

1. WHO INITIATES THE COVENANT?

When in this book we speak of the covenant as a living relationship with God, we must clearly understand that God alone establishes this relationship. It is a matter of God's sovereignty and omnipotence. It is true that we from our side must respond to God's effective call and that in this relationship our responsibility is great, but we cannot from our side establish the covenant. It is God's prerogative.

In every relationship someone must take the initiative. Sometimes, it is true, it is a matter of almost naturally growing together towards more contact and commitment. In that sense human relationships can just "happen" by way of mutual attraction, and who knows or cares who took the initiative? In the case of God's covenant, however, this *is* important, for the Bible teaches us that we would never seek a relationship with God. We are of ourselves unspiritual (1 Cor 2:14), dead in transgressions and sins (Eph 2:1), God's enemies (Rom 5:10), unable to come to the Father unless we are drawn by Christ (John 6:44).

If we had to reach up to God, the covenant would never come about, for by nature we will go anywhere except to God. When the Lord looks down from heaven to see if there is one who seeks him, he must conclude: "All have turned aside...there is no one who does good, not even one" (Ps 14:3, quoted at length by Paul in Rom 3; see also Ps 53). But the LORD God comes down to us sovereignly in his power and grace, and he establishes with us this remarkable bond called the covenant.

Sometimes the truth of the covenantal relationship is expressed in the following way: the covenant is one-sided in origin but two-sided in existence. This means simply that the covenant originates through God's initiative, and that it is subsequently accepted and honoured by us.

We already gave some reasons why this distinction is important. In what follows we will add to these reasons.

The covenant: God's initiative

First, this manner of speaking is biblical, and we must learn to think and speak biblically. Let us consider some passages from the Old Testament. After the fall

into sin, Adam and Eve do not eagerly wait for God to present himself so that they may confess to him their sin, but they hide from God, and he is the one who calls out, “Where are you?” (Gen 3:9). This all-important question leads to the disclosure of sin and also to God’s revelation concerning the victory over Satan (Gen 3:15). Therefore we rightly confess in the Belgic Confession, “We believe that, when He saw that man had thus plunged himself into physical and spiritual death and made himself completely miserable, our gracious God in His marvelous wisdom and goodness set out to seek man when he trembling fled from Him” (Article 17). God set out; he retained the initiative.

The events in paradise surrounding the fall may not at first glance seem to be related to the covenant, but we will see later that they are very closely linked precisely to the covenant as sovereign initiative of God. He will not let human, animal, or diabolical effort destroy the relationship which he has established in his covenant. The fall into sin may alter the relationship but can not undo it. Therefore God immediately acts with covenant-preserving deeds.

When later all living beings are destroyed in the mighty flood, except those who are taken into the ark with Noah and his family, it is again the Lord who acts to continue his relationship with mankind. It says in Genesis 9:8, “Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him: ‘I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you and with every living creature that was with you....’” It is an act of God: “I now establish....”

When Abraham is selected out of mankind to be the father of God’s people, this, too, is presented as solely the LORD’s initiative. In fact, Abraham’s trials and testing confirm that he must learn to *wait* upon the LORD. Abraham is not an exuberant volunteer, who of his own will and by his initiative goes to serve the LORD; he is called by God and must learn to trust in God. And God’s power becomes very clear: “I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come...” (Gen 17:7). The initiative belongs to the Lord. He calls, and his calling is effective.

God has chosen Israel; they did not choose him. Moses makes quite sure that Israel understands this fully before they enter the promised land: “Because he loved your forefathers and chose their descendants after them, he brought you out of Egypt by his Presence and his great strength...” (Deut 4:37). God called Israel, and he confirmed this in the Exodus, an event of salvation almost unparalleled in the history of redemption in the Old Testament.

Establishing a covenant with a man and his descendants is presented as a divine prerogative. God is free to establish this covenant, and he is also free to establish it with whomever he wants. The people of Israel are taught to acknowledge this fully: “He has revealed his word to Jacob, his laws and decrees to Israel. He has done this for no other nation; they do not know his laws” (Ps 147:19, 20). These words are not intended to create a feeling of racial superiority among the Israelites as God’s chosen people; they simply express how privileged

Israel is in being God's own people. The Israelites are blessed above all other nations, and the blessing of God to all nations will come only through Israel (as God promised to Abraham, Gen 12:1-3).

I chose you

God takes the initiative. In the New Testament we find the same emphasis, for the Bible is one. When the Lord Jesus appoints his apostles, it is described in the following manner: "Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him" (Mark 3:13). Our Lord reminded his disciples of this reality in the night he was betrayed and would be deserted by all his disciples: "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last..." (John 15:16). All may flee, but Christ did not make the wrong choice.

