

## 17. THE COVENANT AND THE CHURCH

It is commonly accepted that Israel is God's covenant people of old. What is not always recognized, as we have seen in previous chapters, is that the New Testament speaks in the same terms about the church, which is today God's people in Christ. Everything that held true for God's people of old now holds true in even richer measure for God's people in the new covenant.

This applies to both the promises and the obligations of the covenant. In fact, the New Testament church stands under greater obligations, because it also shares the greater riches and blessings in Christ. Let us illustrate this from pertinent expressions in the Gospel and the apostolic letters.

### **Children of God**

John writes in his Gospel, "Yet to all who received him [Christ], those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God" (1:12, 13). Believers have the right to the designation "children of God."

This name did not just fall out of the sky. We read in Deuteronomy 14:1 that the LORD also said of Israel, "You are children of the LORD your God." Conversely, when the people of Israel rebel against the LORD and refuse to serve him, Moses says, "They have acted corruptly toward him; to their shame they are no longer his children, but a warped and crooked generation. Is this the way you repay the LORD, O foolish and unwise people? Is he not your Father, your Creator, who made you and formed you?" (Deut 32:5,6). The prophets constantly remind Israel that they must live and act as God's children (e.g. Isai 8:18, Jer 3:12f.).

The bond has now become much closer, however, because Christ, the only-begotten Son, has shown us the Father and given us his Spirit. "For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.' The Spirit himself testifies with our

Spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ" (Rom 8:15-17).

It is very important to see the covenant relationship as one between a heavenly *Father* and his earthly *children*. This is a relationship of love, a love that began from God's side. "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!" (1 John 3:1).

We are God's children by adoption through the sacrifice of the eternal, natural Son of God, who said before his ascension, "I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God" (John 20:17). We may call ourselves God's children in Christ, and this is a gift that we have received in the covenant, confirmed in the blood of Christ, our Saviour.

### **Children of Abraham**

When God made his covenant with Abraham, he chose him and his seed as the people out of whom the Messiah would be born. This was a high privilege, and the Jews, as Abraham's offspring, were proud of their heritage. When the Lord Jesus told the unbelieving Jews that they would be free only if they believed in him, they replied, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?" (John 8:33). The Lord then said that physically the Jews were Abraham's descendants, but in fact they were children of the devil. For the real children of Abraham are known by their love for Christ.

The apostle Paul comes back to this when he makes clear that Abraham is the father of all believers, Jews as well as Gentiles (Rom 4:16, 17). Later, when he discusses the sad reality that many Jews have rejected the Lord Jesus, he writes, "For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel. Nor because they are his descendants are they all Abraham's children. . . . In other words, it is not the natural children who are God's children, but it is the children of the promise who are regarded as Abraham's offspring" (Rom 9:6-9). True children of Abraham accept the Lord Jesus Christ as their Saviour.

In the letter to the Galatians, when Paul makes it clear that justification is by faith, he shows that this was true under both covenants. Abraham already was justified by faith. Paul adds, "Understand then that those who believe are children of Abraham" (Gal 3:7). The conclusion is that by faith we are sons of God, heirs of the covenant promises given to Abraham, and his (true) seed (Gal 3:26). The church of today is the seed of Abraham, the people of God's covenant.

### **Ingrafted branches**

The close union between the believers of today and the people of Israel is illustrated by the apostle Paul also in the discourse on the olive tree and the ingrafted branches, as we find it in Romans 11.

The people of Israel can be compared to an olive tree. It is a cultivated tree, as the NIV correctly indicates, one grown and selected to bring forth an abundant

harvest. It is also holy, dedicated to God (verse 16). The situation, however, is that some of the branches are broken off because of unbelief. They produced no fruit (cf. John 15 about the vine and the branches). Unbelieving Jews are cut away from the people of Israel.

In the place of these broken-off branches, wild olive shoots are grafted. These wild shoots are Christians from the Gentiles. Normally, such an experiment would be a risk. A wild branch does not produce cultured fruit. But here it does. Through grace and by faith these wild branches produce good fruit.

From all this Paul draws some important conclusions. The believers in the New Testament church, especially those from the Gentiles, are ingrafted into the true Israel, the covenant people of old. Therefore they are subject to the same rules: they must bring forth fruit or be cut off. We again see here the unity in the history of redemption. The believing Gentiles do not form a new church with all kinds of new laws and conditions; they are simply ingrafted into the covenant people of old. This should make them humble toward God and appreciative of his grace.

