

19. THE SIGNS OF THE COVENANT

We saw earlier that when we enter into a new and important relationship we tend to do so in a solemn manner. The occasion is frequently marked by having fellowship together in a festive meal and also by having certain signs or symbols. So, for example, at a wedding the bride and groom will exchange rings, which function as a visible expression of their new status as married persons. In the Bible a marriage is seen and presented as a “covenant,” something which we may call to mind in this section.

There are two kinds of signs. The one is given at the beginning of the new relationship, and functions as a kind of initiation into the relationship. It is given only once. The other is given regularly, throughout the relationship, and functions to nurture and strengthen it. To use again the example of a marriage: the wedding rings are exchanged once, on the day of the wedding itself, right after the wedding vows. But the couple every year celebrates the anniversary of the marriage, and at other occasions also tokens of love and appreciation are given. These signs are not to be despised. They do not make or break the relationship itself, for that is founded on the loyalty of love, but they play an important role.

We focus now on the signs that God has given to demonstrate and confirm to us his covenant love.

The Sabbath as sign

Before we turn to the signs commonly known as the sacraments, we consider first another sign, that of the Sabbath. This day, a special festive occasion of rest and worship, functioned indeed as a sign. We read this in Exodus 31:12-17. The Sabbath had been instituted earlier, but the LORD here emphasizes its covenantal importance. Also during the construction of the tabernacle, which was a holy work, the Sabbath must be kept.

Let me quote a few pertinent lines. “Then the LORD said to Moses: Say to the Israelites, ‘You must observe my Sabbaths. This will be a sign between me and you

for the generations to come, so you may know that I am the LORD, who makes you holy” (Exod 31:12). And also verse 17, “[the Sabbath] will be a sign between me and the Israelites forever...”

Not keeping the Sabbath was punishable by death, the same punishment meted out to those who neglected circumcision (verse 15). The Sabbath is a day “holy to the LORD” and must be treated in that manner.

It is important to see how this sign functioned. It sent a clear message to Israel: the LORD is their Maker and Redeemer, and the most important aspect of life is to honour and serve the LORD, who made them and delivered them. It also sent a clear message to the nations around Israel, who did not have a day of rest like Israel: the covenant people of the LORD are not slaves of their work, but are free servants of God, who are loved by him and love him in return. They are set apart and sanctified unto the LORD.

Unfortunately the Israelites did not always keep the Sabbath properly. In Jesus’ time it had become a day of impossible and unbearable restrictions. The Lord never rejected the Sabbath, but he did reject what the Jews had made of it. The Lord proclaimed himself to be “Lord even of the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27), and he restored it as a day of healing and edification. By his resurrection on the first day of the week, he designated for the people of the new covenant the first day, the Sunday, as the day of worship and praise.

The Sunday is still a sign of the covenant. Whenever people stop attending church diligently, their faith declines, their children drift away from the Lord, and secularism (leading a worldly lifestyle) is the result. It is not without reason that we read in Hebrews 10:25, “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching.” A few verses later we are warned against treating as an unholy thing “the blood of the covenant” (verse 29). Christians who do not attend the church services forget that they have a covenant with the Lord, and this leads to a despising of God’s grace in Christ. Today, as under the old covenant, the people of God are known by their keeping of the day of rest and by their worship of the Lord in the public services.

The sign of admission

If the Sabbath may be called a general sign, which affected all people of God equally, other signs are more of a personal or family nature. They are not personal or familial in the sense that they have nothing to do with the people as a whole, but because they affect the status of individuals. These other signs under the old covenant demanded the shedding of *blood*, something which is not necessarily connected with the sabbath.

There is first the sign of admission to God’s covenant people. Under the Old Testament this was circumcision, while in the New Testament it is holy baptism. I will later in this chapter deal at greater length with questions surrounding

baptism; here we first want to find a scriptural answer to the question: when does the relationship of love between God and a person begin? The answer to this question has a bearing on the timing of circumcision and, later, baptism.

