

God's Everlasting Covenant

By Malcolm H. Watts

Introduction

Federal or Covenant theology was, in the words of Professor John Murray, 'a distinguishing feature of the Reformed tradition'. The earliest of the Reformers rediscovered this biblical truth and began to explore its spiritual riches.

As early as 1561, Zacharias Ursinus, a professor at Heidelberg, referred to a covenant made with man before the Fall. The Tenth Question of his 'Major Catechism' (1561) was: 'What does the divine Law teach?' The answer was: 'That God made a covenant with humanity in creation'. Later, in answer to Question 36, Ursinus explained the nature of this cove-

nant which, he observed, is now contained within the Law. He wrote: 'It requires from us perfect obedience to God, and it promises eternal life, for those who keep it, and threatens eternal punishments for those who do not fulfil it'.

Ursinus proceeded further, maintaining that the covenant of grace is published in the Gospel. This reveals 'the fulfilment in Christ of his justice, which the Law requires' and 'promises eternal life by grace because of Christ, to those who believe in him'. It was, however, Caspar Olevianus, a colleague of Ursinus', who developed this doctrine of an eternal, redemptive covenant. In his work, 'The Substance of the Covenant of Grace' (1585), Olevianus asserted that 'the Son' was 'appointed by God as Mediator of the covenant' and

that, in the exercise of this office, he became the covenant's 'guarantor', able to 'satisfy for the sins of all those whom the Father has given him'.

Thereafter, this teaching spread and became standard Reformed doctrine.

The Covenant of Works

According to the book of Genesis, God made a covenant or conditional promise in the Garden of Eden. While by virtue of his creation, Adam was obliged to obey God, his obedience did not give him right to any spiritual or eternal reward. It therefore pleased God to make Adam's perfect obedience the condition upon which a higher good might be secured. This involved making a contract - 'the Covenant of Works'.

A special command was given to ascertain the nature of Adam's obedience: he was not to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge which grew in the garden of Eden (Gen 2:16-17). While not explicitly mentioned, the promise was certainly implied in the threatening for disobedience. 'In the day that thou eatest thereof', God said, 'thou shalt surely die (2:17 margin: 'dying thou shalt die'). From these words, we gather that obedience would have procured the opposite: that is, a continuance of natural and spiritual life, issuing at last in the full blessing of eternal life.

This was, in fact, confirmed by the appointed seal of that covenant - 'the tree of

life' (Gen 2:9), and also in those later scriptures which state that 'the commandment...was ordained to life' and that 'the man which doeth those things shall live by them' (Rom 7:10; 10:5).

In this covenant, Adam was no mere individual. He was a Head and Representative, acting for all who would be his natural descendants. Had he fulfilled the condition, his obedience would have been reckoned to all men and, in consequence, they would have been entitled to eternal life. As it happened, however, he failed to keep that law, thereby involving the whole human race in his disobedience. In him, all men 'sinned' and 'by the offence of one, judgment came upon all men to condemnation' (Rom 5:12 margin, 18). The result? The penalty annexed to the violation of the covenant was inflicted upon every soul of man. All men everywhere are subject to physical, spiritual, and eternal death. As Scripture so clearly states, 'In Adam all die' (1 Cor 15:22).

Such is our condition by nature. We are viewed as guilty sinners, condemned to everlasting punishment. Is there, then, no hope at all for us? Certainly there is no hope in the covenant made with Adam and tragically broken by him. That covenant spells only death! In the midst of appalling judgment, however, God opened a door of hope to the guilty.

The Covenant of Grace

As soon as Adam fell, God graciously revealed that there was another covenant. Addressing the Serpent, God said: 'I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it (more literally, he) shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel' (Gen 3:15).

This has been called 'the first gospel proclamation'. It refers to 'the seed of the woman', an expression followed by the masculine pronouns 'he' and 'his'. The promise evidently concerns an individual Man, called by way of eminence 'the seed' (Gal 3:16,19), but also called - and most significantly - 'the seed of the woman' (no man is named here). This suggests a miraculous conception and birth of a pure virgin (as later predicted, Isaiah 7:14; cf Matt 1:18-23) which would render the Person concerned free from sin's guilt and taint; and, in the New Testament, the fulfilment is described in the following terms: 'When the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman...' (Gal 4:4); '(He) is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners...' (Heb 7:26).

