

The Development of the Doctrine of the Covenant

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This section of the *British Reformed Journal* is to be devoted to the covenant. What a fine subject this is! For one thing, it provides us with much scope. We could consider the covenant as the ground of our comfort in the Christian life. We could approach the subject more polemically and interact with the various views on the covenant, in order to come to a clearer understanding of the truth. We could trace the unfolding of God's covenant through the Old and the New Testaments. Or we could relate the covenant to many other key Biblical subjects such as the Holy Trinity, the perseverance of the saints (cf. *Westminster Confession* 17:2), Christian education etc. "And some [if not all of] this will we do, if God permit" (Heb. 6:3).

However, now we shall examine the development of the doctrine of the covenant in the Christian church. In other words, we shall consider how the church's understanding of the covenant has grown and matured in the New Testament era after the death of the apostles.

This presupposes three things. **Presupposition 1:** the doctrine of the covenant is important. For why bother to trace a subject's development through the centuries if that subject is peripheral to the Biblical message or of little theological or practical value? According to Heinrich Heppe, for Reformed theology, "The doctrine of God's covenant with man is . . . the inmost heart and soul of the whole of the revealed truth."¹ In support of his thesis, Heppe proceeds to quote John Henry Heidegger of Zurich (d. 1698):

¹Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. G. T. Thomson (Grand Rapids: Baker, repr. 1978), p. 281.

Hence the marrow and as it were the sort of centre of the whole of Holy Scripture is the . . . covenant and testament of God, to which as their single and most target-like target everything comprised in them must be referred. Admittedly nothing else has been handed down to the saints of all ages through the entire Scripture, than what is contained in the covenant and testament of God and its chapters, save that in the flow and succession of times individual points have been expounded more lavishly and clearly.²

In so saying Reformed theology is accurately representing the Word of God. Our Bible consists of two parts: the Old and New Testaments (where testament is the equivalent of covenant). The book of Hebrews presents God's revelation as rotating on an old covenant/new covenant axis (cf. Heb. 8:7-13/34). The Scriptures present God's man through a succession of covenant heads: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, Christ. The mother promise of Genesis 3:15 is consummated in the perfect realization of the covenant when the tabernacle of God shall be with men (Rev. 21:3)."

Presupposition 2: the church's understanding of the doctrine of the covenant has developed. Whereas God's objective revelation of the covenant is finished and complete with the inspiration of the book of Revelation, the church's subjective understanding of the covenant not only admits of growth but has actually grown over the centuries. This is the work of the Spirit of truth who guides the church into all truth by taking the things of Jesus Christ and revealing them to our hearts and minds (cf. John 16:13-15).

²Quoted in Heppe, *Op. cit.*, p. 281.

Here I must make three clarifications regarding the development of the church's grasp of the truth of the doctrine of the covenant.

First, I do not say that the church's understanding of the covenant has always and in every age progressed so that the church's knowledge of the covenant is necessarily greater say in the ninth century than the eighth century, which in turn was greater than the seventh century. Rather, I speak of the development of the covenant *in the main and over the long haul*. For, as we shall see, there were retrograde steps taken in the development of the doctrine of the covenant.

Nor do I mean, second, that all members of the church at one time reached the same level of understanding of the covenant. Obviously, the subjective understanding of this doctrine varies (as it does for all doctrines) from believer to believer, for the members of the body of Christ have different gifts (I Cor. 12:4-12) and not all have the same opportunities for learning of God's covenant.

Third, neither do I mean that at any one time all Christians then living hold the same view of the covenant. To look no further than our own day, we can readily appreciate that there are various opinions. For example, the covenant is understood very differently by baptistic premillennial dispensationalists and orthodox Presbyterian and Reformed churches. Moreover within the latter community different views obtain. Thus when I speak of the (positive) development of the doctrine of the covenant I am speaking of the church in her soundest and most orthodox sections, as her views are expressed in her creeds and in the writings of her greatest theologians.

Presupposition 3: the covenant has a specific meaning. Development necessarily speaks of progress from lower to higher and growth from less mature to more mature. This in turn involves the processes of correction and reformulation as well as those of addition and expansion. Some ele-

ments in the church's tradition are positive and helpful; others are erroneous and misleading. The latter lead the church on the wrong path and require her to retrace her steps. All this determining of true and false developments requires value judgements on my part.

Rather than engage in a critique of the other views or proceed with a lengthy defence of my position, it is sufficient for the purpose of this series of articles to present the main lines of defence of the position here presupposed. That position is that *the covenant is a bond of friendship between the Triune God and His elect people in Jesus Christ*.

That this is the case is shown, first, in the aptly named "covenant formula": namely, *I will be your God and you shall be my people*. This formula occurs in various forms in connection with the covenant, especially at key moments.³ This formula explains what the covenant is: God is our God and we are His people. This is fellowship with Jehovah through His Son, in which we experience His goodness and enjoy true blessedness.

Second, it is generally agreed that the promise of Genesis 3:15 is a *covenant* promise.⁴ Moreover, it is the *first* covenant promise and therefore what it testifies concerning the nature of the covenant is all the more weighty. According to Genesis 3:15, God puts enmity between the seed of the woman (Christ and the church in Him) and the seed of the serpent (Satan and the reprobate). But what is it to be at enmity with Satan other than to know *friendship* (the opposite of enmity) with God? We conclude, therefore, that the first covenant promise presents the covenant as friendship with God.

³As examples of these various forms, consider, "I will . . . be a God to thee, and to thy seed after thee" (Gen. 17:7); "I . . . will be their God, and they shall be my people" (Jer. 31:33); "they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God" (Rev. 21:3).

⁴Cf. Robert L. Reymond: "By the *protevangelium* [first gospel promise] of Genesis 3:15 God put into effect the 'covenant of grace' which in its Abrahamic form became salvifically definitive for all time to come" (*A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* [Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 1998], p. 449).

A third strand in the argument that the covenant is communion with God is found in the symbols and figures that the Word of God uses to shadow forth that blessed reality. First, God's relationship to His covenant people Israel is that of a Father and His son (Ex. 4:22-23; Jer. 31:9). There is a strong familial bond between Jehovah and His offspring, a relationship in which God loves, cares for and defends His son, who in turn trusts and delights in his Father. Second, God is the faithful husband of His bride, the church (Eze. 16; Hos. 2). This speaks of the *intimacy* of the covenant communion. Third, God's covenant relationship with His people is manifested in the tabernacle and temple, in which God dwells with His people. This foreshadows the covenant reality of the incarnation of the Son of God when "the Word was made flesh and dwelt [literally, tabernacled] among us" (John 1:14).

With the first covenant promise, the covenant formula and the covenant symbols all indicating that the covenant is *a bond of friendship between the Triune God and His elect people in Jesus Christ* we can safely proceed to analyse the development of the doctrine of the covenant in the church. We can only hit a few of the high points. As yet the route we will take is not set in stone but it is intended that we shall reflect upon the creeds (Nicea, Chalcedon, Dordt, Westminster), specific periods of church history (early church, medieval church) and key theologians (Athanasius, Augustine, Bullinger, Calvin, Olevianus, Bavinck, Hoeksema). Maybe we will consider some of these together. Maybe we will omit some and add others. "And [most if not all of] this will we do, if God permit" (Heb. 6:3). Let us pray that the Spirit of truth would guide us aright that we might see how He leads the church into all truth.

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