It is often suggested that the relationship between God and a person only exists when both acknowledge this relationship. Before that, it is one-sided and does not really function. The sign should therefore be received much later in life, when the mutual love has become evident beyond doubt.

In the Old Testament, this reasoning obviously does not apply, for an infant was to be circumcised on the eighth day. Already then there is a relationship of love, be it one-sided still, but it is there and receives a sign or seal. Actually, when we really study Scripture, we discover that the bond of love (which is the covenant!) exists already *before* birth.

I think of the well-known and moving Psalm 139, where David as an adult, perhaps wondering if he still deserves to be called a covenant child because of his sins, takes comfort in the amazing fact that God recognized and knew him even before he was born. And God did not look down as an uninterested observer, but as one who was fully involved in what was going on within his mother's womb: "...you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb (verse 13),"...your eyes saw my unformed body" (verse 16). "Knitting" means paying attention to each little detail. "Seeing" is here not merely "looking at" but being intensely focused on, even having fellowship with someone in love.

Other passages speak in the same manner. I am always touched by Psalm 71, where an old(er) person who is experiencing much trial can still say, "From birth I have relied on you; you brought me forth from my mother's womb.... Do not cast me away when I am old..." (verses 6, 9). The point is that the relationship between this man and the LORD started already before his birth, and God has always been true to him. Since life begins at conception, that is when the bond between God and his children also begins.

It is no wonder, then, that the first sign, circumcision in the Old Testament, had to be administered on the eighth day. God regarded the children of his people, the children of believers, from the beginning as His children. He works with his people in the line of the generations, as the God of the parents and the God of the children.

We find this beautifully expressed in the book of Isaiah: "Listen to me, O house of Jacob, all you who remain of the house of Israel, you whom I have upheld since you were conceived, and have carried since your birth. Even to your old age and gray hairs I am he, I am he who will sustain you" (Isa 46:3, 4).

Circumcision makes clear that we are admitted to God's people from the start of our lives. He is the God of our entire life, from conception and birth to death and beyond. This is how the LORD revealed himself to Adam and Eve, to Seth, to Noah, to Abraham, to David.

Remember also that the believers' posterity were always included in God's promises and blessings. It is important to bring this out once again, and to realize

that it has to do with the nature of God. He does not change, not in essence, not in approach. The question must be asked: would God who through the centuries, from Adam to Malachi, worked in a covenantal manner, giving his promises to believers and their seed, suddenly in the New Testament adopt an entirely different approach? To ask the question is to answer it.

The Passover meal

The other sign which the LORD God gave to his people under the old covenant was the Passover and, related to this, the feast of unleavened bread. It was instituted by God in Egypt in the night he delivered Israel from Egypt. The heart of the Passover feast is that a *lamb* was slaughtered and its blood put on the tops and sides of the doorframes of the houses where the lamb was eaten (Exod 12:7). God would in his judgment pass over the houses marked by the blood, for the sins of the people were atoned for by the blood of the lamb.

It was not to be a sumptuous meal; it was prepared with bitter herbs and the bread was to be unleavened. It was to be eaten standing, in haste, for the time to depart was nigh. The bitter herbs signify the bitterness of the slavery in Egypt. Unleavened bread speaks of the hasty departure. Leaven is also symbolic of *sin*, and this bread therefore pointed also to the holiness which is required among God's redeemed people.

It is important to note that the LORD intended this Passover not as a one-time occurrence, but as a feast to be celebrated annually. "This is a day you are to commemorate; for the generations to come you shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD – a lasting ordinance" (Exod 12:14). It would be a feast that lasted an entire week, beginning with the Passover itself and then continuing as the feast of unleavened bread. Its purpose was to assure Israel of atonement by the blood of the sacrifice and to convince the people to live in holiness before God.

Unfortunately, for extended periods of time Israel did not celebrate this feast. It was, however, maintained during the period that our Lord lived on earth. It was celebrated annually, in Jerusalem, and many people went up to partake in the festivities. Through the Passover the Lord God assured his people of righteousness (atonement) and impressed upon them the need for holiness and obedience (unleavened bread).

