

CIRCULAR LETTER
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THE COVENANT OF GRACE

The theological construction known as the Covenant of Grace is under attack in our day on two fronts: from Covenantal Peadobaptism on one side and New Covenant Theology on the other. The first makes it an organizing principle and meta-narrative for all of their theology while the last seeks to eradicate its legitimate use. This circular letter addresses how this idea of the Covenant of Grace is used in our common Confession and how it ought to be used to give our people instruction of the gracious work of God in Christ.

THE THEOLOGICAL CONSTRUCTION

The compound term, "Covenant of Grace" is not found in the Scriptures by itself. It is a construction of ideas about God and His work among men that is used to explain how the eternal decree of God in the Covenant of Redemption has been located among men in space and time. The Covenant of Grace is therefore to be distinguished from the Covenant of Redemption.

All theologians (all men) have theological meta-narratives or presuppositions or theological a priori that drive theological reflection in a comprehensive manner. Some of these transcendent ideas are justified; some are not. They must all be tested by the Scriptures to see if they have been rightly deduced from God's revelation of himself. It is right to make doctrinal pronouncements based on the implicit statements of Scripture as well as the explicit. The Confession speaks of those things that are "...either expressly set down or necessarily contained in the Holy Scripture.... (1.6)." Some things are revealed on the face of the Scriptures; others have to be dug out through hard work with the right use of reason comparing Scripture with other Scriptures.

Doctrines and doctrinal pronouncements are consistent with the Bible's teaching about its own legitimate uses. "The Word of God...is profitable for...doctrine. (II Tim 3:16)" To make systematic statements that are consistent with the entirety of God's Word is itself consistent with the purposes for which the Holy Spirit breathed out the Word. We should not shrink back from teaching doctrine or theologizing based on the Scriptures. We ought to engage our minds and energies to bring all thought captive to the Lordship of Christ. Confessional statements are biblical statements as they are doctrinal pronouncements of what God has said and those things most surely believed among us.

The Scriptures teach ubiquitously that God operates with mankind before and after the Fall according to his grace. It is his principle by which he works, reveals, directs, delivers, gives Law, and any other "good" thing. As the Scriptures are examined, it is noted that this grace is often codified in covenants between God and man. Thus this principle of covenant found throughout the scriptures is married to the ubiquitous grace of God therein to create an organizing principle by way of theological construction commonly called the Covenant of Grace. This idea helps the reader to better understand the overall

work and mercy of God. It is in modern terms a "meta-narrative," an idea that transcends all thought on a subject. It is an implicit theological truth drawn from many inferences in manifold places.

Premise 1: The Word of God was given to teach Doctrine.

Premise 2: The Covenant of Grace is a doctrine taught in the Word implicitly and discerned by good and necessary inferences (necessarily contained) therefrom.

Conclusion: The Covenant of Grace should be taught as a biblical Doctrine.

THE CONFESSION

Presupposition: Since the Scriptures are given to teach Doctrine, any doctrinal statement consistent with the Word of God is a biblical statement in summary form. The Confession of Faith is such a statement. Therefore the Confession should be viewed as biblical in its content and in its form. It is consistent with the first use of the Scriptures mentioned in II Timothy 3:16 (The Word of God is profitable for... doctrine....).

Our Confession defines some important truths about the Covenant of Grace. The foundation is poured in Chapter Seven, *Of God's Covenant*.

The gracious condescension of God to provide for man what man could not provide for himself. This divine condescension comes by way of Covenant (7.1).

In 7.2 we have the first mention of the Covenant of Grace specifically. Among other important truths, it reads, "...it pleased the Lord to make a covenant of grace, wherein 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 eternal life, his Holy Spirit, to make them willing and able to believe." Herein is the grace of God operative upon sinners. Note well, the Covenant of Grace in our common Confession is understood as between the Lord, and those he makes willing to believe. It is not understood as a middle ground between ordinary existence and saving faith. It is made with those who God "makes willing to believe," in other words, with the elect.

The Confession goes on to say how this Covenant was disclosed. "First to Adam in the promise..." "...until the full discovery thereof was completed in the New Testament." There is a progressive nature to the unveiling of the Covenant of Grace. The Confession tells us that the Covenant of Grace is analogous to and founded upon but not equal to "that eternal covenant transaction that was between the Father and the Son about the redemption of the elect...(7.3)" The Covenant of Redemption has a defining effect upon our understanding of the Covenant of Grace. It informs the content of those who will be found in both of these Covenants. It is about the salvation of the elect, of all who believe. Reading further, the Confession adds, "and it is alone by the grace of this covenant that all of the posterity of fallen Adam that ever were saved did obtain life and a blessed immortality, man being now utterly incapable of acceptance with God upon those terms on which Adam stood in his state of innocency (7.3)." In order for any to receive salvation, they must be made participants in the Covenant of Grace through the principle of grace. That is only possible if God has decreed to save them by the Lamb slain according to his eternal and irrevocable decree.

