

21. COVENANT AND ELECTION

The problem of the relation between the covenant and regeneration, which we dealt with in the previous chapter, leads to another important question, namely: what is the relation between the covenant and *election*?

The question arises, as we have seen, because there are covenant people who rebel against God, do not serve him, and perhaps come to hate him. These people cannot have been elected, for we confess that the elect cannot fall away. But if not all covenant children belong to the elect, what is the sense or value of being in the covenant?

In what follows we will deal with this question. We will see that the covenant is the way in which God realizes his work of salvation. While we must keep in mind the connection between election and the covenant, we must also have an eye for the distinction between the two. Because of the dynamics involved, namely, the fact that the covenant is a living interaction between God and man, we cannot force everything into some kind of closed system.

Similarities between election and covenant

Behind both God's eternal decree of election and the establishing of his covenant lies his sovereign grace. God is not obligated to elect anyone – for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. If he elects some, he does not have to elect others, for this, too, is according to his sovereign pleasure. God's decree of election finds its root in his love and mercy. I have mentioned this before and mention it again because it has an important bearing on the present topic.

What was said about God's decree of election must also be said of God's covenant. He establishes it with whom he wills. He does this, as we have noted earlier, unilaterally. He does not ask us whether we would like to enter into a covenant with him, but he comes to us and tells us: I now establish my covenant with you and your descendants after you.

Both election and covenant are limited in their scope. God has not elected all people, but only a number of them. Similarly, he does not today call everyone into

his covenant, although initially (in Adam) it was made with all mankind. Before the fall, God's grace extended to all people; after the fall it was given only to those who feared the LORD and awaited his anointed. Although the LORD is considerate to all creatures and in his providence cares for them, he gives grace only to his children.

It is important to note that both election and the covenant are related to God's work *in Christ*. Concerning election, it is said, "For he chose us in him (Christ) before the creation of the world" (Eph 1:4). The covenant also is an arrangement built on the work of Christ, as we saw when the Lord's Supper was instituted: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood." Take Christ away, and there is no election and no covenant.

We may connect the two as follows: in the way of his covenant with us God realizes his decree of election. The covenant is the manner in which he calls his children to himself, pours out over them his blessings, and binds them to Christ. If election is the only *basis* for our salvation, the covenant is the common *manner* by which we are called to serve God.

The distinction between election and covenant

Election is a one-time, eternal decree of God that is unchangeable, made before the foundation of the world. God's covenant, however, is a relationship made with people over time, and it therefore has a history. Election is determined from eternity, but the covenant goes through various dispensations or phases.

We must distinguish between a decree and a relationship. Election is a decree; the covenant is a relationship. This means that in election we are faced with a decision in which we are not involved in any way. But in the covenant we are faced with a relationship in which we must from the start be active and responsive. Election is unconditional, but there certainly are conditions in the covenant.

We do not know who the elect are. All we can say is that the tree is known by its fruit. But we know who the people of the covenant are, and we also know what is expected of them. Here it is wise to call to mind the words spoken by Moses, "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law" (Deut 29:29). God has not revealed the number and identity of the elect, but he has made known who belong to his covenant and what his covenant entails.

It follows from the above that God's election, which is unchangeable, cannot be broken or nullified. But the covenant can be broken. Decrees stand; relationships may fail. Although God remains faithful, we, because of our sinfulness, can break the covenant.

An unconditional decree and conditional promises

While in election we have to do with God's eternal decree, in the covenant as a relationship of love we are faced with God's promises. We believe and confess

that the decree of election is unconditional: God does not demand of us that we meet certain requirements before he elects us. He elects us in his good pleasure, and then proceeds to place before us certain demands.

In the covenant, however, we always have to do with conditions. The covenant, as we saw, contains two parts, a promise and an obligation. From this it follows that when we refuse to meet the obligation, we also forfeit the right to the fulfillment of the promises. While election is a static decree, the covenant is a dynamic relationship, which demands of us a constant involvement.

Yet God uses the living relationship of his covenant of love to realize his eternal decree of election. All God's works are one in a manner that we cannot comprehend but must adore.