

AN OVERVIEW OF THE BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION OF COVENANT BAPTISM

The Nature of the Covenant

Covenant baptism is based upon the Covenant of Grace. Before proceeding to develop a biblical framework for covenant baptism, a brief introduction to the nature of a covenant and the Covenant of Grace is necessary.

What is a covenant? A covenant is a divinely instigated contract between God and man that declares that God has bound himself in relationship to his people for their good and to his glory through Christ (Keddie 1996, 6-7). The covenant calls for something. The covenant calls for a response of faith in God's promise of salvation. Every covenant is a call of faith to that which God has promised and bound himself.

It should be understood that a covenant between God and man is more than a contractual agreement. A covenant, at its center, is a relationship between the Creator and the creature, between the King and his vassal, between the Father and his child.

Herman Hoeksema writes:

But the essence of the covenant is to be sought in this living relation of friendship whereby God the Lord is the sovereign friend of his people, and they are the Lord's friend-servants, partaking of his fellowship, by grace possessing and manifesting in his life and fighting the battle of his cause in the midst of the world. (Hoeksema 1997, 65)

What is the Covenant of Grace? Following the fall of Adam, God entered into a gracious pact in Christ between himself, the offended, and man, the offender. In it, God graciously promises remission of sins and salvation to man, who in response, relying upon that same grace in Christ promises to live in faith and obedience toward God

(Turretin, Loc. 12, ques 2, part 5). It is the self-binding of God to his elect people through the grace procured by Christ. This grace calls for a response of faith in Christ alone and repentance from our sinful rebellion toward God. The Covenant of Grace is in essence the context and contract through which God calls a people unto himself through the gospel.

This Covenant of Grace progressively unfolds in an organic and progressive manner through Scripture (Golding 2004, 145). The unfolding manner of the Covenant of Grace is seen in its six administrations. They are the inauguration of the Covenant of Grace in Genesis 3:15, the Noahic Covenant in Genesis 6:18 and Genesis 9:9-17, the Abrahamic Covenant in Genesis 12:1-3, the Mosaic Covenant in Exodus 19:5-6, the Davidic Covenant in 2 Samuel 7:12-17, and the New Covenant in Hebrews 8:7-13 (Keddie 1996, 13-15).

God's plan in Scripture is singular. It is hard to conceive of it in any other way when the omnipotence, wisdom and omniscience of God are considered. God is not using the empirical method of experimentation in the Old Testament to see how man may or may not respond. Rather, God's saving purposes are an unfolding of the singular great promise that binds all of Scripture together. This unfolding of God's great covenant promise is presented in terms of a number of covenant renewals that each give new insight to God's singular purpose.

The Inauguration of the Covenant of Grace

The inauguration of the Covenant of Grace is given in Genesis 3:15 (Berkhof 1941, 293). Herman Bavinck writes, "In this mother-promise, is contained nothing less than the announcement and institution of the Covenant of Grace" (Bavinck 1956, 271).

In Genesis 3:15, God gives the original promise of the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. Scripture as a whole will unfold regarding the redemption of God's people from this one verse. The grace of God is revealed in this promise when God says to a fallen Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:15, "And I will put enmity between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise you on the head, and you will bruise him on the heel."

What does God promise in this verse? A detailed discussion will follow but, in summary, here God promises to Adam as the federal head of the human race that a deliverer will come from the seed of the woman. God will raise up a champion from the line of the woman who through His own suffering will crush the devil and his works. Thus, this verse is called the "protoevangelium", the first gospel (Reymond 1998, 406).

The Noahic Covenant

The next covenant seen in Scripture is the covenant with Noah. The Noahic Covenant is presented in Genesis 6:18; 8:20-22; 9:11-17. This covenant can be referred to as the covenant of preservation (Robertson 1980, 109). It establishes the fact that God is going to preserve the arena upon which the work of redemption is going to occur. Despite man's sinfulness, God promises not to destroy the earth until his purpose of redemption is accomplished.

The Noahic covenant points to the relationship between creation and redemption (Robertson 1980, 110). It points to the fact that God is going to preserve the whole earth for the sake of saving his people. By material creation, man is tied to the earth. He is body and soul. If God's people are to be redeemed through the physical seed of the woman, then the earth must remain intact.

The Noahic covenant has a symbol. Just as the tree of life served as a symbol in the covenant of works, the rainbow is given for Noah and his descendants. This symbol emphasizes the unilateral, unconditional and universal scope of this covenant (Keddie 1996, 13). This continuous observable symbol was placed in the heavens so that people would know that God would not destroy the earth again by flood (Murray 1953, 13). The rainbow is a testimony to God's faithfulness and grace, not man's faithfulness or faith (Vos 1948, 55).

The Abrahamic Covenant

The next covenant given in Scripture is God's covenant with Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3; Genesis 15; Genesis 17). This is not a separate covenant, but the unfolding of the original covenant promise commitment of Genesis 3:15 (Golding 2004, 152). This is the formal establishment of the Covenant of Grace (Berkhof 1941, 295). What was suggested to Adam now is clearly presented to Abram.

In the Abrahamic Covenant, God instituted a covenant relationship with Abram and promised to him, along with several other commitments, that his seed will be a blessing to all the nations of the earth.

There are several emphases in the Abrahamic Covenant that should be noted. First, the covenant with Abraham emphasized the need to respond in faith to God's promises. In Genesis 15, Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. Through this passage in the Abrahamic Covenant, the foundational truth of righteousness by faith is underscored. This is the only means Scripture reveals for a right relationship to God.

Second, the cutting of the covenant in Genesis 15 placed a strong emphasis upon the absolute and unilateral aspect of God's saving purposes. It is God, himself, who will fulfill the responsibility of both parties in the covenant relationship (Westerink 1997, 17-18).