It is no wonder, then, that in the next chapter (12:1) the apostle urges the New Testament church “in view of God’s mercy” to bring proper thank offerings. This, too, is covenantal language: “...offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship.” The sacrifice we now bring is not a sacrifice of animals; it is a spiritual one, which has also physical implications (Paul speaks of “your bodies”). We give ourselves in faith and obedience through the Holy Spirit. Covenantal service has grown in meaning and depth since Christ’s ascension and the outpouring of his Spirit.

## **Examples and warnings**

I referred earlier, when dealing with the Exodus motif, to what is written in 1 Corinthians 10. There we noted the similarity between the Israel of old and the church of today. The people of old were “baptized” into Moses, and they “ate and drank” Christ. Despite these tremendous gifts, they turned to idolatry and were severely punished.

We cannot shrug off this account (and similar ones) and say, “Well, this was the Old Testament, it does not happen anymore today.” The apostle Paul reminds us of the bond we have with old Israel. God still deals with us in a covenantal manner, which means that obedience will be graciously blessed on the basis of God’s promise, and disobedience will incur wrath on the basis of God’s justice.

Paul therefore writes, “Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did” (1 Cor 10:6). And again, “These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come” (1 Cor 10:11).

Notice again the unity in covenant history. If Israel was punished for its idolatry, why do we think we will not be punished for the same sin? Israel’s punishment is an example for us, for we are one with this people of old, having the

same LORD and Saviour (verses 1-4).

We are warned in even stronger terms. For there is a difference in our situation which must not be overlooked. Paul describes us as people “on whom the fulfilment (the end) of the ages has come” (verse 11). We live in the last days. We know much more than Israel. Our Exodus is infinitely greater. We know of the death and resurrection of Christ. We share in the anointing of the Holy Spirit. God therefore expects more from us. This is the serious demand of the covenant today, “So if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall!” (verse 12).

Paul can apply to us in greater measure what applied to the Israel of old, because we are the covenant people of the LORD on a more solid basis, the sacrifice of Christ. *Noblesse oblige*: greater wealth means greater responsibility.

## Being separate

One of the characteristics of Israel’s life as a covenant people was that the antithesis with the nations had to be maintained. Having covenant status as God’s people meant breaking with the peoples around them and not sharing in their sins.

This separation did not have anything to do with a false feeling of superiority but was a rule given to preserve the holiness and integrity of Israel as God’s people. We find the same line of thinking in the New Testament. When the apostle Paul deals with the issue of mixed marriage, he writes, “Do not be yoked together with unbelievers” (2 Cor 6:14). His reason is that the church is “the temple of the living God” (6:16).

Paul then proceeds to demonstrate this from the Old Testament. He writes, “As God said: I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people.” God lives with his people, is present among them. The apostle quotes from Leviticus 26:12 and 13, “I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people. I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt so that you would no longer be slaves to the Egyptians; I broke the bars of your yoke....” Apparently this can without any further explanation be applied to the New Testament church.

Paul’s statement that we are the temple of the Lord (2 Cor 6:16) is important. For there lies the difference with the people of old. Here we see not only unity but also progress: then God dwelt *among* them, but He remained in the temple; now we are ourselves the temple of God, and He dwells *in* us through his Holy Spirit.

Then follows the command, “Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the LORD. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you.” This is taken from Isaiah 52:11, 12, where the exiles who return from Babylon are urged to leave and to take nothing along that might contaminate them. It is remarkable that the same warning regarding Babylon is found in Revelation 18:4, “Come out of her, my people,” do not share in her sins and go under in her plagues. Apparently this command stands until the end of history.

We today, like Israel of old, are in the world but not of the world, and must therefore keep ourselves from being polluted by the world (see also James 1:27).

If we do, we will experience in our time what is implied in God's promise: "I will be a Father to you and you will be my sons and daughters, says the LORD Almighty." This is a reference to Exodus 4 and Isaiah 43.

