

Conditionality and the Covenant of Grace

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Reformed Covenant Theology

BS/CH/ST866 (Th.M.)

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Spring 2017

“...Who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began...”

(2 Timothy 1:9)

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Introduction: Covenant Theology and the Problem of Conditions in the Covenant of Grace

Are there any conditions required to enjoy the glorious blessings and benefits of the Covenant of Grace? The Covenant of Grace simply stated is the promise of Almighty God that He will be a God to His people. It is given in the “Immanuel Principle”: *“I am with you”*. We can hear it summarized in Genesis 17:7 when God Almighty appears to Abraham:

“And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.”

Here, the Covenant of Grace is restated and expanded from prior revelation in Genesis 12 and 15.¹ Are these unconditional promises that God makes to Abraham, or are there conditions required for God’s people? If there are conditions, what are they, and how are they fulfilled? If there are conditions, does not that take away from God’s sovereign kindness and initiative, and place some of the burden of responsibility upon sinful man himself? And if the burden is on man himself, how can there be a guarantee that this covenant will be completely accomplished and enjoyed? These kinds of questions have perplexed and baffled interpreters for millennia.

It is my purpose in this paper to demonstrate that the existence of a prior, pre-temporal, eternal covenant between the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit clarifies what appears in

¹ We understand further and more specifically that this Covenant of Grace is not only for Abraham as it is received by him because of God’s initiating grace, but it is also for his “offspring”. God Almighty further says, *“And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of their sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God.”* God promises to be Abraham’s God by grace, and the God of His “offspring”. This is ultimately fulfilled in Galatians 3:16, where the Apostle Paul under the inspiration of the Spirit, sees the ultimate focus of this promise: to Christ as Abraham’s “seed” (singular): *“Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, “And to offsprings,” referring to many, but referring to one, “And to your offspring,” who is Christ”* (^{ESV} **Galatians 3:16**).

redemptive history as conditionality and unconditionality in the covenant that God makes with His people.² Because the Covenant of Grace is the historical outworking of a prior, pre-temporal Eternal Covenant within the Eternal Godhead (*Pactum Salutis*), we can better understand what seems to be conditions placed on sinners, and realize with great joy that the apparent tension is not from God's side but merely from ours.³ In this study, we will look at John Calvin, Richard Sibbes, John Flavel, Francis Turretin, Thomas Brooks, Johannes Cocceius, Herman Witsius, and take a sermon sampling from the later, mature period of the English Puritans to better understand the conditionality of the Covenant of Grace in general, and more specifically on their understanding of the Biblical text of Genesis 17.

The Covenant of Grace

As we think about this, let us think about the term "covenant". What is a covenant, or more particularly the study of God's covenanting with man in Holy Scripture?⁴ Simply stated, Covenant is God's pursuing a sinful people to make them His—and to make them holy—like Him. Covenant includes both legal and relational elements. A covenant is a legal arrangement, but it is for the purpose of having a relationship. Like the adoption of children, there is a legal vowing and promising and contracting through pact to give oneself as parent to an orphan. There is implied in this legal transaction a relationship that will be enjoyed as a parent to a child, or as a father to

² See also Richard A. Muller, "Toward the *Pactum Salutis*": Locating the Origins of a Concept". *Mid-America Journal of Theology* (2007): 21.

³ See Gentry, Peter J. and Wellum, Stephen J. *Kingdom Through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Crossway, 2012), pgs. 608-609. Gentry and Wellum write that viewing the biblical covenants as either unconditional or conditional is "not quite right". They rightly suggest that "the Old Testament covenants consists of unconditional (unilateral) and conditional (bilateral) elements blended together. In fact, it is precisely due to this blend that there is a deliberate tension within the covenants—a tension which is heightened as the story line of Scripture...progress toward their fulfillment in Christ", pg. 609.

⁴ Theologian Dr. Stephen Myers summarized covenant theology as "the study of God's eternal, unchanging purpose to bring a people to Himself through covenantal relationship." Class lectures, January 18, 2017, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary.

a son. There is growth in the relationship that is to be expected as part of the end goal of the legal act of adoption. As in any relationship there are blessings and obligations. Though the Covenant of Grace is a gracious covenant, we must affirm that there are both blessings and obligations, and obligations necessarily require conditions as the response of man to God.

Theologian Francis Turretin (1623-1687) describes a covenant as properly a pact or agreement, a relationship that is entered into between God and man, consisting partly in a stipulation of duty (of a thing to be done), and partly in the promise of a reward (which is the meaning in Gen. 17:2 where God is said to wish to make a covenant with Abraham).⁵ This is a covenant where all things are “gratuitous and thus even the conditions” of the covenant are given by God.⁶ Turretin notes that God desired for the whole of the covenant to depend upon His promise of grace, not only the reward promised by God, but also with regard to the duty demanded from us. He wrote more fully:

“Thus God performs here not only his part, but also ours; and if the covenant is given for the happiness of only the one party, it is guarded and fulfilled by the fidelity of only one party. Hence not only God’s blessings fall under the promise, but also man’s duty; not only the end, but also the means and conditions leading us to it.”⁷

This Covenant of Grace is designated “of Grace” in contrast to the Covenant of Works made with man when he was first created.⁸ The Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace are both revelations of God’s voluntary kindness, and gracious condescension to form a legal relationship with man.⁹ Both covenants reveal that the true and living God is a God of promise, full of

⁵ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, edited by James T. Dennison, Jr. (P&R, 1994), Vol. II:172.

⁶ Turretin, Vol. II:172.

⁷ Turretin, Vol. II:173.

⁸ Turretin, Vol. II:174.

⁹ Westminster Confession of Faith, Chap. 7.1 says: “The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto Him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition

kindness, and good pleasure before His creatures.¹⁰ God is not compelled to make a covenant with man the creature or man the sinner, but it is because of His good pleasure that He does. God is “pleased” to condescend in this way.

