

Systematic Theology 2.3

Man in the Covenant of Grace

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Part Two: The Doctrine of Man in Relation to God — Section 3: Man in the Covenant of Grace

Editorial note

The text has been updated to UK English; gloss boxes have been added to explain technical terms; summaries have been included; and questions for further study have been added. We have also included a master outline with the part represented in this volume shown in bold.

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Berkhof's Systematic Theology: Master Outline

This six-part guide is designed for use at the beginning of each volume. The part represented in this volume is shown in bold.

Part One: The Doctrine of God

The Being of God

- The existence of God
- The knowability of God
- Being and attributes
- The names of God
- Attributes in general
- Incommunicable attributes
- Communicable attributes
- The Holy Trinity

The Works of God

- Divine decrees
- Predestination
- Creation in general
- The spiritual world
- The world
- Providence

Part Two: The Doctrine of Man in Relation to God

Man in His Original State

- Origin of man
- Constitutional nature
- Image of God
- Covenant of works

Man in the Covenant of Grace

- Origin of sin
- Character of sin
- Transmission of sin
- Sin in the human race
- Punishment of sin

Man in the Covenant of Grace

- Name and concept**
- Covenant of redemption**
- Nature of the covenant of grace**
- Its dual aspect**
- Its dispensations**

Part Three: The Doctrine of the Person and Work of Christ

The Person of Christ

- History of the doctrine
- Names and natures
- The unipersonality of Christ

The States of Christ

Humiliation

Exaltation

The Offices of Christ

Prophetic office

Priestly office

Necessity of the atonement

Nature of the atonement

Theories of the atonement

Purpose and extent of the atonement

Intercession

Kingly office

Part Four: The Doctrine of the Application of the Work of Redemption

Soteriology

Soteriology in general

The Holy Spirit's operations

Common grace

Mystical union

External calling

Regeneration and effectual calling

Conversion

Faith

Justification

Sanctification

Perseverance of the saints

Part Five: The Doctrine of the Church and of the Means of Grace

The Church

Names and history

Nature of the Church

Government

Power

The Means of Grace

Means of grace in general

The Word

Sacraments in general

Christian baptism

The Lord's Supper

Part Six: The Doctrine of the Last Things

Individual Eschatology

Physical death

Immortality of the soul

Intermediate state

General Eschatology

Second coming of Christ

Millennial views

Resurrection of the dead

Final judgement

Final state

Man in the Covenant of Grace

I. Name and Concept of the Covenant

The covenant of grace is God's sovereign and gracious bond with His people, in which He makes promises and calls them to live before Him in faith.

A. The Name.

GLOSS Covenant: a solemn bond established by God, containing His promises and His call to faithful response.

1. IN THE OLD TESTAMENT. The Hebrew word for covenant is always *berith*, a word of uncertain derivation. The most general opinion is that it is derived from the Hebrew verb *barah*, to cut, and therefore contains a reminder of the ceremony mentioned in Gen. 15:17. Some, however, prefer to think that it is derived from the Assyrian word *beritu*, meaning "to bind." This would at once point to the covenant as a bond. The question of the derivation is of no great importance for the construction of the doctrine. The word *berith* may denote a mutual voluntary agreement (*dipleuric*), but also a disposition or arrangement imposed by one party on another (*monopleuric*). Its exact meaning does not depend on the etymology of the word, nor on the historical development of the concept, but simply on the parties concerned. In the measure in which one of the parties is subordinate and has less to say, the covenant acquires the character of a disposition or arrangement imposed by one party on the other. *Berith* then becomes synonymous with *choq* (appointed statute or ordinance), Ex. 34:10; Isa. 59:21; Jer. 31:36; 33:20; 34:13. Hence we also find that *karath berith* (to cut a covenant) is construed not only with the prepositions 'am and ben (with), but also with *lamedh* (to), Jos. 9:6; Isa. 55:3; 61:8; Jer. 32:40. Naturally, when God establishes a covenant with man, this *monopleuric* character is very much in evidence, for God and man are not equal parties. God is the Sovereign who imposes His ordinances upon His creatures.

2. IN THE NEW TESTAMENT. In the Septuagint the word *berith* is rendered *diatheke* in every passage where it occurs with the exception of Deut. 9:15 (*marturion*) and I Kings 11:11 (*entole*). The word *diatheke* is confined to this usage, except in four passages. This use of the word seems rather peculiar in view of the fact that it is not the usual Greek word for covenant, but really denotes a disposition, and consequently also a testament. The ordinary word for covenant is *suntheke*. Did the translators intend to substitute another idea for the covenant idea? Evidently not, for in Isa. 28:15 they use the two words synonymously, and there *diatheke* evidently means a pact or an agreement. Hence there is no doubt about it that they ascribe this meaning to *diatheke*. But the question remains, Why did they so generally avoid the use of *suntheke* and substitute for it a word which denotes a disposition rather than an agreement? In all probability the reason lies in the fact that in the Greek world the covenant idea expressed by *suntheke* was based to such an extent on the legal equality of the parties, that it could not, without considerable modification, be incorporated in the Scriptural system of thought. The idea that the priority belongs to God in the establishment of the covenant, and that He sovereignly imposes His covenant on man was absent from the usual Greek word. Hence the substitution of the word in which this was very prominent. The word *diatheke* thus, like many other words, received a new meaning, when it became the vehicle of divine thought. This change is important in connection with the New Testament use of the word. There has been considerable difference of opinion respecting the proper translation of the word. In about half of the passages in which it occurs the Holland and the Authorized Versions render the word "covenant," while in the other half they render it

“testament.” The American Revised Version, however, renders it “covenant” throughout, except in Heb. 9:16,17. It is but natural, therefore, that the question should be raised, What is the New Testament meaning of the word? Some claim that it has its classical meaning of disposition or testament, wherever it is found in the New Testament, while others maintain that it means testament in some places, but that in the great majority of passages the covenant idea is prominently in the foreground. This is undoubtedly the correct view. We would expect a priori that the New Testament usage would be in general agreement with that of the LXX; and a careful study of the relevant passages shows that the American Revised Version is undoubtedly on the right track, when it translates *diatheke* by “testament” only in Heb. 9:16,17. In all probability there is not a single other passage where this rendering would be correct, not even II Cor. 3:6,14. The fact that several translations of the New Testament substituted “testament” for “covenant” in so many places is probably due to three causes: (a) the desire to emphasize the priority of God in the transaction; (b) the assumption that the word had to be rendered as much as possible in harmony with Heb. 9:16,17; and (c) the influence of the Latin translation, which uniformly rendered *diatheke* by “testamentum.”

B. The Concept.

GLOSS Covenant of grace: God’s gracious relationship with sinners in Christ, by which He gives salvation and calls them to faith.

The covenant idea developed in history before God made any formal use of the concept in the revelation of redemption. Covenants among men had been made long before God established His covenant with Noah and with Abraham, and this prepared men to understand the significance of a covenant in a world divided by sin, and helped them to understand the divine revelation, when it presented man’s relation to God as a covenant relation. This does not mean, however, that the covenant idea originated with man and was then borrowed by God as an appropriate form for the description of the mutual relationship between Himself and man. Quite the opposite is true; the archetype of all covenant life is found in the trinitarian being of God, and what is seen among men is but a faint copy (ectype) of this. God so ordered the life of man that the covenant idea should develop there as one of the pillars of social life, and after it had so developed, He formally introduced it as an expression of the existing relation between Himself and man. The covenant relationship between God and man existed from the very beginning, and therefore long before the formal establishment of the covenant with Abraham.

While the word *berith* is often used of covenants among men, yet it always includes a religious idea. A covenant is a pact or agreement between two or more parties. It may be, and among men most generally is, an agreement to which parties, which can meet on a footing of equality, voluntarily come after a careful stipulation of their mutual duties and privileges; but it may also be of the nature of a disposition or arrangement imposed by a superior party on one that is inferior and accepted by the latter. It is generally confirmed by a solemn ceremony as in the presence of God, and thereby obtains an inviolable character. Each one of the parties binds himself to the fulfilment of certain promises on the basis of stipulated conditions. Now we should not say that we cannot properly speak of a covenant between God and man, because the parties are too unequal, and therefore proceed on the assumption that the covenant of grace is nothing but the promise of salvation in the form of a covenant. By doing that we would fail to do justice to the covenant idea as it is revealed in Scripture. It is perfectly true that both the covenant of works and (as the sequel will show) the covenant of grace are monopleuric in origin, that they are of the nature of arrangements ordained and instituted by God, and that God has the priority in both; but they are nevertheless covenants. God graciously condescended to come down to the level of man, and to honour him

by dealing with him more or less on the footing of equality. He stipulates His demands and vouchsafes His promises, and man assumes the duties thus imposed upon him voluntarily and thus inherits the blessings. In the covenant of works man could meet the requirements of the covenant in virtue of his natural endowments, but in the covenant of grace he is enabled to meet them only by the regenerating and sanctifying influence of the Holy Spirit. God works in man both to will and to do, graciously bestowing upon him all that He requires of him. It is called the covenant of grace, because it is an unparalleled revelation of the grace of God, and because man receives all its blessings as gifts of divine grace.

II. The Covenant of Redemption

The covenant of redemption describes the eternal agreement of the Father and the Son concerning the salvation of the elect through Christ's mediatorial work.

A. Separate Discussion Of This Desirable.

GLOSS **Covenant of redemption:** the eternal agreement between the Father and the Son concerning the salvation of God's people.

There are different representations respecting the parties in the covenant of grace. Some consider them to be the triune God and man, either without qualification, or qualified in some way, as "the sinner," "the elect," or "man in Christ"; others, God the Father, as representing the Trinity, and Christ as representing the elect; [Westm. Larger Cat., Q. 31.] and still others, since the days of Coccejus, distinguish two covenants, namely, the covenant of redemption (*pactum salutis*) between the Father and the Son, and, as based on this, the covenant of grace between the triune God and the elect, or the elect sinner. The second of these representations has a certain advantage from a systematic point of view. It may claim the support of such passages as Rom. 5:12-21 and I Cor. 15:21,22,47-49, and stresses the inseparable connection between the *pactum salutis* and the covenant of grace. It brings out the unity of the covenant in Christ, and is advocated among others by Boston, Gib, Dick, A. Kuyper Sr., H. Kuyper, and A. Kuyper, Jr. The third representation is more perspicuous, however, is easier to understand, and is therefore more serviceable in a practical discussion of the doctrine of the covenant. It escapes a great deal of confusion that is incidental to the other view, and is followed by the majority of Reformed theologians, such as Mastricht, à Marck, Turretin, Witsius, Heppe, the Hodges, Shedd, Vos, Bavinck, and Honig. There is no essential difference between these two representations. Says Dr. Hodge: "There is no doctrinal difference between those who prefer the one statement and those who prefer the other; between those who comprise all the facts of Scripture relating to the subject under one covenant between God and Christ as the representative of His people, and those who distribute them under two." [Syst. Theol. II, p. 358; cf. also Dabney, Lect. on Theol., p. 432; Bavinck, Geref. Dogm. III, p. 240] This being the case, the third mode of representing the whole matter undoubtedly deserves the preference. But in following it we should bear in mind what Shedd says: "Though this distinction (between the covenant of redemption and the covenant of grace) is favoured by Scripture statements, it does not follow that there are two separate and independent covenants antithetic to the covenant of works. The covenant of grace and redemption are two modes or phases of the one evangelical covenant of mercy." [Dogm. Theol. II, p. 360.]

B. Scriptural Data For The Covenant Of Redemption.

GLOSS Mediator: one who stands between God and people; Christ represents His people and secures their salvation.

The name “counsel of peace” is derived from Zech. 6:13. Coccejus and others found in this passage a reference to an agreement between the Father and the Son. This was clearly a mistake, for the words refer to the union of the kingly and priestly offices in the Messiah. The Scriptural character of the name cannot be maintained, but this, of course, does not detract from the reality of the counsel of peace. The doctrine of this eternal counsel rests on the following Scriptural basis.

