

CASPER OLEVIANUS¹ ON COVENANT AND INFANT BAPTISM

by Geerhardus Vos²

Both Olevianus and Ursinus, the well-known Heidelberg theologians, stood in the closest connection to the Zürich theologians. Olevianus had spent time in Zürich, and Ursinus had even been there twice. It is, therefore, obvious that the influence which the covenant concept had on them is to be attributed to this connection. Ursinus applied it in his Larger Catechism. We have two works by Olevianus in which the covenant is dealt with, namely, the Interpretation of the Apostolic Symbol and ***The Substance of the Covenant of Grace between God and the Elect***, which saw the light of day in 1576 and 1585, respectively. ...

In Olevianus the concept of eternal sponsorship on the part of the Son has already been brought to full and clear expression. In *De Substantia Foederis*, page 23, he writes:

“The Son of God, having been appointed by God as Mediator of the covenant, becomes the **guarantor** on two counts: 1) He shall satisfy for the sins of all those whom the Father has given him, 2) He shall also bring it to pass that they, being planted in him, shall enjoy freedom in their consciences and from day to day be renewed in the image of God.”

One should take note that the guaranty of the Son is not merely presented as the prerequisite of the covenant, ***but as the root of the application and operation of the covenant***. With Olevianus this is not an abstract idea, but it dominates his entire presentation. The promise and oath-swearing, by which God gave Himself to us as our God, and the adoption as children of God and heirs of eternal life, ***were made to Christ, who is the Seed of Abraham, and to all those who are implanted into this Seed*** (*De Subst.*, p. 2). As a result of His guaranty, the Mediator forms an ideal unity ***with the elect*** and, when He became flesh and suffered, this suffering could count as a ransom for His body. The resurrection of the Lord is a ***real acquittal*** (*actualis absolutio*) of all those who belong to Him.

One should compare the various quotations in Heppe's *Dogmatik des deutschen Protestantismus*, II, pages 215-20. Heppe draws the following conclusion from his overview:

“From this it appears that the doctrine of redemption in **Olevianus** has its actual center of gravity in the doctrine of the pactum and consilium salutis (treaty and counsel of salvation) between Father and Son, and in the doctrine which rests upon it, namely, ***the planting of the elect in Christ***, or in the mystical body of Christ. . . . This relationship is one already established in eternity, and of such a nature that from eternity the Father looks upon the Son in no other way than as the Word to be made flesh, ***and then in union with the elect, believers***, who form his mystical body” (pp. 218f.).

¹ <http://www.prca.org/books/portraits/ursinus.htm>

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geerhardus_Vos

This train of thought probably also accounts for the **distinction** which Olevianus makes between the substance and the testimonies of the covenant of grace. The substance, the essence of the covenant, lies in the work of the Mediator, whereas the testimonies are brought to us when the Mediator enters into a living union with us through the word and the Spirit. ...

From this rapid overview it is apparent that the dogma of the covenant of redemption is something other than a reworking of the doctrine of election. It owes its existence not to a tendency to draw the covenant back and take it up in the decree, but to concentrate it in the Mediator and to demonstrate **the unity between the accomplishment and application of salvation in Him**, on the one side, and the various stages of the covenant, on the other.

From this it follows that much less emphasis than one generally attributes to the theologians is placed on its transcendent eternity and that, despite the fact that it is called eternal, this eternity still has a different character than that of the decrees. It is eternal insofar as it falls within the Trinity, within the divine being that exists in eternity, but not eternal in the sense that it was elevated above the reality of history.

“Just as man had committed a double evil,” says **Olevianus**, “so the Son of God, having been made Mediator of the covenant by God, becomes **the guarantor** on two counts: 1) that he shall satisfy, etc.” And Francis Roberts gives this definition: “The covenant of faith is God’s gracious compact or agreement **with Jesus Christ, the last Adam, and in him with all his seed**, after the fall, concerning their recovery out of the state of sin and death into a state of righteousness and eternal life, by Christ; that in him the Lord may be their God, and they His people; that they should accept Christ and these covenanted mercies by true faith and walk worthy of them according to the Gospel” (p. 69). ...

Bullinger says (*Decades*, III, 6): “In Genesis we are taught expressly who the parties in the covenant are, viz., the living, eternal, almighty God . . . and Abraham with all his seed, **that is with all believers**. . . . For the apostle Paul explains the seed of Abraham in this way, particularly in his epistle to the Galatians, where he writes, ‘If you are of Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed and heirs according to the promise.’ ”³

Olevianus extensively argues that the sealing of the covenant is not general, but always starts from the presupposition of the presence of faith.

"Therefore one has in the preaching of the Word an offer of the promise of grace and a summons to embrace it; **both are directed in this way to the elect as well as to the reprobate. But only in the elect does God work what He commands**. In order that out of that entire multitude a church might appear, united by God Himself in Christ, God begins that solemn negotiation, as in a marriage compact, not with a sealing of grace offered, in general (for many reject it openly so that it cannot be sealed to them; and moreover **the Lord does not desire to enter into covenant with the**

³ Gal. 3:29. Sien ook Rom. 9:6-8.

hypocrites, who secretly harden themselves, as would be the case if He Himself were first to affix the seal). Rather in the foundation by visible signs, He begins with what was last in the offer of grace, namely, so that we may subject ourselves with our seed and not harden our hearts to the divine command by which He summons us to receive the offered grace. Then follows the sealing of the grace first offered in the gospel and also the special bond of God" (*Substantia Foederis*, II, 54).

It is equally easy to demonstrate that the theologians did not place election and covenant side by side in a dualistic fashion, **but related them organically**. It is a well-known fact that **for many election circumscribes⁴ the extent of the covenant even in their definition of the covenant**. This is the case with Witsius, Braun, Lampe, Maestricht, á Marck, Brakel, Francken and others. One finds this description not only in the later theologians; it is found just as well in the very earliest. **Olevianus' work is entitled: "Concerning the Substance of the Covenant of Grace Between God and the elect."**

Our continual answer to the Anabaptists, when they appeal to the lack of faith in infants against infant baptism, **is that the Holy Spirit works regeneration and the inclination to faith and obedience to God in them in a manner appropriate to their age**, always with it understood that we leave the free mercy and heavenly election unbound and unpenetrated" (quoted in Südhoff, Olevianus und Ursinus, pp. 633f.).

And in the Larger Catechism, the question "Are infants, since they have no faith, properly baptized?" is answered: "Yes, faith and the confession of faith are required of adults, since they can in no other way be included into the covenant. **For infants it suffices that they are sanctified by the Spirit of Christ in a manner appropriate to their age**" (Q. 291).

Source: The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology, hier beskikbaar:
<https://proregno.com/2017/04/11/geerhardus-vos-oor-die-verbond-in-gereformeerde-teologie-spesifiek-die-kinderdoop/> (opskrif en beklemtonings bygevoeg).

⁴ "limits, restricts, defines, confines"