

CHAPTER 7

OF GOD’S COVENANT WITH MAN

God’s grace in giving covenants

“1. The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God’s part, which he hath been pleased to express by way of covenant.”

It is right, proper, and necessary for all people to worship God as their Creator, regardless of his other benefits to us (Rom 1:18-21). On the other hand, we have no right to expect any other thing from God. All we are and have is by his grace alone. Any dealings God has with us are from condescension on his part; they stem from his grace (Ps 113:4-6).

Our Confession uses the term “covenant” to describe God’s communications and dealings with his creatures. This term is found often in the OT (Hebrew *brith*) and in the NT (Greek *diatheke*), where it is translated also as “testament.”

A covenant is an agreement or binding arrangement between two or more persons. Sometimes it is a treaty between equals (Gen 21:27, 32). Sometimes it is a rule imposed by a superior on an inferior (Exod 24:7). It is always a solemn and binding agreement.

The Bible mentions several great covenants God has made with his people. These are the most important biblical covenants:

- Covenant with Noah (Gen 9)
- Covenant with Abraham (Gen 12, 15, 17, 22), Isaac (Gen 26), and Jacob (Gen 28)
- Covenant with Moses (Exod 19-24; Lev 26; book of Deut, esp. ch. 28-30)
- Covenant with David (2 Sam 7; Ps. 89)
- The new covenant (Jer 31; Ezek 36; Heb 8)

The Westminster Confession uses the term also to describe theological covenants which are not explicitly named in the Bible, but whose terms are clearly stated. It names two such covenants: the covenant of works, and the covenant of grace. Theologians often add another, the covenant of redemption, which covers the truths discussed in Chapter 8. This chapter deals with the first two.

The covenant of works

“2. The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam, and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience.”

When God created man, he did not need to grant him eternal life. He could have decided to let man live a few years, and then disappear. But in his mercy and love, he gave Adam and Eve the means for living forever, along with their children. It appears that this life was available through the tree of life (Gen 2:9; 3:22).

Since Adam was already holy, he did not need salvation from sin; all he needed to do was to keep holy, to perfectly obey God’s law. This arrangement has been called in our standards the covenant of works. It also is called the covenant of life:

“What special act of providence did God exercise toward man in the estate wherein he was created? A. When God had created man, he entered into a covenant of life with him, upon condition of perfect obedience; forbidding him to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, upon the pain of death.” (WSC 12)

The covenant of works can be charted like this:

Parties	Condition	Reward	Punishment
God & Adam (for himself and his posterity)	Perfect obedience to God’s law	Life for him and his posterity	Death for him and his posterity

This covenant may be referred to in Hos 6:7 (depending on the translation of the Hebrew *adam* as either “Adam” or “man”). It was given to Adam personally by God, and its consequences were applied to all his descendants (Gen 2:15-17; Rom 5:12-19).

The covenant of grace

“3. Man by his fall having made himself incapable of life by that covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the Covenant of Grace: whereby he freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ, requiring of them faith in him, that they may be saved; and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto life his Holy Spirit to make them willing and able to believe.

“4. This covenant of grace is frequently set forth in Scripture by the name of a Testament, in reference to the death of Jesus Christ the testator, and to the everlasting inheritance, with all things belonging to it, therein bequeathed.”

All people since Adam and Eve have lived under the terms of this covenant of grace. God in his mercy has invited everyone to come to Christ in faith to receive life and salvation. All people need to do is believe on the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 16:31). This salvation is available because of the sufferings of Jesus Christ, and therefore is called the covenant of grace. It can be charted as follows:

Parties	Condition	Reward	Punishment
God & the sinner	Saving faith	Life & salvation	Death & judgment for sin

This covenant of grace is the wonderful message of salvation that we are to carry to all the world. We can still be forgiven and have eternal life. Faith is the only human requirement (Eph 2:8-9; Gal 2:16).

But notice the ending of paragraph 3. We are such miserable sinners that even this simple faith is impossible in our own strength. Therefore, part of the covenant of grace is the truth that God gives to his elect ones the gift of the Holy Spirit, who makes them willing and able to accept the gospel (John 6:44-45; Eph 2:1-5; 2 Thess 2:13-14).

Paragraph 4 points out that the Greek word for “covenant” can also be translated in some contexts as “testament,” as in a “will and testament.” It seems that it is better translated “covenant” everywhere it is found in the NT, except in Heb 9:15-17, where a last testament is clearly being referred to. By Jesus’ death we, the heirs, receive our inheritance (Eph 1:11, 14, 18).

Dispensations under the covenant of grace

Under the covenant of grace the Confession recognizes the two main dispensations that God has instituted. A “dispensation” is a period of time during which the covenant of grace is administered in a particular and distinctive way. All Reformed theologians recognize the existence of various dispensations, yet they believe that the Bible identifies them all as outworkings of the one covenant of grace.

The OT dispensation

“5. This covenant was differently administered in the time of the law, and in the time of the gospel: under the law it was administered by promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the paschal lamb, and other types and ordinances delivered to the people of the Jews, all foreshadowing Christ to come, which were for that time sufficient and efficacious, through the operation of the Spirit, to instruct and build up the elect in faith in the promised Messiah, by whom they had full remission of sins, and eternal salvation; and is called the Old Testament.”

During OT times God directed his people to do different things than they do now. This difference is important enough to be called a separate “dispensation,” or “administration” of God’s purposes. Notice the ways God administered the covenant of grace during those centuries:

- Promises (Gen 3:15)
- Prophecies (Gen 49:10)

- Sacrifices (Lev 4)
- Circumcision (Gen 17:9-14)
- Paschal lamb (Exod 12:1-14, 43-48)

All of these elements in the OT foreshadowed Christ, who was to come (Col 2:16-17; esp. Heb 8-10).

These promises and ordinances were sufficient to teach the elect in Israel, so that they had true saving faith in the Messiah who was coming. OT saints were saved by faith, just as NT saints (Gen 15:6, which is quoted in 3 NT passages—Rom 4:3, 9, 22; Gal 3:6; Jas 2:23; see also Heb 11:13).

The NT dispensation

“6. Under the gospel, when Christ the substance was exhibited, the ordinances in which this covenant is dispensed are the preaching of the Word, and the administration of the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, which, though fewer in number, and administered with more simplicity and less outward glory, yet in them it is held forth in more fullness, evidence, and spiritual efficacy, to all nations, both Jews and Gentiles; and is called the New Testament. There are not therefore two covenants of grace differing in substance, but one and the same under various dispensations.”

Colossians 2:17 states that Jesus Christ is the body that casts the shadow seen in the OT ordinances. Since his coming, these ordinances are no longer needed (Heb 8:13).

The new ordinances of the church are these:

- Preaching the Word
- Sacrament of baptism
- Sacrament of the Lord’s Supper

These ordinances, compared with those in the OT, are fewer and simpler. Yet they are more powerful in their teaching and effect (cf. Heb 12:22-29).

One of the most remarkable things in the NT dispensation is that we do not have to become Jews to have equal standing in the church. This fact was a mystery not revealed until after Christ came (Eph 2:15-19; 3:1-13).

The last sentence of this chapter is most important. There is only one covenant of grace governing both dispensations. A “covenant theologian” is one who recognizes the over-arching covenant of grace.

What is a dispensationalist? A dispensationalist believes that the NT church is entirely separate from Israel, with different promises, purposes, and destiny. We believe that the church

is grafted into Israel, and receives the same promises and destiny with the elect of all ages. Therefore, we are not dispensationalists.