1. Scripture clearly points to the fact that the plan of redemption was included in the eternal decree or counsel of God, Eph. 1:4 ff.; 3:11; II Thess. 2:13; II Tim. 1:9; Jas. 2:5; I Pet. 1:2, etc. Now we find that in the economy of redemption there is, in a sense, a division of labour: the Father is the originator, the Son the executor, and the Holy Spirit the applier. This can only be the result of a voluntary agreement among the persons of the Trinity, so that their internal relations assume the form of a covenant life. In fact, it is exactly in the trinitarian life that we find the archetype of the historical covenants, a covenant in the proper and fullest sense of the word, the parties meeting on a footing of equality, a true *suntheke*.

2. There are passages of Scripture which not only point to the fact that the plan of God for the salvation of sinners was eternal, Eph. 1:4; 3:9,11, but also indicate that it was of the nature of a covenant. Christ speaks of promises made to Him before his advent, and repeatedly refers to a commission which He had received from the Father, John 5:30,43; 6:38-40; 17:4-12. And in Rom. 5:12-21 and I Cor. 15:22 He is clearly regarded as a representative head, that is, as the head of a covenant.

3. Wherever we have the essential elements of a covenant, namely, contracting parties, a promise or promises, and a condition, there we have a covenant. In Ps. 2:7-9 the parties are mentioned and a promise is indicated. The Messianic character of this passage is guaranteed by Acts 13:33; Heb. 1:5; 5:5. Again, in Ps. 40:7-9, also attested as Messianic by the New Testament (Heb. 10:5-7), the Messiah expresses His readiness to do the Father’s will in becoming a sacrifice for sin. Christ repeatedly speaks of a task which the Father has entrusted to Him, John 6:38,39; 10:18; 17:4. The statement in Luke 22:29 is particularly significant: “I appoint unto you a kingdom, even as my Father appointed unto me.” The verb used here is *diatithemi*, the word from which *diatheke* is derived, which means to appoint by will, testament or covenant. Moreover, in John 17:5 Christ claims a reward, and in John 17:6,9,24 (cf. also Phil. 2:9-11) He refers to His people and His future glory as a reward given Him by the Father.

4. There are two Old Testament passages which connect up the idea of the covenant immediately with the Messiah, namely, Ps. 89:3, which is based on II Sam. 7:12-14, and is proved to be a Messianic passage by Heb. 1:5; and Isa. 42:6, where the person referred to is the Servant of the Lord. The connection clearly shows that this Servant is not merely Israel. Moreover, there are passages in which the Messiah speaks of God as His God, thus using covenant language, namely, Ps. 22:1, 2, and Ps. 40:8.

C. The Son In The Covenant Of Redemption.

GLOSS Surety: one who takes responsibility for another’s obligation; Christ bears the demands of the law for His people.

1. THE OFFICIAL POSITION OF CHRIST IN THIS COVENANT. The position of Christ in the covenant of redemption is twofold. In the first place He is Surety (Gr. *egguos*), a word that is used only in Heb. 7:22. The derivation of this word is uncertain, and therefore cannot aid us in establishing its meaning. But the meaning is not doubtful. A surety is one who engages to become responsible for it that the legal obligations of another will be met. In the covenant of redemption Christ undertook to atone for the sins of His people by bearing the necessary punishment, and to meet the demands of the law for them. And by taking the place of delinquent man He became the last Adam, and is as such also the Head of the covenant, the Representative of all those whom the Father has given Him. In the covenant of redemption, then, Christ is both Surety and Head. He took upon Himself the responsibilities of His people. He is also their Surety in the covenant of grace, which develops out of the covenant of redemption. The question has been raised, whether the suretyship of Christ in the counsel of peace was conditional or unconditional. Roman jurisprudence recognises two kinds of suretyship, the one designated *fidejussor*, and the other *expromissor*. The former is conditional, and the latter unconditional. The former is a surety who undertakes to pay for another, provided this person does not himself render satisfaction. The burden of guilt remains on the guilty party until the time of payment. The latter, however, is a surety who takes upon himself unconditionally to pay for another, thus relieving the guilty party of his responsibility at once. Coccejus and his school maintained that in the counsel of peace Christ became a *fidejussor*, and that consequently Old Testament believers enjoyed no complete forgiveness of sins. From Rom. 3:25 they inferred that for those saints there was only a *paresis*, an overlooking of sin, and no *aphesis* or complete forgiveness, until Christ really made atonement for sin. Their opponents asserted, however, that Christ took upon Himself unconditionally to render satisfaction for His people, and therefore became a surety in the specific sense of an *expromissor*. This is the only tenable position, for: (a) Old Testament believers received full justification or forgiveness, though the knowledge of it was not as full and clear as it is in the New Testament dispensation. There was no essential difference between the status of the Old, and that of the New Testament believers, Ps. 32:1,2,5; 51:1-3, 9-11; 103:3,12; Isa. 43:25; Rom. 3:3,6-16; Gal. 3:6-9. The position of Coccejus reminds one of that of the Roman Catholics with their *Limbus Patrum*. (b) Coccejus' theory makes the work of God in making provision for the redemption of sinners dependent on the uncertain obedience of man in an entirely unwarranted way. There is no sense in saying that Christ became a conditional surety, as if it were still possible that the sinner should pay for himself. God's provision for the redemption of sinners is absolute. This is not the same as saying that He does not treat and address the sinner as personally guilty until he is justified by faith, for this is exactly what God does do. (c) In Rom. 3:25, the passage to which Coccejus appeals, the apostle uses the word *paresis* (overlooking or passing over), not because the individual believers in the Old Testament did not receive full pardon of sin, but because during the old dispensation the forgiveness of sin assumed the form of a *paresis*, as long as sin had not been adequately punished in Christ, and the absolute righteousness of Christ had not been revealed in the cross.

2. THE CHARACTER THIS COVENANT ASSUMED FOR CHRIST. Though the covenant of redemption is the eternal basis of the covenant of grace, and, as far as sinners are concerned, also its eternal prototype, it was for Christ a covenant of works rather than a covenant of grace. For Him the law of the original covenant applied, namely, that eternal life could only be obtained by meeting the demands of the law. As the last Adam Christ obtains eternal life for sinners in reward for faithful obedience, and not at all as an unmerited gift of grace. And what He has done as the Representative and Surety of all His people, they are no more in duty bound to do. The work has been done, the reward is merited, and believers are made partakers of the fruits of Christ's accomplished work through grace.

3. CHRIST'S WORK IN THE COVENANT LIMITED BY THE DECREE OF ELECTION. Some have identified the covenant of redemption and election; but this is clearly a mistake. Election has reference to the selection of the persons destined to be the heirs of everlasting glory in Christ. The counsel of redemption, on the other hand, refers to the way in which and the means by which grace and glory are prepared for sinners. Election, indeed, also has reference to Christ and reckons with Christ, for believers are said to be elected in Him. Christ Himself is, in a sense, the object of election, but in the counsel of redemption He is one of the contracting parties. The Father deals with Christ as the Surety of His people. Logically, election precedes the counsel of redemption, because the suretyship of Christ, like His atonement, is particular. If there were no preceding election, it would necessarily be universal. Moreover, to turn this around would be equivalent to making the suretyship of Christ the ground of election, while Scripture bases election entirely on the good pleasure of God.

4. CONNECTION OF THE SACRAMENTS USED BY CHRIST WITH THE COVENANT. Christ used the sacraments of both the Old and the New Testament. It is evident, however, that they could not mean for Him what they do for believers. In His case they could be neither symbols nor seals of saving grace; nor could they be instrumental in strengthening saving faith. If we distinguish, as we are doing, between the covenant of redemption and the covenant of grace, then the sacraments were for Christ in all probability sacraments of the former rather than of the latter. Christ took upon Himself in the covenant of redemption to meet the demands of the law. These had assumed a definite form when Christ was on earth and also included positive religious regulations. The sacraments formed a part of this law, and therefore Christ had to subject Himself to them, Matt. 3:15. At the same time they could serve as seals of the promises which the Father had given to the Son. The objection may be raised to this representation that the sacraments were indeed fit symbols and seals of the removal of sin and of the nourishment of spiritual life, but from the nature of the case could not have this meaning for Christ, who had no sin and needed no spiritual nourishment. The objection may be met, at least to a certain extent, by calling attention to the fact that Christ appeared on earth in a public and official capacity. Though He had no personal sin, and no sacrament could therefore signify and seal to Him its removal, yet He was made to be sin for His people, II Cor. 5:21, by being burdened with their guilt; and consequently the sacraments could signify the removal of this burden, according to the promise of the Father, after He had completed His atoning work. Again, though we cannot speak of Christ as exercising saving faith in the sense in which this is required of us, yet as Mediator He had to exercise faith in a wider sense by accepting the promises of the Father believingly, and by trusting the Father for their fulfilment. And the sacraments could serve as signs and seals to strengthen this faith as far as His human nature was concerned.

D. Requirements And Promises In The Covenant Of Redemption.

GLOSS Election: God's gracious choice of His people in Christ, made according to His purpose and mercy.

1. REQUIREMENTS. The Father required of the Son, who appeared in this covenant as the Surety and Head of His people, and as the last Adam, that He should make amends for the sin of Adam and of those whom the Father had given Him, and should do what Adam failed to do by keeping the law and thus securing eternal life for all His spiritual progeny. This requirement included the following particulars:

a. That He should assume human nature by being born of a woman, and thus enter into temporal relations; and that He should assume this nature with its present infirmities, though without sin, Gal. 4:4,5; Heb. 2:10,11,14,15; 4:15. It was absolutely essential that He should become one of the human race.

b. That He, who as the Son of God was superior to the law, should place Himself under the law; that He should enter, not merely into the natural, but also into the penal and federal relation to the law, in order to pay the penalty for sin and to merit everlasting life for the elect, Ps. 40:8; Matt. 5:17,18; John 8:28,29; Gal. 4:4,5; Phil. 2:6-8.

c. That He, after having merited forgiveness of sins and eternal life for His own, should apply to them the fruits of His merits: complete pardon, and the renewal of their lives through the powerful operation of the Holy Spirit. By doing this He would render it absolutely certain that believers would consecrate their lives to God, John 10:16; John 16:14,15; 17:12,19-22; Heb. 2: 10-13; 7:25.

2. PROMISES. The promises of the Father were in keeping with His requirements. He promised the Son all that was required for the performance of His great and comprehensive task, thereby excluding all uncertainty in the operation of this covenant. These promises included the following:

a. That He would prepare the Son a body, which would be a fit tabernacle for him; a body in part prepared by the immediate agency of God and uncontaminated by sin, Luke 1:35; Heb. 10:5.

b. That He would endow Him with the necessary gifts and graces for the performance of His task, and particularly would anoint Him for the Messianic offices by giving Him the Spirit without measure, a promise that was fulfilled especially at the time of His baptism, Isa. 42:1,2; 61:1; John 3:31.

c. That He would support Him in the performance of His work, would deliver Him from the power of death, and would thus enable Him to destroy the dominion of Satan and to establish the Kingdom of God, Isa. 42:1-7; 49:8; Ps. 16:8-11; Acts 2:25-28.

d. That He would enable Him, as a reward for His accomplished work, to send out the Holy Spirit for the formation of His spiritual body, and for the instruction, guidance, and protection of the Church, John 14:26; 15:26; 16:13, 14; Acts 2:33.

e. That He would give unto Him a numerous seed in reward for His accomplished work, a seed so numerous that it would be a multitude which no man could number, so that ultimately the Kingdom of the Messiah would embrace the people of all nations and tongues, Ps. 22:27; 72:17.

f. That He would commit to Him all power in heaven and on earth for the government of the world and of His Church, Matt. 28:18; Eph. 1:20-22; Phil. 2:9-11; Heb. 2:5-9; and would finally reward Him as Mediator with the glory which He as the Son of God had with the Father before the world was, John 17:5.

E. The Relation Of This Covenant To The Covenant Of Grace.

GLOSS Counsel of peace: another name for the covenant of redemption, emphasising the Father and Son's eternal purpose of salvation.