The Covenant of Works contrasted with the Covenant of Grace was a covenant made with man before sin came into the world, that held forth conditions that must be met by man before the promises were received.¹¹ In the garden, God provided all that Adam and Eve needed for life and godliness in Him. Before the fall of man into sin, Adam and Eve were created and designed for God (Gen. 1:26-28; Ecc. 7:29). They were made upright, righteous, holy, possessed by His Spirit, and enjoyed His special presence and fellowship, yet they were subject to fall. They had yet to be confirmed in righteousness and holiness. They had yet to be given immortality without the ability to sin. God made this covenant with conditions that had to be met by man through “perfect and personal obedience” (WCF, 7.2). This Covenant of Works is summarized in Scripture as “*Do this and live*” (Lev. 18:5; Gal. 3:10-13). It was particularly this command that God gave to his dear children in the garden. He said: “I have given you everything you need in me for life and godliness, I have given you the world, and this beautiful garden, the dominion over the earth and the animals, and now, I want you to walk holily and faithfully before me. You may eat of every

of Him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God's part, which He hath been pleased to express by way of covenant.” (1) (1) Isa. 40:13-17; Job 9:32,33; 1 Sam. 2:25; Ps. 113:5,6; Ps. 100:2,3; Job 22:2,3; Job 35:7,8; Luke 17:10; Acts 17:24,25.

¹⁰ Though with the Covenant of Works we could say God reveals Himself in a “gracious condescension”, but reserve grace, formally speaking, as that response of God to sin that we see revealed in the Covenant of Grace.

¹¹ Westminster Confession of Faith, Chap. 7.2: The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works,(1) wherein life was promised to Adam, and in him to his posterity,(2) upon condition of perfect and personal obedience.(3) (1)Gal. 3:12. (2)Rom. 10:5; Rom. 5:12-20. (3)Gen. 2:17; Gal. 3:10.

tree, and be happy and content, but do not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, or you will die (summary of Genesis 2:17 and context).”

Adam and Eve fell from this lofty estate in fellowship with God, though God had graciously condescended to make this covenant with them both. Upon their fall, immediately in fact, God announced the Covenant of Grace. That He would bring about a Victor who would crush the deceiver, and though this one’s heel would be bruised, He would gain the victory and crush his head. God would place enmity between the Seed or Offspring of the Woman, and the Seed or Offspring of the Serpent (Gen. 3:15). This was the first announcement of the Gospel preached by God Almighty to promise to save a people. This “primeval promise” given to our first parents was a “compendium of the principle parts of the covenant of grace and of the gospel”.¹² This first primeval promise was to be progressively revealed, worked out, and expanded throughout redemptive history until the Consummation and renewal of all things, for the glory of God.

Covenant of Redemption: The Importance of the *Pactum Salutis* or the Eternal, Triune Covenant

The Covenant of Grace was beautifully described by Dutch theologian Herman Witsius (1636-1708) who wrote:

“The covenant of grace is a compact, or agreement, between God and the elect sinner; God on his part declaring his free good-will concerning eternal salvation, and everything relative thereto, freely to be given to those in covenant, by and for the mediator Christ; and man on his part consenting to that good-will by a sincere faith.”¹³

¹² Turretin, Vol. II:222.

¹³ Herman Witsius. *Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man*, 2 Vols. Kindle Edition (Kindle Locations 2634-2637).

This covenant “of Grace” was the historical outworking of what has been termed the *Pactum Salutis*, or the Covenant of Redemption. The *Pactum Salutis*, or the Eternal, Triune Covenant, or the Covenant of Redemption is a covenant that is revealed throughout Holy Scripture that assumes a kindness and mercy of God that is revealed in a pre-temporal, pre-historical, pre-creation manner between the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit.¹⁴ This Covenant assumes that God will create man, and covenantally condescend to covenant with His creatures, but that the creatures will fail. Considering this, a covenant is made between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit who will unconditionally see this covenant through to the end to the praise of His glorious grace.¹⁵

We should understand the decree of God, the creation of the world, and God’s most holy, wise, and powerful providence as being the outworking of God’s Eternal Covenant, or Covenant of Redemption he made within the Godhead. God has chosen a people in Christ before the foundation of the world, according to the purpose of His will, all to the praise of His glorious, Triune grace! God the Father authors the unconditional salvation of His elect, making a holy covenant with His Eternal Son. The Eternal Son willingly takes upon Himself the obligations and mission of this covenant and is the one who accomplishes and makes possible the promises of

¹⁴ Though the Covenant of Redemption or *Pactum Salutis* has its critics, nevertheless, I agree with J. V. Fesko that there is a great need for a retrieval and understanding of it, especially as it clarifies and relates to the conditionality of the covenant. See J. V. Fesko, *The Covenant of Redemption*, (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2016), pgs. 21-25.

¹⁵ We hear of this covenant in Ephesians 1:3-6: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, ⁴ even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love ⁵ he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, ⁶ to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved” (ESV). Also, Richard A. Muller provides a series of texts and biblical teachings that theologian David Dickson cited in 1638 concerning the Covenant of Redemption, or *Pactum Salutis*: Acts 20:28; 1 Cor. 6:20; 1 Pet. 1:18-21; Matt. 26:28; 1 Tim. 2:5-6; Job 19:24; Heb. 7:22; Rom. 5:11; 1 Jo. 2:2; Rom. 3:24; Acts 15:18; Luke 22:22; Psa. 2:7ff; Isa. 52:13-14; 53:4-12; 59:20-21; Psa. 40:6. “Toward the *Pactum Salutis*: Locating the Origins of a Concept.” *Mid-America Journal of Theology* (2007): 19.

the Covenant of Grace through His perfect and faithful life, death, resurrection, and ascension to God's right hand. The Holy Spirit applies this Holy Covenant in space and time, in real history, to God's elect, as God's grace in Christ is made known.

David Dickson (1583-1663) defined the Covenant of Redemption or *Pactum Salutis* as a "Pactum between God the Father and God the Son, the designated Mediator...before the world was, in the Council of the Trinity...This covenant of redemption is in effect one with the decree of redemption, wherein the salvation of the elect, and the way how it shall be brought about is fixed, in the purpose of God, who worketh all things according to the counsel of His own will."¹⁶

This means that in the Eternal Covenant made between the Persons of the Triune Godhead, that the Father elected the Eternal Son to be Mediator of a people. This Blessed Son willingly agreed to become the Mediator, which meant to take to Himself the nature of those He would come to redeem. He would personally and permanently unite Himself in hypostatic union to human nature through the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit would prepare this body in the womb of the virgin Mary, from Adam's substance, yet keep it pure, holy, spotless, and free from sin so that Christ could accomplish His mission as Mediator on behalf of His elect.

Christ the Mediator, chosen by God to perform all the duties and obedience of the Covenant of Grace, was to reconcile God and man. The Father and the Son agreed to carry out the work of redemption. God makes a covenant with His elect in Christ to save them by and on account of Christ under the conditions of faith and repentance. We see here both the unconditional and condition aspects of the one Covenant of Grace. From man's point of view there are two aspects,

¹⁶ Quoted in Muller, "Toward the *Pactum Salutis*", pg. 62.

conditional and unconditional; from God's perspective, there is only one. This supposed tension is resolved very cleanly and clearly in God's eternal Covenant of Redemption with Christ and the Spirit.¹⁷ God makes a pre-temporal covenant with Christ the chosen Mediator, as both Son of God and Son of Man.

