

## THE COVENANT OF GRACE – TWO VIEWS

by Louis Berkhof

[*Manual of Christian Doctrine*, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1933, p.157-159]

Nota: Louis Berkhof gee hier 'n kort opsomming van die (breedweg gesien) twee verskillende sienings oor die genadeverbond binne die gereformeerde tradisie. Die twee lyne wat hy noem (met allerhande variasies daarbinne en oor en weer), is deur die geskiedenis onder andere genoem:

- die *onvoorwaardelike* teenoor die *voorwaardelike* verbondsbeskouing, en
- die *eensydige* teenoor die *tweesydige* verbondsbeskouing.

Op grond van Berkhof se uiteensetting hieronder, sal ek dit noem: die *vriendskapsverbond* teenoor die *kontrakverbond*.

Volgens Berkhof is die *vriendskapsverbond* “the covenant as an end in itself, a covenant of mutual friendship or communion of life” en die *kontrakverbond* “the covenant as a means to an end, a purely legal relationship indicative of the spiritual end that should be realized.”

Twintigste-eeuse verteenwoordigers van hierdie twee lyne, na my eie mening, is:

- a. Vriendskapsverbond: Kuyper, Bavinck, Hoeksema.
- b. Kontrakverbond: Schilder, W. Heyns, S. Greijdanus.

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On the basis of the covenant of redemption God established the covenant of grace, a covenant of friendship with man, which represents the way in which the blessings of redemption are mediated to the sinner. Under the present heading several particulars call for consideration.

### **The Contracting Parties in the Covenant of Grace**

God is the first party in the covenant of grace, the party that takes the initiative and graciously determines the relation in which the second party will stand to Him. He appears in the covenant as a gracious and forgiving Father, willing to pardon sin and to restore sinners to His blessed communion.

It is not so easy to determine precisely who the second party is, though in general it may be said that God established the covenant with fallen man. Though there was no historical limitation at first, it became evident in the days of Abraham that it was not intended to include all men.

For that reason it does not satisfy to say that God made the covenant with the sinner. There must be some limitation, and therefore some hold that God made the covenant with Abraham and his seed, that is, his natural but especially his spiritual descendants; or, slightly different, with believers and their seed. **The majority maintain, however, that He entered into covenant relationship with the elect or the elect sinner.**<sup>1</sup> To be perfectly clear in the matter, it is of great importance to make a very necessary distinction:

### **1. THE COVENANT AS AN END IN ITSELF, A COVENANT OF MUTUAL FRIENDSHIP OR COMMUNION OF LIFE**

The covenant of grace may be contemplated as an end which God had in view in the covenant of redemption, as an ultimate spiritual reality which He brings to realization in the course of history through the ministry of the Word and the powerful operation of the Holy Spirit, and which will be perfected at the time of the consummation of all things.

From this point of view it is a relation sought and established, namely, a relation of friendship between God and man, a communion of life in which man is made to share in the divine life, the life of the resurrection. It represents a condition in which privileges are improved for spiritual ends, the promises of

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<sup>1</sup> Alle beklemtonings in die teks is bygevoeg – SLC.

God are embraced by a living faith, and the promised blessings are brought to full fruition. If the covenant is regarded from this point of view, there would seem to be only one possible position with respect to the second party in the covenant, and that is that **God established His covenant of grace with the elect**. It is then that gracious agreement between God and the elect sinner, in which God gives Himself with all the blessings of salvation to the elect sinner, and the latter embraces God and all His gracious gifts by faith.

In view of the fact that in Abraham the central blessing of the covenant was realized, he is called "the friend of God," Jas.2:23. Jesus calls His disciples friends, because they share the covenant blessing of the new life and live in obedience to His commandments, John 15:14,15. Several passages of Scripture speak of God's covenant mercies as realized in those that fear Him, Deut.7:9; II Chron.6:14; Ps.103:17,18. The way in which this is done in the new dispensation is indicated in Jer.31:31-34 ; Heb.10:8-12. The final realization of the covenant is described in Rev.21:3, "And I heard a great voice out of the throne saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He shall dwell with them, and they shall be His peoples, and God Himself shall be with them, and be their God."

## **2. THE COVENANT AS A MEANS TO AN END, A PURELY LEGAL RELATIONSHIP INDICATIVE OF THE SPIRITUAL END THAT SHOULD BE REALIZED**

It is quite evident that the Bible also speaks of the covenant in a broader sense, as including many who do not share in the life of the covenant, and even some in whom the covenant promises are never realized. Ishmael and Esau were in the covenant; so were the wicked sons of Eli. The rebellious Israelites, who died in their sins, were covenant people, and even the Scribes and Pharisees, so strongly denounced by Jesus, shared in the privileges of the covenant. The covenant may be regarded **as a purely legal agreement**, in which God guarantees the blessings of salvation to all those who believe.

This agreement may exist as a purely objective arrangement even where nothing is done to realize its purpose. The relation which it represents may exist independently of the attitude assumed by man to his covenant obligations. That is, a man may not meet the covenant requirements, may not believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and yet stand in covenant relationship to God. If we conceive of the covenant in this broader sense, as a purely legal relationship, as a means by which God realizes the blessings of salvation in the lives of those who meet the covenant requirements, - **then we shall have to say that God established the covenant with believers and their children.**<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Berkhof moes ter van onderskeid tussen hierdie twee standpunte van die verbond, die woorde “ ‘all’ (head-for-head)” hier ingevoeg het., want eersgenoemde standpunt hierbo glo ook die verbond is met ‘believers and their children’, maar dan word dit organies-verbondsmatig verstaan, nl. al die uitverkorenes ongeag of hul ‘volwassenes’ is of ‘kinders’ deur die geslagte (sien HK v/a 74; NGB artikel 34; DL I.17).