

## THE COVENANT OF GRACE WITH CHRIST AND HIS ELECT<sup>1</sup>

by Herman Bavinck<sup>2</sup>

*And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee. - Genesis 17:7.*

### THE COVENANT OF GRACE IS ALL DEPENDENT ON GOD ALONE AND NOTHING OF MAN

The covenant of grace lies immovably firm and fast in God's eternal mercies. In the first covenant which was established prior to the fall, God came to man demanding and requiring obedience, and promised him eternal life and heavenly salvation only after perfect fulfillment of the law. This first covenant therefore reckoned with the will and with the work of man, it rested for a part in his hand and hence was uncertain and breakable.

But the covenant of grace, which was announced for the first time in the maternal promise, has its basis and security **only** in the divine counsel of grace. Although the word covenant does not appear in this promise, still the matter represented by this word is fully contained in it. For, before man through transgression has made a covenant of friendship with Satan, God intervenes, puts enmity in the room of the effected friendship and in the seed of the woman once more brings man over to his side. The covenant of grace therefore has proceeded **entirely** from God, He himself brings it about; therefore it does not rest in man **nor is it in any way dependent upon his will and work**. It is eternal, unchangeable, immovable, even as God himself. *For the mountains shall depart and the hills be removed, but my kindness shall not depart from thee, neither shall the covenant of my peace be removed, saith the Lord that hath mercy on thee.*<sup>3</sup>

In this covenant, **God is the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End, the Alpha and the Omega**. In the most beautiful way it maintains the absolute sovereignty of God in the **whole** work of salvation. For from the very beginning to the very end **nothing of man is added or introduced**. Redemption is specifically a divine work, the work of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. All boasting is excluded, the honor and glory is entirely and only due unto God, who is not only the Creator but also the Recreator of all things.

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<sup>1</sup> Bron: H. Bavinck, The Sacrifice of Praise - Meditations before and after receiving access to the Table of the Lord, hier beskikbaar: <https://www.monergism.com/sacrifice-praise-ebook>. Die opskrifte is bygevoeg, asook die beklemtonings en voetnotas deur S. Le Cornu.

<sup>2</sup> <https://hermanbavinck.org/biography/>

<sup>3</sup> Jes. 54:10.

On this account is it a covenant of grace, of pure grace. In the divine virtue of grace this covenant has its origin; in the gifts of grace it finds its contents; and in the glorification of grace lies its end and purpose. It is God, who has established this well ordered and **eternal** covenant; who has accepted into it man, separated from Him through sin; who makes man a participant of **all the profits and benefits of this covenant**; who makes man to walk in the ways of this covenant and through this covenant leads him to the heavenly glory.

The stability of this covenant is the reason why in Holy Writ it is not a few times revealed unto us as a will or testament. **It is not a mutual contract**; it is not like unto an agreement between two persons brought about by them upon mutual consent, after much weighing and consideration. But the covenant of grace is an institution, **a gracious disposition of God, a gift in Christ**. As the Father hath appointed the Kingdom unto me, even so I appoint it unto you. As by will or testament, in the way of a last free disposition, in the form of an inheritance the divine blessings of this covenant come unto us, **without our will**. It is the most precious gift, the most perfect gift which comes to us from above, descending from the Father of Lights, with whom there is neither variableness nor shadow of turning.

And behold now, what and what kind of blessings form the contents of this free and eternal covenant. Together they form a fullness of spiritual and material, of heavenly and earthly, of eternal and temporal blessings. In that covenant there is opened and unlocked for man a fullness of salvation; a fountain of blessedness; a spring of life. The one grace makes room for another and that one is again in turn relieved and substituted by another. Indeed, out of the fullness of Christ we receive grace for grace.

## **THE SPIRITUAL BLESSINGS OF THE COVENANT IN CHRIST ALONE**

Spiritual profits and benefits are the first things of which man becomes a recipient in this covenant. For before and above all things Christ came upon earth to seek and to save that which was lost. He did not appear as a reformer of society, as a political leader of the people, as an artist or philosopher. But a Savior; that was His name and also His office. For that, the Father had anointed Him with His Spirit, to preach good tidings unto the meek; to bind up the broken hearted; to proclaim liberty to the captives and the opening of the prison to them that are bound, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.

