

Thoughts on God's Covenants

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The Historical Nature of the Covenants

How should we envision God's covenants and what it means to be a covenant-member, that is, what does it mean to be in covenant with God? Covenants as presented in Scripture are historical pacts of oath-bound commitment. They operate in the progression of time. When one is made it has full validity at that moment, and in the history that unfolds after its inception or after new parties are brought into the covenant-union, its terms are applied in accordance with the conditions that obtain.

Children in covenant with God by covenant definition, for example, should not be regarded as only externally in the covenant until they make a credible profession of faith. Nor should the covenant be regarded as really only with the elect. Comparison with the marriage covenant is scripturally appropriate. Such a covenant goes into full effect when the vows are exchanged. At a later point one of the spouses may break the covenant and it may end in divorce. It was in full effect until then, however. There should be no talk of there only being an external covenant until that point.

The Biblical language presents God's covenant as one that can be broken. To conceptualize God's covenant, in the present history, as really only with the elect is to call into question the biblical teaching about covenants being breakable. It is to adopt a concept of covenant that is different from the one used in the Bible. When the present age has passed away, the Lord's covenant will be only with the elect, but until then it includes among its members some who later fall away from the living God.

In history the covenant is broken by those who rebel. Isaiah states that Israel broke the everlasting covenant (Is.24:5). Covenant pledges are commitments to be loyal to each other forever. Both God and man make such commitments. God does not break his, but some men do break theirs. When that happens, the Lord is no longer bound with regard to promised blessings. He can now apply covenant curses to the treaty-breaker. The Lord can cut him off from his people. Prior to this cutting off, the Lord's commitment to such persons is the same as it is to all in the covenant community. That is according to the nature of covenants and that is how we see God's covenant function in biblical history.

With the swearing of oaths covenants are made legally binding. Consequently, they have the same legal character as other contracts. When a builder and homeowner sign a contract to build a house, the commitments have full force and the penalties come into play when they are broken. The commitments are expressed in fulfillment language. The contractor describes what he will do and the materials he will use. The contract provides for penalties and it is understood that the final result may not be in accordance with the commitments made by the parties involved, but this does not imply that the contract is really only in effect in some kind of external or formal sense. This is also the case with the Lord's legal covenants made with man in history. They are

expressed in fulfillment language because God makes binding commitments, which also include curses when man fails to keep his. For some, the outcome of a covenant may not be the same as is intended for all, but that does not make it less binding for them.

The Lord's redemption is a work-in-progress, not just in broad strokes, but also in moment-by-moment interaction with each and every member of the covenant community. Adam was a child of God and beneficiary of all covenant blessings until he broke the covenant. His original status in the covenant was not determined by his later fall into sin. Similarly, all covenant children, who are in covenant with God by God's declaration, are full beneficiaries of the covenant until they break it in hardened rebellion. Their original status in the covenant is not determined by what they do later, but when they harden their hearts, then their status changes radically. In the same way, this work-in-progress includes the ingrafting of new members who before were far off. At the end of the historical process only those who were predestined for life eternal remain, but through the course of history there is an ongoing process of adding persons to the chosen covenant people and removing some of them.

Covenants are historical. The covenant of grace continues into the everlasting history on the new earth. At that time the participants are confirmed, but from the perspective of covenant, the relationship with God is always defined according to terms of the covenant as they apply on the particular day in question. It is not the final outcome on the new earth that determines whether God has a legally valid covenant with one who professes the name of Christ at a certain time on this earth.

With this in mind, it would seem that the work-in-progress model is a better description of the church than the invisible/visible distinction. Talk of an invisible church and a visible one makes it difficult to avoid Platonic Greek thinking that would make the invisible church the ideal and imply that the visible one is less real and less important. There is only one church and it is, as yet, incomplete. Part of it is glorified in heaven and part still has wrinkles, blemishes and members who will be cut off in due time. This church is visible and also has many aspects that are invisible to us.

The historical nature of the covenants, as functioning in the progression of time does not undermine God's eternal counsel or call into question his election. Through the progression of changing historical events God works out his eternal plan precisely according to his predetermined will. Eternal election and covenant are different perspectives of the same reality. We were chosen from before the foundation of the world and are also commanded to make our calling and election sure (2 Peter 1:10).

Unknowns in the Historical Process

Reformed theology has given a variety of answers over the centuries to the details of what characterizes the covenant of grace, how to define it and how it is to be understood in the light of God's sovereign election in Christ Jesus. Most differences seem to flow from attempts to correlate the historical process and *ordo salutis* as the working out of the eternal plan. Perhaps the biggest questions have been with regard to how covenant children are to be regarded and addressed. If they are full members of the covenant people, can their sins be forgiven even if

they are not yet able to hear the Word and believe? Does God love them? Are all covenant blessings linked to regeneration?