Now, according to this early revelation, the coming One would be at 'enmity' with 'the serpent'. This must mean that - unlike Adam - he would resist the adversary and his temptations: but a further and somewhat more mysterious thought is expressed, namely that he would be

wounded or 'bruised' (as our version has it) in the 'heel'. A literal meaning may be intended, as pierced feet would involve such bruising; but it is rather more likely that figurative language is being employed to convey the idea of suffering which proves to be only temporary, not final. Such suffering, of course, was endured by our Lord when he was 'wounded for our transgressions' and 'bruised for our iniquities', for after his death he 'rose again' and he now 'liveth by the power of God' (Isaiah 53:4,10; 1 Cor 15:3,4; 2 Cor 13:4).

As Dr Horatius Bonar asks, 'Is not this the very truth in which we now rejoice? A Deliverer that has suffered? One whose suffering avails to avert suffering from us; nay, one whose suffering is to take the place of our suffering?'

There is yet more truth to be found in these words. God makes it clear that the Saviour, through his suffering, would overcome the devil. He would inflict upon him a deadly wound, a 'bruise' to the 'head', by which his power would be decisively and completely destroyed. This, of course, is precisely what happened. Christ, 'through death', was able to 'destroy him that had the power of death, that is the devil' (Heb 2:14; cf 1 John 3:8)

It is particularly important to observe that the coming Deliverer is not called the seed of Adam. Why not? The answer is that he himself was to be another Adam, inas-

much as, like the first, he was to be a Covenant Head, sustaining a representative character. This is only One whom Scripture describes as 'the last Adam' or 'the second man': that is, the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor 15:45,47).

Now, this remarkable proclamation implied an earlier covenant, an 'everlasting covenant' (Heb 13:20), an arrangement made before the foundation of the world and in anticipation of Adam's sin. This covenant had been formally agreed among the undivided Three. There was mutual consent between the Father and the Son, the Holy Spirit also concurring (Zech 6:13; Gal 3:17; Heb 12:24).

Embodied in this eternal covenant was a divine purpose of grace, fulfilled - not through a mere man - but through none other than the Son of God. 'God', writes the apostle Paul, 'has saved us, and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace given us in Christ Jesus before the world began' (2 Tim 1:9,10). In another place, he makes reference to 'the eternal purpose which he (God the Father) purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Eph 3:10,11).

This eternal contrivance is correctly called 'the covenant of grace'.

Its origin or cause was the divine grace, not anything good or worthy foreseen in man; and its ultimate end was the glorifying of that grace in a saved people, to all

eternity (Eph 1:6; 2:7).

In grace, the Son of God was chosen and appointed as a covenanting Head for the elect - the spiritual seed (Prov 8:23; Is 42:1; Eph 1:4; Col 1:18). Grace also ensured that the Son would, on behalf of his people, meet the necessary requirements, even those exacting and rigorous demands of Adam's broken covenant. He would 'fulfil all righteousness' (Matt 3:15; 5:17), assuming, in the fulness of time, a holy human nature, conforming impeccably to the Law's precepts, and (because of Adam's failure) rendering complete satisfaction for human transgression (Rom 8:3,4; Gal 4:4; Phil 2:8).

The promise, too, was wholly of grace. Once secured by Christ, it would be freely dispensed to the elect by the Holy Spirit, in measure here and in fulness hereafter. What was this promise? It was 'eternal life, which God, that cannot lie, promised before the world began' (Titus 1:2; cf 1 Jn 5:11).

Covenant blessings are now at Christ's disposal. When through grace we receive him, we enter a relationship with him and we are as those 'married' or 'joined unto the Lord' (Rom 7:4; 1 Cor 6:17). This union with Christ, the covenant's head, enables us to possess those invaluable blessings secured by him (Rom 8:32; 1 Cor 1:30,31). Hence, we read: 'He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life' (Jn 3:36).