Spiritual blessings, therefore, above all, are granted unto the church by the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ in heaven. **In communion with Christ, forgiveness of sins and regeneration, faith and conversion, sanctification and perseverance become the part and portion of believers**. Both their consciousness and their being, their state and attitude are renewed by the Spirit of Christ. They have become different people through the spirit that dwelleth in them; they are not from below but from above; they have been born of God, accepted by Him as children and are destined for the heavenly inheritance. For them, old things have passed away, behold, all things have become new.

But these spiritual and eternal blessings are also accompanied by those which are earthly and temporal. Heaven and earth, spirit and matter, soul and body are certainly too closely allied than that an absolute separation could be possible. In the glorious picture of the future revealed by the prophecies of the Old Testament we do not only see that Israel shall be a holy nation, that the Lord has betrothed Himself in eternity, and that He shall cleanse from all uncleanness and grant a new heart, but we also see in that picture, that under the Prince of Peace out of the House of David, Israel shall live in peace and enjoy a prosperity beyond recollection, and an extraordinary fruitfulness of the soil.

And thus also the New Testament unites the corporal blessings with the spiritual. ***Certainly the emphasis falls upon the latter.*** First, the Kingdom of God with His righteousness must be sought, and that Kingdom, already here upon earth, becomes the part and portion of those who believe the gospel of Christ and turn unto God with a true and contrite heart. For that Kingdom is, in the first place, established within the heart and consists not in food and drink but in righteousness, and joy, and peace through the Holy Spirit. But he who has sought and found that Kingdom as a pearl of great price, receives thereafter also all other things. Such need no longer take thought of the morrow, as the Gentiles do, and anxiously ask: What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? for his heavenly Father knoweth that he hath need of all these things. He who spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for the guilty, **shall also with Him grant us all things.**<sup>4</sup> The hairs of our head are all told. Our bread is certain and our water sure. To be sure, he who would follow Jesus must forsake all. But even now, in this life, he again receives fathers and mothers, brethren and sisters, friends and fields, and in the coming day even life forevermore. Godliness with contentment is therefore a great gain; it is useful unto all things, having the promise of both this and the future life.

***All these gifts, profits and benefits of the covenant of grace are united in the one great promise, that God will be our God and the God of our seed.***<sup>5</sup> The proclamation of salvation begins with this promise when God, after the fall of man, again seeks him, breaks the contracted friendship with Satan setting enmity in its place, and again receives man into His communion and fellowship. This promise stands at the head of the covenant which was established with Abraham, shines above the law given unto Israel, and forms the chief contents of the dispensation of the covenant of grace in the days of the Old Testament. In that promise the pious find, even in the midst of need and want, distress and misery, their salvation and comfort; besides God they have no one in heaven and none upon earth that they desire but Him. He is the strength of their heart and their portion forever. When Israel forsakes Him, then this remains their comfort, that God nevertheless remains their God, again gathers them out of the dispersion and at the end of days establishes with them a new covenant wherein they shall be unto Him a people and He unto them a God.

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<sup>4</sup> Rom. 8:32.

<sup>5</sup> Gen. 17:7; Hand. 2:39.

And this promise passes on into the New Testament. ***It is fulfilled in Christ***, who, in the most fearful trials, in the severest temptations, in the struggle of Gethsemane and in the suffering on the cross, remained standing because God was His God and He God's own well beloved Son. ***It is being fulfilled in the church***, which has come in the room of Israel, and glorying in the Immanuel, God with us, is accepted as His people. And it shall be fully realized, when the New Jerusalem shall descend from God out of Heaven, when His tabernacle shall be with men, and He dwell with them as His people.

What gift is and can be greater than that of God Himself?<sup>6</sup> What can He give more than Himself; Himself with all His virtues and perfections, with His grace and wisdom, with His right and power, with His unchangeableness and faith? For, where God is for us, who dare, who can, who shall be against us? What then can come unto, what then can hinder us? He is and He remains ours, in necessity and death, in living and dying, for time and eternity. He is a God, not of the dead but of the living. Blessed is the people whose God is the Lord! Moreover this promise becomes still richer when we remember, that God binds Himself therein, not only that He will be our God ***but also the God of our seed***.

