



# CHRIST THE KING

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN AMERICA

## The Sacraments

### Lecture 2 - The Covenantal Context for Discussing the Sacraments

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#### I. A brief overview of Covenant theology (Systematic Formulations)

##### A. The Covenant of Redemption:

As Reformed theology began to develop a full-orbed Covenant theology in the 17th century, the Reformed placed great stress upon the relationship between God's eternal decree to save his elect, and the actualization of that decree in time and space. Thus the covenant of redemption attempts to link God's decree with its execution in time. According to Eugene Osterhaven, the covenant of redemption is defined as “the eternal pact between the Father and the Son whereby the Father commissioned the Son to be the Savior and gave him a people. The Son agreed to fulfill all righteousness and give his life for the salvation of humankind. Thus, before the foundation of the world a covenantal relationship existed in the Godhead as an archetype of that which was to appear later in history. Scriptural support stemmed from John 3:16; 5:20, 22, 36; 10:17, 18; 17:2, 4, 6, 9, 24; Ps 2:7, 8; Heb. 1:8-13.” [Osterhaven, “Covenant,” ERT, 85]. There is a debate within the Reformed tradition about this particular covenant. Some see it as one and the same with the covenant of grace [cf. The Westminster Larger Catechism, Q 31.], while others see the covenant of redemption as a different mode or phase of the one evangelical covenant of mercy. [cf. Berkhof, ST, 265].

##### B. The Covenant of Works (Also called the Covenant of Creation)

According to the Westminster Confession of Faith, the covenant of works can

be defined as follows:

“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 (VII. ii.)”

According to Osterhaven, this covenant

“consisted of the promise of eternal life and confirmation in righteousness for Adam if he would be obedient throughout a probationary period and death if he were disobedient.”

According to Louis Berkhof there are a number of important elements in this covenant. All of

“the elements of a covenant are clearly present: In the case under consideration [the first three chapters of Genesis] two parties are named [God and Adam representing the human race], a condition is laid down [perfect obedience], a promise of reward for obedience is clearly implied [eternal life], and a penalty for transgression is threatened [death].” [Berkhof, ST, 213].

Let us look at these in more detail \* [The following discussion taken from Berkhof, ST, 215-217].

**1. *The Contracting Parties:*** On the one hand there was the triune God, the Creator and Lord, and on the other, Adam as His dependent creature. A twofold relationship between the two should be distinguished:

**a. *The natural relationship.*** When God created man, He by that very fact established a natural relationship between Himself and man. It was a relationship like that between the potter and the clay, between an absolute sovereign and a subject devoid of any claim . . . As a creature of God man was naturally under the law, and was duly bound to keep it. And while transgression of the law would render him liable to punishment, the keeping of it would not constitute an inherent claim to reward. Even if he did all that was required of him, he would still have to say, I am but an unprofitable servant.

**b. *The covenant relationship.*** From the very beginning however, God revealed Himself, not only as absolute Sovereign and Lawgiver, but also as a loving Father, seeking the welfare and happiness of His dependent creature. He condescended to come down to the level of man, to reveal Himself as a

friend, and to enable man to improve his condition in the way of obedience. In addition to the natural relationship He, by a positive enactment, graciously established a covenant relationship. He entered into a legal compact with man, which included as the requirements implied in the creaturehood of man, but at the same time added some new elements.

(1) Adam was constituted the representative head of the human race, so that he could act for all his descendants.

(2) He was temporarily put on probation, in order to determine whether he would willingly subject his will to the will of God.

(3) He was given the promise of eternal life in the way of obedience, and thus by the gracious disposition of God acquired certain conditional rights. This covenant enabled Adam to obtain eternal life for himself and for his descendants in the way of obedience.

2. *The Promise of the Covenant.* The great promise of the covenant of works was the promise of eternal life . . . The threatened penalty clearly implies such a promise. When the Lord says “for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die,” his statement clearly implies that, if Adam refrains from eating, he will not die, but will be raised above the possibility of death . . . The promise of life in the covenant of works was a promise of the removal of all limitations of life to which Adam was still subject, and of the raising of his life to the highest degree of perfection. When Paul says in Rom. 7:10 that the commandment was unto life, he means life in the fullest sense of the word. The principle of the covenant of works was: the man that does these things shall live thereby; and this principle is reiterated time and time again in Scripture, Lev. 18:5; Ezek. 20:11, 13, 20; Luke 10:28; Rom. 10:5; Gal. 3:12.