Paul uses these passages from Exodus, Leviticus, and Isaiah to show the present covenantal status of God's people and to provide a scriptural basis for the prohibition of a unity with those who do not belong to God's people. God has given us rich promises in the covenant, and Paul can therefore continue in 2 Corinthians 7:1, "Since we [the New Testament church] have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God."

Having been washed in the blood of Christ, we must remain holy and may not return to the lifestyle from which we were redeemed.

## **Hagar and Sarah**

I referred already to the letter to the Galatians, where Paul calls the New Testament believers children of Abraham and sons of God (3:7, 26). What interests us now is how Paul in the same letter makes references to Hagar and Sarah.

Paul explains that what is related about these two women may be taken figuratively (Gal 4:24). They represent two covenants. Hagar stands for the covenant made at Sinai, for the children of Abraham there became enslaved. They were subjected to a law they could not keep. The law could not deliver them, but actually bound them. This is the present Jerusalem in Palestine. Israel has become like Ishmael. But Sarah represents the *new* covenant. Paul writes, "But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother" (Gal 4:26).

It is not hard to see how Paul comes to these statements. "Hagar" is the way of the human will, of the flesh, of self-salvation. Hagar thinks she is free, but remains enslaved. That is what Israel became when it sought salvation by the works of the law. But Sarah is the way of the divine promise, of salvation by grace through faith. And this is what characterizes the New Testament church.

The church of Christ is the seed of Abraham, the child of Sarah, the people of the promise and of God's eternal covenant of love. It is connected not to the earthly Jerusalem with its laws and regulations, but to the Jerusalem above, where Christ is. It is therefore free, redeemed from sin and death. In this manner the apostle shows us our riches in Christ as people of the new covenant.

## **The dividing wall destroyed**

The letter to the Ephesians describes the riches we have in Christ. It tells us how we, who once were dead in our trespasses and sins, have been made alive in Christ. We are told in no uncertain terms that our salvation is a matter of grace, through faith (2:8-10).

Having pointed out our great blessings in Christ, the apostle goes on to remind

us that at one point we were far from such benefits. Like all Gentiles, we 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” (Eph 2:12). God had made a covenant with his people Israel alone; no others shared in it. It is true that there were a few exceptions, but they concerned individuals. Israel was the *only people* of the covenant.

This situation has changed radically. “But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ” (verse 13). It is the Lord Jesus who has opened the way also for the Gentiles to become God’s children. In this way the “dividing wall of hostility” that existed between Jew and Gentile has been broken down.

We know from Scripture and history that the inclusion of the Gentiles in the church was a point of contention among Jewish Christians. But Paul makes it very clear: the two have become united in Christ. This unity is not superficial or merely cosmetic, but goes deep, for Christ’s purpose was “to create in himself one new man out of the two” (verse 15).

We then read of the new status which Jew and Gentile have together in Christ: “Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household...” (verse 19). God includes the believing Gentiles in his people and recognizes them in Christ as belonging to his covenant nation.

In fact, there is no longer a covenant nation as before. The church of God is *catholic*: it is being gathered out of all tongues and nations, out of the whole world. This is precisely what God promised in paradise: the creation of a new humanity, cleansed by the blood of Christ, filled with his Spirit, living as his children.

From this passage it becomes clear that Christians everywhere may know themselves to be the people of God today, members of God’s household, the true Israel, with whom God has made an everlasting covenant.

It is something that should never cease to amaze us: once we were far away, but now we are part of the family of God. Paul calls this a mystery (Eph 3:3, 6), that is, something not known before but now revealed. The Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus. In the letter to the Colossians Paul makes similar assertions (1:21-23).

## **Be holy because I am holy**

There is another passage to which I want to refer, because it so clearly relates to our thesis that the New Testament church is the covenant people of God today. In Leviticus 11:44, 45 we read of the demand that God makes: “I am the LORD your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy. Do not make yourselves unclean by any creature that moves about on the ground. I am the LORD who brought you up out of Egypt to be your God; therefore be holy,

because I am holy.”

The demand of holiness is the theme of the book of Leviticus. God has delivered his people out of Egypt (Exodus), so that they might live before him in holiness and dedication (Leviticus). The word “holy,” meaning set aside and made pure, dedicated only to the LORD, occurs more often in the book of Leviticus than in any other Bible book, but it echoes throughout Scripture. The covenant is a holy covenant and God’s people are to be a holy priesthood.