Great would it be already; if God had granted His communion and fellowship unto a few people standing in no relation whatsoever to each other; if God working arbitrarily and reckoning not with generations, had made ***His elect*** loose from all historical connection with flesh and with blood. But the Lord does not work arbitrarily and in this way. He establishes His covenant ***organically*** with man, in Christ as Head, first with Adam and then with Abraham, who is a father of all believers. With His grace God follows the line of generations. In the recreation He follows and joins Himself to the creation.

## **GOD EXECUTES THE ELECTION IN THE WAY OF THE COVENANT, UNCONDITIONALLY**

He executes the election in the way of the covenant. As Father of all mercies He walks in the path which, as the Father of all things He hath assigned. Therefore the covenant of grace is also eternal in this sense, that in history it proceeds from generation to generation and is never interrupted. Grace is a stream, which, taking a beginning after the fall, in the history of mankind prepares for itself a bed and only finds its mouth in eternity. As covenant it may run through different dispensations and appear in several forms, but nevertheless, through the almighty power of God it has become an inextinguishable part of the world and an indestructible good for mankind.

Just because it is a covenant it bears this incorruptible character. As we know, in all covenants there are two parts. ***First***, God therein gives Himself unto us; but then we are thereby also admonished of God and obliged unto a new obedience, namely, that

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<sup>6</sup> Sien <https://proregno.com/2021/02/17/die-wese-van-beide-die-ouer-verbond-ot-en-die-nuwer-verbond-in-christus-nt-god-homself/>

we cleave to this one God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, that we trust in Him, and love Him with all our hearts, with all our souls, with all our minds, and with all our strength; that we forsake the world, crucify our old nature and walk in a new and holy life. When God gives Himself unto us, then He wills, that we thereafter shall also give ourselves unto Him, ourselves entirely, undivided, **unconditionally**, ourselves with our souls and our bodies, with our strength and talents, with our money and possessions, with our children and grandchildren. Also and above all with our children, who are legacies of the Lord, and the choicest of His earthly blessings. They must be God's, because we are His.

But nevertheless, when God in that covenant also with our children requires and demands us for His service, then He remains the First, who, and unto us and unto our children glorifies the richness of His grace. He is the First, when He calls Adam and Noah, Abraham and Israel unto His communion and fellowship but He also remains this, when with them He also accepts their children into His covenant. I will be a God unto thee and unto thy seed after thee. **Thus is the promise with which God binds Himself unto the elect in their generations.** And before our children were born, before they had done either good or evil; He it is, that said in His free almighty power: *I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.*<sup>7</sup>

Our children do not come into that covenant **because** we give, **because** we consecrate them unto the Lord. Much less do they come into it, **because** they have or possess any merit or virtue of their own, making them worthy of acceptance. **But they are in that covenant by virtue of the promise of God, they are born in it and are therefore in it from the very first beginning of their existence, not of nature, but of grace, because God hath bound Himself to be the God of believers and of their seed.**

In the spiritual world, governs the same law as in the natural. We are all participants of a natural life, which we have received through our parents from God, the Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth. That we possess that life is not a matter of fact. We have not given it unto ourselves, we have not merited it, we have by our guilt even forfeited it; it is in an absolute sense a gift, to be sure, not of God's particular but of God's general grace. We become recipients of it by conception and birth, in which **we are entirely passive.** Without out our consciousness and will we are placed in a world, which is filled with rich gifts, and we go in unto the mighty inheritance of our ancestors and forefathers; we stand upon their shoulders and enjoy of that which they wrought and brought together in the sweat of their brow.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Rom. 9:15.

<sup>8</sup> Daarom dat ons in die Formulier vir die Bediening van die Kinders (FBK) in navolging van die Skrif, leer en bely: "En hoewel ons kinders hierdie dinge nie verstaan nie, mag hulle nogtans nie daarom van die doop uitgesluit word nie, aangesien hulle **sonder dat hulle dit weet**, aan die verdoemenis in Adam deel het en ook, **sonder dat hulle dit weet** weer in Christus tot genade aangeneem word." En dan is die FBK se Skrifbegroning die genadeverbond in die hele Skrif, Gen. 17:7 en Hand. 2:39.