3. *The Condition of the Covenant.* The promise of the covenant of works was not unconditional. The condition was that of implicit and perfect obedience. The divine law can demand nothing less than that, and the positive command not to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, relating as it did, to a thing indifferent to itself, was clearly a test of pure obedience in the absolute sense of the word.

4. *The Penalty of the Covenant.* The penalty that was threatened was death, and what this means can best be gathered from the general meaning of the term as it was used in Scripture, and from the evils that came upon the guilty

in the execution of the penalty. Evidently death in the most inclusive sense of the word is meant, including physical, spiritual, and eternal death.

**5. *The Sacrament of the Covenant.*** The tree of life . . . We should not think of the fruit of this tree as magically or medically working immortality in Adam's frame. Yet it was in some way connected with the gift of life. In all probability it must be conceived of as an appointed symbol or seal of life. Consequently, when Adam forfeited the promise, he was debarred from the sign. So conceived the words of Gen. 3:22 must be understood sacramentally.

It is interesting, I think, to note that the sacramental Tree of Life, reappears in the New Jerusalem (Ezekiel 47:12; Revelation 22:2-3)

### **C. The Covenant of Grace** (Also called the Covenant of Redemption)

The Westminster Confession defines the covenant of grace as follows (Chapter VIII):

**III.** Man, by his fall having made himself incapable of life by that covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second [covenant] 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.

**IV.** This covenant of grace is frequently set forth in the 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.

**V.** 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 fore-signifying 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.

**VI.** 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.

According to Louis Berkhof, it is important to set out the contrasts and the similarities between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace.

\* [The following is taken from Berkhof, ST, 272].

**1. *Points of similarity.*** The points of agreement are of a rather general nature. The two covenants agree as to:

- (a) The author: God is the author of both; He only could establish such covenants.
- (b) The contracting parties, which are in both cases God and man.
- (c) The external form, namely condition and promise.
- (d) The contents of the promise which is in both cases eternal life.
- (e) The general aim, which is the glory of God.

**2. *Points of difference***

- (a) In the covenant of works God appears as Creator and Lord; in the covenant of grace, as redeemer and father. The establishment of the former was prompted by God's love and benevolence; that of the latter, by His mercy and special grace.
- (b) In the covenant of works man appears simply as God's creature, rightly related to his God; in the covenant of grace he appears as a sinner who has perverted his ways, and can only appear as a party in Christ, the Surety. Consequently, there is no mediator in the former, while there is in the latter.
- (c) The covenant of works was contingent on the uncertain obedience of a changeable man, while the covenant of grace rests on the obedience of Christ as Mediator, which is absolute and certain.
- (d) In the covenant of works the keeping of the law is the way of life; in

the covenant of grace, it is faith in Jesus Christ. Whatever faith was required in the covenant of works was a part of the righteousness of the law; in the covenant of grace, however, it is merely the organ by which we take possession of the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

(e) The covenant of works was partly known by nature, since the law of God was written in the heart of man; but the covenant of grace is known exclusively through a positive special revelation.

### 3. *The contents of the covenant of grace:*

\* [Again, the following is taken from Berkhof, ST, 277 ff]

**a.** *The promises of God.* The main promise of God, which includes all other promises, is contained in the oft-repeated words, “I will be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee.” Gen. 17:7. This promise is found in several Old and New Testament passages which speak of the introduction of a new phase of covenant life, or refer to a renewal of the covenant, Jer. 31:33; 32:38-40; Ezek. 34:23-25, 30, 31; 36:25- 28; 37:26, 27; II Cor. 6:16-18; Heb. 8:10 . . . This one promise [Jehovah is my God] really includes all other promises, such as

(a) The promise of various temporal blessings, which often serve to symbolize those of a spiritual kind.

(b) The promise of justification, including the adoption of children, and a claim to life eternal.

(c) The promise of the Spirit of God for the application, full and free, of the work of redemption and of all the blessings of salvation.

(d) The promise of a final glorification in a life that never ends. Cf. Job 19:25-27; Ps. 16:11; 73:24-26; Isa. 43:25; Jer. 31:33, 34; Ezek. 36:27; Dan. 12:2, 3; Gal. 4:5, 6; Tit. 3:7; Heb. 11:7; Jas. 2:5.

**b.** *The Response of Man.* The assent or response of man to these promises of God naturally appears in various forms, the nature of the response to be determined by the promises [more on this below].