Application

Thus administered, the covenant produces the church, which in every age is God's covenant community. Its members are the objects of his loving care and they are distinguished from others by high privileges: not least among them, the possession of sacred ordinances and the gracious indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

It is incumbent on the people of the covenant to show themselves separated from false doctrine and practice, and united in the blessed fellowship of faithful men and women. This, of course, should be true of every member of Christ's church. We should all heed the exhortation to 'walk worthy of God', who has 'called' them 'unto his kingdom and glory' (1 Thess 2:12; cf 2 Cor 6:16-18; 1 Pet 2:9).

Furthermore, since from Adam's Fall there has been a progressive revelation of the one eternal covenant, we believe this is the one, single, and consistent theme of the Holy Scriptures. True, the revelation of it before Christ came is rather dark and obscure compared to the revelation of it since he came, which explains why the former is called 'the old testament' and the latter, 'the new testament'; but - and this is the important point - both disclosures concentrate on one and the same theme, that of God's 'testament' or 'covenant' (2 Cor 3:6,14; Heb 8:7,13). So this doctrine is the key which unlocks the treasury of God's Word and the believer's

delight will be to discover the riches of God's covenant within these sacred pages.

'This covenant', wrote Richard Alleine in 1665, 'is the hope of sinners, the riches of saints, the magna charta of the city of God; the forfeited lease of eternity renewed; God's deed of gift wherein he hath, on fair conditions, granted sinners their lives, and settled upon his saints an everlasting inheritance'.

In preaching this covenant, ministers must first declare man's misery under the curse of the violated covenant of works; and then, since there is neither relief nor hope for sinners in that covenant, they must preach Christ, in whom alone there is recovery from a fallen and wretched state. He is said to be 'given' as 'a covenant of the people' (Is 42:6; cf 49:8), which means that he is the substance of that covenant. It receives validity in him and he it is who secures its promise. In Christ, believing sinners have a better Head, a superior righteousness, a firmer standing, a greater comfort, and a surer hope. Our dear Saviour has 'restored' what he 'took not away' (Ps 69:4).

Here is the antidote for our many doubts and fears. Are some quite overwhelmed with a sense of sin? Do they feel that, at the last, their hopes may well be dashed as they themselves be denied entrance into the kingdom of heaven? The doctrine before us teaches that believers are free from the law in its covenant form. As the

apostle says, we are both 'dead to the law by the body of Christ' and also 'delivered from the law, that being dead wherein we were held' (Rom 7:4,6). What does he mean? He means that, because of Christ's fulfilment of the law, believers no longer obey it as a means of obtaining righteousness and eternal life, neither are they subject to its terrible sentence of everlasting punishment. In this sense (not in any antinomian sense), 'ye are not under the law, but under grace' (Rom 6:14). Covenant truth, believed in the heart, delivers the Lord's people from many needless anxieties.

What then of the future? The covenant of grace was established from eternity; it was fulfilled in time; but it will be honoured throughout the ages to come, even for evermore. In his 'Sacred Contemplations' (1786), Adam Gib wrote: 'Those who die under the Covenant of Grace will be advanced to an inconceivable height of happiness in realms of absolute and endless day; to a full enjoying of all good, in God himself: without an fear of alteration or abatement in their blessedness - for EVER and EVER and EVER'.

We confidently await the full accomplishment of God's promise in the glory of his holy and heavenly kingdom. There, with untold multitudes, we shall appreciate the glories of the eternal covenant and we shall delight in solemn, rapturous praise, singing, 'Salvation to our God which sitteth upon the throne, and unto the

Lamb' (Rev 7:10).

Awake, my soul, and join the song,
Which swells the choir above;
No theme so well employs the tongue
As Jesus' covenant love.

When o'er the wondrous scheme of grace
In Bible truth I rove;
I see the worst of Adam's race
Are saved by covenant love.

My Surety's work, my Father's word,
For ever firm shall prove;
The Spirit's graces all afford
Sweet proofs of covenant love.

My life and strength, and joy and peace,
My hope of bliss above;
My union with the Prince of Peace,
All flow from covenant love.

Here then I'll sit, and love, and die,
Nor once from hence remove:
Yea, when I sit with Christ on high,
I'll sing of covenant love.

(Joseph Irons, 1785-1852)