

4. WHEN DID GOD FIRST ESTABLISH HIS COVENANT?

We begin our survey of the history of the covenant in paradise, where God placed man and woman after he had created them. It is with Adam and Eve that God first made his covenant. The covenant with them we may call the covenant with mankind, for Adam and Eve are the first parents of us all. What was said to them and done by them has a bearing on their offspring. In the beginning, through Adam and Eve, God made his covenant with all people.

It is God's love for his children that immediately after he has created them, he enters with them into a covenant and binds them to himself with specific promises, while also establishing clear demands. Unless we see here already a covenant relationship between God and mankind, we cannot understand why God takes measures to fulfill his promises in the great Mediator Jesus Christ.

Like Adam, they broke the covenant

It is true that in the first chapters of Genesis the word covenant does not appear. It is first used in connection with Noah, in the days after the flood (Gen 9:8). But as many scholars have pointed out, one does not need to find a specific *word* to demonstrate that a certain *matter* exists. Proper exegesis does not necessarily hinge on specific words. There existed from the beginning between God and mankind a special relationship such as did not exist between God and his other creatures, and there is every reason to call this relationship a covenantal one.

I should mention, by the way, that there is a specific Bible text suggesting that God did make a covenant with Adam. In Hosea 6:7 we read, "Like Adam, they have broken the covenant – they were unfaithful to me there." The question is how the expression "like Adam" is to be translated and understood.

The NIV footnote informs us that "the allusion is uncertain since Scripture records no covenant with Adam." The fact that the word "there" is used may lead one to believe, according to the same footnote, that the word translated as Adam

refers to a place name. It is unclear, however, which place is then meant. The theologian Herman Bavinck discusses the various options and then concludes, “So there remains, unless the word is corrupt or denotes the name of a place, only the translation *Adam*.” Bavinck accepts the text as it is and sees here indeed a reference to Adam.

It is of interest here to note the rendering of the King James Version, “But they like men have transgressed the covenant. . . .” This translation properly recognizes that “Adam” is not a place, but then makes a plural (men) out of the singular (Adam). The problem of the text is not solved in this way.

According to Bavinck, whose exegesis was always carefully reasoned, “[the translation ‘like Adam’] implies that the command given to Adam was in essence the matter of a covenant....” (*Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, II, 526).

It would seem to me that Bavinck was right, and that the text indeed refers to the historical Adam. This also fits the context of Hosea. What Ephraim and Judah were doing in Hosea’s time was nothing less than breaking the covenant, something which had been done long ago by their father Adam. Just as in Adam’s time it led to exile from Eden, so it will lead in Hosea’s time to exile from Canaan.

The thought that already in paradise God made a covenant with mankind is a biblical one, as is the notion that all subsequent sin is a result of the breaking of the covenant. It is important to note, however, that we do not depend on this one text in Hosea 6 to conclude that God made a covenant with Adam. There are many other reasons why we must come to this conclusion. One is that already in Genesis 2, where a more detailed account of man’s creation and position is given than in Genesis 1, God is referred to as “the LORD God” (Yahweh Elohim). It is the Almighty God, Elohim, who is also the covenant God, Yahweh, who makes a covenant with his people.

But let us examine some other elements. In what follows I will show that the existence of the covenant in paradise can also be inferred from man’s special status, gifts, and obligations.

A special creation: in God’s image

Man was created in a different manner than any other creature. This is made clear by God himself when he says, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness” (Gen 1:26). This special manner of creation places mankind in a unique position.

What does it mean to be made in God’s image and after his own likeness? It means that we are much like God himself. We are not equal to God by any means, yet we are above all other creatures. Because we were created in this way we can associate with God in a manner that is not possible for any other creature on earth. We can have a relationship with him.

God makes a covenant only with those who are like him, who are able to know

him and respond to him. It is clear that the creation of man is the crowning element and the finishing touch to all God's creative work. When God created man, he created his child, his servant, his friend, to whom he would give his special favour.

A special office

The manner in which mankind was created had a purpose. Man was placed in a special office, which means that he was given an official function or duty. The function was man's dominion over [all creatures on] the earth. The immediate purpose of being created in God's image was that man would rule (Gen 1:26).

We must conclude that being created in God's image means that man has been given the office of government and dominion over all creatures. Man is to function as God's representative on earth, to act as his governor. He is to show forth in this office the glory of God and lead all things to glorify God. To be image-bearer is to reflect something of God himself, to be able to govern, and to have fellowship with God, his King. Man was enabled to communicate with God in heaven and with the creatures on earth. He was made not just to be a part of creation but to be an office-bearer in and over creation. And an office, which is a specific mandate or task, requires a covenant. It requires that the LORD enter into a special relationship with Adam and in him with all mankind.

Special gifts

The creation of man in God's image also means that he was given special gifts in order to fulfill his office.