### 4. *The Characteristics of the Covenant of Grace*

**a.** *It is a gracious covenant.* This covenant may be called a gracious covenant:

(a) because in it God allows a Surety to meet our obligations



**(b)** because He Himself provides the Surety in the person of His Son, who meets the demands of justice

**(c)** because by His grace, revealed in the operation of the Holy Spirit, he enables man to live up to his covenant responsibilities. The covenant originates in the grace of God, is executed in virtue of the grace of God, and is realized in the lives of sinners by the grace of God. It is grace from beginning to end for the sinner.

**b.** *It is a Trinitarian Covenant.* The Triune God is operative in the covenant of grace. It has its origin in the elective love and grace of the Father, finds its judicial foundation in the suretyship of His Son, and is fully realized in the lives of sinners only by an effective application of the Holy Spirit, John 1:16; Eph. 1:1-14; 2:8; I Pet. 1:2.

**c.** *It is an eternal and therefore unbreakable covenant.* When we speak of it as an eternal covenant, we have reference to a future rather than a past eternity. Gen. 17:19; II Sam. 23:5; Heb. 13:20 . . . God remains forever true to His covenant and will invariably bring it to full realization in the elect.

**d.** *It is a particular and not a universal covenant . . .* The New Testament dispensation of the covenant may be called universal in the sense that in it the covenant is extended to all nations, and is no more limited to the Jews, as it was in the old dispensation.

**e.** *It is essentially the same in all dispensations, though its form of administration changes . . .* The unity of the covenant in all dispensations is proved by the following:

**(1)** The summary expression of the covenant is the same throughout, both in the Old and New Testament: "I will be thy God." It is the expression of the essential content of the covenant with Abraham, Gen. 17:7, of the Sinaitic covenant, Ex. 19:5; 20:1, of the covenant of the plains of Moab, Deut. 29:13, of the Davidic covenant, II Sam. 7:14, and of the new covenant, Jer. 31:33; Heb. 8:10. This promise is really an all-comprehensive summary and contains a guarantee of the most perfect covenant blessings. Christ infers from the fact that God is called the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, that those patriarchs are in possession of eternal life, Matt. 22:32.

**(2)** The Bible teaches that there is but a single gospel by which men can

be saved. And because the gospel is nothing but the revelation of the covenant of grace, it follows that there is also but one covenant. This gospel was already heard in the maternal promise, Gen. 3:15, was preached unto Abraham, Gal. 3:8, and may not be supplanted by any Judaistic gospel, Gal. 1:8, 9.

(3) Paul argues at length over against the Judaists that the way in which Abraham obtained salvation is typical for New Testament believers, no matter whether they be Jews or Gentiles, Rom. 4:9-25; Gal. 3:7-9, 17, 18. He speaks of Abraham as the father of believers, and clearly proves that the covenant with Abraham is still in force. It is perfectly clear from the argument of the apostle in Rom. 4 and Gal. 3 that the law has not annulled nor altered the covenant. Cf. Also Heb. 6:13-18.

(4) The Mediator of the covenant is the same yesterday, to-day, and forever, Heb. 13:8. In none other is there salvation, John 14:6; for neither is there any other name under heaven, that is given among men, whereby we must be saved, Acts 4:12. The seed promised to Abraham is Christ, Gal. 3:16, and those that are identified with Christ are the real heirs of the covenant, Gal. 3:16-29.

(5) The way of salvation revealed in the covenant is the same. Scripture insists on the identical conditions all along, Gen. 15:6, compared with Rom. 4:11; Heb. 2:4; Acts 15:11; Gal. 3:6, 7; Heb. 11:9. The promises for the realization of which believers hoped, were also the same, Gen. 15:6; Ps. 51:12; Matt. 13:17; John 8:56. And the sacraments, though differing in form have essentially the same signification in both dispensations, Rom. 4:11; I Cor 5:7; Col. 2:11, 12. [Thus, it is important to notice that the Baptist and memorialist not only have to prove that the sign changes between the administration of the Old and New Covenants, but that so does the thing signified].