It is essential to bear in mind that there are unknowns. Some of our problems result from trying to define matters that the Bible leaves unrevealed. We know that the Lord makes his covenant with children. We know that if the covenant means anything it assures us that the Lord is God to his people and that, therefore, he is God to covenant infants and they are his people. We do not know how some covenant infants can be elect and others not, while all are his people. We do not know for sure who is regenerate and who is not. We do not know how a king of Israel can be a good king and later become unfaithful and yet maintain that only regenerate can bear good fruit and that regenerated saints cannot fall away.

We do not know how God can be three, yet one. We are content to leave this unexplained and accept it as incomprehensible to man. We need to do the same with many more unknowns. We must be watchful not to make our theology more systematic than Scripture does, i.e., we must not use part of God's system to contradict other parts of God's system. God's way of systemizing things includes much that is unknown to us and incomprehensible to us. Of course, we all know this, yet current controversies make it clear that a reminder is not out of order.

We are called to faithfully reflect Scripture in all it says. To do this as humans we have no other option than to let the unknowns remain unknown to us. For example, we must let the warning of the possibility of falling away from the living God (Heb. 3:12) motivate us to persevere in obedience until the end, and at the same time, we must derive great comfort from the knowledge that we are the elect of God and that no one can snatch us out of his hand (Jn. 10:28). We must live both truths because we believe them. The just live by faith.

Distinctions between covenants in a broader sense (covenant in their administration) and covenants in a narrower sense (covenants in their fruition) are similar to the distinction between the visible and the invisible church and do not really help to relieve difficulties we may have in understanding how God works in eternity as well as within the confines of history. In our legal understanding of inter-personal commitments we do not find it helpful to distinguish between a contract in its broader sense and in its narrower sense. We should think similarly of divine-human covenants. We should leave the unknowns up to God and receive his covenants in terms of their provisions as they are known to us at the moment in history to which we are referring.

Promise and Law

Reformed theology has generally defended the mutuality of promise and law, even though discussions about the contrast between covenants of promise and covenants of law have been part of the fuel that has advanced our insights into covenant theology. Not a few Reformed theologians have shown that all of the historical covenants bring together both promise and law and they are not in opposition to each other. They come together as the expression of the commitments of the two parties of the covenant.

Covenants between God and man are oath-bound pledges of loyalty to each other. Divine promises are God's commitments in the covenants. The laws define what man pledges to do. The

promises express the manward side of the covenant while laws express the Godward side. The Lord's covenants have modeled ancient Near-Eastern Suzerainty treaties, bringing into relief the Lord as both the Sovereign and the initiator of his covenants. Any covenant between the Lord and man must bring to expression the great difference between Creator and created and the contrast between God's independence and man's dependence. In the nature of the case, even perfect and righteous Adam could not negotiate a covenant or propose the nature of commitments he would make to the Lord. God imposes his rule on man and instructs him concerning the commitments man is to make on penalty of death if he break them. This is the only way in which the Lord can receive his due and, at the same time, the only way in which man can live in freedom and express his love to the Lord.

The nature of these covenants is that the pledging parties are motivated to keep their commitments, not by what the other party does, but by the commitments made. It is love that drives the fulfillment of the commitments and not self-interest even if self-interest is not excluded. God makes and fulfills his promises because he loves us. He blesses us because he desires to do so and therefore has committed himself to us, and not because anything a creature does puts God under obligation to man. Similarly man keeps his pledges out of love for God. Divine blessings express God's love and man keeps God's laws as an expression of man's love. This is seen in the fact that all man's obligations are summarized in the law of love. Love does not seek its own interest, but that of the other. Man does not obey God in order to obtain blessings, but as an expression of love to God. He seeks God's glory, not his own.

What has just been said is not the only perspective on the motivation for covenant-keeping. Self-interest is excluded, neither for God nor for man. Because God is worthy of all glory, he also acts for his name's sake. He further motivates man to faithfulness to the covenant by reminding him of promised blessings that result from covenant-keeping. With regard to man, the two different motivations, love for God and the promise of blessings, can be reconciled by saying that love for God must always override self-interest and self-interest is provided for only by loving God with heart, soul, strength and mind.

Promise and law or promise and obligation are both essential to every covenant. Covenants consist of commitments by both parties expressing their love for each other. What binds them together is their vows. Man's oath made the death of Christ necessary, and not just God's judgment for disobedience. This also means that covenant law-keeping on man's part is an expression of love and loyalty and not a striving to merit favor. Correspondingly, God owes man nothing for obedience. His debt is only to his own sworn oath.

Are Covenants Conditional?

God's covenants with man are conditional and unconditional at the same time, but not at the same level. Life in covenant with God involves conditionality, but at the deepest level, God does not make his vows conditionally. His covenant pledges flow unreservedly from his heart. This is more than saying that covenants are unconditional in their initiation. God does not vow to be our God on the condition that once we have heard he will continue to be our God only if we keep his covenant. Just as a husband vows to love his wife from the heart and not conditionally, so God dwells with us because of his own love and pledges, not conditionally.