He received the gifts of wisdom and reason. Man is above the animals in intelligence. He is able to communicate by the gift of speech, the gift of making himself understood and of understanding others. Man has been given an insight into the wondrous creation of God. Therefore Adam was called to give all the animals their names according to their kind (Gen 2:19, 20). He also received the gift of foresight, and hence the ability to anticipate and plan, not by instinctive reaction, but by careful thinking.

Moreover, man was in a special way directed to God his Creator and Father. There was openness between God and mankind; the fellowship was intimate and spontaneous.

The Bible tells us that man was created in true righteousness and holiness (Eph 4:24). If righteousness is the *ability* to do right (that is, to do what is according to God's will and law), holiness can be understood as the *willingness* to do what is right. Man was *able* and *willing* to live in accordance with God's law. He was dedicated to God.

The Heidelberg Catechism sums this up in Lord's Day 3, answer 6: "God created man good and in his image, that is, in true righteousness and holiness, so that he might rightly know God his Creator, heartily love him, and live with him in eternal blessedness to praise and glorify him." Note the sequence of the verbs

know God, *love* God, and *live with* God. Only when we rightly know someone and heartily love him, can we joyfully live with him. Here the relationship between God and his children is described. It is a relationship of love and fellowship ordained and given by God in paradise.

A special place

The relationship between God and man in the beginning is also evident in the place which God prepares for Adam and Eve. It is remarkable how from the beginning of time the notion of a covenant always includes a place (or land), where God's people would dwell in safety and where God and man would meet in peace.

In Genesis 2:2-13, this special place is described as a large garden with all kinds of trees (a great variety of fruit), an abundance of water, and many natural resources. It truly is a place where man can live, function and grow, and from which he can expand his activities over all the earth. It is also a place where God himself can visit Adam and Eve in their own home.

We note at this point the information that is given about two special trees in the garden. Verse 9 tells us that in the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. I conclude that these two trees stood side by side, or close to one another, to emphasize that life is only possible in obedience. These two trees, in the middle of the garden, may both have been outstanding in height, circumference, and beauty, and therefore clearly visible from all angles in the garden. In a sense they also characterized the garden as a place of decision. Adam and Eve would feel the compelling presence of both trees, and they would know: God's covenant must be lived in obedience.

It is important to note that God himself places man in this garden. It is not left up to Adam to decide where he will live and work; the garden is God's personal and precious gift to his children. From the very beginning, as a loving Father, he cares for them in every way.

Now, when we read of a special office, special gifts, and a special place, what else can we conclude than that there is also a special *relationship*, one that can only be adequately captured in the concept of a covenant. From what follows, this becomes even clearer.

A special obligation

In Genesis 2:15-18 we find an important passage. It says: "The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the LORD God commanded the man, 'You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.'"

There are a number of key points to note here.

God places the man in the garden with a specific task, which appears to be two-fold: to work the garden and to take care of it. We might translate also: to cultivate it and to guard it. The first verb means, “to bring into culture.” Adam and Eve were not to sit idly, but were called to work in the garden, to tend and develop it to the glory of God’s Name. They were to discover and use the resources God had put in creation, and, starting in this garden, bring the entire creation to blossom. There is a *cultural* mandate here.

Second, man is also to *take care* of the garden. The original uses a verb commonly translated as “to guard.” Whenever the special calling is given to *guard* something, there must be an enemy, some evil force against which watchfulness is required. It is inconceivable that the LORD God would have neglected to tell Adam what and whom to be on guard against. No one posts a sentry without explaining the potential of an enemy attack and how this attack may take place.

I have through the years more than once suggested to the students in my catechism classes that God gave Adam and Eve fair warning. They did not “fall” in the sense that they were unsuspectingly tripped up. They were not led into a trap, but were expressly forewarned.

In his commentary on Genesis, G. Ch. Aalders writes, “...the verb ‘to guard’ shows that there was an evil power against which man had to be watchful. It was a power which could be damaging. It does not say here what this power was, but we see its working in Genesis 3.” Indeed, we do not know exactly how much the LORD told Adam about the preceding rebellion in heaven and the uprising of the unfaithful angels, but again, it seems unlikely to ask someone to guard something without any specification. This makes the sin of Adam and Eve only greater, when they give in to the suggestions of the evil one.

Abundance and obedience

When the LORD God placed man in this garden, we read in Genesis 2:16, 17, he gave a wonderful *promise* and bestowed a tremendous *obligation*. This again shows us that we are here in the atmosphere of a covenant. The LORD God puts man in the garden and immediately sets forth the *terms and conditions* of his covenant. The covenant is also in Paradise one-sided, unilateral in its origin.

What should be carefully noted is that first God’s goodness and generosity are proclaimed. “You are free to eat from any tree in the garden...” God grants abundance to his children. This is the starting point in all covenantal declarations of love: “Open wide your mouth and I will fill it” (Ps 81:10). The same holds true in the New Testament in the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ, when he speaks of our earthly needs: “...seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things [i.e., earthly needs] will be given to you as well” (Matt 6:33).