Puritan Thomas Brooks (1608-1680) captures this clear revelation of Christ as Mediator in an imagined dialogue in the communion of the Godhead prior to creation, agreeing to take upon Himself the burden of keeping the covenant on behalf of His people:

"Christ, to speak after the manner of men, lays his hand upon God, the Father, and saith, O blessed Father, wilt thou be at peace with these poor sinners? Wilt thou pardon them? And wilt thou lift up the lift of thy countenance upon them? If thou wilt, then I will undertake to satisfy thy justice, and to pacify thy wrath, and to fulfill thy royal law, and to make good all the wrong they have done against thee. And then he layeth his hand upon the sinner, and saith, Sinner, art thou willing to be changed and renewed? Art thou willing to come under the bond of the covenant? Art thou willing to give up thy heart and life to the guidance and government of the Spirit? Then be not discouraged, for thou shalt certainly be justified and saved."¹⁸

John Owen summarized the Covenant of Redemption as the foundation of the Covenant of Grace:

"The Father appointed the Son to become incarnate and—as prophet, priest and king—to mediate salvation to a great multitude of sinners. He did this through his atoning death in humiliation on the cross, his exaltation from the grave to the glory of his celestial throne, and his joining the Father in sending the Spirit to bring salvation home to blinded and twisted human hearts. Depending upon the covenant of redemption was the covenant of grace, whereby God established a new relationship of pardon, acceptance, adoption and protection, through Christ the Mediator, with sinners whom the Spirit had led to faith and repentance."¹⁹

¹⁷ Turretin, Vol. II:177ff.

¹⁸ Thomas Brooks, *The Works of Thomas Brooks, Vol. V*, Edited with Memoir by Alexander B. Grosart (Banner of Truth Trust, reprint 1980), pgs. 176-77.

¹⁹ Quoted in J. I. Packer, 'A Puritan Perspective: Trinitarian Godliness according to John Owen'. In T. George (ed), *God the Trinity: Reflections on Christian Faith and Practice* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), pg. 101.

Theologians stressed this Eternal Covenant throughout church history coming to a high watermark during the Reformation and Post-Reformation periods. This Eternal Covenant preserved the unity of the Godhead, while focusing on each Divine Person's glorious work that He would covenant to accomplish as the revelation of the one will of the Triune God.²⁰

"Now to him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of his glory with great joy,²⁵ to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen"
(^{ESV} **Jude 1:24-25**).

Johannes Cocceius (1603-69) in his masterwork *The Doctrine of the Covenant and Testament of God*, emphasized that the Covenant of Grace as it is worked out in history has both conditional-bilateral elements as well as unconditional-unilateral elements. From before the foundation of the world, God made a covenant in the Godhead, but in history, as this covenant is being worked out in history, there are bilateral elements where the people of God respond to God's sovereign, initiating grace with grateful obedience. Commenting on Deuteronomy 29, Cocceius wrote:

"...Covenant (foedus) means a mutual testimony of love. From God's part it is an attestation of His benevolence, from the people's part it is gratitude that must be demonstrated by the obedience by which God is glorified. God is said to establish a covenant with people in so far as He is the first author of friendship and obliges them 'to homologia', that is to an agreement and response of mutual love."²¹

The validity and the assurance that the Covenant of Grace and all its benefits and blessings will be enjoyed is not ultimately up to man, but up to God to fulfill. In fact, the covenant is primarily not with fallen man but with Christ the Mediator. The Eternal Son wills to present Himself to the Father to fulfill this salvation or the elect, and the Father requires the perfect and

²⁰ John V. Fesko, *The Trinity and the Covenant of Redemption* (Christian Focus Publications, 2016), Kindle Edition, Location: 377-79; Fesko, *The Covenant of Redemption* (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2016), 55-68.

²¹ Johannes Cocceius, *The Doctrine of the Covenant and Testament of God* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2016), pgs. xxxviii-ix.

personal obedience of the Son unto death, and promises a spiritual seed. Hence, it is important to note, that the Covenant of Grace is between God and Eternal Son *as God*, as well as between God and Eternal Son *as man*. The Son will take upon Himself humanity to represent both sides of this glorious Covenant of Redemption.²² In every covenant relationship God requires an obedient covenant partner, yet man is sinful. God remains faithful to His promises though sinful man is unfaithful. God, in His Eternal Covenant, the Covenant of Redemption, provides and obedient Son—His Son to stand in our place as Mediator.²³ This clarifies what appear to be conditions set upon man the sinner, and relieves any assumed tensions in God’s dealings with man, because it reveals that God makes a covenant with man in Christ before the foundation of the world.

The Eternal Covenant of Redemption would be worked out in three primary periods according to theologian Francis Turretin. There would the period of eternity past, the period of promise, what we would call the first covenant, or the old covenant, and the execution of the covenant in the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ in the fullness of the times.²⁴ What was promised to man through the Mediator in this covenant? That God would be God of Christ the Mediator as man, and the God of His seed.²⁵ God would dwell forever in Christ by His Spirit, and God would dwell forever in the midst of Christ’s people in union with Him. God would grant believers not only the grace to believe and persevere to the end in holiness, but also would grant them glory, being conformed to the image of Christ, the *“firstborn of many brothers”* (Rom. 8:29-

²² Cocceius, pgs. 85-89.

²³ Gentry and Wellum, pg. 628.

²⁴ Turretin, Vol. II:178.

²⁵ See Galatians 3:16, where the Apostle Paul says by the Spirit’s inspiration that the promise is to Christ as Abraham’s “seed” (singular). Christ is Abraham’s God and Abraham’s son, or “seed”: *“Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, “And to offsprings,” referring to many, but referring to one, “And to your offspring,” who is Christ”* (^{ESV} **Galatians 3:16**).

