

THE WESTMINSTER CONFSSION OF
FAITH
VII. OF GOD'S COVENANT WITH MAN

Second Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC

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I. GOD'S CONDESCENSION

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

I. GOD'S CONDESCENSION

- A covenant is a formal, legal, oath-bound bond and relationship between two or more parties.
- By virtue of the Creator-creature distinction, God is never bound to relate to mankind.
- The Divines' choice of condescension vs. gracious.
- Mankind owes God obedience not only by covenant, but by creation.
 - Neither does our obedience ever put God under obligation to us, since we always owe obedience as creatures (Lk. 17:10).
- God is always sovereign in establishing the terms of covenants.
- God's condescension is in granting us a *right* to his blessing, not according to our obedience but according to his promise.
- God's covenant is our basis for assurance: "So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath" (Heb. 6:17).

2. THE COVENANT OF WORKS

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

“And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, ‘You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die’” (Gen. 2:16-17).

- Genesis 2:16-17 describes a *covenant* (Hos. 6:7).
 - Involves 2 parties (God and man), a condition (obedience), a promise (life), & a sanction (death).
- The parties included Adam and his posterity.
 - Denied by Pelagius; equivocated by Arminians.
 - The basis for the doctrine of original sin.
 - Proved by Romans 5:12: “so death spread to all men because all sinned;” and Romans 5:13, where Adam is called “a type of the one who was to come.” (see also 1 Cor. 15:47-49).

“As Christ was a federal head, representing all his spiritual seed in the covenant of grace, so Adam was a federal head representing all his natural seed in the covenant of works.” (Robert Shaw).

3. THE COVENANT OF GRACE

Man, by his fall, having made himself incapable of life by that covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second, 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, and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto eternal life his Holy Spirit, to make them willing, and able to believe.

- God sent his Son to fulfill the covenant of works on our behalf; by faith in Christ, we are forgiven, justified, and made heirs to eternal life.
 - “Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous” (Rom. 5:18-19).
- Grace is that God “freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ.”
- Involves 2 parties (God & man), a condition (faith in Christ), a promise (eternal life), and a sanction (eternal death).
 - “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him” (Jn. 3:36).
- To be saved is to be in a gracious covenant relationship with God
 - “I may be a very humble believer, or a very untalented believer. But every believer is in covenant with God. . . . It is totally secure because God is righteous; and God’s being righteous means that God is a covenant-keeper.” (D. Macleod).

4 & 5 THE COVENANT OF GRACE UNDER THE LAW

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.
5. This covenant was differently administered in the time of the law, and in the time of the gospel; 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 foreshadowing Christ to come; 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, by whom they had full remission of sins, and eternal salvation; and is called the old testament.

4 & 5 THE COVENANT OF GRACE UNDER THE LAW

- The idea of “will and testament” is used in Heb. 9:15-17, so the Divines included this term.
- The Covenant of Grace in the Old Testament
 - Same gospel, different administration.
 - Christ presented by promises, prophecies, sacrifices, and types.
 - OT saints were saved through faith in Christ, as he was presented in that administration (Ps. 51:7).
 - Their faith was directed to the Savior who would come; ours is to the Savior who has come.
 - OT believers had “full remission of sins and eternal salvation” in Christ.
 - For this reason, the Old Testament is *our* book.

6. THE COVENANT OF GRACE UNDER THE GOSPEL

Under the gospel, when Christ, the substance, 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: 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, to all nations, both Jews and Gentiles; and is called the new covenant. There are not therefore two covenants of grace, differing in substance, but one and the same, under various dispensations.

6. THE COVENANT OF GRACE UNDER THE GOSPEL

- “Under the gospel we find Christ himself, the Word made flesh, exhibited before the world.” (C. van Dixhoorn).
 - Christ is the substance of the promise and of all the OT signs and types. He is the gospel.
- Christ having come, the means of grace are simplified and spiritualized.
- Because of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2), the gospel has more “spiritual efficacy” under the new covenant.
- In the new covenant, the covenant of grace is proclaimed throughout the world.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (Jn. 1:14).

And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life” (1 Jn. 5:20).