The same element is stressed on the day of Pentecost, when the Gospel goes world-wide: "The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call" (Acts 2:39). God will send out his messengers and all who are called by him will come. People do not reach out on their own to establish a relationship with God; he comes to them with the power of his Spirit and his word and he binds himself to them in Christ, his Son.

We find the same emphasis in the apostolic letters. Paul writes, "For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction" (1 Thess 1:4, 5; see also 1 Cor 1:26, Eph 1:4). God takes the initiative in coming to people and he remains sovereign in working in people. By the power of his Spirit and word he leads people to accept the Gospel and the Lordship of Christ. Even when we are called to cooperate with God, to continue to work out our salvation with fear and trembling, it is added, "for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose" (Phil 2:13).

The biblical manner of speaking in Old and New Testament, then, emphasizes clearly that the work of salvation is and remains the work of God's initiative and power. In the covenant, the Father reaches down to us in his Son through the Holy Spirit, and only when this happens can we and do we reach up to him. We must learn more and more to speak here in *biblical* terms, for only then is the basis laid for a proper understanding of what God does and how he works in our lives.

Only to God the glory

Second, this manner of speaking gives all the glory to God. To state that the glory belongs to God alone may seem superfluous, but it is not. There is always the human tendency to think that our salvation depends at least in part on who we are and on what we do. Some feel that human responsibility has been ignored in the Reformed tradition and needs more attention. They argue that God can establish a relationship with us only if we want this relationship from our side. The existence

of the relationship then depends in part or whole on our acceptance of it.

I will give attention later to our responsibility within the covenant. The human element requires proper attention, indeed. But here we are concerned with the *establishing* of the covenant, not its acceptance by us or its continuation through the generations. God alone establishes the covenant. He does not first ask us for permission or inquire whether we are interested in or qualified for this relationship. He does not first test to see who is worthy. He simply goes ahead and speaks his covenant word to whomever he wills.

Those who are addressed by God as his covenant children and joyfully accept the covenant, experience this as a sign of undeserved *grace*. They have no right to it of themselves. As a matter of fact, it is quite remarkable what type of people God calls into his covenant. The Israelites were not chosen by God because of their numerical superiority; as Moses reminds Israel, “The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples” (Deut 7:7). Israel was no super-power, but a small, enslaved nation.

Nor is the choice based on a higher moral rectitude or natural holiness which some people might have above others. Of Israel’s esteemed forefathers, Abraham, Nahor, and Terah, it is written: “Long ago your forefathers...lived beyond the River and worshipped other gods” (Josh 24:2). After the LORD has endured from the Israelites many insults and then also witnessed the idolatry with the golden calf at Horeb – right after the proclamation of the law! – he says to Moses: “I have seen these people, and they are a stiff-necked people. Now leave me alone so that my anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them” (Exod 32:9,10). God certainly has not chosen the most cooperative people.

Many centuries later, Stephen in his defence before the Jewish Sanhedrin must say the same: “You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! . . . You always resist the Holy Spirit!” (Acts 7:51). God’s people have often proven themselves through the ages to be ungrateful, irresponsible, and difficult. Is it different today?

The very same elements return in the New Testament. The Corinthians were inclined to think more highly of themselves and their spiritual gifts than they should, and Paul therefore reminded them of their past. “Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth” (1 Cor 1:26). God’s call does not come on the basis of learning, influence, or nobility. He does not look for potential commitment. Paul explains that God chooses, rather, what is foolish, weak, and despised in the world. There is an important reason for this: *so that no one may boast before him* (1 Cor 1:29, 31). God alone will receive the glory for the salvation of his people.

In the letter to the Romans Paul makes this quite clear. The Jews are not saved with the law – for they did not keep it – and the Gentiles are not saved without the

law – they did not know it. We are all justified by faith alone. And Paul asks: “Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded” (Rom 3:27). “Let him who boasts boast in the Lord” (1 Cor 1:32; Ps 44:8).

Unlikely candidates

Indeed, in establishing his covenant the LORD often chooses people most *unlikely* to succeed. If you are going to build a great nation, would you choose an old man with a barren wife, such as Abraham (Gen 11:30)? It seems rather ludicrous, from a human point of view. If you want to find an inspiring leader to guide your people out of slavery against all human odds, would you choose a fugitive like Moses, a man who does not even want the job anymore and offers many excuses, “I am slow of speech and tongue” (Exod 4:10)? You would pick a man of impressive appearance and with boldness of character, rather than one who is called “a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth” (Num 12:3).

