same benefits are also ascribed to the New Testament church. We focus now, however, on the fact that the word covenant is rendered here by Paul in the plural. Does this not imply that there are more covenants than one?

There are not many other passages where the word covenant, either in Hebrew or Greek, is used in the plural. In Isaiah 33:8 we read of “covenants being broken” (NIV: treaties), but this refers to treaties made among people and denotes a time when law and order are lacking. Similarly Hosea 10:4 speaks of “agreements” which are not kept, but the reference is again to the breakdown of mutual agreements among people.

Of more importance, Paul writes to the Galatians about two women, Hagar and Sarah, and states that these two women “represent two covenants” (Gal 4:24).

From the context it becomes clear, however, that the contrast is between the way of the *flesh* (the works of the law) and the way of *faith* (the fruit of the Spirit). This passage touches on the deeper question of the connection and contrast between the two dispensations, old and new, within the one covenant. It contains the warning: those who try to work their own salvation by fulfilling the law will be put to shame, for we must live by faith in the promises of God. We will come back to this portion of Scripture later, when we examine further the relation between old and new covenant.

Another place where the word covenant is used in the plural form is Ephesians 2:11 and 12. Here Paul tells his readers (mostly of pagan origin) to “remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called ‘uncircumcised’ by those who call themselves ‘the ‘circumcision’ (that done in the body by hands of men) – remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world.”

Some manuscripts have in Romans 9:4 the singular, covenant. This translation need not be followed, however, as a way of escape out of the difficulty. Dr. S. Greijdanus has written in his commentary on Romans that “the plural denotes the repeated testimonies to the covenant, as well as the expansions and rich blessings of it to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the confirmation of the covenant to Israel after discipline and repentance.” The one covenant is simply confirmed and expanded.

Another well-known commentator, Dr. F.W. Grosheide, sees in the plural form “covenants” especially the “stipulations and decisions made by God under the old covenant concerning his one promise in Christ.” This is in essence the same view as Greijdanus expressed. The word covenants does not mean that there are different covenants, but it denotes the dynamic and progressive work of God to come to the fulfilment of his promises of old in Jesus Christ. The covenant has marked dispensations, and therefore the *intensive plural* can be used, but we are still faced with the *one* covenant of God, the same work of salvation and the same unique relationship of love between God and his people.

To summarize

We have noted that there are a few instances where the Bible speaks of covenant in the plural, but that also in those cases reference is made to the one and only covenant that exists throughout time, even though it deepens with time.

Keeping this line in mind helps to prevent derailment in covenantal thinking as we continue to explore what the Bible teaches about the covenant as the way God goes with his people, and therefore also with us, in the history of redemption.