**f.** [*The covenant of grace*] is both conditional and unconditional. On the one hand the covenant is unconditional. There is in the covenant of grace no condition that can be considered as meritorious. The sinner is exhorted to repent and believe, but his faith and repentance do not in any way merit the blessings of the covenant . . . In a sense it may be said that God Himself fulfills the condition in the elect . . . We may say that faith is the condition *sine qua non* of justification, but the reception of faith itself in regeneration is



not dependent on any condition, but only on the operation of the grace of God in Christ. On the other hand it is conditional. There is a sense in which the covenant is conditional. If we consider the basis of the covenant, it is clearly conditional on the surety-ship of Jesus Christ. In order to introduce the covenant of grace, Christ had to, and actually did, meet the conditions originally laid down in the covenant of works, by his active and passive obedience. Again, it may be said that the covenant is conditional as far as the first conscious entrance into covenant as a real communion of life is concerned. This entrance is contingent on faith, a faith, however, which is itself a gift of God . . . it is only through faith that we can obtain a conscious enjoyment of the blessings of the covenant . . . It would seem perfectly proper to speak of a condition in connection with the covenant of grace,

- (1) the Bible clearly indicates that the entrance upon the covenant life is conditioned on faith, John 3:16, 36; Rom. 10:9.
- (2) Scripture often threatens covenant children, but these threatenings apply exactly to those who ignore the condition, that is, who refuse to walk in the way of the covenant.
- (3) If there were no condition, God would only be bound by the covenant, and there would be no “bond of covenant” for man (but cf. Ezek. 20:37); and thus the covenant of grace would lose its character as a covenant, for there are two parts in all covenants.

#### **D. The sacraments of the covenant of grace.**

If the two sacraments instituted by our Lord are, in fact, signs and seals of the gracious promises given by God to his people under the covenant of grace, then the sacraments of the New Testament (Baptism and the Lord's Supper) stand in substantial continuity with those they supersede (circumcision and the Passover). Though with the coming of Christ — the one mediator of that covenant — the sign itself may change, but the thing signified does not since the mediator and the promises made in him remain the same. Since baptism replaces circumcision as the sign of promise (Col. 2:11-12) there is no reason to believe that the thing signified (the forgiveness of sin and regeneration) changes as well (baptism understood only as a human testimony of the presence of regeneration and not a sign of God's promise of regeneration and the forgiveness of sins). In fact, just the opposite seems to be true (Romans 4:11 with Acts 2:39 — note that Luke uses the term *teknon*, meaning “child,”

but which is used in secular Greek for embryo — [cf. BAG, s.v. “*teknon*”]). The same continuity is evident in the words of institution for the Lord's Supper, when Jesus speaks of the sacrament as the “blood of the covenant,” Matthew 26:28 with Exodus 24:8 ff). This will take on added significance and serve to support the practice of infant baptism when we look at biblical-theological concerns and the distinction between covenants of law (which are ratified by the oath of the people of God) and covenants of promise (which are ratified by God himself).

## II. The Covenants in Redemptive History (Biblical Theological Considerations)

### A. What is a covenant?

1. Reformed discussions in the 16th century speak of covenants in terms of *mutual* agreements between God and humanity. According to Zacharius Ursinus, “A covenant in general is a *mutual* contract, or agreement between two parties, in which the one party binds itself to the other to accomplish something upon certain conditions, giving or receiving something, which is accompanied with certain outward signs and symbols, for the purpose of ratifying in the most solemn manner the contract entered into . . .” Furthermore, “we may define [a covenant] as a *mutual* promise and agreement, between God and men, in which God gives assurance to men that he will be merciful to them, remit their sins, grant unto them a new righteousness, the Holy Spirit, and eternal life by and for the sake of his Son, our Mediator. And, on the other side, men bind themselves to God in this covenant that they will exercise repentance and faith, or that they will receive with a true faith this great benefit which God offers, and render such obedience as will be acceptable to him. Thus mutual agreement between God and man is confirmed by those outward signs which we call sacraments, which are holy signs, declaring and sealing unto us God's good will, and our thankfulness and obedience” [Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 97].

Similar definitions are found in; [Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man*, I.45; and Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* I.574].

2. Some contemporary Reformed theologians, such as John Murray, were concerned about the language of “mutuality” in the early Reformed

conception of what constitutes a covenant, seeking to instead emphasize the sovereign aspect of God's actions in covenant making. For Murray, a covenant is a unilateral and “sovereign administration of grace and of promise,” or a “sovereign dispensation of God's grace,” or a “grace bestowed and a relation established,” or a relationship in which “grace is bestowed and the relation established by sovereign divine administration” [John Murray, *The Covenant of Grace*, 19, 31]. Such a definition moves to the other extreme from a mutual agreement to a unilateral one, and according to Meredith Kline, denies any place for “responsibility of covenant recipients” [M. G. Kline, *By Oath Consigned*, 15. For an effective treatment of Murray's rather novel formulation, see Mark Karlberg's essay, “*Reformed Interpretation of the Mosaic Covenant*,” WTJ, V43. 48 ff.].