There are many more examples. When Samuel has to anoint a king to replace the disobedient Saul, he must first let all the sons of Jesse pass by until he comes to the youngest; and he, only a lad, is chosen (1 Sam 6:7). And when the prophet Jeremiah is called by God, he responds: “Ah, Sovereign LORD, I do not know how to speak; I am only a child” (Jer 1:6). We find again that there are no volunteers for covenant service, that what we would consider the most likely candidates are passed by, and that people are chosen who hardly seem motivated and qualified for the task.

In the New Testament it is no different. The twelve apostles were by and large unlearned men of despised Galilee, country bumpkins without any credentials in Israel. The apostle Paul, who had studied at the feet of Gamaliel (Acts 22:3), one of the most honoured teachers of Israel in the first century, was also not a man of impressive eloquence and high self-esteem. As he writes to the Corinthians, “I came to you in weakness and fear, with much trembling...” (1 Cor 2:3). It is true that Paul was given great revelations (taken up, as he says, to paradise) but “to keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me” (2 Cor 12:7).

The apostle Paul always defended the right and the truth of his apostolic ministry, whenever it was under attack. But when it came to himself as a person, he knew of his limitations: “...we have this treasure [that is, the Gospel] in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us” (2 Cor 4:7).

There is in the covenant work of God this underlying theme when it comes to people whom he chooses: “Though the LORD is on high, he looks upon the lowly, but the proud he knows from afar” (Ps 138:6). Blessed are the meek, said our Lord Jesus. The LORD takes people who are of themselves unsuited for the task, often ill-equipped, and unmotivated, and makes them into powerful instruments for his

covenant work.

When we speak of “the heroes of faith,” as is sometimes done, we must understand that the Bible does not call any human being a “hero,” lest even the notion of human boasting be present. All these people, chosen and enabled by God, are rather called *witnesses* (Heb 12:1), people who do not display their own power, but in whose weakness the strength of God becomes evident. A “hero” displays his own courage and strength; a “witness,” typically, testifies not of himself, but of Another.

Secure for the future

Third, the confession that the covenant is God’s initiative acknowledges that its continuation depends on God, not on mankind. If the covenant were in any way dependent on us, it would be doomed. But it rests in God’s sovereign initiative, and he finishes what he has begun.

It is important to note this. Sometimes the idea is presented that God may take the first step in establishing his covenant, but that from then on it is up to his people to keep it going. God started things, but we must finish them. Again, I am not here denying the great responsibility that every covenant child has – we will come later to the topic of our responsibility in the covenant. The point is now that God, who initiates his covenant, also *perfects* it. He acts time and again to restore the covenant relationship, to give his people much-needed liberation and renewal.

At key moments in the history of God’s people, when all seems lost and the road has come to a dead end, we find that the LORD God takes decisive steps to open new ways and that he does so for the sake of his covenant. He entered into a relationship with his people, and did so with an oath of faithfulness to his own Name. He remains true to his word.

The Name Yahweh

It is in this context that we can begin to appreciate the Name with which the LORD revealed himself to Israel in the time of Moses. Knowledge of this Name is indispensable for a correct understanding of the covenant. We read about the LORD’s revelation of his Name in Exodus 3, where Moses is called to lead Israel.

Moses quite well understands how far the people of Israel have wandered from the true service of God, and he asks: “Suppose I go to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his Name?’ Then what shall I tell them?” (Exod 3:13).

We note that when God revealed himself to Abraham it was not with the Name “Yahweh” but with the Name *El Shaddai*, to be translated as “God Almighty” (Gen 17:1). In that Name God emphasized to Abram the sovereign power by which he would fulfil all his promises. God can do what he intends to do, for he is the Almighty God.

It is possible that the name *El Shaddai* never really functioned among the

Israelites. What is more important at this point is that when God reveals himself to Israel via Moses as Yahweh, he does this to underline his faithfulness as God of the covenant. Israel may long have forgotten, but the LORD still remembers the promises made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The reason that God now comes to deliver his people is his faithfulness to his covenant. The focus is not on what Israel deserves, but on what God has promised.

The Name Yahweh comes from the verb “to be” and can be translated as follows: “I am,” or “I am who I am,” or perhaps “I will be who I will be.” This Name first identifies God as the only *living* God. Contrary to the gods of the nations who are idols, he alone is the true God, who acts decisively for the benefit of his people. “I am” implies that all others are not, i.e., do not even exist. There may be demonic power behind the idols (1 Cor 10:19-22), but demons have no divine ability.