## FAITH AND CONVERSION ARE BENEFITS NOT CONDITIONS OF THE COVENANT

All this is true of, and in a still **stronger** way applicable unto, the spiritual gifts of the covenant. For instance it is not true, that we first for awhile wander about outside of and without the covenant and **thereafter** by faith and conversion as by deeds of our own free will come into that covenant, may indeed, **faith and conversion are not conditions without and unto the covenant of grace, but they are profits and benefits in that covenant**, revealing participation in and communion and fellowship with Christ and opening the access unto the enjoyment of His merits.

All these gifts, viz., of forgiveness and renewing, holiness and glory **come unto us through the Mediator, who hath earned and merited them with the price of His blood**. They can only be our part and portion then, when we are participants of Christ's person. The mystical union with Christ **precedes** all merits and benefits and **reveals** itself first in faith and conversion. Even as natural life is granted unto us in birth and thereafter reveals itself in deeds of mind and will, even so spiritual life becomes our possession through regeneration or the new birth, **thereafter** to bear fruits of faith and conversion.

And again, it is only possible to be a participant in Christ then, when the Father grants or gives us that Christ. The offering and the gift of Christ **precedes all His benefits and profits**. It is God, who grants us Christ, yea who gives Himself unto us in Christ and who in communion and fellowship with Him makes us recipients of all the successive gifts of the covenant, yea, of complete salvation.

## BAPTISM IS A SIGN AN SEAL OF THE 'ASSEMBLY OF THE ELECT' IN CHRIST

And now of this unspeakable gift of God's grace, **baptism is a sign and seal**. For everyone, who is **in truth** baptized,<sup>9</sup> is as **surely** washed with Christ's blood and spirit of the uncleanness of the soul, that is from all his sins, as he is externally washed with water which is used to remove the uncleanness of the body. Baptism is, is it not, a baptism in the name of the Triune God?

For when we are baptized in the name of the Father, God the Father witnesseth and sealeth unto us, that he doth make **an eternal covenant of grace with us**, and adopts us as His children and heirs, and therefore will provide us with **every** good thing, and avert all evil, or turn it to our profit. And when we are

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<sup>9</sup> "Die bedienaars gee ons van hulle kant dus met die sakrament wat sigbaar is, **maar die Here gee wat met die sakramente aangedui word**, naamlik die onsigbare genadegawes: Hy was ons siel, suiwer en reinig dit van alle vuilheid en ongeregtigheid; Hy maak ons hart nuut en vul dit met alle vertroosting; Hy gee ons egter sekerheid van sy Vaderlike goedheid; Hy beklee ons met die nuwe mens en ontklee ons van die ou mens en al sy werke." (NGB artikel 34, die heilige doop); "Verder, hoewel die sakramente én die sake waarvan hulle tekens is, bymekaar hoort, word nie beide deur alle mense ontvang nie. Die goddelose ontvang wel die sakrament tot sy verdoemenis, **maar hy ontvang nie die waarheid van die sakrament nie**. So het Judas en Simon die towenaar albei wel die sakrament ontvang maar nie Christus, wat daardeur voorgestel word nie; **Hy word slegs aan die gelowiges gegee**." (NGB artikel 35, die heilige nagmaal)

baptized in the name of the Son, the Son sealeth unto us, **that He doth wash us in His blood from all our sins**, incorporating us into the fellowship of His death and resurrection, so that we are freed from all our sins and accounted righteous before God. In like manner, when we are baptized in the name of the Holy Ghost, the Holy Ghost assures us, by this Holy Sacrament, that He will dwell in us, and sanctify us to be members of Christ, **applying unto us that which we have in Christ**, namely, the washing away of our sins, and the daily renewing of our lives, till we shall finally be presented without spot or wrinkle among **the assembly of the elect** in life eternal.<sup>10</sup>

Baptism is therefore unto us a sign, a witness, that God, **unto all eternity, will be our God**, being unto us a gracious and merciful Father. For He hath commanded us to baptize all of those, who are His, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. In baptism God gives us the visible sign and seal that **in Christ** He hath given Himself unto us and hath accepted and adopted us as His children. And that acceptance, that adoption is **the basis or foundation** of our confession. ...

