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For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

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The Biblical Covenant of Grace

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Editor's Note: *This essay is an excerpt from Not Reformed at All: Medievalism in "Reformed" Churches, a new book responding to Douglas Wilson's book "Reformed" Is Not Enough: Recovering the Objectivity of the Covenant. Not Reformed at All is available from The Trinity Foundation for \$9.95, plus \$6.00 shipping and handling.*

The New Testament is a fuller, clearer, and more systematic revelation of Jesus Christ than the Old. The New Covenant is superior to the Old, as the author of the book of *Hebrews* argues at length, and the revelation of the New Covenant is superior to the Old. Both are, of course, the Word of God, but "in these last days [God] has spoken to us by his Son [not merely by the prophets], who [is] the brightness of his glory and the express image of his person."

Not only does the New Testament give us a fuller, clearer, and more systematic revelation of Jesus Christ than the Old, it also is the authoritative interpretation of the Old. It does this in four ways: (1) by commenting explicitly upon the text of the Old Testament; (2) by incorporating Old Testament texts into its own arguments; (3) by repealing portions of the Mosaic system that are obsolete; and (4) by correcting the common misinterpretations of the Old Testament taught by the Jewish religious leaders of the first century – what some recent theologians call "Second Temple Judaism." Perhaps the most obvious example of the last is Christ's Sermon on the Mount, in which he corrects the false teaching of the rabbis in this way: "You have heard it said...but I say unto you."

There are many examples of the first three methods – commentary on and incorporation of the text of the Old Testament itself, and repeal of its national and sacrificial system – and the one that we shall look at most closely is Paul's

letter to the Romans. In this letter, the Apostle Paul is the inspired and authoritative interpreter of the Covenant of Grace; any interpretation of the Covenant that conflicts with the authoritative interpretation written by the Holy Spirit and Paul, either by appealing to the teachings of Judaism, or by imposing its own construction on the text of the Old Testament, is false.

Now, what does Paul teach about the Covenant of Grace in *Romans*? First, Paul denies that there is any corporate salvation, any offer of corporate salvation, or corporate election to salvation, as the unbelieving Jews of that day commonly thought. They were falsely assured of their favor with God and of their salvation because they were children of Abraham, in solidarity with the patriarch with whom God had made the covenant. But Paul denounces that assurance in *Romans* 2 and declares the Jews more guilty before God than the Gentiles:

Indeed you are called a Jew, and rest on the law, and make your boast in God, and know his will, and approve the things that are excellent, being instructed out of the law, and are confident that you yourself are a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of babes, having the form of knowledge and truth in the law. You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that a man should not steal, do you steal? You who say, "Do not commit adultery," do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonor God through breaking the law? For "the name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you," as it is written. For circumcision is indeed profitable if you keep the law; but if you are a breaker of the law, your

circumcision has become uncircumcision.... For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God [*Romans* 2:17-29].

Paul here denies that there is any group justification, corporate election to salvation, or corporate salvation. Rather than assuring their salvation, their outward advantages – chiefly the oracles of God, the Scriptures – condemned them more severely than the Gentiles, who did not have any special revelation from God. Paul concludes his argument with these words: “Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in his sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin” (*Romans* 3:19-20).

The next step in Paul’s argument is to assert not only justification by belief alone, but to insist that justification is taught in the Old Testament: “But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by *The Law and the Prophets*” (*Romans* 3:21). Paul explicitly attacks the Jewish notion that righteousness comes by the law, and insists that nothing of the sort is taught in *The Law and the Prophets*; in fact, *The Law and the Prophets* teaches that righteousness comes “apart from the law.” Furthermore, Paul attacked the Jewish misunderstanding of the covenant by denying that God was the God of all loyal, circumcised Jews because he had entered into covenant with Abraham: “Or is he the God of the Jews only? Is he not also the God of the Gentiles? Yes, of the Gentiles also, since there is one God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith” (*Romans* 3:29-30).

Notice Paul’s reason for saying that God is the God of the Gentiles as well as the Jews: justification by faith alone. It was not circumcision, nor Torah, nor descent from Abraham that guaranteed the fulfillment of the promise “I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” Today, it is not baptism, nor church membership, nor godly heritage nor covenant faithfulness that guarantees fulfillment of that promise, but God alone.

So far in this passage, Paul has asserted:

1. that the circumcision of the Jews does not make them pleasing to God;
2. that being the physical children of Abraham and bearing the sign of the covenant are not assurances of favor with God;
3. that there is no group insurance policy that insures a loyal, circumcised child of Abraham election or salvation;
4. that all circumcised Jews are as guilty before God as

uncircumcised Gentiles, and more so;

5. that what makes a true Jew is the invisible circumcision of the heart (which Gentiles may have, and some do have), not the visible circumcision of the flesh;
6. that no one, Jew or Gentile, will be justified by the deeds of the law, done at any time in his life;
7. that justification by belief alone is taught in the Old Testament (which he calls *The Law and the Prophets*), and all the Jews should have understood it;
8. that God is God of both Gentiles and Jews, because justification is by belief, not heritage, alone;
9. that belief alone makes God our God, and we his people, thus uniting us to Christ and fulfilling the promise God made to Abraham;
10. that righteousness does not come by the law.