30). As God would be the God of Christ and His Seed, Christ would act as Federal Head, and Second Adam, showing forth the mercy of the Father, the grace of the Son, and the power of the Holy Spirit.²⁶ God covenanted *in Christ* that He would grant life and immortality in the Son. God is the God of the Living, not of the dead, as our Lord Jesus Christ told the Sadducees of His day who knew neither the Holy Scriptures nor the power of God in resurrection life (Matthew 22:32). God's people in Christ would be saved to enjoy eternal felicity in the presence of the Triune God, gazing on the glory and beauty of Christ the Savior. Because of this great covenant of grace, man would obey and worship God as Father and friend throughout eternity.²⁷

God's Covenant with Abraham

God had initiated a relationship with Abraham in Genesis 12, calling a moon-worshipping pagan to faith by revealing His grace and goodness to Him through promises (cf. Joshua 24:2-3). In Genesis 15, God formally made a one-sided, unconditional, unilateral covenant with Abraham, cutting a covenant, and promising Him in word and symbol that if God did not keep His promises, then the curses of the covenant would fall upon Him (which lends itself to focusing our eyes upon the cross that would come in the fullness of the times, cf. Gal. 3:13). In Genesis 17, God appears to Abraham, revealing Himself to be "El Shaddai" or the Almighty God, the All-Powerful,

²⁶ Turretin, Vol. II:180-81.

²⁷ Turretin, Vol. II: 182-84. This pre-temporal, Eternal Covenant that God makes from within the Triune Godhead should be read "behind the scenes" of every scene in redemptive history. Let this understanding encourage the careful observation of the progressive nature of God's revelation throughout Scripture, and especially note the covenant made prior to, the covenant that is being fulfilled in time, and the goal of that covenant to bring a people, holy and blameless before God through Christ the Mediator, by the power of the Holy Spirit, all to the glory of God. These aspects of the Covenant of Redemption are important to note as they are being revealed throughout the revelation of the Covenant of Grace in redemptive history.

Omnipotent God, who establishes covenant friendship in order that Abraham might be obligated to live before Him blamelessly and holily. God says to Abraham in summary:

"I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly" (vv. 1-2) ... "Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations..." (v. 4) ... "I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you" (vv. 6-7) ... "As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised" (vv. 9-10).

Let us observe a few things here: God appears as Abraham's covenantal friend, the Almighty God possessed of all power that Abraham will need to live an obedient and blameless life before Him. God reveals Himself to Abraham as *"the LORD, the LORD, merciful and gracious, slow to anger and full of steadfast love..."* (cf. Ex. 34:6-7) because in between God's covenanting promise in Genesis 15 is Abraham and Sarah's foolish and impetuous sins against their God and covenant friend. Yet God continues to bless Abraham, and expands this covenant by giving Abraham more joyous news of what he can expect from God toward him all because of His grace. The covenant that is further revealed in Genesis 17 is clearly two-sided, or conditional here. The mutuality could be summarized as *"covenant privileges imply covenant responsibilities"*. The conditions required by Abraham, part of his responsibility, are given to Abraham through the grace, and the initiating, sovereign power of *"El Shaddai"*. In other words, Abraham is obligated to obey God because there are conditions for the covenant; there is an obedient response that is required. Yet all that is required of Abraham and His seed in this glorious Covenant of Grace is provided by God in the

Covenant that has been made prior to this period, before the foundation of the world, in Christ the Mediator. The foundation of Abraham's obedience is the grace and promise of God in Christ through the *Pactum Salutis*. The conditions are real, but they are not meritorious; the conditions are revealed really as a gracious gift in Christ to Abraham—and by the same faith, to all believers (cf. Gal. 3:13-19).

Abraham is promised by God that He will be the Father of a multitude, which is an advancing and expansion of God's original, initiating promise made to Abram in Genesis 12:3. God promises to make Him fruitful, and even kings will come from his seed. This points to the historical fullness of the times, when the Son of God, the Seed of Abraham would come "*born of a woman, born under law, to redeem under law*" so that believers might fully know the adoption as sons (cf. Gal. 4:4; 3:16). Christ the King would come as the Seed of Abraham, heir to the promises, as covenanted by the Triune God before the foundation of the world.²⁸

Additionally, Abraham was given a sign and a seal of the Covenant of Grace (17:9ff). This sign of circumcision would be the sign and seal of righteousness found in the Mediator until His coming in history (cf. Rom. 4:9ff; Col. 2:11ff). This sign and seal was part of Abraham's conditions of the covenant. He was to be obedient to God's commands in light of the grace and kindness that God had shown to Him.²⁹ The sign should be understood as a condition, but as one that could be kept in dependence upon God's grace and power. Ultimately, because this covenant was part of the greater Covenant of Grace, therefore, it pointed forward to Jesus Christ and His righteousness.

²⁸ Muller notes that for John Calvin and many other Reformed exegetes, that Christ is the foundation of the agreement between God and Abraham as specifically His "seed". In fact, he writes that "the priority of Christ derives from the fact that he is the scope and foundation of all the promises of God". Muller, "*Toward the Pactum Salutis*", pgs. 41, 43.

²⁹ Cocceius calls the covenant signs of circumcision a sign of the "friendship with God", pgs. 141, 280.

Abraham saw through this sign, and the gracious promises of God, the face of Jesus Christ, the Mediator of the Covenant (cf. John 8:56; Col. 2:11-12).

God was gracious in giving Abraham this sign of circumcision for himself and his seed, as an outward, external sign to give him power and grace to keep the obligations of his side of the covenant made with God. As our forefather, John Flavel (1630-1691) wrote, “[Circumcision] was an obliging sign to Abraham and his seed, to walk with God in the uprightness and sincerity of their hearts, in the performance of all covenanted duties; in which duties, Abraham, and the faithful, walked obediently, with God, looking to Christ for righteousness...”³⁰ Though the sign was a condition that had to be kept, it was a condition to be lived out not for merit, but in grateful obedience to God as faithful, covenanting Father and friend.

In understanding this revelation of the Covenant of Grace, we should understand the glorious reality that covenant and friendship go hand in hand. God’s initiating grace to reveal Himself, His counsel, His revelation is likened to that of a friend speaking secrets to another friend. As God revealed and spoke to Moses, it is described *“as a man speaks to his friend”* (Exodus 33:11). In Jehoshaphat’s prayer to God, He calls the Covenantal LORD, the God of Salvation the *“God of our fathers”* who powerfully rules over the nations and has given covenant blessings to God’s people *“forever to the descendants of Abraham your friend”* (2 Chron. 20:6-7, my emphasis). When God sent the Prophet Isaiah to comfort His people with hope in the exile, He proclaims God’s goodness to His people in the Covenant of Grace, reminding them of covenantal friendship through Abraham, by saying:

³⁰ John Flavel, *The Works of John Flavel*, Vols. 1-6 (Banner of Truth Trust, reprint 1968), pgs. 341.

