



Introducing the Big Idea

Scripture: Genesis 17:1-14; Hebrews 8:1-7
Confessions: Belgic Confession article 17

What is the covenant of grace? I once heard it explained like this: “The covenant is where God does his part and we do our part, and then we get saved and get to go to heaven.” Now that explanation came from a Canadian Reformed young person and perhaps we can cut that person some slack because of their youth. However, I wonder how many of us would get it right if we were randomly asked. Would we make it sound like we believe that salvation is partly God’s work and partly ours just because the covenant speaks of God’s promises and our obligations?

What is the covenant of grace? That is an important question because we have attached so much importance to the covenant in our churches. It is an important part of our history. It is not an understatement to say that the Canadian Reformed Churches exist because of the doctrine of the covenant. During the 1930s and 1940s, there were intense debates about this doctrine. When the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands in the early 1940s decided to bind everyone to the views of Abraham Kuyper on the covenant (and several other doctrinal matters), that led to the Liberation of 1944. When immigrants from the Liberated Reformed Churches came over to Canada beginning in the 1950s, they were compelled to establish the Canadian Reformed Churches. So the covenant is crucially important in our history.

It is also important in the life of our churches. The covenant is behind the way we do certain things. For example, it impacts the way we view our children, the way we raise our children, and the way we educate our children. It also affects the way we worship. As we shall see later in this book, a big part of why we worship the way we do has to do again with the covenant of grace.

Covenant theology is something that really sets us apart from a lot of the other church groups around us. Even those who hold to the doctrines of grace (or TULIP)¹ usually do not hold to a Reformed doctrine of the covenant of grace. They might be Calvinistic in holding to five points about our salvation, but without the covenant, it is very difficult to view them as Reformed. A vitally important part of being Reformed is being covenantal.

If it is true that it is so crucially important, someone might raise a question: why is the covenant of grace not mentioned more often in our confessions? It is true that the covenant is mentioned only a few times in the Three Forms of Unity. For example, in the Heidelberg Catechism, it’s only mentioned in the Lord’s Days dealing with the sacraments. Lord’s Day 27 mentions the covenant in connection with infant baptism and Lord’s Day 30 mentions it in connection with the Lord’s Supper. But other than that, the covenant is not explicitly mentioned in the Heidelberg Catechism anywhere else. Why is that? Probably at least partly because the Catechism was originally meant to be a teaching tool for children and young people. In Heidelberg in the sixteenth century, the doctrine of the covenant was considered to be more meat than milk. Zacharias Ursinus wrote another catechism for use with his seminary students.² That catechism mentions the covenant in many places and works out the doctrine in more detail, providing the meat seminary students need.

Certainly we can say that this doctrine has always been important in Reformed churches, even if it is not especially prominent in our confessions. Because it is so important, it is good that we give some dedicated attention to it. Over the following chapters, we are going to look at the basic shape of the doctrine of the covenant of grace and why it is so important for us as Reformed believers.

Now it would be very easy to make this rather complicated. It **is** a meaty doctrine and the potential is there to go over the heads of nearly every reader. That is the last thing I want. I want everyone reading this to have a solid basic understanding of the covenant of grace. I am going to do my best to keep it as simple and straightforward as I can. Some readers will already have read or studied more on this subject and may be wondering why this or that is not being discussed. It is not necessarily because it is unimportant; it is just that I do not want to lose anybody as we go through this. I am not writing for theologians, but for regular church members.

In that line, let me narrow our focus here. We are going to focus on the covenant of grace as we encounter it in our lives as believers in this day and age. We are not going to get into questions about whether there is a covenant between the three persons of the Trinity regarding our salvation. We are not going to get into questions about whether the relationship between God and Adam before the fall into sin was a covenant relationship and if so, how we should speak about it. I am not going to discuss Hittite vassal treaties or the development of different covenant administrations through the course of redemptive history. These are all interesting questions and they are certainly important, but we want to keep everything as simple as possible. So, in this book, our focus will be on the covenant of grace in our lives today.

I have one last introductory comment. This is a gospel doctrine. After all, it is a covenant **of grace**. This doctrine speaks to us powerfully about the grace of God, which is good news for sinners. I really want to bring that out in the following pages. Too often, the covenant of grace has been misunderstood as a burdensome or legalistic thing. We deny works in our salvation with the Five Points (TULIP) and so on, but then inadvertently reintroduce them with our covenant doctrine. Remember the young person who thought that the covenant was God doing his part, and us doing our part? That is not the gospel. That is not a covenant **of grace**. As we are going to see, in the Bible, the covenant of grace is a gospel blessing. It is something to treasure and embrace with both our minds and our hearts.