The following points indicate the relation in which this covenant stands to the covenant of grace:

1. The counsel of redemption is the eternal prototype of the historical covenant of grace. This accounts for the fact that many combine the two into a single covenant. The former is eternal, that is, from eternity, and the latter, temporal in the sense that it is realised in time. The former is a compact between the Father and the Son as the Surety and Head of the elect, while the latter is a compact between the triune God and the elect sinner in the Surety.

2. The counsel of redemption is the firm and eternal foundation of the covenant of grace. If there had been no eternal counsel of peace between the Father and the Son, there could have been no agreement between the triune God and sinful men. The counsel of redemption makes the covenant of grace possible.

3. The counsel of redemption consequently also gives efficacy to the covenant of grace, for in it the means are provided for the establishment and execution of the latter. It is only by faith that the sinner can obtain the blessings of the covenant, and in the counsel of redemption the way of faith is opened. The Holy Spirit, which produces faith in the sinner, was promised to Christ by the Father, and the acceptance of the way of life through faith was guaranteed by Christ.

The covenant of redemption may be defined as the agreement between the Father, giving the Son as Head and Redeemer of the elect, and the Son, voluntarily taking the place of those whom the Father had given Him.

III. Nature of the Covenant of Grace

The covenant of grace differs from the covenant of works because salvation rests on Christ's obedience and is received through faith.

In a discussion of the nature of the covenant of grace several points come up for consideration, such as the distinction between it and the covenant of works, the contracting parties, the contents, the characteristics of the covenant, and the place of Christ in the covenant.

A. Comparison Of The Covenant Of Grace And The Covenant Of Works.

GLOSS Covenant of works: God's original arrangement with Adam, in which life was promised upon perfect obedience.

1. POINTS OF SIMILARITY. The points of agreement are of a rather general nature. The two covenants agree as to (a) the author: God is the author of both; He only could establish such covenants; (b) the contracting parties, which are in both cases God and man; (c) the external form, namely, condition and promise; (d) the contents of the promise which is in both cases eternal life; and (e) the general aim, which is the glory of God.

2. POINTS OF DIFFERENCE. (a) In the covenant of works God appears as Creator and Lord; in the covenant of grace, as Redeemer and Father. The establishment of the former was prompted by God's love and benevolence; that of the latter, by His mercy and special grace. (b) In the covenant of works man appears simply as God's creature, rightly related to his God; in the covenant of grace he appears as a sinner who has perverted his ways, and can only appear as a party in Christ, the Surety. Consequently, there is no mediator in the former, while there is in the latter. (c) The covenant of works was contingent on the uncertain obedience of a changeable man, while the covenant of grace rests on the obedience of Christ as Mediator, which is absolute and certain. (d) In the covenant of works the keeping of the law is the way of life; in the covenant of grace, it is faith in Jesus Christ. Whatever faith was required in the covenant of works was a part of the righteousness of the law; in the covenant of grace, however, it is merely the organ by which we take possession of the grace of God in Jesus Christ. (e) The covenant of works was partly known by nature, since

the law of God was written in the heart of man; but the covenant of grace is known exclusively through a special positive revelation.

B. The Contracting Parties.

GLOSS Contracting parties: those who enter a covenant; in grace, God graciously establishes the relationship with sinners in Christ.

Just as in the covenant of works, so in the covenant of grace God is the first of the contracting parties, the party that takes the initiative, and graciously determines the relation in which the second party will stand to Him. He appears in this covenant, however, not merely as a sovereign and a benevolent God, but also, and especially, as a gracious and forgiving Father, willing to pardon sin and to restore sinners to His blessed communion.

It is not easy to determine precisely who the second party is. In general it may be said that God naturally established the covenant of grace with fallen man. Historically, there is no definite indication of any limitation until we come to the time of Abraham. In course of time it became perfectly evident, however, that this new covenant relation was not meant to include all men. When God formally established the covenant with Abraham, He limited it to the patriarch and his seed. Consequently, the question arises as to the exact limits of the covenant.

Reformed theologians are not unanimous in answering this question. Some simply say that God made the covenant with the sinner, but this suggests no limitation whatsoever, and therefore does not satisfy. Others assert that He established it with Abraham and his seed, that is, his natural, but especially his spiritual, descendants; or, put in a more general form, with believers and their seed. The great majority of them, however, maintain that He entered into covenant relationship with the elect or the elect sinner in Christ. This position was taken by earlier as well as by later representatives of federal theology. Even Bullinger says the “covenant of God includes the entire seed of Abraham, that is, the believers.” He finds this to be in harmony with Paul’s interpretation of “the seed” in Gal. 3. At the same time he also holds that the children of believers are in a certain sense included in the covenant.[Cf. the quotations in A. J. Van ‘t Hooft, *De Theologie van Heinrich Bullinger*, pp. 47, 172.] And Olevianus, co-author with Ursinus of the Heidelberg Catechism, says that God established the covenant with “all those whom God, out of the mass of lost men, has decreed to adopt as children by grace, and to endow them with faith.”[*Van het Wezen des Genade-Verbondts Tusschen God ende de Uitverkorene*, Afd. I, par. 1.] This is also the position of Mastricht, Turretin, Owen, Gib, Boston, Witsius, à Marck, Francken, Brakel, Comrie, Kuyper, Bavinck, Hodge, Vos, and others.

But now the question arises, What induced these theologians to speak of the covenant as made with the elect in spite of all the practical difficulties involved? Were they not aware of these difficulties? It appears from their writings that they were fully conscious of them. But they felt that it was necessary to contemplate the covenant first of all in its most profound sense, as it is realised in the lives of believers. While they understood that others had a place in the covenant in some sense of the word, they nevertheless felt that it was a subordinate place, and that their relation to it was calculated to be subservient to the full realization of it in a life of friendship with God. And this is no wonder in view of the following considerations:

1. They who identified the covenant of redemption and the covenant of grace, and considered it un-Scriptural to distinguish the two, naturally thought of it first of all as a covenant established with Christ as the representative Head of all those whom the Father had given Him; a covenant in which He became the

Surety of the elect and thus guaranteed their complete redemption. In fact, in the covenant of redemption only the elect come into consideration. The situation is practically the same in the case of those who distinguish two covenants, but insist on their close relationship and represent the covenant of redemption as the eternal basis of the covenant of grace, for in the former only the grace of God, as it is glorified and perfected in the elect, comes into consideration.

2. Even in the history of the establishment of the covenant with Abraham, interpreted in the light of the rest of Scripture, Reformed theologians found abundant evidence that fundamentally the covenant of grace is a covenant established with those who are in Christ. The Bible distinguishes a twofold seed of Abraham. The beginning of this is distinctly found in Gen. 21:12, where we find God saying to Abraham, “In Isaac shall thy seed be called,” thus ruling out Ishmael. Paul, in interpreting these words speaks of Isaac as a child of promise, and by “a child of promise” he does not simply mean a promised child, but a child that was not born in the ordinary way, but, in virtue of a promise, by a supernatural operation of God. He also connects with it the idea of a child to whom the promise belongs. According to him the expression, “in Isaac shall thy seed be called,” indicates that “it is not the children of the flesh that are children of God; but the children of the promise are reckoned for a seed.” Rom. 9:8. The same idea is expressed in Gal. 4:28, “Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are children of promise,” and as such also heirs of the promised blessings, cf. vs. 30. This is entirely in harmony with what the apostle says in Gal. 3:16: “Now to Abraham were the promises spoken, and to his seed. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ.” But the seed is not limited to Christ, but includes all believers. “And if ye are Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, heirs according to promise.” Gal. 3:29. W. Strong in his *Discourse of the Two Covenants* calls attention to the following subordination in the establishment of the covenant. He says that it was made “(1) first and immediately with Christ the second Adam: (2) in Him with all the faithful: (3) in them with their seed.” [p. 193.]

3. Still another factor should be taken into consideration. Reformed theologians were deeply conscious of the contrast between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. They felt that in the former the reward of the covenant was dependent on the uncertain obedience of man and as a result failed to materialize, while in the covenant of grace the full realization of the promises is absolutely sure in virtue of the perfect obedience of Jesus Christ. Its realization is sure through the operation of the grace of God, but, of course, sure only for those who are partakers of that grace. They felt constrained to stress this aspect of the covenant especially over against the Arminians and Neonomians, who virtually changed it into a new covenant of works, and made salvation once more dependent on the work of man, that is, on faith and evangelical obedience. For this reason they stressed the close connection between the covenant of redemption and the covenant of grace, and even hesitated to speak of faith as the condition of the covenant of grace. Walker tells us that some of the Scottish divines were opposed to the distinction of two covenants, because they saw in it a “tendency . . . to Neonomianism, or, as the covenant of reconciliation (i.e., the covenant of grace as distinguished from that of redemption) was external in the visible Church, even a sort of bar to immediate dealing with the Saviour, and entrance by an appropriating faith into living union with Him.” [Scottish Theology and Theologians, pp. 77 f.]

4. All in all it would seem safe to say that Reformed theology contemplated the covenant, not primarily as a means ministering to an end, but as an end in itself, a relation of friendship; not first of all as representing and including a number of external privileges, a set of promises, conditionally held out to man, a good merely offered unto him; but primarily as the expression of blessings freely given, of privileges improved by the grace of God for spiritual ends, of promises accepted by a faith which is the gift of God, and of a good realised, at least in principle, through the operation of the Holy Spirit in the heart. And because in

its estimation all this was included in the covenant idea, and the blessings of the covenant are realised only in those that are actually saved, it stressed the fact that the covenant of grace was established between God and the elect. But in doing this it did not intend to deny that the covenant also has a broader aspect.

Dr. Vos says with reference to this view: “Het behoeft nauwelijks herinnerd to worden, hoe met dit alles geenszins bedoeld is, dat de verbondsbediening van de verkiezing uitgaat, noch ook dat alle niet-uitverkorenen buiten iedere relatie tot deze verbonds-bediening staan. Het is veelmeer zoo bedoeld, dat uit ‘t gesterkt verbonds-bewustzijn de zekerheid aangaande de verkiezing zich ontwikkelen moet; dat door heel de verbonds-bediening heen, ook de volstreckte, alomvattende beloften Gods, zooals zij uit de verkiezing voortvloeien moeten worden in het oog gehouden, bij Woord en Sacrament beide; dat eindelijk het wezen des verbonds, deszelfs volle realiseering slechts bij de ware kinderen Gods wordt aangetroffen, en dus niet wijder is dan de uitverkiezing. Vooral op het tweede punt dient gelet te worden. Behalve dat er overal, waar Gods verbond bediend wordt, eene verzegeling is van dezen inhoud: In de vooronderstelling der aanwezigheid van geloof, wordt u het recht op alle verbondsgoederen verzekerd — behalve dat, zeggen wij, is er steeds een plechtige betuiging en verzegeling, dat God in alle uitverkorenen den geheelen omvang des verbonds will verwerkelijken.” [That is, “It need hardly be said that with all this it is not meant that the administration of the covenant originates from the election, nor that all who are not elect stand outside of every relation to this administration of the covenant. It is far more intended thus, that out of the strengthened covenant consciousness the certainty respecting the election must develop itself; that through the entire administration of the covenant, also the absolute, all-comprehensive promises of God, as they issue from the election, must be borne in mind in connection with both Word and Sacrament; that, finally, the essence of the covenant, its full realization, is found only in the true children of God, and therefore is not more extensive than the election. Attention should be paid especially to the second point. Besides that everywhere, where God’s covenant is administered, there is a seal having this content: In the supposition of the presence of faith, you are assured of the right to all the blessings of the covenant, — besides that, we say, there is always a solemn testimony and seal, that God will realise the whole content of the covenant in the elect.” *De Verbondsl eer in de Gereformeerde Theologie*, pp. 46 f.]

