

WCF 07: OF GOD'S COVENANT WITH MAN

The term 'covenant' has become quite controversial in many modern churches partly because it sounds so 'profound' and 'theological', and partly because of its confrontational connotations. It is in a certain sense confrontational because those who affirm 'Covenant Theology' would often do so in contra distinction to 'Dispensational Theology' which has become rather popular in conservative churches because it is widely promoted in Study Bibles such as Scofield Study Bible; Ryrie Study Bible; KJV Study Bible, etc.

But essence of 'Covenant Theology' has always been taught since the early days of the New Testament Church though its present systematic form can be traced back largely to the 16th Century Reformation.

This chapter of our Confession presents the systematic and developed form of Covenant Theology as held by the Reformed and Presbyterian Churches in the tradition of John Calvin. This form, we believe, is fully consistent with Biblical data and presents in a systematic way the mind of God in regard to the framework with which He would want us to think of His relationship with us.

Why Covenant?

7.1 The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto Him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of Him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God's part, which He hath been pleased to express by way of covenant.¹

¹Isa 40:13–17; Job 9:32–33; 1 Sam 2:25; Ps 113:5–6; 100:2–3; Job 22:2–3; 35:7–8; Lk 17:10; Acts 17:24–25.

The distance between God as Creator and man as creature is a theme that is frequently emphasised in Scripture (see proof-texts above). Because of this distance, and the fact that man's existence is dependant on God, man owes God his absolute obedience and therefore cannot expect to be rewarded by Him. So our Lord, pointing out to His disciples that a master does not thank his slave for doing his duties, teaches us: "So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do" (Lk 17:10). The Lord has nevertheless condescended to relate to man by way of covenant so that man may have some "fruition [or enjoyment] of Him as their blessedness and reward."

What is a covenant? Palmer Robertson defines it as "bond-in-blood, committing the participants to loyalty on pain of death" (*The Christ of the Covenants*, 11). We may enlarge this definite to: "A covenant is a bond of friendship governed by a sworn statement."

Think of marriage. Marriage is not just a contract. It is a bond of friendship. It is friendship, but it is not just friendship because the husband and wife make a sworn agreement with each other. They are more than friends. They made a vow to love each other exclusively and for the rest of their life. They promise not to have another other man or woman in their life. If they keep their vow, then they would enjoy the blessings of each other's company including having children together. But if they fail to keep their vows, then the consequence is severe. They cannot just part company. They will suffer the penalty in various ways such as lost of peace, lost of face, lost of property, or lost of custody of the children, etc.

In the Ancient Near Eastern Culture, a covenant is a treaty or contract that generally has five elements (of which the first four are essential):

- *Two parties.* Both parties are sometimes represented by an individual in the Scripture. In Abraham's covenant with Abimelech, the contracting parties were really Abraham's family and Abimelech and his descendants (Gen 21:23).
- *A condition or stipulation.* This is the statement or oath of the covenant. This is usually stated either in clear writing (Ex 34:27–28) or verbally (Gen 21:23–24, 31–32; Ex 19:8; 24:3, 7), and can be ratified by (a) offering a sacrifice (Ps 50:5); (b) sprinkling of blood (Ex 24:8); (c) passing under the rod (Ezk 20:37); (d) passing through path of divided animals (Gen 15:10, 18); etc.
- *A promise or blessing.* This refers to the pledge or guarantee of blessing when the stipulations of the covenant is kept. In bilateral covenant (as contrasted with divine covenants), the promise is often implied rather than explicitly spelt out. In Abraham's covenant with Abimelech, for example, the

promise implied was that Abraham and his would be allowed to dwell in peace at Beersheba (see Gen 21:22–23).

- *A penalty.* This refers to the punishment that will be inflicted when the stipulation of the covenant is broken. Again, this is often implied as in the covenant between Abraham and Abimelech.
- *A sign and seal* (or sacrament). This refers to the token or symbol that points to the substance of the covenant, to remind the covenanting parties of the covenant that has been made. It can take a variety of forms such as: (a) a gift (Gen 21:27–32); (b) a meal (Gen 31:54); or (c) a memorial (Gen 31:44ff; Josh 24:27).

