



Seven Essential Distinctions in the Doctrine of the Covenant of Grace

Good distinctions are part of the essence of sound theology. They are an important tool for theologians. Preachers often employ distinctions as well, though because they can be technical, they are not always mentioned explicitly. In the preceding chapters, I have worked with the seven distinctions found below, even if I have not always mentioned them outright. Along with some brief explanation, they are included here for those readers who may be more theologically inclined.

1. *We distinguish between the administration of the covenant of grace in this era and administrations of the covenant of grace in previous eras*

There is substantially one covenant of grace revealed in Scripture in both the Old and New Testaments. However, Reformed theology recognizes that this one covenant of grace has had several administrations. Each administration has its own character. For example, the covenant of grace as administered to Abraham contained a promise of offspring and land and involved a sign and seal of circumcision (Genesis 17:1-14). The covenant of grace as administered to believers and their children today contains the promises of the gospel in Jesus Christ and involves the sign and seal of baptism.

2. *We distinguish between parties in the gracious covenant relationship: on the one side, God; on the other all believers with all their children. Jesus Christ mediates between these two parties*

Any covenant by definition has parties. In the covenant of grace, the Creator relates to certain creatures, namely with believers and their children (Acts 2:39). However, for this relationship to function as intended, because it involves a Holy God and a sinful people, a Mediator is required and according to passages like Hebrews 8:6, Christ is that Mediator.

3. *We distinguish between greater and lesser parties in the covenant of grace. God is the infinitely greater; his people the lesser. Therefore, God alone initiates this gracious relationship and determines its terms*

The Creator and the creature are not only distinct from one another in terms of their being (ontologically), they are also distinct in terms of their transcendence (qualitatively). With his great majesty, the Creator vastly transcends all human creatures (Psalm 145:3). This gets worked out historically as we observe God pursuing Adam in the first administration of the covenant of grace, Abraham in a subsequent, and still later the Israelites. Every administration of the covenant of grace sees God taking the initiative and determining the terms.

4. *We distinguish between promises and obligations in the covenant of grace. God gives promises and imposes obligations (or conditions) in this relationship*

Promises and obligations are included in the essence of covenant relationships in Scripture. Without them, there would be no covenant relationship. Because of the preceding distinction, it is God who sovereignly determines what shall be promised and what shall be expected.

5. We distinguish between God extending the gospel promises and man receiving what is promised. God extends his gospel promises to all in the covenant of grace, but not all receive what is promised

It cannot be said that all covenant members automatically receive what is promised. This is evident from examples in Scripture such as that of Esau. As a son of Isaac, he was included in an administration of the covenant of grace. Esau received circumcision, the sign and seal of that covenant administration. Yet Scripture says he failed to receive what was promised (Malachi 1:2-3).

6. We distinguish between antecedent and consequent conditions in the covenant of grace. The antecedent condition is a true faith which unites one to Christ and all his saving benefits. The consequent condition is the fruit of faith and union with Christ in a growing, holy obedience to God's law

Justification and every other saving benefit promised in the gospel (promised in the covenant) can only be received through true faith (Romans 4). We do not and cannot earn our place in the covenant of grace. However, Scripture is abundantly clear that a true faith must inevitably (or consequently) produce good works, and if it does not, it is not a true faith (James 2:14-26). The relationship between these two is one of root and fruit.

7. We distinguish between two ways of relating to God within the covenant relationship: a strictly legal relation characterized by unbelief, which leads only to curse and death; a vital relation characterized by true faith, which leads to blessing and life

Scripture speaks of those who break the covenant (e.g. Ezekiel 16:59). This language speaks of unfaithfulness and dysfunction within the covenant relationship — not the utter dissolution of this relationship. This unfaithfulness leads to consequences — first chastisement (discipline) and then later, if there is no repentance, just punishment. All wickedness will be punished by God, but he has a special measure of wrath for covenant breakers (Hebrews 10:26-31). He yet maintains a relationship with them, but it is a hostile one of Judge/accused or King/traitor. However, those who have true faith live in fellowship with him in the covenant relationship through the mediation of Jesus Christ. Through Christ, they enjoy a living, joyful, and healthy relationship, one of Father/son.

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