## **ELECTION AND COVENANT CONSIST AND INCLUDE THE SAME PERSONS**

*Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God.* (Matt. 4:4).

In **the way** of the covenant of grace God trains or brings up all His children unto liberty and independence. While election only includes who shall infallibly inherit eternal salvation, the covenant of grace describes **the way in which these elect are and shall be led to this, their destiny**. Election and covenant are therefore not distinguished as a narrower and a wider circle, **for they both consist of and include the same persons**; but while in election they are considered by themselves, in the covenant they are always considered as standing in relation to the whole human race.

Although the covenant of grace, thus, in the most beautiful way maintains the absolute sovereignty of God in the whole work of salvation and prohibits **anything** of man being added to or introduced into it, it nevertheless also, at the same time, **does full justice** to man's rational and moral nature and to the fact that he was created in the image of God. When God obtains His right, man also receives the place and the honor which belongs to him according to the will of God. God chooses those who are His in Christ, **that** they should be holy and blameless before Him in love.<sup>11</sup> To be sure, Christ appears in the covenant of grace as **head** of the church, but He does not efface His believers neither does he force them from their place. From the beginning to the end Christ is **surety** for them, but, in such a way that they themselves, also taught and

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<sup>10</sup> Sien die FBK en HK vraag en antwoord 1.

<sup>11</sup> Ef. 1:4

enabled by His spirit, consciously and willingly begin to live and walk in the covenant.<sup>12</sup>

## **ELECTION AND THE COVENANT ARE THE FOUNTAIN OF AND PRODUCE FAITH AND A NEW OBEDIENCE**

True, *the covenant of grace is established with Christ* but through and over Him it propagates itself unto all those who are His and adopts them wholly and entirely, with body and soul, with mind and will and all strength. Because God works in them both to will and to do His good pleasure, He urges and compels them to work out their own salvation with fear and trembling. By the grace of God they are what they are; and are enabled to do all things through Christ who strengtheneth them. Because Christ lives in them, *they themselves live by the faith of the Son of God*. Now, therefore, because the children of believers are accepted into this covenant of grace even before their consciousness and will, therefore we say, the calling particularly and specifically comes to the parents that they shall help and cause them to be instructed in the aforesaid doctrine and shall bring and have them brought up in the fear and admonition of the Lord. Because in all covenants there are two parts, therefore the covenant of grace *also admonishes and obliges us into a new obedience*. When God says unto us: *I am your God*; He also immediately adds to it: *Walk before my countenance and be ye upright*.<sup>13</sup> Giving Himself unto us, He also wills that we shall give ourselves unto Him with all we are and with all we have.

Children, however, are not able immediately to confess for themselves and to walk in that confession. The parents are responsible for them. They are they who appear as witnesses at the baptism of their children and as sureties answer for their Christian training. Upon the basis or foundation of the acceptance or adoption from God's side the parents are obliged to bring and lead their children to the full conscious, free and willing confession of faith ....

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<sup>12</sup> "Dit is die wedergeboorte, die nuwe skepping, die opwekking uit die dood en die lewendmaking waarvan die Skrif so heerlik spreek wat God sonder ons in ons werk. Dit alles word glad nie deur die uiterlike prediking alleen, deur morele oorreding of op enige ander wyse in ons gewerk nie, sodat, na die voltooiing van God se werk, dit dan in die mens se mag sou lê om weergebore te word of nie, om bekeer te word of nie. Dit is 'n volkome bonatuurlike, baie kragtige en tegelyk baie aangename, wonderlike, verborge en onbeskryflike daad van God. Volgens die getuienis van die Skrif wat deur Hom, die Outeur van hierdie werkinge, geïnspireer is, is dit in sy krag nie minder of geringer as die skepping of die opwekking van die dooies nie. **Die gevolg** is dat almal in wie se harte God op hierdie wonderlike wyse werk, sekerlik, onfeilbaar en kragdadig weergebore word en daadwerklik glo. Dan word die wil, wat nou vernuwe is, nie alleen deur God gedryf en beweeg nie, maar omdat dit deur God beweeg word, **werk dit ook self**. Daarom word ook tereg gesê dat die mens, deur die genade wat hy ontvang het, **glo en hom bekeer**."

<sup>13</sup> Gen. 17:1,7,10.