A divine covenant may also be understood according to these five elements. It may be defined as “a bond-in-blood sovereignly administered” (*ibid.*, 15), or as I prefer, “a bond of friendship governed by divine oath and sovereignly administered.” This means divine covenants are unilateral, i.e., God dictates the terms, and man has no right to bargain.

The Covenant of Works

7.2 *The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works,¹ wherein life was promised to Adam; and in him to his posterity,² upon condition of perfect and personal obedience.³*

¹ Gal 3:12; ² Rom 10:5; 5:12–20; ³ Gen 2:17; Gal 3:10.

It is often objected that the word *covenant* does not appear in Genesis 1 to 3 and therefore it is unbiblical to speak of a Covenant of Works. However, there are three good reasons to believe that God did make a covenant with Adam:

- a. The Hebrew of Hosea 6:7 is better rendered: “They like *Adam* have transgressed the covenant” rather than “They like *men* have transgressed the covenant.” Firstly, the Hebrew *adam* is singular. Secondly, if Israel did not transgress the covenant “like men” how else would they have transgressed it, since they are men? Thirdly, the same Hebrew word translated “like men” (אדם) is translated “as Adam” in Job 31:33, “If I covered my transgressions as Adam, by hiding mine iniquity in my bosom.”
- b. The parallel which the Apostle Paul draws between Adam and Christ in Romans 5:12–21, in connection with justification, can only be explained on the assumption that Adam, like Christ, is the head of a covenant. Just as Adam’s sin was imputed on his posterity whom he represented, Christ’s righteousness is imputed on the elect whom he represented.
- c. All the essential elements of a covenant are present.
 - i. *The Contracting Parties*
 - The Triune God, the Creator and Sovereign Lord;
 - Man, His dependent creature. Note their relationship:-
 - Naturally: Creator and Creature. Creature is duty bound to keep the laws of the Creator. Transgression deserves punishment, Obedience deserves nothing.
 - Covenantally: Adam was the representative and head of the whole human race. He was under probation: will he subject his will to the will of God? Transgression deserves punishment, Obedience obtains eternal life (by grace).

- ii. *The Condition or Stipulation*

Perfect, personal obedience to the Moral Law of God. Adam had the Moral Law written in the tablets of his heart: “For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves: Which shew the work of the *law written in their hearts*, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another” (Rom 2:14–15). The Moral Law of God is summarised in the Ten Commandments, but in a different form. The Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 is predominantly negative because it pre-supposes knowledge of sin. But Adam knew no sin, so the Law inscribed in his heart must have been entirely positive. Moreover, since he knew no sin, it would have been natural, effortless and reasonable for him to obey these commandments. Therefore God deemed it necessary to add a negative commandment that is in some sense arbitrary and indifferent: “But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die” (Gen 2:17). By itself it was not a moral question, but it was a test of pure obedience on the part of Adam. Would Adam obey God, or

would he follow the guidance of his own judgment? In that sense, the demands of the law is concentrated on one point. If Adam obeyed, he would receive the blessings of the covenant, if he failed, he will experience the curses.

iii. *The Promise or Blessing of the Covenant*

Most Reformed theologians believe that it is a promise of eternal life (Hoeksema asserts that it is a natural earthly life). Although the promise is not explicit, it is implied since death—temporal, spiritual and eternal,—results from disobedience. Although there is no mention of eternal life, we know that Adam already had eternal life in so far as the quality is concerned since eternal life is life in communion with God: “This is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent” (Jn 17:3).

But Adam could lose that by sin. So it cannot be eternal or everlasting. However, Scripture suggests that if he continued on and stood the test, he would be lifted to a higher plane after an indefinite period—just as the good angels have been confirmed in righteousness. Adam would have been raised above the possibility of erring, sinning and dying. That is the implicit promise.

The life promised under the Covenant of Works is referred to in numerous places in Scripture:

Rom 7:10 And the commandment, which was ordained to life, I found to be unto death. I.e., “The law was designed and adapted to secure life, but became in fact the cause of death” (Charles Hodge).

Rom 10:5 For Moses describeth the righteousness which is of the law, That the man which doeth those things shall live by them.