The idea that the covenant is fully realised only in the elect is a perfectly Scriptural idea, as appears, for instance, from Jer. 31:31-34; Heb. 8:8-12. Moreover, it is also entirely in line with the relation in which the covenant of grace stands to the covenant of redemption. If in the latter Christ becomes Surety only for the elect, then the real substance of the former must be limited to them also. Scripture strongly emphasizes the fact that the covenant of grace, in distinction from the covenant of works, is an inviolable covenant, in which the promises of God are always realised, Isa. 54:10. This cannot be intended conditionally, for then it would be no special characteristic of the covenant of grace, but would apply to the covenant of works as well. And yet, this is exactly one of the important points in which the former differs from the latter, that it is no more dependent on the uncertain obedience of man, but only on the absolute faithfulness of God. The covenant promises will surely be realised, but — only in the lives of the elect.

But now the question arises, whether in the estimation of these Reformed theologians all the non-elect are outside of the covenant of grace in every sense of the word. Brakel virtually takes this position, but he is not in line with the majority. They realised very well that a covenant of grace, which in no sense of the word included others than the elect, would be purely individual, while the covenant of grace is represented in Scripture as an organic idea. They were fully aware of the fact that, according to God’s special revelation in both the Old and the New Testament, the covenant as a historical phenomenon is perpetuated in successive generations and includes many in whom the covenant life is never realised. And whenever they desired to include this aspect of the covenant in their definition, they would say that it was established with believers

and their seed. It should be borne in mind, however, that this description of the second party in the covenant does not imply that the covenant is established with men in the quality of believers, for faith itself is a fruit of the covenant. Dr. Bavinck correctly says: “Maar het verbond der genade gaat aan het geloof vooraf. Het geloof is geen voorwaarde tot het verbond, maar in het verbond; de weg, om al de andere goederen van dat verbond deelachtig te worden en te genieten.” [That is, “But the covenant of grace precedes faith. Faith is not a condition to the covenant, but in the covenant; the way to obtain possession of and to enjoy all the other blessings of the covenant.” Roeping en Wedergeboorte, p. 108.] The description “believers and their seed” merely serves as a convenient practical designation of the limits of the covenant. The question of harmonizing these two aspects of the covenant will come up later on. The covenant of grace may be defined as that gracious agreement between the offended God and the offending but elect sinner, in which God promises salvation through faith in Christ, and the sinner accepts this believingly, promising a life of faith and obedience.

C. The Contents Of The Covenant Of Grace.

GLOSS Promise of grace: God’s pledge to forgive, renew, and bring His people into life with Him through Christ.

1. THE PROMISES OF GOD. The main promise of God, which includes all other promises, is contained in the oft-repeated words, “I will be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee.” Gen. 17:7. This promise is found in several Old and New Testament passages which speak of the introduction of a new phase of the covenant life, or refer to a renewal of the covenant, Jer. 31:33; 32:38-40; Ezek. 34:23-25,30,31; 36:25-28; 37:26,27; II Cor. 6:16-18; Heb. 8:10. The promise is fully realised when at last the new Jerusalem descends out of heaven from God, and the tabernacle of God is pitched among men. Consequently we hear the last echo of it in Rev. 21:3. This grand promise is re-echoed time and again in the jubilant exaltation of those who stand in covenant relationship to God, “Jehovah is my God.” This one promise really includes all other promises, such as (a) the promise of various temporal blessings, which often serve to symbolize those of a spiritual kind; (b) the promise of justification, including the adoption of children, and a claim to life eternal; (c) the promise of the Spirit of God for the application, full and free, of the work of redemption and of all the blessings of salvation; and (d) the promise of final glorification in a life that never ends. Cf. Job 19:25-27; Ps. 16:11; 73:24-26; Isa. 43:25; Jer. 31:33,34; Ezek. 36:27; Dan. 12:2,3; Gal. 4:5,6; Tit. 3:7; Heb. 11:7; Jas. 2:5.

2. THE RESPONSE OF MAN. The assent or response of man to these promises of God naturally appears in various forms, the nature of the response being determined by the promises. (a) In general the relation between the covenant God and the single believer or believers collectively is represented as the close relationship between man and wife, bridegroom and bride, a father and his children. This implies that the response of those who share the covenant blessings will be one of true, faithful, trustful, consecrated, and devoted love. (b) To the general promise, “I will be thy God,” man responds by saying, “I will belong to thy people,” and by casting his lot with the people of God. (c) And to the promise of justification unto the forgiveness of sins, the adoption of children, and eternal life, he responds by saving faith in Jesus Christ, by trust in Him for time and eternity, and by a life of obedience and consecration to God.

D. The Characteristics Of The Covenant Of Grace.

GLOSS Faith: the receiving trust by which a sinner rests in Christ and receives the blessings God promises.

1. IT IS A GRACIOUS COVENANT. This covenant may be called a gracious covenant, (a) because in it God allows a Surety to meet our obligations; (b) because He Himself provides the Surety in the person of His Son, who meets the demands of justice; and (c) because by His grace, revealed in the operation of the Holy Spirit, He enables man to live up to His covenant responsibilities. The covenant originates in the grace of God, is executed in virtue of the grace of God, and is realised in the lives of sinners by the grace of God. It is grace from the beginning to the end for the sinner.

2. IT IS A TRINITARIAN COVENANT. The triune God is operative in the covenant of grace. It has its origin in the elective love and grace of the Father, finds its judicial foundation in the suretyship of the Son, and is fully realised in the lives of sinners only by the effective application of the Holy Spirit, John 1:16; Eph. 1:1-14; 2:8; I Pet. 1:2.

3. IT IS AN ETERNAL AND THEREFORE UNBREAKABLE COVENANT. When we speak of it as an eternal covenant, we have reference to a future rather than to a past eternity, Gen. 17:19; II Sam. 23:5; Heb. 13:20. Past eternity can be ascribed to it only, if we do not distinguish between it and the covenant of redemption. The fact that the covenant is eternal also implies that it is inviolable; and this is one of the reasons why it can be called a testament, Heb. 9:17. God remains forever true to His covenant and will invariably bring it to full realization in the elect. This does not mean, however, that man cannot and never will break the covenant relationship in which he stands.

4. IT IS A PARTICULAR AND NOT A UNIVERSAL COVENANT. This means (a) that it will not be realised in all men, as some Universalists claim, and also that God did not intend that it should be realised in the lives of all, as Pelagians, Arminians, and Lutherans teach; (b) that even as an external covenant relation it does not extend to all those to whom the gospel is preached, for many of them are not willing to be incorporated in the covenant; and (c) that the offer of the covenant does not come to all, since there have been many individuals and even nations who were never made acquainted with the way of salvation. Some of the older Lutherans claim that the covenant may be called universal, because there have been periods in history when it was offered to the human race as a whole, as for instance, in Adam, in Noah and his family, and even in the days of the apostles. But there is no ground for making Adam and Noah representative recipients of the offer of the covenant; and the apostles certainly did not evangelize the whole world. Some Reformed theologians, as Musculus, Polanus, and Wollebius, and others, spoke of a foedus generale, in distinction from the foedus speciale ac sempiternum, but in doing this they had in mind the general covenant of God with all creatures, men and beasts, established by Noah. The New Testament dispensation of the covenant may be called universal in the sense that in it the covenant is extended to all nations, and is no more limited to the Jews, as it was in the old dispensation.

5. IT IS ESSENTIALLY THE SAME IN ALL DISPENSATIONS, THOUGH ITS FORM OF ADMINISTRATION CHANGES. This is contradicted by all those who claim that Old Testament saints were saved in another manner than New Testament believers, as for instance, Pelagians and Socinians, who hold that God gave additional help in the example and teachings of Christ; the Roman Catholics, who maintain that the Old Testament saints were in the Limbus Patrum until Christ's descent into hades; the followers of Coccejus, who assert that Old Testament believers enjoyed only a pæsis (a passing over) and no aphasis (full forgiveness of sins); and present-day dispensationalists, who distinguish several different covenants (Scofield mentions 7; Milligan 9), and insist on the necessity of keeping them distinct. The unity of the covenant in all dispensations is proved by the following:

a. The summary expression of the covenant is the same throughout, both in the Old and New Testament: "I will be thy God." It is the expression of the essential content of the covenant with Abraham, Gen. 17:7, of

the Sinaitic covenant, Ex. 19:5; 20:1, of the covenant of the Plains of Moab, Deut. 29:13, of the Davidic covenant, II Sam. 7:14, and of the new covenant, Jer. 31:33; Heb. 8:10. This promise is really an all-comprehensive summary and contains a guarantee of the most perfect covenant blessings. Christ infers from the fact that God is called the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, that those patriarchs are in possession of eternal life, Matt. 22:32.

b. The Bible teaches that there is but a single gospel by which men can be saved. And because the gospel is nothing but the revelation of the covenant of grace, it follows that there is also but one covenant. This gospel was already heard in the maternal promise, Gen. 3:15, was preached unto Abraham, Gal. 3:8, and may not be supplanted by any Judaistic gospel, Gal. 1:8,9.

c. Paul argues at length over against the Judaists that the way in which Abraham obtained salvation is typical for New Testament believers, no matter whether they be Jews or Gentiles, Rom. 4:9-25; Gal. 3:7-9,17,18. He speaks of Abraham as the father of believers, and clearly proves that the covenant with Abraham is still in force. It is perfectly clear from the argument of the apostle in Rom. 4 and Gal. 3 that the law has not annulled nor altered the covenant. Cf. also Heb. 6:13-18.

d. The Mediator of the covenant is the same yesterday, to-day, and forever, Heb. 13:8. In none other is there salvation, John 14:6; for neither is there any other name under heaven, that is given among men, whereby we must be saved, Acts 4:12. The seed promised to Abraham is Christ, Gal. 3:16, and those that are identified with Christ are the real heirs of the covenant, Gal. 3:16-29.

e. The way of salvation revealed in the covenant is the same. Scripture insists on the identical conditions all along, Gen. 15:6, compared with Rom. 4:11; Heb. 2:4; Acts 15:11; Gal. 3:6,7; Heb. 11:9. The promises, for the realization of which the believers hoped, were also the same, Gen. 15:6; Ps. 51:12; Matt. 13:17; John 8:56. And the sacraments, though differing in form have essentially the same signification in both dispensations, Rom. 4:11; I Cor. 5:7; Col. 2:11,12.

f. It is both conditional and unconditional. The question is repeatedly asked, whether the covenant is conditional or unconditional. This is a question that cannot be answered without careful discrimination, for the answer will depend on the point of view from which the covenant is considered.

On the one hand the covenant is unconditional. There is in the covenant of grace no condition that can be considered as meritorious. The sinner is exhorted to repent and believe, but his faith and repentance do not in any way merit the blessings of the covenant. This must be maintained in opposition to both the Roman Catholic and the Arminian position. Neither is it conditional in the sense that man is expected to perform in his own strength what the covenant requires of him. In placing him before the demands of the covenant, we must always remind him of the fact that he can obtain the necessary strength for the performance of his duty only from God. In a sense it may be said that God Himself fulfills the condition in the elect. That which may be regarded as a condition in the covenant, is for those who are chosen unto everlasting life also a promise, and therefore a gift of God. Finally, the covenant is not conditional in the sense that the reception of every separate blessing of the covenant is dependent on a condition. We may say that faith is the *conditio sine qua non* of justification, but the reception of faith itself in regeneration is not dependent on any condition, but only on the operation of the grace of God in Christ.

On the other hand the covenant may be called conditional. There is a sense in which the covenant is conditional. If we consider the basis of the covenant, it is clearly conditional on the suretyship of Jesus Christ. In order to introduce the covenant of grace, Christ had to, and actually did, meet the conditions originally laid down in the covenant of works, by His active and passive obedience. Again, it may be said

that the covenant is conditional as far as the first conscious entrance into the covenant as a real communion of life is concerned. This entrance is contingent on faith, a faith, however, which is itself a gift of God. When we speak of faith as a condition here, we naturally refer to faith as a spiritual activity of the mind. It is only through faith that we can obtain a conscious enjoyment of the blessings of the covenant. Our experimental knowledge of the covenant life is entirely dependent on the exercise of faith. He who does not live a life of faith is, as far as his consciousness is concerned, practically outside of the covenant. If in our purview we include not only the beginning, but also the gradual unfolding and completion of the covenant life, we may regard sanctification as a condition in addition to faith. Both are conditions, however, within the covenant.