The Name also identifies the living God as one who does not change: I am who I am, that is, I am faithful, trustworthy, always remembering my covenant. The gods of the nations are not to be trusted, and they have never entered into a covenant with their peoples. In heathen religions the gods are an unknown quantity whose arbitrary actions can never be fully anticipated, who say something one day but do something different another. The gods are not loyal to their people and always need to be pacified if they are to bestow their favour. Heathen people know: the gods are not really to be trusted; it is best to avoid them as much as possible. Pagans are always at odds with their gods.

But the LORD is true and faithful to his promises; his people can trust in him. He is forever the same, not in the philosophical sense of being totally unaffected by anything, but in the sense of always being true to himself, to his word. Therefore the Name Yahweh identifies the Lord God as the *God of the covenant*.

See also Exodus 3:15: “God also said to Moses, ‘Say to the Israelites, “The LORD [Yahweh], the God of your fathers – the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob – has sent me to you.” This is my name forever, the name by which I am to be remembered from generation to generation’.”

It is noteworthy that one of the main words connected with this Name of God is the word “faithfulness.” The Hebrew word that is used here, *chesed*, can mean many things, such as love, kindness and mercy, but it always denotes the gracious faithfulness of the LORD to his given word, to his covenant. This is the depth of the refrain of Israel’s praise, “Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good. His love (*chesed*) endures forever” (Ps 136:1). The God who established the covenant also confirms it and remains true to it. This is why there is always a future for God’s obedient children.

Covenant certainty

The people of Israel could count on God’s covenant faithfulness. This was not an automatic guarantee which did away with the requirement of Israel’s positive

response. But the point is again that this faithfulness rests not upon human actions but on God's own promise.

Also in the New Testament this element of certainty is stressed. In the letter to the Hebrews we read that when God made his promises to Abraham he did so *under oath*. "When God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself, saying, 'I will surely bless you and give you many descendants' " (6:13,14). The Lord God swore an oath for a reason. It was "...to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised" (Heb 6:17). God swore an oath: he is serious about his relationship with his people!

And this is not something that is true only under the old covenant. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews freely applies this certainty to the New Testament church: "God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged" (Heb 6:18). Indeed, our certainty in the new covenant is by no means less than it was under the old. It is greater, because we live not under the (temporary) priesthood of Aaron but under our Lord Jesus Christ, who is a priest forever after the (lasting) order of Melchizedek!

The certainty of God's covenant and promises lies in God himself, in his own oath and word, in the depth of the very name of Yahweh, and in Jesus Christ, the Mediator of a better covenant.

Jesus and the name of Yahweh

At this point it is important to note how our Lord Jesus applied the name of Yahweh ("I am") to himself, thus indicating that in him the covenant finds its final surety. Christ often used the expression "*I am...*," followed by various far-reaching claims. I am the bread of life (John 6:35). I am the light of the world (John 8:12; 9:5). I am the gate (John 10:7). I am the good shepherd (10:11ff.). I am the resurrection and the life (John 11:25). I am the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6). I am the true vine (John 15:1). All these expressions imply the unmistakable claim: *I am* the Son of the living God, and therefore divine! Only Yahweh could speak in such a manner about himself.

This claim was made very clearly in Christ's discussion with the Jewish leaders about his origin and authority (John 8). When our Lord proclaims himself to be the "light of the world" (vs. 12) the Jews warn him not to be his own witness. Jesus then speaks of his Father, who witnesses about him, and explains that he has come from above and that he alone can set them free. The Jews respond that as Abraham's children, they are free. But Christ warns them that although they are Abraham's children, they do not act as Abraham's children, for they plan to kill him. Then the Lord reveals that he is before and above Abraham. They scoff at him, saying, "You are not yet fifty years old, and you have seen Abraham!" But the Lord responds, "Before Abraham was born, *I am!*" (John 8:58).

The Lord Jesus does not say, “I was” or “I will be,” but “*I am*,” thus applying to himself the name of God, and thereby claiming all that is divine. It is no wonder that at this point the Jews pick up stones to kill him, for if it is not true, it is gross blasphemy worthy of death.

But it *is* true. Jesus Christ is fully and truly divine, and he came to establish forever the covenant of God by his one sacrifice on the cross, by his own blood which would be the atonement for all our sins. In him the reality of the covenant finds its absolute fulfilment and finality.