Lev 18:5 Ye shall therefore keep my statutes, and my judgments: which if a man do, he shall live in them: I am the LORD.

Gal 3:12 And the law is not of faith: but, The man that doeth them shall live in them.

Lk 10:25–28 And, behold, a certain lawyer stood up, and tempted him, saying, Master, what shall I do to *inherit eternal life*? He said unto him, What is written in the law? how readest thou? And he answering said, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself. And he said unto him, Thou hast answered right: *this do, and thou shalt live*.

Ezk 20:11 And I gave them my statutes, and shewed them my judgments, which if a man do, he shall even live in them (cf. Ezk 20:13, 21).

iv. *The Penalty*

“But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof *thou shalt surely die*” (Gen 2:17). This refers to death: physical, spiritual and eternal (cf. *WCF* 6.6).

- Physical death: That is, Adam and Eve would become mortal and begin the process of bodily decay which would eventually lead to necrosis. “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, *till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return*” (Gen 3:19). “But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept. For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. *For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive*” (1 Cor 15:20–22).
- Spiritual death: That is, Adam and Eve would henceforth not be able to do good in the sight of God whatsoever. They would become “dead in trespasses and sin” (Eph 2:1); and all their righteousness would be as “filthy rags” (Is 64:6) in the eyes of God. This spiritual death is referred to in Romans 5:17, “For if by one man’s offence death reigned by one; much more they which receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness shall reign in life by one, Jesus Christ.”
- Eternal death: That is, Adam and Eve would no longer be able to enjoy fellowship with God and would upon their bodily death experience the full wrath of God for ever and ever. This death is symbolised in Genesis 3:24, “So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of

the tree of life.” This is the death referred to in Romans 6:23, “For the wages of sin is *death*; but the gift of God is *eternal life* through Jesus Christ our Lord” and in Romand 5:18-19, “Therefore as by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life. For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous.”

When Adam fell, he experienced spiritual death immediately, and had begun to feel both the corruption of physical death and the effects of eternal death. But God, as we shall see, immediately introduced an economy of grace and restoration, the Covenant of Grace (Gen 3:15).

v. *The Sign and Seal*

Although the sign and seal is an optional element in a covenant, most Reformed theologians, such as Francis Turretin see the Tree of Life as the sign and seal of the Covenant of Works. He says: “[The Tree of Life] was a sacrament and symbol of the immortality which would have been bestowed upon Adam if he had persevered in his first state. Augustine says, ‘He had nourishment in other trees; in this, however, a sacrament.’ Now this signification can have a threefold relation. (1) With respect to past life, it was a symbol putting him in mind of the life received from God. As often as he tasted its fruit, he was bound to recollect that he had life not from himself, but from God. (2) With respect to future life, it was a declarative and sealing sign of the happy life to be passed in paradise and to be changed afterwards into a heavenly life, if he had continued upright. (3) With respect to the state of grace, it was an illustrious type of the eternal happiness prepared for us in heaven; also a type of Christ himself who acquired and confers it upon us and who is therefore called ‘the tree of life in the midst of the paradise of God’ (Rev 2:7); ‘the tree of life yielding her fruit twelve times every month, whose leaves are for the healing of the nations’ (Rev 22:2)” (Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 1.581).

Since Adam was the federal head of the human race, the result of his fall was that (1) His posterity is imputed with his sin: “Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned” (Rom 5:12). (2) His posterity inherits his sin nature: “Behold, I was shapen in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me” (Ps 51:5). See also *WCF* 6.2, 6.3.

The Covenant of Grace

7.3 *Man, by his fall, having made himself incapable of life by that covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second,¹ commonly called the Covenant of Grace: wherein He freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ, requiring of them faith in Him, that they may be saved;² and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto eternal life His Holy Spirit, to make them willing and able to believe.³*

¹Gal 3:21; Rom 8:3; 3:20–21; Gen 3:15; Isa 42:6; ²Mk 16:15–16; Jn 3:16; Rom 10:6, 9; Gal 3:11; ³Ezk 36:26–27; Jn 6:44–45.