Reformed Churches have often objected to the use of the word “condition” in connection with the covenant of grace. This was largely due to a reaction against Arminianism, which employed the word “condition” in an un-Scriptural sense, and therefore to a failure to discriminate properly.[Cf. Dick, Theol. Lect. XLVIII.] Bearing in mind what was said in the preceding, it would seem to be perfectly proper to speak of a condition in connection with the covenant of grace, for (1) the Bible clearly indicates that the entrance upon the covenant life is conditioned on faith, John 3:16,36; Acts 8:37 (not found in some MSS.); Rom. 10:9; (2) Scripture often threatens covenant children, but these threatenings apply exactly to those who ignore the condition, that is, who refuse to walk in the way of the covenant; and (3) if there were no condition, God only would be bound by the covenant, and there would be no “bond of the covenant” for man (but cf. Ezek. 20:37); and thus the covenant of grace would lose its character as a covenant, for there are two parts in all covenants.

g. The covenant may in a sense be called a testament. In view of the fact that a testament is an absolute declaration and knows of no conditions, the question is raised whether it is proper at all to apply the term “testament” to the covenant. There is but one passage in the New Testament where it seems to be justifiable to render the word *diatheke* by “testament,” namely, Heb. 9:16,17. There Christ is represented as the testator, in whose death the covenant of grace, considered as a testament, becomes effective. There was a testamentary disposal of the blessings of the covenant, and this came into force through the death of Christ. This is the only passage in which the covenant is explicitly referred to as a testament. But the idea that believers receive the spiritual blessings of the covenant in a testamentary way is implied in several passages of Scripture, though the implied representation is slightly different from that in Heb. 9:16,17. It is God rather than Christ who is testator. In both the Old and the New Testament, but especially in the latter, believers are represented as children of God, legally by adoption, and ethically by the new birth, John 1:12; Rom. 8:15,16; Gal. 4:4-6; I John 3:1-3,9. Now the ideas of heirship and inheritance are naturally associated with that of sonship, and therefore it is no wonder that they are frequently found in Scripture. Paul says: “And if children, then heirs,” Rom. 8:17; cf. also Rom. 4:14; Gal. 3:29; 4:1,7; Tit. 3:7; Heb. 6:17; 11:7; Jas. 2:5. In view of these passages there is no doubt that the covenant and the covenant blessings are represented in Scripture as an inheritance. But this representation is again based on the idea of a testament, with this difference, however, that the confirmation of the covenant does not imply the death of the testator. Believers are heirs of God (who cannot die) and joint-heirs with Christ, Rom. 8:17. It is perfectly evident that for the sinner the covenant has a testamentary side and can be regarded as an inheritance; but now the question arises, whether it can also assume this character for Christ. An affirmative answer would seem to be required in view of the fact that we are called co-heirs with Christ. Is He then also an heir? This question may be answered in the affirmative in view of the statement found in Luke 22:29. The inheritance referred to here is the mediatorial glory of Christ, which He received as an inheritance from the Father, and which He, in turn, communicates as an inheritance to all those that are His. But though there is undoubtedly a testamentary side to the covenant, this is but one side of the matter, and does not preclude the idea that the covenant is

really a covenant. It can be called a testament, because (1) it is as a whole a gift from God; (2) the New Testament dispensation of it was ushered in by the death of Christ; (3) it is firm and inviolable; and (4) in it God Himself gives what He demands of man. Yet this should not be interpreted to mean that there are no two sides to the covenant, and that it is therefore absolutely monopoleuric. However unequal the parties in themselves may be, God condescends to come down to the level of man and by His grace enables him to act as the second party in the covenant. A monopoleuric covenant in the absolute sense of the word is really a *contradictio in adjecto*. At the same time those theologians who stress the monopoleuric character of the covenant did this to emphasize an important truth, namely, that God and man do not meet each other half way in the covenant, but that God comes down to man and graciously establishes His covenant with him, freely giving all that He demands, and that man is really the only one that profits by the covenant. It is essential, however, that the dipoleuric character of the covenant be maintained, because man really appears in it as meeting the demands of the covenant in faith and conversion, though it be only as God works in him both to will and to do, according to His good pleasure.

E. The Relation Of Christ To The Covenant Of Grace.

GLOSS Head of the covenant: Christ as the representative and saving head of His people, in whom the covenant promises are secured.

Christ is represented in Scripture as the Mediator of the covenant. The Greek word *mesites* is not found in classical Greek, but does occur in Philo and in later Greek authors. In the Septuagint it is found but once, Job 9:33. The English word “Mediator,” as well as the Holland “Middelaar” and the German “Mittler,” might lead us to think that it (*mesites*) simply designates one who arbitrates between two parties, an intermediary in the general sense of the word. It should be borne in mind, however, that the Scriptural idea is far more profound. Christ is Mediator in more than one sense. He intervenes between God and man, not merely to sue for peace and to persuade to it, but as armed with plenipotentiary power, to do all that is necessary to establish peace. The use of the word *mesites* in the New Testament justifies our speaking of a twofold Mediatorship of Christ, namely, that of surety and that of access (Gr. *prosagoge*, Rom. 5:2). In most of the passages in which the word is found in the New Testament, it is equal to *egguos*, and therefore points to Christ as one who, by taking upon Himself the guilt of sinners, terminated their penal relation to the law and restored them to the right legal relationship to God. This is the meaning of the word in Heb. 8:6; 9:15, and 12:24. In Heb. 7:22 the term *egguos* itself is applied to Christ. There is one passage, however, in which the word *mesites* has a meaning that is more in accord with the ordinary sense of the word “mediator,” as one who is called in to arbitrate between two parties and to reconcile them, namely, I Tim. 2:5. Here Christ is represented as Mediator in the sense that, on the basis of His sacrifice, He brings God and man together. The work of Christ, as indicated by the word *mesites*, is twofold. He labors in things pertaining to God and in things pertaining to man, in the objective legal sphere, and in the subjective moral sphere. In the former He propitiates the just displeasure of God by expiating the guilt of sin, makes intercession for those whom the Father has given Him, and actually makes their persons and services acceptable to God. And in the latter He reveals to men the truth concerning God and their relation to Him with the conditions of acceptable service, persuades and enables them to receive the truth, and directs and sustains them in all circumstances of life, so as to perfect their deliverance. In doing this work He employs the ministry of men, II Cor. 5:20.

IV. The Dual Aspect of the Covenant

The covenant has an outward administration and an inward reality; its visible signs must never be confused with saving communion with God.

In speaking of the contracting parties in the covenant of grace it was already intimated that the covenant may be considered from two different points of view. There are two different aspects of the covenant, and now the question arises, In what relation do these two stand to each other? This question has been answered in different ways.

A. An External And An Internal Covenant.

GLOSS Administration: the visible form in which the covenant is preached, signed, and lived in the community of faith.

Some have distinguished between an external and an internal covenant. The external covenant was conceived as one in which a person's status depends entirely on the performance of certain external religious duties. His position is entirely correct, if he does what is required of him, somewhat in the Roman Catholic sense. Among Israel this covenant assumed a national form. Perhaps no one worked out the doctrine of an external covenant with greater consistency than Thomas Blake. The dividing line between the external and the internal covenant was not always represented in the same way. Some connected baptism with the external, and confession of faith and the Lord's Supper, with the internal covenant; others thought of baptism and confession as belonging to the external covenant, and of the Lord's Supper as the sacrament of the internal covenant. But the trouble is that this whole representation results in a dualism in the conception of the covenant that is not warranted by Scripture; it yields an external covenant that is not interpenetrated by the internal. The impression is created that there is a covenant in which man can assume an entirely correct position without saving faith; but the Bible knows of no such covenant. There are, indeed, external privileges and blessings of the covenant, and there are persons who enjoy these only; but such cases are abnormalities that cannot be systematized. The distinction between an external and an internal covenant does not hold.

This view must not be confused with another and related view, namely, that there is an external and an internal aspect of the covenant of grace (Mastricht and others). According to this some accept their covenant responsibilities in a truly spiritual way, from the heart, while others accept them only by an external profession with the mouth, and therefore are only apparently in the covenant. Mastricht refers to Judas Iscariot, Simon the sorcerer, those who have temporal faith, and others. But the trouble is that, according to this view, the non-elect and non-regenerate are merely external appendages to the covenant, and are simply regarded as children of the covenant by us because of our short-sightedness, but are no covenant children at all in the sight of God. They are not really in the covenant, and therefore cannot really become covenant breakers either. It offers no solution of the problem in what sense the non-elect and non-regenerate, who are members of the visible Church, are children of the covenant also in the sight of God, and can therefore become covenant breakers.

B. The Essence And The Administration Of The Covenant.

GLOSS Essence of the covenant: the saving communion with God that belongs truly to those who trust in Christ.

Others, as for instance, Olevianus and Turretin, distinguish between the essence and the administration of the covenant. According to Turretin the former corresponds to the internal calling and the invisible Church formed by means of this calling; and the latter, to the external calling and the visible Church, as consisting of those who are called externally by the Word. The administration of the covenant consists only in the offer of salvation in the preaching of the Word, and in the other external privileges in which all share who have a place in the Church, including many non-elect. The essence of the covenant, however, also includes the spiritual reception of all the blessings of the covenant, the life in union with Christ, and therefore extends to the elect only. This distinction certainly contains an element of truth, but is not altogether logical and clear. While essence and form would constitute an antithesis, essence and administration do not. They may refer to the invisible and the visible Church, as Turretin seems to intend, or to the final end or realization and the announcement of the covenant, as Olevianus understands the distinction. But if the former is meant, it would be better to speak of essence and revelation; and if the latter is intended, it would be preferable to speak of the aim and the means of its realization. Here, too, the question remains unanswered, whether and in how far the non-elect are covenant children also in the sight of God.

C. A Conditional And An Absolute Covenant.

GLOSS Conditionality: the covenant call to faith and obedience; these are responses to grace, not ways of earning it.

Still others, as for instance, Koelman, speak of a conditional and an absolute covenant. Koelman emphasizes the fact that, when an external and an internal covenant are distinguished, only a single covenant is meant, and the terms “external” and “internal” simply serve to stress the fact that all are not in the covenant in exactly the same way. Some are in it merely by an external confession, to the enjoyment of external privileges, and others by a hearty acceptance of it, to the enjoyment of the blessings of salvation. Likewise, he wishes it to be clearly understood that, when he says that some are in the covenant externally and conditionally, he does not mean to assert that they are not really in the covenant, but only that they cannot obtain the promised blessings of the covenant, except by complying with the condition of the covenant. This representation, too, undoubtedly contains an element of truth, but in Koelman it is linked up in such a way with the notion of an external and an internal covenant, that he comes dangerously near to the error of accepting two covenants, especially when he claims that during the New Testament dispensation God incorporates whole nations and kingdoms in the covenant.

D. The Covenant As A Purely Legal Relationship And As A Communion Of Life.

GLOSS Communion with God: the restored fellowship with God that is the heart and goal of the covenant of grace.

Reformed theologians, such as Kuyper, Bavinck, and Honig, speak of two sides of the covenant, the one external and the other internal. Dr. Vos uses terms that are more specific, when he distinguishes between the

covenant as a purely legal relationship and the covenant as a communion of life. There is clearly a legal and a moral side to the covenant. The covenant may be regarded as an agreement between two parties, with mutual conditions and stipulations, and therefore as something in the legal sphere. The covenant in that sense may exist even when nothing is done to realise its purpose, namely the condition to which it points and for which it calls as the real ideal. The parties that live under this agreement are in the covenant, since they are subject to the mutual stipulations agreed upon. In the legal sphere everything is considered and regulated in a purely objective way. The determining factor in that sphere is simply the relation which has been established, and not the attitude which one assumes to that relation. The relation exists independently of one's inclination or disinclination, one's likes and dislikes, in connection with it. It would seem to be in the light of this distinction that the question should be answered, Who are in the covenant of grace? If the question is asked with the legal relationship, and that only, in mind, and really amounts to the query, Who are in duty bound to live in the covenant, and of whom may it be expected that they will do this? — the answer is, believers and their children. But if the question is asked with a view to the covenant as a communion of life, and assumes the quite different form, In whom does this legal relationship issue in a living communion with Christ? — the answer can only be, only in the regenerate, who are endowed with the principle of faith, that is, in the elect.