So the LORD gave to his people a visible sign of their admission into his covenant as well as a clear reminder of their continuation in his covenant. The signs were special gifts by which the LORD assured his people of the certainty of his covenant promises.

Holy Baptism

Baptism had long been used as a cleansing ritual to initiate proselytes into Israel. It was our Lord, however, who instituted it as the sign and seal of the new covenant. By it Christians were assured of their admission into that covenant. The

Lord himself decreed just before his ascension into heaven, “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit...” (Matt 28:19).

About adult baptism and its requirements there is little quarrel among Christians. But there has been throughout the ages much debate about the question whether infants should be baptized.

The underlying questions here are whether the old covenant is replaced by the new covenant and what the place is of infants (children) in this new covenant. If the children are included in it with their parents, it follows that they should also receive the sign of that new covenant, namely, holy baptism.

Earlier I pointed out that the suggestion regarding the physical nature of the old covenant (as distinguished from a spiritual new covenant) is to be rejected. While there may have been many more physical aspects in it, the old covenant also was spiritual. What is important now is to note that when the new covenant is announced by the prophets, this covenant (as every legitimate covenant) extends to the children.

I quote from Jeremiah, “They will be my people, and I will be their God. I will give them singleness of heart and action, so that they will always fear me for their own good and the good of their children after them. I will make an everlasting covenant with them...” (32:38-40). The basic covenantal declaration is: they will be my people and I will be their God. The element of the new covenant is: I will give them singleness of heart and action. God’s people will be directed only to his service. This singleness has been explained in Jeremiah 31 as “a new covenant.” And the extent of this covenant is: their own good and the good of their children after them. The children belong in the new covenant, just as they did in the old.

In this connection, see also Isaiah 59:21: “‘As for me, this is my covenant with them,’ says the LORD. ‘My Spirit, who is on you, and my words that I have put in your mouth will not depart from your mouth, or from the mouths of your children, or from the mouths of their descendants from this time on and forever,’ says the LORD.”

Consider also what we find in Ezekiel 37. This chapter, too, speaks of the time of the new covenant when God’s Spirit will dwell with his people. It refers to the fact that “David my servant will be their prince forever,” a clear reference to the kingship of Christ. In verse 25 we read, “They [the returned and restored exiles, the remnant of grace] will live in the land I gave to my servant Jacob, the land where their fathers lived. They and their children and their children’s children will live there forever...” In the coming era of restoration, when the kingdom of heaven is manifest, under the new covenant, also children have their undisputed, lawful place.

It is noteworthy that precisely those texts which speak prophetically of the new covenant, also speak emphatically of the place of the children within it. Not that this is surprising; for the covenant of love has always been a relationship between God and believers with their seed. Why would this suddenly be different

in the new covenant? Remember that new does not mean radically different but better in the sense of improved.

We note that in the new covenant the sign (baptism) is also given to females. In Acts 16 we read the history of Lydia and her baptism (which included also the members of her household). The administration of baptism to females has become possible, Paul explains elsewhere, because “all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:16-29). The distinctions which played a role under the old covenant are not valid anymore.

Females were not circumcised. They did not receive a special sign. But now in Christ a change has come: male and female are both baptized! The covenant is indeed new in the sense of better than before. There is in the new covenant expansion (females also receive the sign), not reduction (children are not excluded).

Baptism replaced circumcision

Baptism has replaced circumcision. This claim is made on the basis of what Paul has written in Colossians 2:11, 12: “In [Christ] you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.” It may be helpful at this point to take a closer look at this passage.

In this letter Paul is warning the Colossians against the dangers of Judaism. One point of contention was that Christians needed to be circumcised to belong to God’s people. We find the same issue mentioned at various places in the New Testament (e.g., Gal 2; Phil 3).