Many Reformed theologians such as Owen, Charnock, Flavel, etc., speaks of two covenants connected with the salvation of fallen men, namely: (1) the Covenant of Redemption which is made between the persons of the Godhead in eternity, and (2) the Covenant of Grace which is made with sinners in time. In such a scheme, the Covenant of Grace is generally regarded as being conditioned upon faith, i.e. only those who exercise faith enters into a covenant relation with God. This faith is provided to the elect as a gift that comes with the Covenant of Redemption.

Our Confession, on the other hand, speaks only of one covenant, which combines the covenant between the persons of the Godhead and God’s covenant with the elect. In this scheme, the Covenant of Grace (note the slight difference in meaning with the understanding of those who speak of a Covenant of Redemption) is a covenant between God and His elect, with Christ, the God-Man as their representative.

The Larger Catechism, Q. 31 makes it clear: “With whom was the Covenant of Grace made?” Answer: “The Covenant of Grace was made with Christ as the second Adam, and in Him with all the elect as His seed.” The Covenant of Works was made with Adam as a representative of all mankind, and so it was made with him for his posterity. In the same way, the Covenant of Grace is made with Christ, the second Adam, as the representative of His elect, and so it was made with Him for His seed (see Gal 3:16; Rom 5:15ff.; Isa 53:10–11). It is as such an unconditional covenant as far as the elect is concerned, although it is, in a sense, conditioned upon Christ’s fulfilment of the Covenant of Works as well as payment of the debt of sin on the behalf of the elect.

This is elaborated in the confessional statement above, which may be comprehended in the following 9 propositions:

1. This Covenant was made between God the Father, representing the entire Godhead, and His co-eternal Son, who was to assume, in the fullness of time, a human element into His Person, and to represent all His elect as their Mediator and Surety. This is taught in various passages in the Scripture:

Psalm 89:3, 4: “I have made a covenant with my chosen, I have sworn unto David my servant, Thy seed will I establish for ever, and build up thy throne to all generations.” This psalm,—as all the psalms,—refers to David as a type of Christ, the Greater David or the “Root of David” (Rev 5:5). The Scripture clearly intimates that the covenant was made with Christ rather than merely with David, for long after David was dead and buried, Ezekiel prophesied, “And I will set up one shepherd over them, and he shall feed them, even my servant David; he shall feed them, and he shall be their shepherd. ... And David my servant shall be king over them; and they all shall have one shepherd: they shall also walk in my judgments, and observe my statutes, and do them” (Ezk 34:23, 37:24; cf. Jer 30:9; Lk 24:44).

Isaiah 42:6–7: “I the LORD have called thee in righteousness, and will hold thine hand, and will keep thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people, for a light of the Gentiles; To open the blind eyes, to bring out the prisoners from the prison, and them that sit in darkness out of the prison house.” This verse clearly refers to Christ (cf. Isa 42:1–3 with Mt 12:18–21). It teaches us that the Covenant is a covenant of redemption of sinners from sin and Satan.

2. This Covenant was made with Christ, as the head or representative of His spiritual seed. This is clearly taught by the Apostle Paul in his comparisons between Adam and Christ: “Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned: ... But not as the offence, so also is the free gift. For if through the offence of one many be dead, much more the grace of God, and the gift by grace, which is by one man, Jesus Christ, hath abounded unto many. ... Therefore as by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life” (Rom 5:12, 15, 18). Just as Adam, as a public person represented his posterity in death, so Christ represent His elect in life. Christ may, in fact, be called the “Second Adam”: “And so it is written, The first man Adam was made a living soul; the last Adam was made a quickening spirit. ... The first man is of the earth, earthy: the second man is the Lord from heaven” (1 Cor 15:45, 47).

Furthermore, the identity of Christ and His Church through covenant union is clearly taught in the Scripture. The covenant people and Christ are identified by the same name: “And said unto me, Thou art my servant, O Israel, in whom I will be glorified” (Isa 49:3). Though Saul persecuted the Church, the Lord asked him: “Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?” (Acts 9:4).

Christ is also called the Surety of the Covenant: “By so much was Jesus made a surety of a better testament” (Heb 7:22). A surety is a person who takes upon himself the legal obligations of another. And the promises of the Covenant were primarily made with him: “Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ” (Gal 3:16). These promises were not made when the covenant was enacted in Genesis 15. They were made before the foundation of the world: “In hope of eternal life, which God, that cannot lie, promised before the world began” (Tit 1:2).