*“But you, Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, the offspring of Abraham, my friend:⁹ you whom I took from the ends of the earth, and called from its farthest corners, saying to you, “You are my servant, I have chosen you and not cast you off”;¹⁰ fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand” (^{ESV} **Isaiah 41:8-10**) [my emphasis].*

Johannes Cocceius emphasized the covenant as a beautiful friendship with God. He emphasized that the sinner does not initiate this friendship, but by the Sovereign, gracious God of the covenant. In fact, because sinful, fallen man is at enmity with God; he will not make peace with His God. So the Holy Spirit enables sinful man to love God as a friend, but it is God’s movement toward sinners that must be emphasized. He wrote:

“The friendship of God certainly presupposes God’s initiative and choice. Man, before grace came, had nothing by which he could raise himself, please God, and be united to Him. Hence, it is clear that man is led by grace alone into the covenant and to grace or the friendship of God.”³¹

In God’s covenant with Abraham, God is progressively advancing and expanding the promises of the Covenant of Grace, the outworking of the Covenant of Redemption in history, by making His friend also a son through His grace and power. And this friend and son is to walk as a true, faithful, blameless obedient servant.³²

Antecedent and Consequential Conditionality in the Covenant of Grace

What is being taught here in Genesis 17 was summarized helpfully by Francis Turretin. He teaches an important distinction that should be made between conditions that are antecedent and consequent. Antecedent conditions are required before something can be enjoyed. If believers had to focus on the antecedent conditions of blamelessness, faith and repentance being met before they could enjoy the Covenant of Grace, it would turn it into another Covenant of Works, or seem like one. Abraham, nor any sinful man has no ability to perform these tasks that

³¹ Cocceius, pgs. xxxiii, 144-45.

³² Cocceius, pg. 207.

are required of him (Abraham, though a recipient of God's grace, continued to sin terribly, though he was a true son and friend of God). If we understand the conditions as consequent, that is, as those conditions that follow the initiating work and power of God in the Covenant of Redemption, then all the blameless obedience, faith, and repentance that is required by God can be obtained in Christ. Yet man is involved. The elect as true recipients of the benefits and blessings of the Covenant of Grace do truly believe and do indeed live obediently before God. What is given to them by grace is the ability to believe, and the perseverance to endure.

In other words, since the Eternal Covenant or Covenant of Redemption necessarily precedes the outworking of this Covenant of Grace in redemptive history, we can understand that all that God requires of believers are what Turretin terms "consequent conditions". Most importantly for man the sinner, these are conditions given through the powerful application of them to the elect by the Holy Spirit.³³ The antecedent conditions require that man's response, or work, or obedience, or faith or repentance be the instrumental cause of election and of receiving the blessings of the covenant. While consequent conditions require man to respond, but the response, or work, or obedience, or faith, or repentance is a necessary consequence of the prior foundation of this covenant made between the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit, "produced by the efficacy of omnipotent grace". As Turretin wrote:

³³ It should be noted that Herman Witsius, in desiring to emphasize the absolute graciousness of God in the Covenant of Grace frowned upon using any language of condition. He wrote, "...The Covenant of Grace, to speak accurately, with respect to us has no conditions, properly so called...A condition of a covenant, properly so called, is the action which, being performed, gives a man a right to a reward. But that condition cannot be required of us in the Covenant of Grace, is self-evident: because a right to life neither is nor indeed can be founded on any action of ours, but on the righteousness of our Lord alone; who having perfectly fulfilled the righteousness of the law for us, nothing can, in justice, be required of us to perform, in order to acquire a right already fully purchased for us." Witsius, *Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man*, 2 Vols. Kindle Edition, Loc. 4740, 4824.

“If the covenant be viewed in relation to the first sanction in Christ, it has no previous condition, but rests upon the grace of God and the merit of Christ alone.... If the covenant of grace was said to depend upon an unstable human condition, its efficacy and immutability would be overthrown. But because the condition is supernatural and divine (produced by the efficacy of omnipotent grace), so far is it from being weakened by it that on the contrary it is more and more strengthened. ...The covenant does not rest upon a condition in us, but upon the mere grace of God and His inviolable faithfulness and the infinite merit of Christ.”³⁴

Our obligations upon receiving all the consequent conditions required of entering the Covenant of Grace in Christ, or realizing our place in it by the omnipotent power of the Holy Spirit, are to then commit ourselves wholeheartedly with body, soul, mind, strength—all that is within us—to give ourselves to God our Lord, Father, and friend. Holiness and obedience are the consequent means through which the Covenant of Grace is realized in the believer’s life. Faith is a gift that takes hold of the righteousness of Christ both in imputation and impartation, both justifying grace, as well as sanctifying grace. As Turretin wrote, two important things should be remembered and “always connected”, “the acceptance of the covenant and the keeping of it when accepted. Faith accepts by reception of the promises [instrumental means not efficacious means]; obedience keeps by a fulfillment of the commands. *‘Be ye holy, as I am holy’.*”³⁵ To summarize, the Covenant of Grace is founded on the free and kind promises of God ultimately, and faith believes these promises, that faith being a realization of the promise to God’s elect. All that God *requires* for sinners to enter the joy of the Covenant of Grace, He also *graciously provides*.³⁶

³⁴ Turretin, Vol. II:185-86.

³⁵ Turretin, Vol. II:189. John Flavel also agrees with Turretin’s assessment of the conditions of the Covenant of Grace, rejecting that conditions necessarily imply antecedent conditions that functionally return to another Covenant of Works. Flavel wrote: “By a condition of the covenant, we do not mean in the strictest rigid sense of the word, such a restipulation to God from man of perfect obedience in his own person, at all times...that is rather the condition of Adam’s covenant of works, than of the evangelical covenant; nor do we assert any meritorious condition...”; John Flavel, *The Works of John Flavel*, Vols. 1-6 (Banner of Truth Trust, reprint 1968), Vol. 6: 348-353.

³⁶ This wonderfully and concisely summarized in the Westminster Larger Catechism, Q&A 32: Westminster Larger Catechism 32: How is the grace of God manifested in the second covenant? A. The grace of God is manifested in the

Different Administration, Same Covenant of Grace

Additionally important for our understanding in this study is that the Covenant of Grace as it is revealed to Abraham, though under a different time of administration, particularly with regard to the covenant signs, such as circumcision, that nevertheless, it is the same covenant in substance.³⁷ Another important implication of the Covenant of Redemption preceding, or being the pre-temporal Covenant of Grace, is understanding the Christ-focused, unified, one purpose and goal of God to make one holy people for Himself, and to be their God with them, for them, and in them, for the glory of the Triune God (Eph. 1:9-11; 3:8-10; Col. 1:27-2:3; the Apostle Paul calls this the “mystery” of God hidden, yet progressively revealed, Rom. 16:25-27). We see this covenantal unity of purpose and people clearly made manifest in the fullness of the times, prior to the birth of Jesus, in Zechariah’s song about John the Baptist:

“...To show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant,⁷³ the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us⁷⁴ that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear,⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness before him all our days” (ESV Luke 1:72-75).