Paul continues his explanation of the Covenant of Grace by focusing on Abraham, whose descendants the Jews were. In *Romans* 4 Paul mentions the doctrine of imputation 11 times – a doctrine that the Jews in general simply did not understand. Abraham was saved by an imputed righteousness, a righteousness not his own. He was saved while he was still uncircumcised. Physical circumcision, to which the Jews looked for assurance of their favor with God, had no part to play in Abraham’s salvation – and it has no part to play in the salvation of his children either. “For circumcision is indeed profitable if you keep the law [and no one does], but if you are a breaker of the law [and everyone is] your circumcision has become uncircumcision” (*Romans* 2:25). Further, “this blessedness” (*Romans* 4:6, 9) that is, salvation apart from works, comes on all who believe, whether they are physically circumcised or not. Paul further explained the reasons:

For the promise that he would be the heir of the world was not to Abraham or to his seed through the law, but through the righteousness of faith. For if those who are of the law are heirs, faith is made void and the promise made of no effect, because the law brings about wrath; for where there is no law there is no transgression. Therefore it is of faith that it might be according to grace, so that the promise might be sure to all the seed, not only to those who are of the law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all [*Romans* 4:13-16].

The first reason for justification by faith alone that Paul presents is that the promise was not made to Abraham or his seed through the law, that is through their law-keeping, as the Jews misunderstood the Covenant, but through the righteousness received by faith alone. Paul says that if those who are of the law – those who bear the marks of the covenant and keep their noses clean, those whom Calvin called

“saintlings” – are heirs of the promise, then the promise is made of no effect, for they are not saved, but objects of wrath. Notice Paul’s argument here: The Jewish misinterpretation of the Covenant makes the promise of the Covenant ineffective (“of no effect”), for the circumcised are not saved, but are objects of wrath, just as he had proved in chapter 2. This is the same Jewish misinterpretation of the Covenant that infected medieval churches, Reformed churches in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and American Presbyterian and Reformed churches in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

In the place of an effective, efficacious Covenant of Grace, in which God writes his laws in the minds of all the members of the Covenant, these churches substitute an ineffective, objective covenant in which reprobate (children of the flesh) and elect (children of the promise) alike receive the promises of God in baptism. In opposition to this counterfeit covenant, Paul teaches a Covenant of Grace in which “the promise might be sure to all the seed.” There is no sure promise of salvation in Wilson’s counterfeit covenant. His appeal to ritual baptism for assurance is asinine, for he admits that some baptized people go to Hell.

At this point in his argument, the Apostle Paul discusses the role of the Mediator of the Covenant of Grace, who fulfills the law of God perfectly on behalf of and instead of his people, and who dies the death demanded by the law for their sin, paying the full penalty due to them. Because he is the Mediator of the Covenant for his people, their union with Christ, the Covenant Head, results in their receiving the free gift of salvation, freedom from the condemnation of the law (they are “dead to the law through the body of Christ” their substitute), and all the blessings of the Covenant of Grace, including regeneration and faith itself. This is exactly what God had promised in *Jeremiah 31*, as repeated in *Hebrews 8*.

This “new covenant” (not the covenant made with Moses, and explained in greater detail in the New Testament), this Covenant of Grace, is personal (“I will put”; “all shall know me”); individual (“I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts”); and absolutely effective (“I will be their God and they shall be my people;” “None of them shall teach his neighbor...for all shall know me”); and “not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt.” The Mosaic covenant was public, corporate, and ineffective (“because they did not continue in my covenant”). By this efficacious, sovereign Covenant of Grace, believers are justified and made sons of God:

And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to his purpose. For whom he foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be

the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom he predestined, these he also called; whom he called, these he also justified; and whom he justified, these he also glorified.

What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things? Who shall bring a charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written: “For your sake we are killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.” Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord [*Romans 8:28-39*].

This is God’s sovereign Covenant of Grace, and it is wholly efficacious; no one and nothing can thwart it. This Covenant is made exclusively with Christ and the elect, to whom alone the promises of life and salvation belong.

At this stage in his extended argument, Paul uses the doctrine of election (individual, of course) to defend God against the charge that he has not kept his covenant promises to the Jews, and his Word is of no effect. Paul’s argument is, in summary, that God had made no promises of salvation to all the children of Abraham, nor even to all the circumcised, but to his chosen people only. Just as God’s election is of some only, and Christ died for some only, so in the Covenant of Grace the promise of salvation is to some only. The Covenant is not a promise to all men, not even to all those that are circumcised or baptized, but only to those chosen by God in Christ from before the foundation of the world.