3. Most contemporary Reformed writers generally agree with Meredith Kline's formulations: “A covenant may be defined as a relationship under sanctions [penalty or reward]. The covenant commitment is characteristically expressed by an oath sworn in the solemnities of covenant ratification” [Kline, *By Oath Consigned*, 16; cf. Kline's *Kingdom Prologue*, 1-5.]

\* This will be the working definition for what follows — A covenant is . . .

A legal disposition [arrangement] established by oath, specified in divinely sanctioned commitments [Kline, *KP*, 3].

Most of the following is taken from Meredith Kline's book, *By Oath Consigned*:

## **B. Covenants of law and Covenants of promise** in the Old Testament.

1. If Kline is correct, then “it is this swearing of the ratificatory oath that provides an identification mark by which we can readily distinguish in the divine covenants of Scripture between a *law covenant* and *one of promise*. For it is evident that if God swears the oath of the ratification ceremony, that particular covenantal transaction is one of promise, whereas if man is summoned to swear the other, the particular covenant is one of law” [Kline, *BOC*, 16].

Thus, “there are *berith* [covenant] arrangements in the Bible that are informed by the principle of works, the opposite of grace [contra John Murray]. One of these is the original order in Eden [the so-called covenant of works]. In postlapsarian history [after the Fall], where we encounter

covenants of both works and grace, the identity of the party who takes the oath is an indicator of which kind of covenant it is in a particular case . . . . If the covenant is ratified by divine oath alone, it is a covenant of grace, either saving or common. But when the covenant-making includes a human oath of ratification, as in the case of Israel's oath of ratification in the Sinaitic Covenant (Exod 24), the arrangement is informed by the works principle” [Kline, KP, 3].

2. Thus Genesis 15, clearly describes a *covenant of promise* since it “provides an example of a covenant sealed by the divine oath. The theophany-ritual described there symbolized the conditional self-malediction that inheres in the swearing of oaths. To his promise to Abraham God added a second immutable thing (Heb. 6:17, 18). Passing between the slain and divided beasts beneath the threatening birds of prey (cf. vv. 9-11, 17), God invoked the curse of the oath upon himself should he prove false to it . . . . By undergoing this ritual God declared in effect that if he failed to fulfill the promises of the covenant (cf. vv. 5, 14, 16, 18ff.), he was like these creatures to be slain and devoured as a feast for the fowls. Thus, on that day the Lord ratified a covenant with Abraham (v. 18), a covenant that was a dispensation of grace and blessing guaranteed by twofold immutability” [Kline BOC 16-17].

This serves as an important background to any discussion of the sacraments. It is this *covenant of promise* based upon God's self-maledictory oath (the promise of dismembering upon failure to fulfill the promise) that provides the background for the human cutting of flesh — circumcision — which will appear in Genesis 17 as the rite by which God's covenant with Abraham was “cut”. As we will see, the covenant sign of circumcision therefore is a sign of grace/promise, not law/works, since it is God who makes the oath, which is ratified by the cutting of flesh.

3. According to Kline the original *covenant of works* [which Kline prefers to call the covenant of creation for reasons set forth in Kingdom Prologue 10-14], was clearly a law covenant. Even though the term “covenant” is missing in the first three chapters of Genesis, Kline contends that “the reality denoted by a word may be found in biblical contexts from which that word is absent” [Kline, BOC, 27]. According to Kline, “the divine administration to Adam at the beginning corresponds fully with the law type of covenant as it appears in

later history . . . In brief, the original relationship of the Creator and man was an administration of God's lordship in the form of a divine protectorate, which God sovereignly established and within which his suzerainty [Lordship] over his human servants was expressed in a revelation of law, including both service obligations and dual sanctions . . . Certainly the major elements of the law-covenant structure are present in God's administration of his sovereignty over Adam in Eden” [Kline, BOC, 27- 28].

As Kline notes, this is also certainly confirmed by the Apostle Paul's use of “two Adams,” in his panoramic sweep of redemptive and pre-redemptive history in Romans 5. When Paul says that Adam is the “*tupos*” or type/figure of Christ in 5:14, he means that Adam's place in the pre-redemptive covenant (of works), is juxtaposed with Christ's role as the head of the redemptive covenant (grace). This shows us quite clearly that Romans 5:12 ff., and 1 Corinthians 15 are indicative of “how closely the two-Adams schema and the divine covenants were intertwined in Paul's own thought patterns [Kline, BOC, 28].”