3. This Covenant was established from eternity. The Covenant of Grace is called a “second” covenant in our Confession because it is second in respect to *manifestation* and *execution* when compared with the Covenant of Works. Yet, in respect to the period or the order in which it was made, it is the first covenant. Christ,—the embodiment of Wisdom,—says, “I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was” (Prov 8:23); i.e., “he was set apart to his mediatory office and work,—in other words, to be the head of his spiritual seed in the covenant of grace from everlasting” (Shaw, 90–91; cf. Ps 2:6–8). Thus Christ in His earthly ministry made constant reference to a previous commission He had received of His Father (Jn 10:18, 17:4–5; Lk 22:29). Thus Paul tells us that eternal life was “promised before the world began” (Tit 1:2). Thus the Covenant of Grace is called an “everlasting covenant” (Heb 13:20).
4. This Covenant originated in the good pleasure of His sovereign will of God and is completely gratuitous. “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ: According as he hath chosen us in him before the

foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love: Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, To the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved” (Eph 1:3–6).

5. While the Covenant of Grace seen from the standpoint of it being a relationship between God and the elect is unilateral (will be kept by God) and unconditional (to man), when seen as an agreement between God and the Son, it is neither unilateral nor unconditional. The conditions or requirements of this Covenant are:
 - a. That Christ should fulfil the Covenant of Works on behalf of His elect. In this sense the Covenant of Grace is the continuation of the Covenant of Works. In this regard, He would assume human nature with its present infirmities, yet without sin, by being born of a virgin. This is seen in Galatians 4:4–5, Hebrews 2:10 and 4:15. He would also place Himself under the Law, to keep it perfectly and so merit salvation on behalf of His elect. This is seen in Matthew 5:17–18, “Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled” (cf. Ps 40:8; Jn 8:29).
 - b. That Christ should bear their iniquities by dying a propitiatory death on behalf of His elect—thus receiving upon Himself the curse due them for the violation of the Covenant of Works. This is clearly taught in Isaiah 53:10–11: “Yet it pleased the LORD to bruise him; he hath put him to grief: when thou shalt make his soul an offering for sin, he shall see his seed, he shall prolong his days, and the pleasure of the LORD shall prosper in his hand. He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be satisfied: by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities.” Verse 10 has been paraphrased beautifully as: “If His soul shall make a propitiatory sacrifice, he shall see a seed which shall prolong their days; and the gracious purpose of Jehovah shall prosper in His hands” (cited by Shaw, 90). See also John 10:17–18.
 - c. That Christ should apply His merits to His elect by regenerating them, endowing them with faith, and sanctifying them through the monergistic work of the Holy Spirit, thus securing the consecration of their lives to God. That this is the work of Christ is clearly seen in John 17:19–22: “And for their sakes I sanctify myself, that they also might be sanctified through the truth. Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one.” That it is worked through the Holy Spirit is seen in John 16:13–15.
6. The promises of the Covenant, which the Father make on behalf of the entire Godhead, include:
 - a. That He would prepare for Him a body uncontaminated by sin (Heb 10:5), and would anoint Him by giving Him the Spirit without measure, thus qualifying Him for the Messianic office (Isa 42:1–2; 61:1; Jn 3:34).
 - b. That He would support Him in His work (Isa 42:6–7; Lk 22:43).
 - c. That He would deliver Him from the power of death, and highly exalt Him over all power in heaven and earth (Ps 16:8–11; Acts 2:25–28; Phil 2:9–11).
 - d. That He would enable Him, on account of His fulfilment of the conditions of the Covenant to send out the Holy Spirit for the formation of His spiritual body by regeneration and sanctification of His elect; and for the instruction, guidance and protection of His Church so constituted (Jn 6:37, 39–40, 44–45, 14:26; 15:26; 16:13–14). This is the aspect emphasised in our Confession, which notes that God promises “to give unto all those that are ordained unto life His Holy Spirit, to make them willing and able to believe.”
7. In the administration of this Covenant, God “freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ, requiring of them faith in Him, that they may be saved.” It must be carefully noted that the faith in Christ that is referred here is, strictly speaking, not a condition, stipulation or requirement of the Covenant—if we understand such condition, stipulation or requirement as *meritorious*. Rather, faith is presented here as the instrument or means of obtaining the salvation already procured by Christ. The condition of the Covenant is wholly fulfilled by Christ. It is true that *WLC* 32 speaks of “requiring faith as the condition to interest them in Him.” But this must be read carefully in context, for it a participle clause to the phrase, “promiseth and giveth His Holy Spirit to all His elect, to work in them that faith,