This distinction is warranted by Scripture. It is hardly necessary to cite passages proving that the covenant is an objective compact in the legal sphere, for it is perfectly evident that we have such a compact wherever two parties agree as in the presence of God to perform certain things affecting their mutual relation, or one party promises to bestow certain benefits on the other, provided the latter fulfills the conditions that are laid down. That the covenant of grace is such a compact is abundantly evident from Scripture. There is the condition of faith, Gen. 15:6, compared with Rom. 4:3 ff., 20 ff.; Hab. 2:4; Gal. 3:14-28; Heb. 11; and there is also the promise of spiritual and eternal blessings, Gen. 17:7; 12:3; Isa. 43:25; Ezek. 36:27; Rom. 4:5 ff.; Gal. 3:14,18. But it is also clear that the covenant in its full realization is something more than that, namely, a communion of life. This may be already symbolically expressed in the act of passing between the parts of the animals slain at the establishment of the covenant with Abraham, Gen. 15:9-17. Moreover, it is indicated in such passages as Ps. 25:14; Ps. 89:33,34; 103:17,18; Jer. 31:33,34 (Heb. 8:10-12); Ezek. 36:25-28; II Cor. 6:16; Rev. 21:2,3.

Now the question arises as to the relation between the sinner's being under the "bond of the covenant" as a legal relationship and his living in the communion of the covenant. The two cannot be conceived of as existing alongside of each other without some inner connection, but must be regarded as being most intimately related to each other, in order to avoid all dualism. When one takes the covenant relation upon himself voluntarily, the two must naturally go together; if they do not, a false relation ensues. But in the case of those who are born in the covenant the question is more difficult. Is the one then possible without the other? Is the covenant in that case a bare legal relationship, in which that which ought to be — but is not — takes the place of the glorious realities for which the covenant stands? Is there any reasonable ground to expect that the covenant relation will issue in a living communion; that for the sinner, who is of himself unable to believe, the covenant will actually become a living reality? In answer to this question it may be said that God undoubtedly desires that the covenant relationship shall issue in a covenant life. And He Himself guarantees by His promises pertaining to the seed of believers that this will take place, not in the case of every individual, but in the seed of the covenant collectively. On the basis of the promise of God we may believe that, under a faithful administration of the covenant, the covenant relation will, as a rule, be fully realised in a covenant life.

E. Membership In The Covenant As A Legal Relationship.

GLOSS Covenant membership: a person's outward place within the covenant community, which must be joined by living faith.

In discussing membership in the covenant as a legal relationship, it should be borne in mind that the covenant in this sense is not merely a system of demands and promises, demands that ought to be met, and promises that ought to be realised; but that it also includes a reasonable expectation that the external legal relationship will carry with it the glorious reality of a life in intimate communion with the covenant God. This is the only way in which the idea of the covenant is fully realised.

1. ADULTS IN THE COVENANT. Adults can only enter this covenant voluntarily by faith and confession. From this it follows that in their case, unless their confession be false, entrance into the covenant as a legal relationship and into the covenant as a communion of life coincide. They not merely take upon themselves the performance of certain external duties; nor do they merely promise in addition to this, that they will exercise saving faith in the future; but they confess that they accept the covenant with a living faith, and that it is their desire and intention to continue in this faith. They enter upon the full covenant life at once therefore, and this is the only way in which they can enter the covenant. This truth is implicitly or explicitly denied by all those who connect the confession of faith with a merely external covenant.

2. CHILDREN OF BELIEVERS IN THE COVENANT. With respect to the children of believers, who enter the covenant by birth, the situation is, of course, somewhat different. Experience teaches that, though by birth they enter the covenant as a legal relationship, this does not necessarily mean that they are also at once in the covenant as a communion of life. It does not even mean that the covenant relation will ever come to its full realization in their lives. Yet even in their case there must be a reasonable assurance that the covenant is not or will not remain a mere legal relationship, with external duties and privileges, pointing to that which ought to be, but is also or will in time become a living reality. This assurance is based on the promise of God, which is absolutely reliable, that He will work in the hearts of the covenant youth with His saving grace and transform them into living members of the covenant. The covenant is more than the mere offer of salvation, more even than the offer of salvation plus the promise to believe the gospel. It also carries with it the assurance, based on the promises of God, who works in the children of the covenant "when, where, and how He pleaseth," that saving faith will be wrought in their hearts. As long as the children of the covenant do not reveal the contrary, we shall have to proceed on the assumption that they are in possession of the covenant life. Naturally, the course of events may prove that this life is not yet present; it may even prove that it is never realised in their lives. The promises of God are given to the seed of believers collectively, and not individually. God's promise to continue His covenant and to bring it to full realization in the children of believers, does not mean that He will endow every last one of them with saving faith. And if some of them continue in unbelief, we shall have to bear in mind what Paul says in Rom. 9:6-8. They are not all Israel who are of Israel; the children of believers are not all children of promise. Hence it is necessary to remind even children of the covenant constantly of the necessity of regeneration and conversion. The mere fact that one is in the covenant does not carry with it the assurance of salvation. When the children of believers grow up and come to years of discretion, it is, of course, incumbent on them to accept their covenant responsibilities voluntarily by a true confession of faith. Failure to do this is, strictly speaking, a denial of their covenant relationship. It may be said therefore that the legal relationship in which the children of believers stand, precedes the covenant as a communion of life and is a means to its realization. But in emphasizing the significance of the covenant as a means to an end, we should not stress exclusively, nor even primarily, the

demands of God and the resulting duty of man, but especially the promise of the effectual operation of the grace of God in the hearts of covenant children. If we stress the covenant responsibilities only or excessively, and fail to give due prominence to the fact that in the covenant God gives whatsoever He demands of us, in other words, that His promises cover all His requirements, we are in danger of falling into the snare of Arminianism.

3. UNREGENERATE IN THE COVENANT. From the preceding it follows that even unregenerate and unconverted persons may be in the covenant. Ishmael and Esau were originally in the covenant, the wicked sons of Eli were covenant children, and the great majority of the Jews in the days of Jesus and the apostles belonged to the covenant people and shared in the covenant promises, though they did not follow the faith of their father Abraham. Hence the question arises, in what sense such persons may be regarded as being in the covenant. Dr. Kuyper says that they are not essential participants of the covenant, though they are really in it; and Dr. Bavinck says that they are in *foedere* (in the covenant), but not *de foedere* (of the covenant). The following may be said regarding their position in the covenant:

a. They are in the covenant as far as their responsibility is concerned. Because they stand in the legal covenant relationship to God, they are in duty bound to repent and believe. If they do not turn to God and accept Christ by faith, when they come to years of discretion, they will be judged as breakers of the covenant. The special relationship in which they are placed to God, therefore, means added responsibility.

b. They are in the covenant in the sense that they may lay claim to the promises which God gave when He established His covenant with believers and their seed. Paul even says of his wicked kinsmen, “whose is the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises,” Rom. 9:4. As a rule God gathers the number of His elect out of those who stand in this covenant relationship.

c. They are in the covenant in the sense that they are subject to the ministrations of the covenant. They are constantly admonished and exhorted to live according to the requirements of the covenant. The Church treats them as covenant children, offers them the seals of the covenant, and exhorts them to a proper use of these. They are the guests who are first called to the supper, the children of the kingdom, to whom the Word must be preached first of all, Matt. 8:12; Luke 14:16-24; Acts 13:46.

d. They are in the covenant also as far as the common covenant blessings are concerned. Though they do not experience the regenerating influence of the Holy Spirit, yet they are subject to certain special operations and influences of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit strives with them in a special manner, convicts them of sin, enlightens them in a measure, and enriches them with the blessings of common grace, Gen. 6:3; Matt. 13:18-22; Heb. 6:4-6.

It should be noted that, while the covenant is an eternal and inviolable covenant, which God never nullifies, it is possible for those who are in the covenant to break it. If one who stands in the legal covenant relationship does not enter upon the covenant life, he is nevertheless regarded as a member of the covenant. His failure to meet the requirements of the covenant involves guilt and constitutes him a covenant breaker, Jer. 31:32; Ezek. 44:7. This explains how there may be, not merely a temporary, but a final breaking of the covenant, though there is no falling away of the saints.

V. The Different Dispensations of the Covenant

The one covenant of grace is administered differently across redemptive history, reaching its fullest expression in the New Testament.

A. The Proper Conception Of The Different Dispensations.

GLOSS Dispensation: a distinct historical administration of God's one covenant of grace.

The question arises, whether we ought to distinguish two or three, or with the modern Dispensationalists, seven or even more dispensations.

1. THE DISPENSATIONAL VIEW. According to Scofield “a dispensation is a period of time during which man is tested in respect of obedience to some specific revelation of the will of God.”[Scofield Bible, p. 5.] In further explanation of this he says on page 20 of his pamphlet on Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth: “Each of the dispensations may be regarded as a new test of the natural man, and each ends in judgment, — marking his failure.” Every dispensation has a character of its own, and is so distinct that it cannot be commingled with any of the others. Seven such dispensations are usually distinguished, namely, the dispensation of innocence, of conscience, of human government, of promise, of the law, of grace, and of the kingdom. In answer to the question, whether God is then so fickle-minded that He must change His will as regards man seven times, Frank E. Gaebelin replies: “It is not God who has vacillated. Though there are seven dispensations, they are all one in principle, being throughout based upon the single test of obedience. And had man been found able to keep the conditions laid down by the first dispensation, the other six would have been unnecessary. But man failed. Yet, instead of casting off His guilty creature, God was moved with compassion, and gave him a fresh trial under new conditions. Thus each dispensation ends with failure, and each dispensation shows forth God's mercy.”[Exploring the Bible, p. 95.] There are serious objections to this view. (a) The word “dispensation” (oikonomia), which is a Scriptural term (cf. Luke 16:2-4; I Cor. 9:17; Eph. 1:10; 3:2,9; Col. 1:25; I Tim. 1:4) is here used in an un-Scriptural sense. It denotes a stewardship, an arrangement, or an administration, but never a testing time or a time of probation. (b) The distinctions are clearly quite arbitrary. This is evident already from the fact that dispensationalists themselves sometimes speak of them as overlapping. The second dispensation is called the dispensation of conscience, but according to Paul conscience was still the monitor of the Gentiles in his day, Rom. 2:14,15. The third is known as the dispensation of human government, but the specific command in it which was disobeyed and therefore rendered man liable to judgment, was not the command to rule the world for God — of which there is no trace—, but the command to replenish the earth. The fourth is designated the dispensation of promise and is supposed to terminate with the giving of the law, but Paul says that the law did not disannul the promise, and that this was still in effect in his own day, Rom. 4:13-17; Gal. 3:15-29. The so-called dispensation of the law is replete with glorious promises, and the so-called dispensation of grace did not abrogate the the law as a rule of life. Grace offers escape from the law only as a condition of salvation — as it is in the covenant of works —, from the curse of the law, and from the law as an extraneous power. (c) According to the usual representation of this theory man is on probation right along. He failed in the first test and thus missed the reward of eternal life, but God was compassionate and in mercy gave him a new trial. Repeated failures led to repeated manifestations of the mercy of God in the introduction of new trials, which, however, kept man on probation all the time. This is not equivalent to saying that God in justice holds the natural man to the condition of the covenant of works — which is perfectly true — but that God in mercy and compassion

— and therefore seemingly to save — gives man one chance after another to meet the ever varying conditions, and thus to obtain eternal life by rendering obedience to God. This representation is contrary to Scripture, which does not represent fallen man as still on probation, but as an utter failure, totally unable to render obedience to God, and absolutely dependent on the grace of God for salvation. Bullinger, himself a dispensationalist, though of a somewhat different type, is right when he says: “Man was then (in the first dispensation) what is called ‘under probation.’ This marks off that Administration sharply and absolutely; for man is not now under probation. To suppose that he is so, is a popular fallacy which strikes at the root of the doctrines of grace. Man has been tried and tested, and has proved to be a ruin.”[How to Enjoy the Bible, p. 65.] (d) This theory is also divisive in tendency, dismembering the organism of Scripture with disastrous results. Those parts of Scripture that belong to any one of the dispensations are addressed to, and have normative significance for, the people of that dispensation, and for no one else. This means in the words of Charles C. Cook “that in the Old Testament there is not one sentence that applies to the Christian as a Rule of Faith and Practice — not a single command that is binding on him, as there is not a single promise there given him at first hand, except what is included in the broad flow of the Plan of Redemption as there taught in symbol and prophecy.”[God’s Book Speaking For Itself, p. 31.] This does not mean that we can derive no lessons from the Old Testament. The Bible is divided into two books, the Book of the Kingdom, comprising the Old Testament and part of the New, addressed to Israel; and the Book of the Church, consisting of the remainder of the New Testament, and addressed to us. Since the dispensations do not intermingle, it follows that in the dispensation of the law there is no revelation of the grace of God, and in the dispensation of grace there is no revelation of the law as binding on the New Testament people of God. If space permitted, it would not be difficult to prove that this is an entirely untenable position.