“To remember His holy covenant” (Luke 1:72) the same covenant Gentile believers are now under (Acts 2:37-39; cf. Galatians 3:16-29). In fact, because God’s covenant with Abraham is part of the outworking of the one Covenant of Grace, necessarily stressing the progressive, though unified covenant, the covenant made with Abraham is ultimately seen in this light as a covenant made “in the Son”.³⁸

second covenant, in that he freely provideth and offereth to sinners a Mediator,(1) and life and salvation by him;(2) and requiring faith as the condition to interest them in him,(3) promiseth and giveth his Holy Spirit(4) to all his elect, to work in them that faith,(5) with all other saving graces;(6) and to enable them unto all holy obedience,(7) as the evidence of the truth of their faith(8) and thankfulness to God,(9) and as the way which he hath appointed them to salvation.(10) (1)Gen. 3:15; Isa. 42:16; John 6:27.

³⁷ See John Flavel, *The Works of John Flavel*, Vols. 1-6 (Banner of Truth Trust, reprint 1968), Vol. 6: 328ff.

³⁸ Muller, “Toward the *Pactum Salutis*”, pg. 58.

Richard Sibbes also stressed the unity of the Covenant of Grace revealed to Abraham. He wrote:

“Now, the foundation of the covenant is, that God will be our God, and give us grace and glory, and all good in Christ, the Mediator of the new covenant, a friend to both: to God as God, to man as man, God and man in himself and by office; such is His office, as to procure love and agreement between God and man. He being the foundation of the covenant, there must be agreement in Him.”³⁹

John Calvin (1509-1564) and Puritan Sermons (1659-1689) on the Covenant of Grace

At the theological root of much covenant theology in the 17th and 18th centuries is the fine exegesis and faithful theology of John Calvin (1509-1564). In his sermons from Genesis, we can get a better understanding of his teaching on the Covenant of Redemption as it works itself out in the Covenant of Grace, particularly taking note of his unique influence that he had on Reformation and Post-Reformation covenant theologians. In a sermon entitled “The Covenant: God’s Initiation of Eternal Salvation” from Genesis 17:4-8, preached on April 3, 1560 (late in Calvin’s life), Calvin emphasizes that in this further revealing of the covenant to Abraham God will be the God of Abraham and his seed. He focuses the parishioner-hearer’s attention on how both Gentiles and Jews make up Abraham’s children and that the church is one people (cf. Gal. 3:7, 16; Eph. 2:14, 20; Acts 3:25).⁴⁰ God’s revealing of this to Abraham was to grant him and his seed confidence to live faithfully before him in holy lives. Calvin points the people to God as Savior who in essence says to Abraham, *“You belong to me, and I am approaching you so you will be my friends and I will make known to you my goodness and my favors in such a way that you will sense by experience that I am your Father and that you can trust me for salvation and call*

³⁹ Richard Sibbes, *The Demand of a Good Conscience in The Complete Works of Richard Sibbes*, edited, with memoir by Alexander Grossart, 7 vols. (Banner of Truth Trust, reprint 1973), VII: 481-82.

⁴⁰ John Calvin, *Sermons on Genesis, Chapters 11:5-20:7*, Translated by Rob Roy McGregor, (Banner of Truth Trust, 2012), pgs. 544-46.

upon me in complete confidence."⁴¹ Calvin encourages the church to know that this implies that grace is offered to all unconditionally in a sense from God's free offer, but also that there is the condition of receiving this grace. He wrote, "...Let us also note that when grace is offered to all, it has to be received."⁴² God gives the promise to all in Christ, but sinners must receive, and then must persevere in the same gracious promise unto the end.⁴³

Calvin summarizes the covenant promise beautifully when he says very simply, "God wants us to be his." He desires to be one with us.⁴⁴ Calvin reminds his congregation that the promise that God made to Abraham is for all his seed, all those who believe the promise like Father Abraham. Abraham is not a "private person", Calvin wrote, but as the "ordained father of all those who were to believe."⁴⁵ What Calvin desired for the congregation to remember above all was that the "Creator of heaven and earth is our God...He acknowledges and accepts us as His children."⁴⁶ He concludes his sermon, "So let us learn to honor God this way [with love, holy lives, gratitude]: when we seek for the things that belong to our felicity (happiness), let us come directly to him; and since we have him as our God, let us know that when he gave himself to us, he omitted nothing."⁴⁷ Though much familial language of God is used, and grace is exalted as a result of God's mercy to sinners, and Calvin would have surely agreed with the more fuller development of the Covenant of Redemption in the 17th century, in his sermons on Genesis 17 he does not mention specifically this pre-temporal, Eternal Covenant (though this had been discussed by

⁴¹ Calvin, *ibid.*, pg. 546.

⁴² Calvin, *ibid.*, pg. 552.

⁴³ Calvin, *ibid.*, pg. 553.

⁴⁴ Calvin, *ibid.*, pg. 553.

⁴⁵ Calvin, *ibid.*, pg. 556.

⁴⁶ Calvin, *ibid.*, pg. 556.

⁴⁷ Calvin, *ibid.*, pg. 557.

Calvin in his *Institutes*, Book II, in the section on ‘Christ the Mediator’ and the eternal decree; we might say it was in seed form at this time, or perhaps he just did not make it explicit in his sermon here).

At the peak and maturity of the Puritan movement we have collected sermons from 1659-89 (immediately prior to the Act of Conformity, 1662, and the ejection of many ministers, and thus after). In these, we can observe a sampling of how they saw the Conditionality and the Covenant of grace being made clear through the Eternal Covenant of Redemption. Two ministers in particular, the Rev. Samuel Annesley (1620-1696) and the Rev. Thomas Jacombe (1622-1689).