The Essence of the Covenant of Grace

So we turn again to that question: what is the covenant of grace? How do we define it? The Bible leads us to think of it along the lines of marriage. When you attend a wedding, you watch bride and groom exchange vows with another. They make promises and commitments to one another. These vows establish the marriage. Soon after the vows, the couple go over to a table and sign some legal forms. These forms also play a role in establishing the marriage. The vows and the legal forms are important, but no one would seriously argue that the marriage consists of those things. Those things are foundational and necessary, but they do not make up the essence of the marriage. What is the essence of a marriage? It is a relationship. While marriage is established by vows, promises, commitments and other things, the essence is a relationship. It is the same thing with the covenant. The covenant of grace is essentially a relationship between God and his people.

That comparison comes out in Scripture in several places. One of those places is in the prophecy of Hosea. Hosea married an unfaithful woman and then the LORD used that broken marriage to illustrate the broken covenant relationship with his people. He explicitly and directly compares his covenant with Israel to a marriage relationship. The amazing thing is that even though that relationship is broken, God does not stop loving his spouse. He takes the initiative, goes after her and will redeem her and repair the relationship. We can see this in Hosea 2:14-23:

¹⁴ "Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. ¹⁵ And there I will give her her vineyards and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. And there she shall answer as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt. ¹⁶ "And in that day, declares the Lord, you will call me 'My Husband,' and no longer will you call me 'My Baal.' ¹⁷ For I will remove the names of the Baals from her mouth, and they shall be remembered by name no more. ¹⁸ And I will make for them a covenant on that day with the beasts of the field, the birds of the heavens, and the creeping things of the ground. And I will abolish the bow, the sword, and war from the land, and I will make you lie down in safety. ¹⁹ And I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in

righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. ²⁰ I will betroth you to me in faithfulness. And you shall know the Lord. ²¹ “And in that day I will answer, declares the Lord, I will answer the heavens, and they shall answer the earth, ²² and the earth shall answer the grain, the wine, and the oil, and they shall answer Jezreel, ²³ and I will sow her for myself in the land. And I will have mercy on No Mercy, and I will say to Not My People, ‘You are my people’; and he shall say, ‘You are my God.’”

That’s grace functioning in this covenant relationship!

Notice how that passage ended, “*you are my people,*” “*you are my God.*” That kind of language is also found in Genesis 17 when God establishes his covenant with Abraham. The LORD says clearly that he will be their God. They will be his people and that will be shown through circumcision. The LORD being their God and they being his people again speaks of a relationship. There is a close bond and connection between them.

Now you might be thinking, “I thought we were going to be looking at the covenant of grace as we experience it as believers today. But we’re in the Old Testament here, looking at Hosea and now Abraham. That’s not today!” But hold on one moment. You need to look carefully at Genesis 17, especially verse 7:

And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.

God speaks there of an “*everlasting covenant*” with Abraham and his people. This covenant relationship is going to be in effect forever, from that point forward. It is still in effect today — it includes us.

This is confirmed by what we read in the New Testament, especially in Galatians 3. In that chapter, Paul connects Christians today to Abraham in Genesis. In verse 7, he says, “*Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham.*” And in verse 29, “*And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise.*” In other words, you are in that everlasting covenant relationship between God and his people that included Abraham thousands of years ago. In that sense, your experience of the covenant of grace is similar to what Abraham experienced. He and his people had a relationship with God and so do you.

The Origins of the Covenant of Grace

Now what about the origins of the covenant of grace? As I said in the introduction, I am not going to trace the historical development of the covenant and its varied administrations in Scripture. What we are interested in is the question of **who** originated the covenant of grace that we enjoy today. So when we talk about origins, we are going at the question of **who** is really behind it. **Whose** big idea is this?

Article 17 of the Belgic Confession does not mention the word “covenant,” but what it says is definitely covenantal:

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 marvellous wisdom and goodness set out to seek man when he trembling fled from Him. He comforted him with the promise that He would give him His Son, born of woman (Gal 4:4), to crush the head of the serpent and to make man blessed.

That article speaks of the fall into sin, summarizing what Scripture says in Genesis 3. After Adam and Eve plunged themselves into a world of hurt, God did not abandon them. He sought to restore his relationship with them — a **covenant relationship**. The key thing to note there is that it was God who took the initiative. Just as God took the initiative to create man, so also God took the initiative to redeem man and restore his relationship with him.

Therefore we insist that the origins of the covenant of grace are with God. God is the one who began this relationship of grace with his people. God sought Adam and Eve. Further down in history, God went after Abraham. In Joshua 24, we read of the covenant renewal ceremony at Shechem. Joshua speaks the Word of the LORD to the people. God says in verses 2 and 3 of Joshua 24, *“Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods. Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan, and made his offspring many.”* Abraham and his forefathers were idol worshippers, not seeking after God. But it was God who came after Abraham. This is why it says, *“I took your father Abraham from beyond the river.”* The LORD graciously took the initiative, not Abraham.

These things are true for us today too. No matter how we came into this covenant relationship with God, we cannot ever claim any credit for it ourselves. God has taken the initiative to pursue us and bring us into this people who have a special bond with him.