Our God is a generous God, who gives abundantly to his people. Israel’s history as God’s people reflects this truth in a special way. God does not begin with restricting Adam and Eve but first fixes their attention on the abundance of divine

blessings which are theirs in the covenant. We, too, confess today that God is an overflowing fountain of all good (Article 1, Belgic Confession).

But the freedom we have in the covenant (“...you are free to eat from any tree in the garden...”) is never a licence to do as we please. There is in this covenant, in this blessed relationship with God, one clear demand that never varies, namely, that God alone be fully acknowledged and served as *sovereign* God and LORD. God wants our total obedience. Man’s freedom is always limited. Perhaps it is better to say that man’s freedom is protected by the sovereignty of God, who governs all things for the benefit of his children on earth. Apart from God, there is no freedom and harmony, but only slavery and chaos.

The sovereignty of God

The word sovereign means having supreme, unlimited control over all things, and being responsible only to oneself. The sovereignty of God is expressed in the commandment that follows in Genesis 2:17, “...but you must not eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil.” Adam and Eve may enjoy abundance. They have unlimited access to all the trees in the garden, except for one, for the “tree of life” is not forbidden to them at this time. In the abundance of God’s goodness and blessings they may enjoy ongoing and uninterrupted life with him and each other. They may live as free creatures, but always under God! God has given them a high position on the earth, but he has not relinquished his sovereignty. He demands obedience, for abundance and obedience go together.

The tree of the knowledge of good and evil

In Psalm 8 we read that man was made a little lower than the heavenly beings and was crowned with glory and honour. This passage may be translated to read, “a little less than God.” There is no higher creature than man. But God the Creator remains sovereign. There lies our only limitation and our greatest protection. The song of God’s covenant children will always be an exulting in God, our Father: “O LORD, our LORD, how majestic is your name in all the earth!” (Ps 8:1 and 9).

The forbidden tree is called the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil,” because only the LORD determines and reveals what is right and wrong. Something is good or evil because God says so. He remains the supreme and sovereign legislator, and we remain at all times his humble and obedient servants. We do what he says; we ask him what he wants.

By means of this tree it is made visible to Adam and Eve that in the covenant there is only one God, the LORD, who is to be obeyed unconditionally and perfectly. This is God’s greatest and deepest demand, embodied in the first commandment, “You shall have no other gods before me.” Already in paradise, God comes to us and enters into a relationship with us in which he gives us abundant blessings and great freedom, but in which he also maintains his sovereignty. *He alone is God*. The covenant is exclusive. In the covenant the first

and greatest commandment is that we love the Lord, our God, with all our heart, soul, and mind (Matt 22:37, 38).

This is what the tree of the knowledge of good and evil makes visible. This tree was not without reason placed in the middle of the garden. Adam and Eve would be able to see it from wherever they were, or would pass by it on a daily basis. And beside it stood the *tree of life* to underscore the message: only with God in his covenant of love there is life, blessed, eternal life. Both trees thus visibly represented the two sides of the covenant of God: there is life and blessing where God's sovereignty is acknowledged and obeyed, and there is death and curse where God's sovereignty is denied and rejected. So it has remained through the ages, until today.

A special sanction

At this point we must pay attention to the *sanction* that God makes known to man when he reveals his covenant of love. A sanction is a measure introduced to enforce the law and reveal the judgment incurred when this law is not kept. Should the covenant be broken, that is, should man take from the forbidden tree and thereby declare himself to be lord and master, sovereign in his own right, he would immediately forfeit the gift of life received from God. God makes clear from the start that apart from him, without his covenant, there is no life but only death.

For the sanction is, "...when you eat of it you shall surely die." Adam did not know at this point what death is. He had not yet seen it or experienced it. But he will have known that death is the opposite of life and fellowship. Death means being cut off from God and the neighbour. Death is termination. If Adam takes from the one tree, thereby indicating that he does not want to live as God's loving and obedient child, he may no longer eat of that other tree beside it, which symbolizes life. For *life and obedience* go together. This teaching holds true into the New Testament: "Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God..." (1 John 3:7-10). The demand of paradise stands forever with the covenant of love.

So it shall always be. We either live within God's covenant, enjoying his blessings, obeying his commands, living in fellowship with him, or we do not live at all. Apart from the LORD and his covenant, there is no life, no future, no enjoyment. A life of vanity, which is a constant dying, ends in certain death. The New Testament expands this to the clear teaching about hell and the lake of fire.

Central biblical truth

Our being created in God's image, our high office, our unique gifts, our wonderful place, as well as the high obligation and the serious sanction laid on us, all point to the fact that from the beginning God made a covenant with man, and so entered with him into a relationship of love. This central biblical truth illuminates all God's further dealings with mankind throughout history.