The comfort of inclusion in the Covenant of Grace has to do with God pledging himself to those to whom he has truly granted faith and repentance unto a final salvation. "...God hath in the covenant of grace mercifully provided, that believers so sinning and falling, be renewed through repentance unto

salvation (15.2). The eternal decree found in the Covenant of Redemption is secured by the believer's personal and corporate inclusion in the Covenant of Grace. In the same Chapter, *Repentance unto Life and Salvation*, it says, "Such is the provision which God hath made through Christ in the covenant of grace, for the preservation of believers unto salvation, that although there is no sin so small, but it deserves damnation; yet there is no sin so great, that it shall bring damnation on them who truly repent; which makes the constant preaching of repentance necessary (15.5). Similar sentiments are found in the Chapter entitled *On the Perseverance of the Saints*. "This perseverance of the saints depends not upon their own free will, but upon the immutability of the decree of election, flowing from unchangeable love of God the Father; upon the efficacy of the intercession of Jesus Christ, and union with Him, the oath of God, the abiding of His Spirit, and of the seed of God within them, and the nature of the covenant of grace: from all which ariseth also the certainty and infallibility thereof (LBC 17.2)." Thus, the Covenant of Grace is not about man as much as it is about the openly-spoken, solemnly-sworn promises of God as regards his love for the Elect alone.

Those who have been recipients of God's electing grace can be assured of their final salvation, not because of their wills, or ability to believe, but due to the sovereign grace of God finishing the work he has begun (Phil 1:6). The Comfort and use of the Covenant of Grace is not to give false hope to our children, but a real, living and vibrant hope to those who are being saved. True believers have God's pledge of love in Christ. It can and will never be revoked.

THE BIBLICAL NATURE OF THIS COVENANT

To discover the biblical nature of the Covenant of Grace, all the reader has to do is start "in the beginning" and read. God created, then commanded, therefore, all creatures owed unswerving allegiance to him. Man did not do the works set before him in order to live. The fall of man was a tragic occurrence in God's perfect world. After the fall, whenever men are brought into special relationship with the Creator it is through his own voluntary condescension. This is in perfect harmony with his gracious activity. It is also within the context of either a representative head and/or the idea of a covenant. God provides the basis for restored fellowship with himself in these means. For example, God provided a covering for our first parents that they might be delivered from the immediate consequences of sin. God stooped down to man to restore in part what was lost.

Throughout the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments we find two sets of glorious words: "their God" and "my people". They are often found together in the sovereign decree of God to take a people known by sin and rebellion against his holy character and to bring them into special fellowship with himself by making them to be "his people" and pledging himself to be "their God."

Abram/Abraham was to be a father of many nations. Through him the promise was given that all nations would be blessed. The Israelites wandering through the wilderness were to be focused upon receiving what had been promised to them through Abraham their covenantal head.

Israel was to be the specially adopted people of God living as his testimony to these nations. The Covenant God made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob comes to fruition in God's true people. Yet the overriding principle taken from the specific historical covenants is that God operates by grace among men to accomplish God's own holy purposes.

Moses was the mediator of the Law. It was of grace that God's expectations were made known to his people. In the prologue of that covenant document we read, "I am the Lord your God." God asserts his

right to be their ruler and lawgiver. He does so on the basis of who he is and the previous grace of deliverance through the Exodus.

The fullest expression of this motif of grace is found in the New Covenant. A sampling of three relevant texts should suffice, though there are dozens, if not hundreds more with implicit relation to this topic:

"But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people (Jeremiah 31:33).

'They shall be My people, and I will be their God.... (Jeremiah 32:38).

"...[T]hat they may walk in My statutes and keep My judgments and do them; and they shall be My people, and I will be their God (Ezekiel 11:20).

It is God's gracious activity that is revealed in the pages of Holy Writ. It is his subduing the hearts of his enemies in order to make them his people that he does by this grace. He calls them into covenantal relationship with himself where he is their ruler and they his people. This fellowship initiated by God is commonly called the Covenant of Grace.

It is God who makes the Covenant of Grace by his own gracious work on behalf of fallen and sinful man. It is God who speaks and decrees, it is God who makes Law to express his character and will. It is this covenanting God who makes his own to walk in His ways. And, this is all of His free grace. It is without any condition in any man and supernaturally accomplished. Grace is the principle by which God operates as regards his people since the fall.

To keep from us from presumption it is best to say we do not know who is in the Covenant of Grace until and unless they believe. The Covenant of Grace is not perpetuated through procreation and lineal descent from believers, but by regeneration as a direct act of God's free and unconditioned grace. The election of those made willing to believe along with all the accompanying works of God, blessings and benefits (and those alone) demonstrates a believer's invincible union with Christ. These realities assure their place forever in his Covenant of Grace. What a blessed comfort to have the one true and living God, the Creator and Sustainer of all things, pledge himself to his people by way of this gracious covenant. What a joy is ours, even in the midst of an awareness of our remaining sin. We should cry out in humble thanks for God's undeserved gift of grace by faith. Amen.