2. THE THEORY OF THREE DISPENSATIONS. Irenæus spoke of three covenants, the first characterized by the law written in the heart, the second, by the law as an external commandment given at Sinai, and the third, by the law restored to the heart through the operation of the Holy Spirit; and thus suggests the idea of three dispensations. Coccejus distinguished three dispensations of the covenant of grace, the first ante legem, the second sub lege, and the third post legem. He made a sharp distinction, therefore, between the administration of the covenant before and after Moses. Now it is undoubtedly true that there is considerable difference between the administration of the covenant before and after the giving of the law, but the similarity is greater than the difference, so that we are not justified in co-ordinating the work of Moses with that of Christ as a dividing-line in the administration of the covenant. The following points of difference may be noted:

a. In the manifestation of the gracious character of the covenant. In the patriarchal period the gracious character of the covenant stood out more prominently than in the later period. The promise was more in the foreground, Rom. 4:13; Gal. 3:18. Yet even this should not be stressed unduly, as if there were no legal burdens, both moral and ceremonial, before the time of Moses, and no gracious promises during the period of the law. The substance of the law was in force before Moses, and sacrifices were already required. And gracious promises are found in great abundance in the post-Mosaic writings. The only real point of difference is this: because the law constituted for Israel an explicit reminder of the demands of the covenant of works, there was a greater danger of mistaking the way of the law for the way of salvation. And the history of Israel teaches us that it did not escape the danger.

b. In the emphasis on the spiritual character of the blessings. The spiritual character of the blessings of the covenant stands out more clearly in the patriarchal period. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were mere sojourners in the land of promise, dwelling there as strangers and pilgrims. The temporal promise of the covenant was not yet fulfilled. Hence there was less danger of fixing the mind too exclusively on the material

blessings, as the Jews did later on. The early patriarchs had a clearer understanding of the symbolical significance of those temporal possessions, and looked for a heavenly city, Gal. 4:25,26; Heb. 11:9,10.

c. In the understanding of the universal destination of the covenant. The universal destination of the covenant was more clearly evident in the patriarchal period. Abraham was told that in his seed all the nations of the world would be blessed, Gen. 22:18; Rom. 4:13-77; Gal. 3:8. The Jews gradually lost sight of this important fact, and proceeded on the assumption that the blessings of the covenant were to be restricted to the Jewish nation. The later prophets, however, stressed the universality of the promises, and thus revived the consciousness of the world-wide significance of the covenant.

But while these differences existed, there were several important points in which the pre- and post-Mosaic periods agreed, and in which they together differed from the Christian dispensation. While their difference from each other is simply one of degree, their common difference from the New Testament dispensation is one of contrast. As over against the Christian dispensation, the two Old Testament periods agree:

a. In the representation of the Mediator as a seed that was still future. The whole Old Testament points forward to the coming Messiah. This forward look characterizes the protevangel, the promise given to the patriarchs, the whole Mosaic ritual, and the central messages of the prophets.

b. In prefiguring the coming Redeemer in ceremonies and types. It is perfectly true that these increased after the giving of the law, but they were present long before that time. Sacrifices were offered as early as the days of Cain and Abel, and also had a piacular character, pointing forward to the great sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Those who served as priests foreshadowed the coming of the great High Priest. In distinction from the Old Testament, the New is commemorative rather than prefigurative.

c. In prefiguring the vicissitudes of those who were destined to share in the spiritual realities of the covenant in the earthly career of those groups which stood in covenant relationship with God. The pilgrimage of the patriarchs in the Holy Land, the servitude in Egypt, the entrance into Canaan, all pointed forward to higher spiritual things. In the New Testament all these types reach their fulfilment and therefore cease.

On the basis of all that has been said it is preferable to follow the traditional lines by distinguishing just two dispensations or administrations, namely, that of the Old, and that of the New Testament; and to subdivide the former into several periods or stages in the revelation of the covenant of grace.

B. The Old Testament Dispensation.

GLOSS Old Testament administration: the earlier form of the covenant, using promises, sacrifices, law, and types to point to Christ.

1. THE FIRST REVELATION OF THE COVENANT. The first revelation of the covenant is found in the protevangel, Gen. 3:15. Some deny that this has any reference to the covenant; and it certainly does not refer to any formal establishment of a covenant. The revelation of such an establishment could only follow after the covenant idea had been developed in history. At the same time Gen. 3:15 certainly contains a revelation of the essence of the covenant. The following points should be noted:

a. By putting enmity between the serpent and the woman God establishes a relation, as He always does in making a covenant. The fall brought man in league with Satan, but God breaks that newly formed alliance

by turning man's friendship with Satan into enmity and re-establishing man in friendship with Himself; and this is the covenant idea. This rehabilitation of man included the promise of sanctifying grace, for it was only by such grace that man's friendship with Satan could be turned into enmity. God Himself had to reverse the condition by regenerating grace. In all probability He at once wrought the grace of the covenant in the hearts of our first parents. And when God by His saving power generates enmity to Satan in the heart of man, this implies that He chooses the side of man, that He becomes man's confederate in the struggle with Satan, and thus virtually establishes an offensive and defensive covenant.

b. This relationship between God and man on the one side and Satan on the other side, is not limited to the individuals, but extends to their seed. The covenant is organic in its operation and includes the generations. This is an essential element in the covenant idea. There will not only be a seed of man, but also a seed of the serpent, that is, of the devil, and there will be a prolonged struggle between the two, in which the seed of man will be victorious.

c. The struggle, then, will not be indecisive. Though the heel of the woman's seed will be bruised, the head of the serpent will be crushed. It can only bite the heel, and by doing this endangers its very head. There will be suffering on the part of the seed of the woman, but the deadly sting of the serpent will terminate in its own death. The death of Christ, who is in a preeminent sense the seed of the woman, will mean the defeat of Satan. The prophecy of redemption is still impersonal in the protevangel, but it is nevertheless a Messianic prophecy. In the last analysis the seed of the woman is Christ, who assumes human nature, and, being put to death on the cross, gains the decisive victory over Satan. It goes without saying that our first parents did not understand all this.

2. THE COVENANT WITH NOAH. The covenant with Noah is evidently of a very general nature: God promises that He will not again destroy all flesh by the waters of a flood, and that the regular succession of seed time and harvest, cold and heat, winter and summer, day and night will continue. The forces of nature are bridled, the powers of evil are put under greater restraint, and man is protected against the violence of both man and beast. It is a covenant conferring only natural blessings, and is therefore often called the covenant of nature or of common grace. There is no objection to this terminology, provided it does not convey the impression that this covenant is dissociated altogether from the covenant of grace. Though the two differ, they are also most intimately connected.

a. Points of difference. The following points of difference should be noted: (1) While the covenant of grace pertains primarily, though not exclusively, to spiritual blessings, the covenant of nature assures man only of earthly and temporal blessings. (2) While the covenant of grace in the broadest sense of the word includes only believers and their seed, and is fully realised only in the lives of the elect, the covenant with Noah was not only universal in its inception, but was destined to remain all-inclusive. Up to the days of the covenant transaction with Abraham there was no seal of the covenant of grace, but the covenant with Noah was confirmed by the token of the rainbow, a seal quite different from those that were later on connected with the covenant of grace.

b. Points of connection. Notwithstanding the differences just mentioned, there is a most intimate connection between the two covenants. (1) The covenant of nature also originated in the grace of God. In this covenant, just as in the covenant of grace, God bestows on man not only unmerited favors, but blessings that were forfeited by sin. By nature man has no claim whatsoever on the natural blessings promised in this covenant. (2) This covenant also rests on the covenant of grace. It was established more particularly with Noah and his seed, because there were clear evidences of the realization of the covenant of grace in this family, Gen. 6:9; 7:1; 9:9,26,27. (3) It is also a necessary appendage (Witsius: "aanhangel") of the covenant of

grace. The revelation of the covenant of grace in Gen. 3:16-19 already pointed to earthly and temporal blessings. These were absolutely necessary for the realization of the covenant of grace. In the covenant with Noah the general character of these blessings is clearly brought out, and their continuance is confirmed.

3. THE COVENANT WITH ABRAHAM. With Abraham we enter upon a new epoch in the Old Testament revelation of the covenant of grace. There are several points that deserve attention here:

a. Up to the time of Abraham there was no formal establishment of the covenant of grace. While Gen. 3:15 already contains the elements of this covenant, it does not record a formal transaction by which the covenant was established. It does not even speak explicitly of a covenant. The establishment of the covenant with Abraham marked the beginning of an institutional Church. In pre-Abrahamic times there was what may be called “the church in the house.” There were families in which the true religion found expression, and undoubtedly also gatherings of believers, but there was no definitely marked body of believers, separated from the world, that might be called the Church. There were “sons of God” and “sons of men,” but these were not yet separated by a visible line of demarcation. At the time of Abraham, however, circumcision was instituted as a sealing ordinance, a badge of membership, and a seal of the righteousness of faith.

b. In the transaction with Abraham the particularistic Old Testament administration of the covenant had its beginning, and it becomes perfectly evident that man is a party in the covenant and must respond to the promises of God by faith. The great central fact emphasized in Scripture, is that Abraham believed God and it was reckoned unto him for righteousness. God appears unto Abraham again and again, repeating His promises, in order to engender faith in his heart and to prompt its activity. The greatness of his faith was apparent in his believing against hope, in his trusting in the promise even when its fulfilment seemed to be a physical impossibility.

c. The spiritual blessings of the covenant of grace become far more apparent in the covenant with Abraham than they were before. The best Scriptural exposition of the Abrahamic covenant is contained in Rom. 3 and 4, and Gal. 3. In connection with the narrative found in Genesis these chapters teach that Abraham received in the covenant justification, including the forgiveness of sins and adoption into the very family of God, and also the gifts of the Spirit unto sanctification and eternal glory.

d. The covenant with Abraham already included a symbolical element. On the one hand it had reference to temporal blessings, such as the land of Canaan, a numerous offspring, protection against and victory over the enemies; and on the other, it referred to spiritual blessings. It should be borne in mind, however, that the former were not co-ordinate with, but subordinate to, the latter. These temporal blessings did not constitute an end in themselves, but served to symbolize and typify spiritual and heavenly things. The spiritual promises were not realised in the natural descendants of Abraham as such, but only in those who followed in the footsteps of Abraham.