with all other saving graces....” In other words, the emphasis in the statement is the work of the Spirit. The present section in the Confession says the same: “promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto eternal life His Holy Spirit, to make them willing, and able to believe.” It is the Arminian doctrine that faith is a condition of the Covenant of Grace. But if this is the case, it is no longer a gracious covenant, for however much easier it is for the sinner to repent and believe in Christ (as the Arminians claim), it is still a work or obedience on the part of the sinner.

Note, however, that there is a sense,—from the human standpoint,—in which faith and obedience is required on the part of Christ’s elect. This requirement is not meritorious, but instrumental and preceptive, namely, that (1) they accept the Covenant and its promises by faith, and therefore enter upon the life of the Covenant; and (2) that from the principle of new life born within them according to the promise, they consecrate themselves to God in new obedience as His people. We highlight this to point out that being in the Covenant of Grace does not imply being without responsibility. But from the standpoint of divine purpose the faith and obedience of the covenant people belongs to the promissory part of the Covenant rather than its stipulations.

8. The penalty of failure to fulfil the requirements of the Covenant is implied in Hebrews 6:17–18, “Wherein God, willing more abundantly to shew unto the heirs of promise the immutability of his counsel, confirmed it by an oath: That by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us.” This passage refers to Genesis 15 when God cut a covenant with Abraham—which is really a graphic re-affirmation of the Covenant of Grace already in force. In that display, God alone passed through the pieces of the animals, signifying that He would be destroyed if He fails to keep His covenant, which is of course impossible. The two immutable things which the author of Hebrews refer to are probably the Father represented by the smoking furnace (cf. Mt 13:42) and Christ represented by the burning lamp (Jn 1:9).
9. The Sign and Seal of the Covenant of Grace are, in the Old Testament, Circumcision and the Passover, and in the New Testament, Baptism and the Lord’s Supper. We will see more of this in chapters 27–29.

Covenant Versus Testament

7.4 This covenant of grace is frequently set forth in Scripture by the name of a Testament, in reference to the death of Jesus Christ the Testator, and to the everlasting inheritance, with all things belonging to it, therein bequeathed.¹

¹Heb 9:15–17; 7:22; Lk 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25.

- The words ‘testament’ and ‘covenant’ in the Authorised Version translate the same word in the Greek (*διαθηκη*). The word ‘testament’ refers to a will in which the testator bequeath an inheritance to his heirs. A covenant is related to a testament in that death is involved in both. In the case of a covenant, death stands at the beginning of the relationship between two parties, as the curse factor of the covenant. Death is not strictly necessary unless the covenant is broken. In the case of a testament, however, death stands at the end of a relationship between two parties to actualise an inheritance. Death is strictly necessary in a testament. (See discussion in Robertson, *Christ in the Covenants*, 11–14).
- The meaning of ‘testament’ is clearly intended in Hebrews 9:16–17, “For where a testament is, there must also of necessity be the death of the testator. For a testament is of force after men are dead: otherwise it is of no strength at all while the testator liveth.” However, I believe that in all other cases (Heb 9:15, 7:22; Lk 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25), the word ‘covenant’ is probably more appropriate. Christ died to pay for the penalty of covenant breakers, not really as a testator. However, since the Greek word allows for both meaning, the author of Hebrews appears to employ the second meaning of the word, i.e., ‘testament,’ to emphasis the necessity of the death of Christ in God’s sovereign design of the Covenant of Grace. A parallel can be seen in Paul’s reference to the singularity of the word ‘seed’ in Galatians 3:16, when the Hebrew word, though singular, can in fact have a plural meaning, namely descendants. There, the choice of word ‘seed’ points to Christ being the representative of the elect. Here the choice of word ‘*diathēkē*’ points to Christ being the covenant head who would die for His people before they can be adopted as children of God, and so heirs of the promise.