Paul writes: “But it is not that the Word of God has taken no effect. For they are not all Israel who are of Israel, nor are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham; but, “In Isaac your seed shall be called” (*Romans 9:6-7*). Paul insists that God keeps his promises, that his Word has in fact “taken effect.” The problem is not with God’s promises, but with those Jews who misunderstand the promises, thinking that God had made promises to all the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. To this Paul replies: “They are not all Israel who are of Israel,” and “they are not all children of Abraham,” echoing his statement in chapter 2: “He is not a Jew who is one outwardly,” visibly, but “he is a Jew who is one inwardly,” invisibly. Paul quotes the Old Testament making that plain, if only the Jews had believed Moses’ writing in *Genesis 21:12*: “In Isaac [not

Ishmael] your seed shall be called." But while they trusted in Moses, as Jesus said, they did not understand or believe Moses' words in *Genesis* 21.

Paul continues: "That is, those who are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God; but the children of the promise are counted as the seed. For this is the word of promise: 'At this time I will come and Sarah shall have a son'" (*Romans* 9:8-9). Paul draws an antithesis between the children of God and the children of the flesh, who are not the children of promise or of God: "These are not the children of God." Those whom the Jews think are the children of God are not. Not only this, but "when Rebecca also had conceived by one man, even by our father Isaac (for the children not yet being born, nor having done any good or evil, that the purpose of God according to election might stand, not of works but of him who calls), it was said to her, 'The older shall serve the younger.' As it is written, 'Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated'" (*Romans* 9:10-13).

Paul carries the argument one step further. Not only is the line of circumcised Ishmael not to be identified with the children of God and made recipients of the promises, even though they were children of Abraham and bore the sign of the covenant, but not all the children of Isaac are children of God either: "Jacob I have loved, but Esau I have hated." The children of God are those whom God has elected, and to them alone are the promises of the Covenant of Grace made.

Paul continues his argument against the unbelieving Jews: "What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? Certainly not! For he says to Moses, 'I will have mercy on whomever I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whomever I will have compassion.' So then it is not of him who wills, nor of him who runs, but of God who shows mercy" (*Romans* 9:14-16). The sinner's performance, before or after baptism or circumcision, contributes precisely nothing to his salvation. The Covenant is sovereign; its terms were set unilaterally; and those terms are fulfilled by the God-man who represents his people. The Covenant of Grace accomplishes exactly what God intends. It is to a remnant, not to all Israelites, nor to all church members, that God made his promises:

Isaiah also cries out concerning Israel: "Though the number of the children of Israel be as the sand of the sea, the remnant will be saved. For he will finish the work and cut it short in righteousness, because the Lord will make a short work upon the Earth." And as Isaiah said before: "Unless the Lord of Sabaoth had left us a seed, we would have become like Sodom, and we would have been made like Gomorrah."

What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness of faith; but Israel, pursuing the law of righteousness, has not attained to the law of righteousness.

Why? Because they did not seek it by faith, but as it were, by the works of the law. For they stumbled at that stumbling stone. As it is written: "Behold, I lay in Zion a stumbling stone and rock of offense, and whoever believes on him will not be put to shame" [*Romans* 9:27-33].

Paul explains the Covenant of Grace in terms of God's election of individuals. Any interpretation of the Covenant that excludes or minimizes the doctrine of individual election is a false interpretation. Today ministers in good standing in several denominations, not just Wilson's, are teaching that the Covenant of Grace is conditional, that it is made with all who are baptized, that it is better understood if we ignore the doctrine of election, and that the salvation of the baptized depends upon their fulfilling the terms of the covenant. To the ten points by which we summarized Paul's teaching earlier, we must now add several more:

11. the sole ground of Abraham's salvation is the imputed righteousness of Christ;
12. this perfect, extrinsic righteousness was imputed to Abraham before he was circumcised; so circumcision (which represents all works done in obedience to God) was neither a condition nor a ground of his salvation, but a result;
13. Christ's righteousness is imputed to believing Jews and Gentiles without partiality;
14. the instrument of this imputation is belief alone, not law-keeping;
15. the Covenant promises of God are not to all the children of Abraham, but only to the children of promise;
16. the Covenant of Grace is made by God the Father with Christ the Mediator, who, acting in the place of (as a substitute for) and on behalf of (as their legal representative), only the people the Father had given him, perfectly fulfills the terms of the Covenant and obtains complete salvation for his people;
17. in the Covenant of Grace God promises all the blessings of the Covenant, including faith and eternal life, to his people;
18. God keeps his Covenant promises by preserving his people for eternity, so that nothing – including they themselves – can separate them from the love of Christ;
19. there is no unrighteousness with God, for he has not broken any promises to his people, but has carried them out fully in Christ.