Paul’s response to the Judaizers is that Christians have already been circumcised! This did not take place, however, in a physical manner (“by the hands of men” with a scalpel) but with the circumcision “done by Christ.” Literally it says: the circumcision of Christ, i.e., the circumcision demanded by Christ and also given by him. What is this circumcision? Paul continues his argument with the words: “having been buried with him in baptism.” The believer’s circumcision took place when baptism was administered.

This is not just a matter of one proof-text. The important, underlying point is that circumcision is no longer necessary in the new covenant. Paul calls circumcision a form of “mutilation” (Phil 3:2). What has come in its place? We are buried and raised with Christ in baptism. We have begun a new life, become part of God’s covenant people, and this is signified and sealed when we are baptized. It is true that many of those who were baptized in the New Testament were adults. In their case faith is required (see Colossians 2:12, “raised with him through your faith in the power of God...”). But the fact that baptism replaces circumcision means that children share with their believing parents in the covenant of love.

The New Testament church does not administer circumcision, but baptizes

believers and their children. The signs have changed. But the riches of the covenant relationship have only grown. It has been said that infant baptism is not mentioned or demanded in the New Testament. Actually, the inclusion of children is a foregone conclusion, and what is obvious does not need to be stated. Children have always belonged to the covenant of God's love.

Baptist thinking

The Baptist movement (which rejects infant baptism) is large and varied. But despite the variations, the basic line of thinking is the same: before there can be baptism, there must be faith, and also evidence of faith. See Mark 16:16: "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned."

Baptists fail to take account of the fact, however, that Mark 16 speaks of a mission situation, where baptism is indeed administered to believers. We agree that faith is required for adult baptism. But we add that the promise of God extends to and is signified to the children of these converts, because this is the nature of God's covenant.

Baptism, however, does not speak to these people of God's promises, but of a believer's commitment. It is the capstone on one's faith. The activity and experience of man stand in the centre. One can say it in many different ways, but the bottom line is that God has to wait for our decisions.

Whereas Reformed believers fully respect the unity of the Bible in Old and New Testament, for many Baptists the Old Testament has little real value. Covenantal thinking is passé with the coming of Christ. The time of ancient Israel is gone and has no meaning for us; the only purpose of the Old Testament is, perhaps, to show how God once related to mankind.

Let me quote from a book by the Reformed theologian Dr. W. van't Spijker on the relation between baptism and circumcision (Dooop in Plaats van Besnijdenis, p. 25): "Old and new Baptists are mostly proponents of the free will of man and opponents of (the doctrine of) election. For most of them baptism is not an underlining of God's gracious promise, but the making public of their own internal decision. In baptism it is not so much a matter of God's promise, but our commitment. *It is not God's covenant with us, but our covenant with God*" (italics added). See on this topic also the brochure of Dr. J. Douma, *Infant Baptism and Conversion*.

Writing about the effect of Baptist individualism and biblicism, Van't Spijker adds another noteworthy sentence: "The new has been divorced from the old, grace from nature, the church from the people, and what is the worst: the grace of God has been divorced from the eternal mercy of God, and has been placed in the hands of a human being whose vision on faith has been reduced to one aspect of salvation."

Biblicism means that we base our thinking on one or more texts without having regard for the immediate and wider context as presented in the Bible. Scripture is not properly compared with Scripture. Then one element is stressed at

the cost of others, and people no longer have the complete picture.

The Lord's Supper

The other sign of the covenant, the Passover, has also been replaced. John the Baptist already introduced our Lord Jesus Christ as follows, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29).

It is noteworthy that Christ instituted the Lord's Supper *during* the Passover feast. Surely a closer connection could not be laid, and a clearer fulfillment can hardly be imagined. Our Lord took the common elements of the passover and made them into signs and seals of his suffering and death. "And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body given for you'." And then comes the institution, "Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19). The apostle Paul later writes in 1 Corinthians 5:7, "For Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed." The apostle also uses the imagery of the unleavened bread, when he writes, "Therefore let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth" (5:8).