- It would probably be more meaningful for us to understand “Old Testament” as “Old Covenant” and “New Testament” as “New Covenant” whenever we see the two former phrases employed in the Confession.

The Covenant of Grace in the Old and New Testaments

7.5 *This covenant was differently administered in the time of the law, and in the time of the gospel:¹ under the law it was administered by promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the paschal lamb, and other types and ordinances delivered to the people of the Jews, all fore-signifying Christ to come;² which were, for that time, sufficient and efficacious, through the operation of the Spirit, to instruct and build up the elect in faith in the promised Messiah,³ by whom they had full remission of sins, and eternal salvation; and is called the Old Testament.⁴*

¹2 Cor 3:6–9; ²Heb 8; 9; 10; Rom 4:11; Col 2:11–12; 1 Cor 5:7; ³1 Cor 10:1–4; Heb 11:13; Jn 8:56; ⁴Gal 3:7–9, 14.

There is only one Covenant of Grace which is administered differently in the Old and New Testaments. They are called ‘old’ and ‘new’ to indicate their differences with respect to the incarnation. But in all essential respects, they are the same:

- (a) Christ is the Saviour of men before and after His advent, and He saves them in the same way, by grace through faith in Him. So Christ is said to be “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (Rev 13:8). And He is a propitiation also for the sins committed under the old covenant (Rom 3:25; Heb 9:15). Thus, Christ was exhibited typically in all the ceremonial, but especially in the sacrificial, system of the tabernacle and temple (Col 2:17; Heb 10:1–10). And these Old Testament sacrifices and ceremonies “*sufficient and efficacious, through the operation of the Spirit*” on the basis of their sacramental union to the incarnational work of Christ.
- (b) Faith in Christ was the *instrumental* cause of salvation in the old and new covenants: “the just shall live by his faith” (Hab 2:4; cf. Ps 2:12; Rom 1:17; Gal 3:11; Heb 10:38). This is why the Old Covenant believers can be set forth as examples of faith (see Romans 4 and Hebrews 11). The same gracious promises of spiritual grace and eternal blessedness were administered then and now (cf. Gen 17:7 with Mt 22:32; Gen 22:18 with Gal 3:16; see also Isa 43:25–27; Ezk 36:27; Job 19:25–27; Dan 12:2–3).

This covenant of Grace was administered in the Old Testament in types and shadows which point to Christ. It was also worked out or displayed through several subordinate covenants, each one continuing in the same theme of redemption, but increasing in fullness and clarity:

- The Adamic Covenant
(Commencement; Genesis 3:15—the Messiah was promised)
- The Noahic Covenant
(Preservation; Genesis 9—the religious significance of blood (for atonement) announced (Cf. Genesis 9:4; Lev 17:11) to point to the procurement of salvation by propitiatory death of a Messiah; rainbow given as sign of covenant)
- The Abrahamic Covenant
(Promise; Genesis 12, 15—sacrament of circumcision as sign and seal of the covenant introduced to mark out covenant people; land inheritance is set as a type eternal spiritual inheritance)
- The Mosaic Covenant
(Law; Exodus 19ff—Ceremonial Law (Ex 24–30) set in place; Moral Law (Ex 19–20) as way of life for God’s people summarised and codified)
- The Davidic Covenant
(Kingdom; 2 Samuel 7:12–13; Kingship of Christ made obvious)

The unity of all these subordinate covenants can be seen in two ways. Firstly, we see each building on the previous, this is known as structural unity. Next, we see a constant theme in each of the covenants. This is known as thematic unity.