It is for this holiness that Christ our Saviour shed his blood. I refer to 1 Corinthians 6:11, where Paul, speaking of former sins, says, “But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.” And the apostle John writes, “But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin” (1 John 1:7).

The apostle Peter takes these words from Leviticus and applies them to the New Testament church: “As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: be holy because I am holy” (1 Pet 1:14, 15). Paul makes a reference to the same holiness in 1 Thessalonians 4:7: God called us to live a holy life. John also mentions this requirement, “Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as he is pure” (1 John 3:3). The apostle Peter connects this holiness to “the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect” (1 Pet 1:19).

It is then but a step to speak of the church in these terms: “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God...” (1 Pet 2:9, 10). All these designations come from the Old Testament, where they always stand in connection with Israel’s status and duty as a covenant people. Exactly the same thing is now said of the holy, catholic, apostolic church. All God’s goodness that under the old covenant applied to Israel, applies through Christ to his church, the people of the new covenant. So does the demand to be a holy people.

In Hebrews 12:14 we read, “Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.” The renewal and sanctification of our life are requirements which we must take seriously. Otherwise we despise the grace of God. Covenantal living must place emphasis on the holiness of life. Redemption and renewal go together.

## **Bride and groom**

The relationship between God and his people in the covenant of love is sometimes described as one between a groom and his bride. The fact that we find this comparison not only in the Old Testament but also in the New provides another striking illustration of the continuity between the Israel of old and the church of today.

For many centuries the Song of Songs was seen as symbolic of the

relationship between Christ and his church. While I do not favour the allegorical interpretation, I am convinced that this book does contain symbolic elements. However, to delve into this matter would lead us too far afield. I therefore leave out a discussion of this Bible book and turn to other parts of the Old Testament.

The prophets especially use the metaphor of groom and bride. When Isaiah prophesies the restoration of Israel and the return of the exiles, he speaks God's word as follows: "Lift up your eyes and look around; all your sons gather and come to you. As surely as I live, declares the LORD, 'you will wear them all as ornaments; you will put them on, like a bride'" (Isa 49:18). The return of the exiles is like the homecoming of a bride, of a wife to her loving husband.

In Isaiah 61 (the passage from which the Lord Jesus later quoted in Nazareth's synagogue) we find great joy expressed: "I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom adorns his head like a priest, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels" (verse 10). See also Isaiah 62:5: "...as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so will your God rejoice over you."

God loves his people as a bridegroom loves his bride, and this love is joyfully reciprocated by the bride. This is the essence of the covenant of love.

Yet there is in the prophets also a bitter complaint. The bride has not always eagerly awaited her bridegroom, or been faithful to her husband. Instead she has committed harlotry and deeply grieved the one who loves her. In Jeremiah 2 we read the lament of the LORD over the unfaithful wife. "I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the desert..." (verse 2). But the bride turned away, "...you have lived as a prostitute with many lovers" (Jer 3:1ff.). Other prophets, like Ezekiel and Hosea, also speak of the bride's unfaithfulness to the groom who chose and redeemed her. What greater sin can be imagined? How can God continue to love an unfaithful bride?

Nevertheless, in the New Testament the Lord Jesus calls the church his bride whom he will sanctify by his blood and present without blemish before the Father. In many parables Christ speaks of the bridegroom, the bride, and the wedding feast. Paul describes his task as apostle in these terms: "I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy. I promised you to one husband, to Christ, so that I might present you as a pure virgin to him" (2 Cor 11:2).

The book of Revelation expands on the theme of the bride and the wedding feast. In Revelation 19:7 and 8 we read: "Let us rejoice and be glad and give him the glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean was given her to wear. (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints)." We also read, "Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!"

Bride and groom. The bride restored and prepared by the groom for life together on the new earth. Why? Because of the great love of the groom for his

bride; because the covenant of love is maintained through the ages.

The Lord loves me, for I belong to his bride. At our baptism it was rightly said that we will be cleansed from our sins and experience the daily renewal of our lives “until we shall finally be presented without blemish among the assembly of God’s elect in life eternal” (Form for the Baptism of Infants, *Book of Praise*, page 584). See also Ephesians 5:27 where Paul explains how Christ will present his church to himself “as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.”

We will stand beside the groom before the Father as a perfect bride.