God finishes what he begins

Because of God’s covenant faithfulness, we may always be assured that he will complete the work he has begun. Israel was time and again assured of this, and learned to sing of it. Despite all the trials and difficulties of life, we also may say and pray, “The LORD will fulfill his purpose for me; your love, O LORD, endures forever – do not abandon the works of your hands” (Ps 138:8).

The prophet Isaiah also could encourage and comfort Israel with the knowledge that God will finish what he has started. I think here of Isaiah 46:8-10: “Remember this, fix it in mind, take it to heart, you rebels. Remember the former things, those of long ago; I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.” God’s purpose is always fulfilled.

In the prophets (Isaiah and Jeremiah especially) we often find the idea of a remnant’s being spared and returning from exile. God’s wrath over the constant disobedience of his people – their hardening in sin – is just and severe, and yet in his grace, because of his covenant, he preserves and restores a remnant out of whom he will again build his people. When God has judged and cleansed his people, “A remnant will return, a remnant of Jacob will return to the Mighty God” (Isa 10:21). There are many casualties; only a remnant returns, but the LORD in his grace does continue the line of his covenant.

The covenant is not a temporary arrangement; it is everlasting (Ps 103:17: “from everlasting to everlasting”). This is how God spoke already to Abraham, “I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you” (Gen 17:7). The covenant is made to last by God’s power and through his faithfulness. It is everlasting because God is eternal. It remains, because God is faithful. It is remarkable how often and how clearly the Bible makes this assertion.

Again, in the New Testament the situation is no different. God has not changed: he is still the eternal God and his covenant still endures forever. If there has been a change, it is that the promises are even more certain now that Christ has risen from

the dead and conquered hell and grave. The Lord Jesus Christ promised, just before his ascension, “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Matt 28:20). This is realized also in the outpouring and abiding presence of the Holy Spirit: “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever – the Spirit of truth” (John 14:16,17).

Therefore, when it comes to the certainty of salvation, Paul can write to the Philippians these wonderful words: “In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (Phil 1:3-6). God finishes what he starts, also for his people in Philippi.

Jesus: author and perfecter of our faith

All this finds its focus and core in Jesus Christ. When the writer to the Hebrews refers to the great(er) riches which God’s people have in the new covenant, he directs them to the Lord Jesus Christ. The Lord is superior to angels, greater than Moses, the only and eternal High Priest of a new covenant, and the one sacrifice for all. In Hebrews 12:2 our Lord is called the “author and perfecter of our faith.”

It is quite remarkable that precisely after the lengthy and impressive list of believers and the fruits of their faith, we are not called to look to those believers as our example and hope, but we are told, “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith...” (12:2). He is the Mediator and certainty of the new covenant, and we must look to him from start to finish.

Before concluding this first chapter, we want to take a closer look at these important words, *author* and *perfecter*, for they make clear that the whole (covenant) relationship with God is now established by Christ, nurtured by Christ, and perfected by him. As it is said of Yahweh that he is the first and the last, so it is said of Christ that he is the author and finisher, the *alpha* and the *omega*, the beginning and the end (see also Rev 22:12, 13).

Christ is first called the author of our faith. In Hebrews 2:10 he is called (in broader terms) the author of our salvation. The word author occurs only four times in the New Testament, twice in this letter and twice in Acts, where Christ is called the author of life. The word is sometimes translated “pioneer” or “trail-blazer,” one who goes ahead of his people and opens the way for them. He has made the covenant possible, has secured it through his suffering and death, and has gone before us into heaven. There he sits at God’s right hand and now works faith in us, so that by this faith we may follow him to where he is.

Christ is the one who gives the faith that is required for following him. The initiative belongs to the Lord. At the same time Christ is called “the perfecter” of the faith. The word used here points to a reaching of the goal that is set before us. The writer has referred to a “race marked out for us” (Heb 12:1). We have to run

a set course. It is Christ who gives us the energy to start the race, so that we rise to the challenge. It is the same Christ who in the course of this difficult race stays with us, and brings us across the finish line. Then, at the end of it all, we may give him the glory for our running the race and for our completing it.

A consistent line

We have seen, then, that the Bible consistently shows that God takes the initiative and sovereignly establishes his covenant with whomever he has chosen. When the Lord has made a covenant, he also remains faithful to it and honours it fully.

The great initiative of God finds its fulfillment and perfection in Jesus Christ, the one and only mediator between God and man (1 Tim 2:5). Our certainty lies not in our feeble, human efforts but in the sovereign initiative and perfect work of God in Christ. This must always be the key issue in the discussions surrounding the covenant.