The origins are a vital part of why it is called the covenant **of grace**. God did not owe it to Adam to come after him in the garden. God was under no obligation, especially after Adam had slapped him in the face by listening to the serpent. Abraham was no better, worshipping idols with his fathers in Ur of the Chaldeans. God was not compelled in any way to set his love upon Abraham and call him out of idolatry. Abraham did not deserve it. Neither do any of us deserve a covenant relationship with the LORD. Of ourselves, we do not have a right to it and he does not owe it to us. This is one of the important reasons why it is called the covenant **of grace**. In his mercy and kindness, he gives us the relationship that we do not deserve. He sets his love on us and says, *“I am your God and you are my people. We have an everlasting bond.”* That is grace and we should not stop being amazed at it. You should never take it for granted that you have been blessed in this way. Be thankful and praise God that he has included you in his covenant people!

The Parties in the Covenant of Grace

I have already mentioned who are the parties in this covenant of grace. There are no surprises here. On the one side there is God. He initiates and establishes the covenant of grace. Then there is us, the people of God.

However, we can and must develop this further. If we look at Genesis 17 again, the relationship described there is not only between God and believing Abraham, but also with his offspring, his children. That everlasting covenant is a relationship between God and believers, together with the children of believers. It is extremely important to recognize that the children of believers are also included in the covenant of grace.

Now someone might say, “Well, that was in the Old Testament for the Jews. For Christians today, it’s different. It’s a new covenant and that new covenant is only between God and believers, it doesn’t include the children of believers.” In response, I would draw your attention to Ephesians 6. In that chapter, Paul addresses the children of the Ephesian church. It is quite remarkable how he addresses them. He says in Ephesians 6:1, *“Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.”* And then in the following verse he appeals to the Fifth Commandment and its promise, *“that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.”* The Ten Words of the Covenant are applied to the children of the Ephesian church. Have you ever noticed that before? Why does Paul write like this? Because those children in the Ephesian church are included in the covenant of grace. Paul can appeal to them as covenant people with the covenant law and covenant promises, because they are covenant children.

Therefore, we maintain that the covenant of grace is with believers **and** their children. The parties in the covenant of grace are God together with believers and their offspring. Yet there is someone else involved in the covenant and we cannot forget about him. His involvement in this covenant of grace is crucially important for it to function in a good way. There is a Mediator in the covenant of grace.

By nature, we as human beings are at war with God. In ourselves, without the Holy Spirit, we hate God and we wage war against him. That makes it impossible for a holy God to be in a friendly relationship with us. We need a Mediator, someone to bring the parties together in the relationship.

That is what Jesus Christ does for us. According to Hebrews 8, he is the Mediator of the covenant administration which we experience and live under today. Christ came with the sacrifice that could atone for our sins. He offers the sacrifice that could turn away the wrath of God. He makes propitiation for us (propitiation means that wrath is turned away and favour is restored). With Christ's redemptive work, we are reconciled to God. That word "reconciled," speaks of a friendly relationship. That friendly relationship is a covenant relationship.

So also when we look at the Mediator of the covenant, we come to understand that this is indeed a covenant **of grace**. This speaks to us of the gospel. We have a Saviour who makes a healthy relationship between a holy God and a sinful people work. It does not depend on us, but on him. Without Christ the Mediator, there would be no covenant of grace. There would be no relationship of peace with our Creator.

With that in mind, I want to urge you to continue looking to our Mediator in faith. Without him, this relationship would not be established. Without him, this relationship would have no hope of continuing in a healthy way. You need Jesus Christ in the covenant of grace. The covenant of grace does not replace Jesus Christ, as if you could have the covenant instead of him. Rather, the covenant depends on Christ and here too we desperately need him. We must not look to ourselves in any way, but only to our Saviour, because everything hangs on him.

As we conclude this chapter, let us review what we have learned. The essence of the covenant is a relationship. The origins of the covenant are with God — hence we speak of the covenant of grace. The parties in the covenant are God, believers and their children, with Christ as the Mediator. With the big idea now sketched out, we can proceed to look at the covenant of grace in more detail.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Why is there a persistent temptation to make the covenant of grace into another form of works-salvation?
2. What is the role of the Holy Spirit in the covenant of grace?
3. What are some potential dangers associated with speaking of the covenant of grace as a legal agreement or contract?
4. As noted above, the parties in the covenant of grace are God together with believers and their children, with Christ as Mediator. Does the covenant of grace have any significance for the created world around us?
5. How would you evaluate the following statement? "In our churches, we need to speak less about the covenant and more about the gospel."

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Endnotes:

¹ These are the five points found in the Canons of Dort: Total Depravity, Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement, Irresistible Grace, and Perseverance of the Saints. While each of them can be described better, these are the terms commonly used and abbreviated with the memorable acronym TULIP.

² Ursinus' Larger Catechism can be found in Lyle D. Bierma, *An Introduction to the Heidelberg Catechism: Sources, History, Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 163-223. It can also be found online here:

http://links.christreformed.org/doctrinevision/ursinus_project.pdf