e. In view of this establishment of the covenant of grace with Abraham, he is sometimes considered as the head of the covenant of grace. But the word “head” is rather ambiguous, and therefore liable to misunderstanding. Abraham cannot be called the representative head of the covenant of grace, just as Adam was of the covenant of works, for (1) the Abrahamic covenant did not include the believers that preceded him and who were yet in the covenant of grace, and (2) he could not accept the promises for us nor believe in our stead, thereby exempting us from these duties. If there is a representative head in the covenant of grace, it can only be Christ (cf. Bavinck, *Geref. Dogm.* III, pp. 239,241); but, strictly speaking, we can consider Him as the Head only on the assumption that the covenant of redemption and the covenant of grace are one. Abraham can be called the head of the covenant only in the sense that it was formally established with him,

and that he received the promise of its continuance in the line of his natural, but above all, of his spiritual, descendants. Paul speaks of him as “the father of all them that believe,” Rom. 4:11. It is clear that the word “father” can only be understood figuratively here, for believers do not owe their spiritual life to Abraham. Says Dr. Hodge in his Commentary of Romans (4:11): “The word father expresses community of character, and is often applied to the head or founder of any school or class of men, whose character is determined by the relation to the person so designated; as Gen. 4:20,21. . . . Believers are called the children of Abraham, because of this identity of religious nature or character, as he stands out in Scripture as the believer; and because it was with him that the covenant of grace, embracing all the children of God, whether Jews or Gentiles, was re-enacted; and because they are his heirs, inheriting the blessings promised to him.”

f. Finally, we must not lose sight of the fact that the stage of the Old Testament covenant revelation which is most normative for us in the New Testament dispensation, is not that of the Sinaitic covenant, but that of the covenant established with Abraham. The Sinaitic covenant is an interlude, covering a period in which the real character of the covenant of grace, that is, its free and gracious character, is somewhat eclipsed by all kinds of external ceremonies and forms which, in connection with the theocratic life of Israel, placed the demands of the law prominently in the foreground, cf. Gal. 3. In the covenant with Abraham, on the other hand, the promise and the faith that responds to the promise are made emphatic.

4. THE SINAITIC COVENANT. The covenant of Sinai was essentially the same as that established with Abraham, though the form differed somewhat. This is not always recognised, and is not recognised by present day dispensationalists. They insist on it that it was a different covenant, not only in form but in essence. Scofield speaks of it as a legal covenant, a “conditional Mosaic covenant of works,” [Ref. Bib., p. 95.] under which the point of testing was legal obedience as the condition of salvation. [Ibid, p. 1115.] If that covenant was a covenant of works, it certainly was not the covenant of grace. The reason why it is sometimes regarded as an entirely new covenant is that Paul repeatedly refers to the law and the promise as forming an antithesis, Rom. 4:13 ff.; Gal. 3:17. But it should be noted that the apostle does not contrast with the covenant of Abraham the Sinaitic covenant as a whole, but only the law as it functioned in this covenant, and this function only as it was misunderstood by the Jews. The only apparent exception to that rule is Gal. 4:21 ff., where two covenants are indeed compared. But these are not the Abrahamic and the Sinaitic covenants. The covenant that proceeds from Sinai and centres in the earthly Jerusalem, is placed over against the covenant that proceeds from heaven and centres in the Jerusalem that is above, that is, — the natural and the spiritual.

There are clear indications in Scripture that the covenant with Abraham was not supplanted by the Sinaitic covenant, but remained in force. Even at Horeb the Lord reminded the people of the covenant with Abraham, Deut. 1:8; and when the Lord threatened to destroy the people after they had made the golden calf, Moses based his plea for them on that covenant, Ex. 32:13. He also assured them repeatedly that, whenever they repented of their sins and returned unto Him, He would be mindful of His covenant with Abraham, Lev. 26:42; Deut. 4:31. The two covenants are clearly represented in their unity in Ps. 105:8-10: “He hath remembered His covenant forever, the word which He commanded to a thousand generations, the covenant which He made with Abraham, and His oath to Isaac, and confirmed the same unto Jacob for a statute, to Israel for an everlasting covenant.” This unity also follows from the argument of Paul in Gal. 3, where he stresses the fact that an unchangeable God does not arbitrarily alter the essential nature of a covenant once confirmed; and that the law was not intended to supplant but to serve the gracious ends of the promise, Gal. 3:15-22. If the Sinaitic covenant was indeed a covenant of works, in which legal obedience was the way of salvation, then it certainly was a curse for Israel, for it was imposed on a people that could not possibly obtain salvation by works. But this covenant is represented in Scripture as a blessing bestowed upon Israel

by a loving Father, Ex. 19:5; Lev. 26:44,45; Deut. 4:8; Ps. 148:20. But though the covenant with Abraham and the Sinaitic covenant were essentially the same, yet the covenant of Sinai had certain characteristic features.

a. At Sinai the covenant became a truly national covenant. The civil life of Israel was linked up with the covenant in such a way that the two could not be separated. In a large measure Church and State became one. To be in the Church was to be in the nation, and vice versa; and to leave the Church was to leave the nation. There was no spiritual excommunication; the ban meant cutting off by death.

b. The Sinaitic covenant included a service that contained a positive reminder of the strict demands of the covenant of works. The law was placed very much in the foreground, giving prominence once more to the earlier legal element. But the covenant of Sinai was not a renewal of the covenant of works; in it the law was made subservient to the covenant of grace. This is indicated already in the introduction to the ten commandments, Ex. 20:2; Deut. 5:6, and further in Rom. 3:20; Gal. 3:24. It is true that at Sinai a conditional element was added to the covenant, but it was not the salvation of the Israelite but his theocratic standing in the nation, and the enjoyment of external blessings that was made dependent on the keeping of the law, Deut. 28:1-14. The law served a twofold purpose in connection with the covenant of grace: (1) to increase the consciousness of sin, Rom. 3:20; 4:15; Gal. 3:19; and (2) to be a tutor unto Christ, Gal. 3:24.

c. The covenant with the nation of Israel included a detailed ceremonial and typical service. To some extent this was also present in the earlier period, but in the measure in which it was introduced at Sinai it was something new. A separate priesthood was instituted, and a continuous preaching of the gospel in symbols and types was introduced. These symbols and types appear under two different aspects: as the demands of God imposed on the people; and as a divine message of salvation to the people. The Jews lost sight of the latter aspect, and fixed their attention exclusively on the former. They regarded the covenant ever increasingly, but mistakenly, as a covenant of works, and saw in the symbols and types a mere appendage to this.

d. The law in the Sinaitic covenant also served Israel as a rule of life, so that the one law of God assumed three different aspects, designated as the moral, the civil, and the ceremonial or religious law. The civil law is simply the application of the principles of the moral law to the social and civic life of the people in all its ramifications. Even the social and civil relations in which the people stood to each other had to reflect the covenant relation in which they stood.

There have been several deviating opinions respecting the Sinaitic covenant which deserve attention.

a. Coccejus saw in the decalogue a summary expression of the covenant of grace, particularly applicable to Israel. When the people, after the establishment of this national covenant of grace, became unfaithful and made a golden calf, the legal covenant of the ceremonial service was instituted as a stricter and harsher dispensation of the covenant of grace. Thus the revelation of grace is found particularly in the decalogue, and that of servitude in the ceremonial law. Before the covenant of Sinai the fathers lived under the promise. There were sacrifices, but these were not obligatory.

b. Others regarded the law as the formula of a new covenant of works established with Israel. God did not really intend that Israel should merit life by keeping the law, since this had become utterly impossible. He simply wanted them to try their strength and to bring them to a consciousness of their own inability. When they left Egypt, they stood strong in the conviction that they could do all that the Lord commanded; but at Sinai they soon discovered that they could not. In view of their consciousness of guilt the Lord now reestablished the Abrahamic covenant of grace, to which also the ceremonial law belonged. This reverses the position of Coccejus. The element of grace is found in the ceremonial law. This is somewhat in line with the

view of present day dispensationalists, who regard the Sinaitic covenant as a “conditional Mosaic covenant of works” (Scofield), containing in the ceremonial law, however, some adumbrations of the coming redemption in Christ.

c. Still others are of the opinion that God established three covenants at Sinai, a national covenant, a covenant of nature or of works, and a covenant of grace. The first was made with all the Israelites, and was the continuation of the particularistic line which began with Abraham. In it God demands external obedience, and promises temporal blessings. The second was a repetition of the covenant of works by the giving of a decalogue. And the last a renewal of the covenant of grace, as it was established with Abraham, in the giving of the ceremonial law.

These views are all objectionable for more than one reason: (1) They are contrary to Scripture in their multiplication of the covenants. It is un-Scriptural to assume that more than one covenant was established at Sinai, though it was a covenant with various aspects. (2) They are mistaken in that they seek to impose undue limitations on the decalogue and on the ceremonial law. It is very evident that the ceremonial law has a double aspect; and it is clear also that the decalogue, though placing the demands of the law clearly in the foreground, is made subservient to the covenant of grace.

C. The New Testament Dispensation.

GLOSS New Testament administration: the fuller administration of the covenant after Christ’s coming and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

Little need be said respecting the New Testament dispensation of the covenant. The following points should be noted:

1. The covenant of grace, as it is revealed in the New Testament, is essentially the same as that which governed the relation of Old Testament believers to God. It is entirely unwarranted to represent the two as forming an essential contrast, as is done by present day dispensationalism. This is abundantly evident from Rom. 4 and Gal. 3. If it is sometimes spoken of as a new covenant, this is sufficiently explained by the fact that its administration differs in several particulars from that of the Old Testament. The following points will indicate what is meant.

2. The New Testament dispensation differs from that of the Old in that it is universal, that is, extends to all nations. The covenant of grace was originally universal; its particularism began with Abraham, and was continued and intensified in the Sinaitic covenant. This particularism, however, was not intended to be permanent, but to disappear after it had served its purpose. Even during the period of the law it was possible for Gentiles to join the people of Israel and thus to share in the blessings of the covenant. And when Christ brought His sacrifice, the blessing of Abraham flowed out to the nations; — those that were afar off were brought nigh.

3. The New Testament dispensation places greater emphasis on the gracious character of the covenant. The promise is very much in the foreground. In fact, it is clearly brought out that in the covenant of grace God freely gives what He demands. In this respect the new dispensation connects up with the Abrahamic rather than with the Sinaitic covenant, as Paul clearly brings out in Rom. 4 and Gal. 3. This does not mean, however, that there were no gracious promises during the period of the law. When Paul in II Cor. 3 contrasts the ministry of the law with that of the gospel, he has in mind particularly the ministry of the law as it was understood by the later Jews, who turned the Sinaitic covenant into a covenant of works.

4. Finally, the New Testament dispensation brings richer blessings than the Old Testament dispensation. The revelation of God's grace reached its climax, when the Word became flesh and dwelt among men "full of grace and truth." The Holy Spirit is poured out upon the Church, and out of the fulness of the grace of God in Christ enriches believers with spiritual and eternal blessings. The present dispensation of the covenant of grace will continue until the return of Christ, when the covenant relation will be realised in the fullest sense of the word in a life of intimate communion with God.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY. How did the introduction of the doctrine of the covenant affect the presentation of the truth in Reformed theology? Why did this doctrine meet with little favour outside of Reformed circles? Who were the first to introduce this doctrine? What characterized the federal theology of Coccejus? Why did some insist on treating the covenant of redemption and the covenant of grace as a single covenant? Why do others prefer to treat them separately? What can be said in answer to the flippant rejection of the covenant idea as a legal fiction? How can Christ be both party and surety in the same covenant? What can be said against the idea of Blake that the covenant of grace is a purely external relationship? What objections are there to the idea of two covenants, the one external, and the other internal? Why does Kuyper maintain that Christ, and Christ only, is the second party in the covenant of grace? In what sense does he regard the covenant of grace as an eternal covenant? What must we think of the tendency of modern Premillennialism, to multiply the covenants and the dispensations? How did modern dispensationalism originate? How does it conceive of the relation between the Old and the New Testament?