Man's commitments also are his oath-bound pledges to love the Lord even to death and are not conditioned on blessings received from the Lord. He does not commit himself to faithfulness only if he is blessed. Man's unconditional covenant pledges are lived out in obedient faith, as he trusts that nothing can impede his love for the Lord.

Although covenant vows are not conditional, there is conditionality in covenant life. As we live in covenant with the Lord, obedience to his commands result in blessings for us. The blessings are conditioned upon covenant-keeping. However, this condition is not meritorious. God's law is a blessing and law-keeping brings blessings, but law-keeping does not produce credit that deserves to be repaid. Law-keepers establish credibility, but not credit.

A law-abiding citizen is approved, praised and trusted, but society does not owe him remuneration for doing what is right. Covenant blessings are directly linked to keeping the law of the covenant, but the link is not one of debt for credits earned. Adam and Eve experienced all kinds of blessings as they lived by God's word, but the Lord did not grant these blessing because they had been earned by being just. The Lord showered his gifts upon them as fruit of his own love. Adam and Eve lost them when they stopped accepting, receiving and resting in God and his word, not because they failed to earn them.

Recognition that God's covenant love is unconditional also serves to illumine the position of covenant children. God embraces them in his covenant family by way of household headship. When he establishes his covenant with household heads he does so with the whole family. Because God's covenant pledges are not conditioned on man's commitments, but are an expression of his heart and his faithfulness to his oath, we do not question whether or not he is really a God for our children or whether he really loves them.

From this perspective we also do not presume that our children are regenerated, nor that they are not born again. The covenant speaks to us of God's revealed commitments. And it speaks to us of the commitments that we ourselves make. Therefore, we know that our children are in God's family by way of covenant and we teach them, both that they are loved by God and that they must love him. All kinds of presumption and carelessness are excluded. Children cannot do whatever they want and think they will not be cut off from fellowship with the living God. Parents disciple their children through teaching and discipline to the end that they will abide in Christ, in repentant, obedient faith, bearing much fruit, for those who do not abide in him will surely be cut off (Jn. 15).

Children are taught to live in oath-bound commitment to the Lord of the covenant and that they need to be born again in order to do this. Because they are born in sin, they can only keep covenant with God in union with their only Savior Jesus Christ. In line with the Heidelberg Catechism, we do not hesitate to teach our children that they belong to their only Savior Jesus Christ, who has fully satisfied for all their sins. Further, in line with the same catechism, we also teach our children that impenitent sinners cannot enter the Kingdom of God. This reformation approach to covenant children speaks to them as Scripture does, where God's pledges are unconditional and man's are as well.

Historical covenants are expressed unconditionally. Spouses do not make vows of allegiance on condition that the other will be true or that they themselves will be able to accomplish them. They swear to be true until death do them part. Spouses do not receive each other's vows conditionally either. In the same way, children should not be taught to receive God's promises conditionally. They should not think, "Maybe God loves me, maybe not. I need to wait until I'm born again before I can really know that he loves me."

At the same time, it is of the nature of covenants that they can be voided when they are broken. As is the case with marriage-covenants, so it is with the Lord's covenant with us. When we break our allegiance to God, covenant curses come into effect, and it is consistent with the covenant that the Lord cut us off for falling away from him. Covenants are conditional, but God's love is not conditioned on obedience or faith. It is expressed as an unconditional sworn commitment. God's covenant with us can come to an end when we do not keep our oath-bound commitment (only through faith in Christ, of course), but his promises are addressed to us as firm pledges, pledges, which he often continues to uphold for a time, even when man fails in his allegiance and when God has the right to cut him off.

The Lord's covenant comes to us as unconditional promise and we are called to unconditional commitment, as well. This is true for both adults and children. If we think that such a covenant perspective is problematic for children, we need to remember that it is no less so for adults. When an adult repents and believes because God has established his covenant with him, the words God addresses to him are words of comfort and promise. God comforts him with words of electing love. God expresses this love in unconditional language. Nevertheless, at the same time, he addresses him in language of warnings about falling away. In fact, some adults that have heard God's words of unconditional love do fall away. For both children and adults, there may seem to be a problem with such unconditional language. Why God uses this language and still, in his decretive will allows some to be cut off is unknown to us. We thank the Lord for this unknown and strive to follow him by using the same language he does and by living by these words of his.

The above perspectives do not resolve our difficulties in understanding the Lord's ways. Speaking of covenant in a broader sense and in a narrower one, or speaking of being externally in covenant with God, but not internally does not solve the problems either. They do not explain how it can be that God addresses his language of covenant love to all of his people. It is troubling to think that God speaks words of love to all, but only means them for some.

In my opinion, the language is best understood by giving heed to progression in time. As long as a covenant is in effect, God addresses unrestrained covenant promises to all his people and his people also swear unconditional allegiance to him. If, at a later point, the covenant is broken, the Lord can then address the covenant-breaker as one who is not in covenant with him. It seems to me to be the best way to avoid trying to express ourselves from the perspective of the hidden things that belong to God. He reveals to us that his relationship with people changes when their allegiances change. We do well to formulate our theological constructions in the same way.