This is important because it clearly demonstrates the unity of the covenant of works and the covenant of grace, and thereby, the unity of the Old and New Testaments.

4. Exodus 24, in marked contrast with Genesis 15, clearly represents a covenant based upon an oath which was sworn by the members of Israel, and not by God. Thus the covenant with Moses is a law covenant. As Kline puts it: “It was an oath of allegiance by which they devoted themselves to the service of their sovereign Lord according to all the law revealed to them (v. 7) . . . It is clear that the solemn commitment by which this covenant was ratified was not made by the Lord but by Israel (Kline, BOC, 17).” As you may know, there has been a long-standing debate in the Reformed tradition about whether or not the covenant with Moses and the giving of the law, is to be associated with the covenant of works, or the covenant of grace. [See Mark Karlberg's essay, “*Reformed Interpretation of the Mosaic Covenant*,” WTJ, V43, for a history of this debate]. According to Kline, It is true that even prior to the covenant making at Sinai the Israelites were in covenant relationship to God by virtue of the terms of God's covenant with Abraham and his seed . . . It is true, too, that the covenant administration of Exodus 19-24 must be understood as serving a purpose compatible with the on-going



program of redemptive grace. The very blood rite by which the covenant was ratified (Ex. 24:5 ff.) implicitly . . . a divine promise of forgiving and purifying grace” (cf. Hebrews 9:18 ff). Thus even though the Sinai covenant was a law covenant, and was ratified through “the act of sworn commitment, [which] was performed by Israel,” through “Israel's formal pledging of obedience to God's law,” it is best to see the covenant with Moses as part of the covenant of redemption, since its purpose was to expose Israel's sin and drive her to seek her Messiah [Kline, BOC, 17 ff.].

**5.** This also means that the Book of Deuteronomy is a “witness to another such law or vassal covenant. In it Moses issued the solemn summons to Israel to swear the ratifactory oath: 'Ye stand this day all of you before the Lord your God . . . that thou shouldest enter into covenant with the Lord thy God, and into his oath'” (Deut. 29:10a, 12a; cf., 29:14; 26:17-19; 27:15-26) [Kline BOC, 18-19 cf. The Structure of Biblical Authority, especially 113 ff.].

#### **D. Covenants of law and covenants of promise in the New Testament**

**1.** It is vital to see that the New Testament writers assume and build upon this distinction. One place where we see this is in Paul's epistle to the Galatians. As Meredith Kline puts it: “Paul found the difference between two of the Old Testament covenants to be so radical that he felt obliged to defend the thesis that the one did not annul the other (Gal 3:15 ff). The promise of God to Abraham and his seed (cf. Gen. 13:15; 17:8) was not annulled by the law which came later (Gal. 3:17)” [Kline BOC, 22].

**2.** Thus the Sinaitic covenant is interpreted by Paul “as in itself a dispensation of the kingdom inheritance quite opposite to inheritance by guaranteed promise. ‘For if the inheritance is by law, it is no longer by promise’ and ‘the law is not of faith; but, He that doeth them shall live in them’ (Gal. 3:12, 18a . . . cf. Lev. 18:5) . . . We must recognize that, according to Paul, it was this specific covenantal entity, the Sinaitic Covenant as such, that made inheritance to be by law, not by promise — not by faith, but by works.” In this we see “the radical opposition of the law covenant of Sinai to the principle of inheritance by promise,” because “the Sinaitic Covenant had been ratified by human oath alone” [Kline, BOC, 23, 24]. Thus the law stands in contrast to the promise.

**3.** This leads Kline to conclude, “in the theology of Paul the demands of covenant law both as stipulations [”you shall live by them” in Galatians 3:12]



and sanctions [”cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the law,” Galatians 3:10] are met and satisfied for men in their faith-identification with the Christ of promise . . . In contrast to the classification of the Sinaitic Covenant as law, Paul placed God's covenantal dealings with Abraham in the category of promise, even though they included the ritual of an oath of allegiance sworn by Abraham and his household. For in the course of God's covenant making with Abraham there was another ceremony of covenant ratification...this one involving a divine oath (Gen. 15). It was, moreover, by this ritual of the divine oath that God's covenant relationship to Abraham was first formally established . . . The Sinaitic Covenant, on the other hand, was ratified in the original instance and, indeed, exclusively by the oath of the Israelite vassal; and it was evidently by reason of this difference that Paul identified the Sinaitic Covenant, in radical contrast to the promise given earlier to the patriarchs, as law” [Kline, BOC, 24, 25].