With respect to the Lord's Supper, Paul writes, "In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you'" (Luke 22:20). Paul makes clear in 1 Corinthians 11:25 that the drinking from the cup also belongs to the ordinance of God: "Do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me."

We note again that in baptism and in the holy supper, there is no flowing of blood, as there was under the old covenant. The animal sacrifices have been fulfilled once for all by the shedding of the blood of Christ. The letter to the Hebrews expands on this theme: Christ "has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself" (Heb 9:26). The old covenant is fulfilled in the new.

Children at the Lord's Supper?

From time to time the problem of paedocommunion is raised, i.e., the question whether children ought to be admitted to the Lord's Supper. Some Baptists point out that the Reformed churches are quite inconsistent on this point. How can you demand paedobaptism on the one hand, they say, and refuse paedocommunion on the other? If infants have the right to the one sacrament, why not also allow them the other? Children no less than adults need to be spiritually nurtured, and the Lord's Supper would seem to be an effective means to that end.

This is not only a matter to which Baptists point. Within the circles of the World Council of Churches also one hears more and more the plea for paedocommunion. It cannot be denied that paedocommunion has been practised in one form or another ever since the early church, and it is now allowed in many established, mainstream churches. Are the Reformed Churches wrong in demanding that a

person make public profession of faith before being admitted to the Lord's Table?

We cannot deal at length with this matter, but we acknowledge its importance. As to the Reformed tradition, Martin Luther made a strong plea against paedocommunion (in his *Babylonian Captivity of the Church*). Luther's belief that young people must first be instructed was one of the reasons why he wrote his larger and smaller catechisms.

John Calvin followed in the footsteps of Luther. Calvin said that infant baptism is necessary because of the promises of God in his covenant with believers and their seed. He emphasized that as they grow up children must accept these promises in faith. Baptism and faith are therefore never to be separated. But neither must the Lord's Supper and faith be separated. And with respect to this sacrament, Calvin believed, the Bible demands knowledge and faith in those who participate in it.

The scriptural data in support of this view are found in the first letter to the Corinthians, where Paul deals with the manner in which the Lord's Supper was celebrated and where he gives certain rules. From that chapter we learn that the Lord's Supper requires from its participants a discerning, conscious faith (1 Cor 11:23-32). The Lord said with respect to this sacrament: do this in remembrance of me. Paul adds that when we eat the bread and drink of the cup, we proclaim the Lord's death. Remembering and proclaiming imply a certain level of understanding.

There is therefore a clear apostolic warning to those who participate in the celebration. Paul writes: "Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. A man ought to examine himself before he eats of the bread and drinks of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without recognizing the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment on himself" (1 Cor 11:27-29). Participation in the Lord's Supper demands self-examination and a recognition of the meaning and importance of the sacrament, and again, these requirements cannot be fulfilled without a certain level of knowledge and understanding.

Children must certainly be told the meaning of the Lord's Supper. This was also an order with respect to the old Passover. To the Israelites it was said, "And when your children ask you, 'What does this ceremony mean to you?' then tell them, 'It is the Passover sacrifice to the LORD who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when he struck down the Egyptians'" (Exod 20:26, 27). The Passover required explanation. Baptized children, who belong to God's covenant, must also be taught and guided, so that by God's grace they may learn to understand, appreciate, and embrace what Christ has done for them in his one sacrifice on the cross, and so reach the point where they may ask to be admitted to his Table. Reformed parents understand this and therefore stress parental responsibility and the need of covenantal education.

The Passover did not become the Lord's Supper. Rather, the Lord's Supper fulfilled the Passover, and added an element which the Passover did not have, namely the strong demand for self-examination in the light of Christ's one sacrifice

on the cross. To equate Passover and Lord's Supper is biblically wrong, just as it is incorrect, as we have seen, simply to equate circumcision and baptism. To determine who may celebrate the Lord's Supper, we must begin with what the New Testament itself says about this feast, and, comparing Scripture with Scripture, note the similarities and differences between this New Testament sacrament and the old Passover feast.