Third, the promise to Abraham marked out God's elective purposes not only in an individual life, but it also underscored the fact that God works through families. God said that through Abraham's seed all the nations of the earth would be blessed. The Abrahamic Covenant states that God is going to work this covenant promise through a family (Golding 2004, 154).

Fourth, in the Abrahamic Covenant, the nations of the earth will be blessed through Abraham's seed. This is what was already said in Genesis 3:15. The seed that will destroy the devil and therefore bless the nations will come through Abraham (Reymond 1998, 512-513).

The mark of the Abrahamic Covenant is circumcision. As with Noah, God gives Abraham a symbol to remind him that he will keep his covenant promise. In the Abrahamic Covenant, male children were to be circumcised. It is a testimony to God's faithfulness, not Abraham's. Just as the rainbow is a testimony to his faithfulness that he will not destroy the earth again, circumcision is a testimony to Abraham that God will be faithful to what he has said (Strawbridge 2003, 94).

The Mosaic Covenant

The next covenant that God established, about 400 years later, is the covenant with Moses (Exodus 19:5-6; 2 Corinthians 3). Again, it is the same covenant of Genesis 3:15, unfolded with further truth about God's people (à Brakel 1975, 4, 404).

The Mosaic Covenant emphasizes the fact that the people of God are to live in sacred relationship to Him. This covenant centered on a statement in Exodus 6:7 that is foundational to the entire Covenant of Grace. The sovereign God states in Exodus 6:7 "Then I will take you for My people, and I will be your God."

The Mosaic Covenant emphasizes that this relationship was to be one marked by holiness and law (Golding 2004, 156). The covenant with Moses centers on the fact that God's people are to be different because God is different. As the Scripture says, "You shall be holy, for I am holy." The covenant with Moses outlines the relationship that God's people are to have with him. It specifies what it means to obey God's voice. It externalizes and clarifies the will of God (Robertson 1980, 172). In this sense, the Abrahamic Covenant and Mosaic Covenant are not to be understood as different but unified. Both call God's people to heed the voice of God (Murray 1953, 20-22).

The Mosaic Covenant also outlines how man condemned by the law can receive forgiveness. In this covenant, God enacted the detailed and exacting sacrificial system to demonstrate the need for redemption. Both of these marks sealed the Covenant of Grace in the lives of the Old Testament saints (à Brakel 1975, 4, 408).

This covenant, above all, points to man's inability to keep the perfect law of God. Apart from the death of God's Son, the perfect Lamb, there could be no ultimate forgiveness of sins. God built into this sacrificial system a sense of incompleteness. It had

to be repeated over and over again. He was showing his people that the blood of goats and sheep simply cannot remove sin.

What were the marks of the covenant made during the time of Moses?

Circumcision continued and the Passover began at this point. Male children on the eighth day were circumcised and proselytes were circumcised as adults upon reception into the covenant community. Passover was observed annually as familial and national memorial to the nation's deliverance from Egypt.

The Davidic Covenant

About 400 years after the Mosaic Covenant, God instituted the Davidic covenant (2 Samuel 7:12-17; Psalm 89:34). The substance of the covenant is found in the words of Nathan the prophet responding to David's desire to build a temple instead, ironically, God states that He will build a house (dynasty) for David (Zinkland 1984, 37). Nathan declares to David, "Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever" (2 Samuel 7:16).

The Davidic covenant was absolute in nature and declared that there will always be a ruler upon the throne of David. It is clearly Messianic in nature (Keddie 1996, 14). John Murray writes, "These Davidic promises are, of course, messianic; it is in Christ that David's seed is established forever and his throne is built to all generations" (Murray 1953, 23).

The Davidic Covenant would continue through David's natural line about four hundred years (Robertson 1980, 239). The line of David was then cursed by God for its disobedience. The fulfillment of God's promise to David was brought about through the

line of David in the birth of the Messiah. The symbols in the Davidic Covenant are the same as the Mosaic Covenant, circumcision and Passover.

The New Covenant

With the coming of Christ came the arrival of the New Covenant (Luke 1:67-79; Acts 2:39; 2 Corinthians 3:6; Hebrews 8:7-13). The former covenants were now obsolete in the way that they were presented. They were only types and symbols. The reality is the New Covenant in Christ. It is still the same covenant, but this is the brilliance of what was once only a shadow. As John Zinkand writes, “The new covenant builds on and fulfills the well known Old Testament covenants. But it is more than the sum of the Old Testament covenant parts for it is the final and lasting covenant” (Zinkand, 1984, 111).

The New Covenant is the fulfillment of God’s unfolding plan for his people. It alone brings man, by faith in Christ, into the fullest restoration of fellowship with God that is available in our fallen world (’a Brakel 1976, 4, 506-510). This is the fulfillment of God’s purposes in this world. This is the end of God’s purposes in his fallen creation. The New Covenant places a greater emphasis upon the universal nature of God’s purposes, the fullness of God’s grace in Christ and on greater benefits given to believers after the work of Christ is completed (Berkhof 1941, 300).

The culmination of the Covenant of Grace is a new heaven and a new earth. Ultimately, Satan, sin and death will be destroyed. In the New Covenant, Jesus Christ comes and fulfills. He is the deliverer spoken of at the beginning of the book of Genesis. He is the one for whom the world has been preserved. He is the one who would be the seed who would come through Abraham to bless all the nations of the earth. He is the one

who keeps the perfect law of God and who is the true Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He is the king who lasts forever and who will reign upon the throne. He is the fulfillment of all the promises of God throughout the Old Testament that one great promise unfolded throughout Scripture.

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