The Rev. Samuel Annesley, in a sermon entitled “*The Covenant of Grace*” asked his parishioner-hearers to consider God’s gracious condescension and mercy in establishing this wonderful covenant after the fall of man. He sought to make clear in his preaching that the obligation and demand of this covenant is faith in the gospel-covenant. Believers must embrace by faith the remedy for our sins. All the forgiveness, mercy and righteousness that sinners need is received by faith alone. He describes faith as the “antecedent condition” for which the reward is given. Though the Rev. Annesley uses this description, it is clear that he intends “consequent condition” as Turretin taught it.⁴⁸ Rev. Annesley is emphasizing the instrumentality of faith as a means to receive salvation; his focus is on the logical priority of faith to be antecedent to the redemption in Christ received. Nowhere does he teach that faith is a merit, or could be considered efficacious to bring about salvation. Faith is an antecedent condition based upon God’s promise to give all that is needed, summarily called the “salvation of God” (Acts 28:28). The Rev. Annesley

⁴⁸ Turretin, pg. 85.

summarized that God's salvation includes justification, sanctification and ultimately glorification that is to come with the resurrection of the dead. Annesley understands the outworking of the Covenant of Grace to be rooted in the eternal election of the Son as Mediator, and emphasizes that it is all of God's grace and power.⁴⁹ He wrote:

"The covenant of grace is made to poor, weak, sinful, frail, man through a Mediator. God doth not expect that we should be perfect here. Poor Christians have more ado to pardon themselves, than to have God pardon them....The covenant is merely of grace: grace runs through all the veins and arteries of it; all the life, blood, and spirit of the covenant are grace, grace, through Jesus Christ. And yet, beloved, though it be wholly of grace, it is of debt, by being a covenant: God is pleased to enter into bond to make good his deed of gift. What God doth for the heirs of promise, --it is no more than what is debt to Christ, and what through Him he is graciously engaged to us. O the comfort of being in covenant with God!"⁵⁰

Yet not importantly, that the Rev. Annesley still emphasizes the condition of the covenant which is to walk faithfully as a "debt" to God. This is indeed not a debt paid to God to receive salvation, but what might be described as a debt for receiving a gift, as when we say we are "forever indebted" to another for showing kindness or generosity to us. Indeed, the Covenant of Grace, against Antinomian thinking that would gladly put all of the burden and work on Christ, not merely before the believer's faith, but also for all that the believer is required to do, Annesley rightly emphasizes the debt of response. That is, as part of a covenant, we receive, and then we live faithfully and obediently indebted to God. The truth is, if these conditions of walking blamelessly after God are not met, then one is merely a recipient of the external benefits of the covenant, and not the actual Covenant of Grace that results in a change and transformation of nature, will, and desires. If we do not walk indebted to God as part of the Covenant of Grace, we

⁴⁹ The Rev. Samuel Annesley, "The Covenant of Grace", in *Puritan Sermons (1659-1689) in Six Volumes*, 181-201. Richard Owen Roberts Publishing, reprint 1981, pgs. 186-88.

⁵⁰ Samuel Annesley, *ibid.*, pg. 201.

are not truly partakers of the blessings and benefits of the covenant freely given in Christ the Mediator, designed to make sinners holy, faithful and obedient sons—and friends.

Considering the thinking of Puritans during this late period of English Puritanism, we next focus upon the pulpit ministry of the Rev. Thomas Jacombe, from a sermon he preached entitled “The Covenant of Redemption Opened”, preaching from the text of Isaiah 53:10.⁵¹ Rev. Jacombe encourages his hearers to make an important distinction between the Covenant of Redemption and the Covenant of Grace, though he realizes he differs with some of his time such as Samuel Rutherford. He states that the Covenant of Redemption is a covenant of grace, but more particularly the foundation of it. He desires to make the distinction between the Covenant of Redemption as being between God and Christ (as Mediator), and the Covenant of Grace between God and believers.⁵²

The Rev. Jacombe summarizes the Covenant of Redemption as the Father demanding satisfaction for man’s sins, and electing and covenanting with Christ to pay and satisfy this debt. The Father promises to give to Christ what he needs to accomplish this mission, to prepare him, equip him, provide all that he needs by the Holy Spirit. The Rev. Jacombe notes how the Father’s giving believers to Christ was a great encouragement to the Son in the accomplishing of his work.⁵³ Free grace, the Rev. Jacombe exults, is possible because there is full satisfaction of man’s debt in the cross of Christ. God accepts the work of Christ as payment of the debt, as man’s surety. Christ actively performs all obedience to God’s law in the place of the sinner, and Christ

⁵¹ The Rev. Thomas Jacombe, “The Covenant of Redemption Opened, in *Puritan Sermons (1659-1689) in Six Volumes*, 168-180.

⁵² Thomas Jacombe, *ibid.*, pgs. 179-70.

⁵³ Thomas Jacombe, *ibid.*, pgs. 171-72.

suffers under the wrath of God for man's disobedience.⁵⁴ Though he clearly speaks of the eternal covenant between the Father and the Son, the Holy Spirit is not as clearly present in this covenant as with other writings. With Jacombe, the focus is on the Father and the Son primarily.

The Rev. Jacombe stirs up his parishioner-hearers to consider and admire the great and infinite love of God for sinners. He desires to heighten the believers' understanding of the goodness and grace and love of the Father as much as the Son.⁵⁵ The Rev. Jacombe seems to be concerned with folks who would realize the goodness of the son, but still think that the Father was angry with them, which seems typical for each period of history. Unfortunately, there has functionally been a heresy such as Marcion of Sinope's (ca. 140s AD) that would somehow make a separation between the wrath and anger of God the Father, and the kind and gentle grace of the Son of God. This too, is something the Covenant of Redemption should clear up and heal for all believers.

The Rev. Jacombe closes his sermon with a desire to strengthen the faith of believers. By faith, all of the blessings of the covenant are sure because they are founded upon God's grace in Christ, and not in the works of man. He stresses that "the covenant mercies are stable, durable, lasting things." God has ratified the covenant through His oath, through the death of His Son, and through the seals he has annexed to it.⁵⁶ He closes by inviting sinners to believe and be saved. Note in this how the Rev. Jacombe understands that faith is the instrument whereby sinners make the COR of their own, and that this faith is not in their own power, but is the gift of God:

"So, then, beloved, if you would draw down comfort to yourselves from this covenant, you must find this out, --that you are the elect of God, chosen of him to vessels of mercy before the world was. Christ undertook to give his life only for those whom the Father had first given to

⁵⁴ Thomas Jacombe, *ibid.*, pgs. 173-75.

⁵⁵ Thomas Jacombe, *ibid.*, pg. 177.