- a. With reference to structural unity, (a) we see at the inauguration of the Mosaic Covenant, that the Lord remembers the Abrahamic Covenant (see Exodus 6:3–8); (b) we see David who is directly in the Davidic Covenant charging Solomon to keep the Mosaic Law (see 1 King 2:3); (c) we see in Ezekiel 37:24–26 most of the subordinate covenants mentioned in a breath: “And David my servant shall be

king over them; and they all shall have one shepherd [*an allusion to the Davidic Covenant*]: they shall also walk in my judgments, and observe my statutes [*Mosaic*], and do them. And they shall dwell in the land that I have given unto Jacob my servant, wherein your fathers have dwelt; and they shall dwell therein, even they, and their children [*Abrahamic*], and their children's children for ever: and my servant David shall be their prince for ever. Moreover I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them: and I will place them, and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in the midst of them for evermore.”

- b. With reference to thematic unity, we see the same theme, “I shall be your God; you shall be my people,” in each of the subordinate covenants. For example, in Adamic Covenant, see Genesis 3:15; cf. 4:25–5:32 and 4:16–24; in Abrahamic Covenant, see Genesis 17:7; in Mosaic Covenant, see Exodus 6:6–7; and in the Davidic Covenant, see 2 Kings 11:17.

7.6 Under the gospel, when Christ, the substance,¹ was exhibited, the ordinances in which this covenant is dispensed are the preaching of the Word, and the administration of the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper:² which, though fewer in number, and administered with more simplicity and less outward glory, yet, in them, it is held forth in more fullness, evidence, and spiritual efficacy,³ to all nations, both Jews and Gentiles;⁴ and is called the New Testament.⁵ There are not therefore two covenants of grace differing in substance, but one and the same under various dispensations.⁶

¹Col 2:17; ²Mt 28:19–20; ³1 Cor 11:23–25; ⁴Heb 12:22–27; Jer 31:33–34; ⁵Mt 28:19; Eph 2:15–19; ⁶Lk 22:20; ⁶Gal 3:14, 16; Acts 15:11; Rom 3:21–23, 30; Ps 32:1; Rom 4:3, 6, 16–17, 23–24; Heb 13:8.

The Covenant of Grace is administered in the New Testament (known here as the ‘gospel’) in greater simplicity, clearness and fulness since Christ, the anti-type, has completed His work of redemption. The New Testament dispensation is superior to the old dispensation for the following reasons:

- a. It is administered by Christ, the Son, rather than Moses, a servant (Heb 3:5–6).
- b. Before, the truth was partly hid, partly revealed in types and symbols, but now it is revealed in clear history of the incarnation and didactic teaching.
- c. The old administration was largely external, carnal and ceremonial—involving land, temples, sacrifices, rituals and feasts. But under the new administration, all these are done away with and the administration of the covenant is largely internal and spiritual.
- d. It was confined to one people, but now it embraces the whole earth without racial or geographic distinction.
- e. The New Covenant involves internalisation of the Law, regeneration and indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Jeremiah 31:33, “But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the LORD, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people” (cf. Ezk 11:19). Under the old economy, the Law of God was external—on tablets of stones. And the Jews,—ordinarily,—had no power to keep them. It was not part of the covenant features. But with the New Covenant, the covenant children have the Law of God inscribed in their hearts. This is a graphic way of saying that the New Covenant will include regeneration and indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Under the New Covenant, God's children will not only be regenerated, and thus be able to keep the Law, but also have the Holy Spirit indwelling them so that they can discern spiritual things, since spiritual things are spiritually discerned. This is what is meant by Jeremiah 31:34: “And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the LORD: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the LORD.” Jeremiah is, of course, employing a hyperbole: it does not really mean that we will know perfectly. But with the illuminating help of the Holy Spirit we would indeed know much more than the average person under the old economy.

But does it mean that there was no Holy Spirit's regenerative activity in the Old Testament? John Calvin answers: “... the Fathers, who were formerly regenerated obtained this favour through Christ, so that we may say, that it was as it were transferred to them from another source. The power then to penetrate into the heart was not inherent in the law, but it was a benefit transferred to the law from the Gospel” (*Comm. On Jeremiah 20:47*, 131). Palmer O. Robertson concurs: “Nothing under the Old Covenant had the effectiveness necessary actually to reconcile the sinner to God. Only in anticipation of the finished work of Christ could an act of heart-renewal be performed under the provisions of the Old Covenant” (*Christ of the Covenants*, 292).