4. Thus Christ becomes the central figure in redemptive history since he alone is the mediator of the covenant of grace. “It is in Christ that the principles of law and promise co-operate unto the salvation of God's people.” This is why human covenants fail, for they cannot guarantee that they will live up to the terms they make, because fallible people change and situations in which they find themselves also change over time. The covenants in Scripture are different, however. For “the Lord of Adam, Abraham, Moses, and Paul is the God of sovereign election and grace, the God who gives Christ as a covenant to his people, he is able to guarantee an everlasting realization of the beatitude of this covenant to his covenantbreaking vassals even while he reaffirms that the fulfillment of the holy demands of this law is the prerequisite of the promised blessings . . . Galatians 3:18 must be stressed in Covenant Theology, but so too must Romans 5:18-21. It is by the obedience of the one that the many are made righteous unto eternal life . . . For Christ himself enters upon the inheritance as the forerunner, surety, and head of the many only when by his active and passive obedience he has fulfilled the constant *Hauptgebot* [chief command] of the covenant and submitted to the demand of the curse sanction voiced in the commandment from the beginning” [Kline, BOC, 30, 31].

5. This same tension between “law” and “promise” can also be seen in the Epistle to the Hebrews. As the author writes, the priesthood of “Jesus is

received as superior to that of the priests (v. 8:6)”, and that if “there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant” (made with Moses), “no place would have been sought for a new another (v. 8:7).” Because the covenant with Moses was based upon law, the covenant brought condemnation and God found fault with the people. But God had promised to send one greater than Moses (Jeremiah 31:31 ff.), who would be the mediator of a better covenant (8:8-13). Again as Kline notes, “In the Book of Hebrews the terms 'first' and 'new' are used to distinguish the Mosaic and the Messianic administrations of God's redemptive covenant (cf. 8:7, 8, 13; 9:1, 15, 18; 10:9). The new covenant is also called the 'second' (10:9) . . . Although the term 'second' appears along with 'new,' it is 'new' that predominates the counterpart to 'first.' Accordingly, the significance of 'first' in this context is not so much priority in a series but opposition to the idea of 'new.' *Protos* thus functions here as equivalent for 'old,' our traditional designation for the Mosaic covenant” [Meredith Kline, “*The First Resurrection*,” in WTJ, V37, 366-367; cf Geerhardus Vos, *The Teaching of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 49 ff.]. Thus once Christ comes, the first covenant was now obsolete. The law has done its work (cf. 9:1- 22).

### **E. Election and covenant; law and gospel**

1. Kline is also careful to remind us that “election is not coextensive with redemptive covenant. And the law principle appears in yet another way in the experience of the non-elect within the covenant; for their judgment unto greater condemnation is according to their works, works more evil because they are in violation of stipulations enhanced by their context of redemptive covenant.” This means that “we will want to distinguish, within the totality of purpose and achievement that constitute the redemptive covenant, and the proper purpose of the covenant, namely, the salvation of the elect. But when we recognize this proper soteric [saving] purpose we are not to reduce the redemptive covenant to that proper purpose” [Kline, BOC, 34, 35].

This is a very important point, because it means that there will be both elect and non-elect within the covenant, bearing the sign and seal of what is promised, and yet will not realize it. We see this in the fact that the wheat and the tares grow together until the end of the age (Matthew 13:24 ff), and that some fall away to eternal judgment (Hebrews 6:1-6; John 15:1-16; Galatians 5:4), but these cannot be the elect. Paul discusses this subject in great detail

in Romans 9-11. This must be referring to members of the covenant, who are not elect and who do not persevere to the end to be saved.

**2.** Kline's schema also reminds us not only of the radical difference between law and gospel, but unlike the Lutheran tendency to read all of Scripture through the lens of law-gospel, Kline points out that the covenant concept is perhaps more fundamental to the history of redemption. According to Kline, “for there was covenantal administration in Eden without the feature of guaranteed promise (i.e., of inevitable and ultimate beatitude), but the principle of inheritance by law has been at the foundation of covenant administration in every age of divine revelation. The great king of the covenant is unchangeable in his holiness and justice. Merciful he may be according to his sovereign will; but all of his works are in righteousness and truth. The satisfaction of the divine law underlies every administration of divine promise” [Kline, BOC, 35]. This is vital because unlike Lutheran theology, which see law and gospel almost as an anti-thesis within God himself [see J. T. Mueller, Christian Dogmatics, 44-47; 470- 485] the Reformed see the law as a revelation of God's character — i.e., his holiness, righteousness, etc., which is revealed in the law.

**3.** This means that “coherence can be achieved in Covenant theology only by the subordination of grace to law. Election must be sub-ordinated to covenant, the representative headship of the two Adams to the lordship of God, redemption to creation. Rejection of the equality of covenant with the election guaranteed promise principle is necessary to avoid the conceptual fragmentation of the theology of the covenant. Covenant conceived of as guaranteed promise cannot assimilate conditional promise. But the covenant concept that has law as its foundation and makes its promises dependent upon on the obedience of a federal representative can accommodate guaranteed promises. For if the federal representative is the Son of God the prerequisite fulfillment of the law is assured . . . For in the broader framework of law covenant Christ's total activity as at once Lord and Servant of the covenant, second Adam and Judge, can be fully integrated in one comprehensive and unified synthesis. And then redemption will then be seen for what it is, a two-sided judgment in which the blessing of the covenant always comes through the covenant curse” [Kline, BOC, 35].

Thus apart from the death of Jesus Christ, our mediator, we receive the

covenant curses!

## **F. The covenant and the kingdom of God.**

1. The last redemptive-historical theme that we will treat is the relationship between the administration of the covenants and the kingdom of God. Again, Kline is insightful here. “God's covenant with man may be defined as an administration of God's lordship, consecrating a people to himself under the sanctions of divine law. In more general terms, it is a sovereign administration of the kingdom of God. Covenant administration is a kingdom administration. The treaties are the legal instruments by which God's kingship is exercised over his creatures” [Kline, BOC, 36].

2. Thus, concludes Kline, “It is this absolute sovereignty of God in the reciprocal relationship which, when recognized, prevents the legalistic distortion of the religious-covenantal bond into a mercantile *quid pro quo* contract . . . Moses was not a lawgiver but a covenant mediator. He was not an Israelite Hammurabi but the agent through whom the Great King of heaven bound a people to himself in a relationship of service” [Kline, BOC, 38], and thus serves as a type of Christ, who is also not a lawgiver, but the mediator of the covenant of grace.

## **G. Summary of Biblical-Theological Considerations**

1. A covenant is *not* a mutual agreement between God and humanity, nor a unilateral and sovereign administration of grace and of promise. A covenant can be *defined as a legal disposition [arrangement] established by oath, specified in divinely sanctioned commitments.*

2. If God swears the oath of the ratification ceremony, that particular covenantal transaction is one of promise [grace/gospel], whereas if man is summoned to swear the oath, the particular covenant is one of law.

3. The original covenant made with Adam [*the covenant of works*] is clearly based upon the works principle, since God commanded Adam to be perfectly obedient (Genesis 2:17). The Sinai Covenant (Exodus 24) made with Moses is also a law covenant (cf. Exodus 24:3, 7).

4. The [*covenant of grace*], however, seen in but a glimpse in Genesis 3:15, comes to full-flower in Genesis 15, in which God himself swears the oath of ratification, typical of covenants of promise.

5. The covenant in Genesis 17, is a further administration of the covenant of

promise made in Genesis 15, in which Abraham is consecrated to God by circumcision [the ratification oath is the “cutting of flesh”] and comes under the dual sanctions of blessing and curse. Thus circumcision as the sign of the covenant is based upon promise [God's oath], not law [man's obedience].

**6.** This is why Paul contrasts law [which inflicts the curse sanctions, Galatians 3:10] and gospel [under which the curse is removed, Galatians 3:13] and therefore, the apostle argues that the promise comes by faith and not by works of law (Galatians 2:16).

**7.** In order for any to be saved under the covenant of promise, God must fulfill the requirements of the law and remove its curse — this is the role of Christ the mediator. Christ is the seed promised to Abraham (Galatians 3:16). This argues for a principle of continuity rather than discontinuity.

**8.** Election and covenant are not co-extensive. One can be in the covenant, bear its sign and seal, receive the temporal benefits of covenant membership and yet not be of the elect. Thus judgment upon such will be harsher since guilt is only increased (Hebrews 6:1-6, for example).

**9.** The covenants are administrations of the kingdom of God and cannot be reduced to mere legal or unilateral relationships. They must allow for conditional promises, which under the covenant of grace are fulfilled in Christ, through his active and passive obedience. Thus Christ is the one mediator of the covenant of promise.

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