⁵⁶ Thomas Jacombe, *ibid.*, pgs. 178-79.

him: these he only prayed for; and therefore, surely, these he only died for....He that believes is certainly in the number of God's elect; he is a chosen vessel of mercy...Have you the precious faith of God's elect? Are your hearts wrought up to a blessed accepting of Christ? ...O you that have this faith, go away in peace; be of good comfort! This everlasting covenant betwixt the Father and the Son is yours..."⁵⁷

Pastoral Implications of the Covenant of Grace: Exhortations and Wisdom for Ministers of God's Word

Covenantal Triune, God-centered Pulpit Ministry

The focus of all the Scriptures is on the Triune God and His mission of salvation for His own glory (Eph. 1:3-14; 3:9-10). A minister is privileged to proclaim this Word of God, that is the very God-breathed revelation of the Living God, the Covenantal-Savior God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The Bible is the revelation of the covenantal "secrets" of the Triune God that He is pleased to make know to us and to our children (cf. Deut. 29:29; Rom. 16:25-27). In the ministry of the Word, perhaps in every sermon, there should be a focus on God the Father as authoring the salvation of His people, God the Son as accomplishing that same salvation, and God the Holy Spirit as applying that salvation to the believing elect's life.

This necessarily implies that there should be a focus upon language of covenant. Using covenantal language to structure our understanding of the story of Holy Scripture should be prevalent. In our time, it seems that the language of covenant is not used enough in pulpit ministry. The covenant should be the structure through which we see the goodness and kindness of God revealed to sinners throughout redemptive history, and this language should be the language of pastors and of those in the pews. This would emphasize the great redemptive story

⁵⁷ Thomas Jacombe, *ibid.*, pgs. 180-81.

that God has authored, told, and is telling His people.⁵⁸ It would also help to emphasize the progressive nature of Holy Scripture (John 5:39; Luke 24:24-27; 44-49).

The Good Pleasure **eudokia** of God

In pulpit ministry, let there be an emphasis on the “*eudokia*” [**eudokia**] or “good pleasure” of God toward His people in the Covenant of Grace.⁵⁹ Over against the sinful deception of the serpent that continually questions the goodness of God since the very beginning, and the Marcion-like, slavish fear of the “God of the Old Testament who is full of wrath” that is sadly the functional thought of too many Christians, let us emphasize from the pulpit the largeness and magnanimity of God’s grace toward sinners *in Christ*.⁶⁰ How God grants such abundance that is so very undeserving, and He is not compelled to do so, but simply desires and delights to do so because of his good pleasure. Let us stress that when speaking of the Persons of the Godhead, it was the Father’s “good pleasure” to give the Kingdom to His people in Christ. It was the Father, in the outworking of His gracious purposes in Christ, to Author or initiate the salvation of the elect. The love the Father has for the Son, is the love He has for those He has elected in the Son (see John 14:21-23; 17:21-26). As Cocceius wrote, the declaration of God’s good pleasure is the promise itself, the very foundation of the Covenant of Grace.⁶¹ God was not compelled to save a

⁵⁸ Sebastian Rehnman. “An Argument Against Theologically Constructed Covenants”, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 50.2 (2007), pgs. 259-261.

⁵⁹ See Turretin, Vol. II:175.

⁶⁰ In John Calvin’s sermon on Genesis 17:1-2, where God appears and says: “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, that I may make my covenant between me and you...”, says: “On the point [God] tells him to walk before him and be perfect. Here we see God is aiming at two things in his desire to instruct us. One is that we doubt that he is our Father and Savior, indeed because of his free goodness; and the other is that, because he is pleased to accept us as his children, we honor him and give him the love and reverence he is due, for he does not want us to abuse his goodness.” *Sermons on Genesis, Chapters 11:5-20:7*, Translated by Rob Roy McGregor (Banner of Truth Trust, 2012), 534.

⁶¹ Cocceius, pg. 82.

people, it was His good pleasure to the praise of His glorious grace that moved Him to initiate and accomplish the Covenant of Redemption.

Furthermore, covenant implies unconditional love and friendship with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.⁶² As the covenant is emphasized, particularly the Eternal Covenant as it reveals itself in the historical Covenant of Grace, there should be a focus on the love of God for sinners. Our Lord Jesus summarizes this love and friendship to believer when he says:

“Fear not, dear flock, it is your Father’s good pleasure to give to you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32).

Christ the Mediator: Object and Subject of Covenant of Grace

There should be an emphasis on the active obedience of Christ as Mediator to make possible all the covenant blessings and benefits that believers receive. Evangelicals rightly focus on Christ’s death, and thankfully, make much of his passive obedience or death for the forgiveness of sins. But there should also be the important focus on the righteousness of Christ that is obtained for believers that is required by God for the covenant demands to be met. Complete devotion and obedience to God are required, and only in Christ and His perfect devotion and obedience to the Father can we find this righteous standing before God.

God imputes our sinfulness to Christ upon the cross and crushes Him on our behalf (cf. Isa. 53:10), but He also graciously imputes Christ’s perfect record to us. *“If you were to mark iniquities, O LORD, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared”*

⁶² Theologian Scott Swain eloquently speaks of the love of the Triune God in this Eternal Covenant for the salvation of the elect: *“God’s eternal decree arises from the love of the Father for the Son in the Spirit, which is its principle and source, and directs all things to the love of the Father for the Son in the Spirit, which is their supreme end. The love of the Triune God is thus the alpha and the omega of all things outside of God.”*⁶²

(Psa. 130:3-4). God, as the ultimate covenant maker and keeper acts unilaterally and unconditionally to keep His own promise through the provision of a faithful, obedient Son.⁶³ As God, the Eternal Son provides the righteousness and is reconciled to sinners; As man, the Mediator, Jesus Christ provides the perfect life and cursed death as reconciler to God. Christ is both object of the Covenant of Redemption as well as the subject; Christ is both the electing God, and the elect of God; Christ is both the reconciled God, and the reconciler of sinners to God; Christ is both Abraham's God, and Abraham's seed.

Spirit of God: Conditionality in the Covenant of Grace

We should clearly make known in our preaching and teaching the conditions of the Covenant of Grace: There are "ifs", and "thens..." for example: "*If you believe...*" (2 Tim. 2:11-13). "... *If we died with Him, we also will lie with Him*"; "...*If indeed you remain established in the faith*" (Col. 1:21-23); "*God so love the world that whosoever believes (if!)...*" (John 3:16; Rom. 10:9; Acts 8:37), and so forth. This will compel preachers to always be calling all to Christ, to always be inviting with the "publication of the good news" through preaching. "If" means "if". God says that all can revel in the Father's goodness in Christ by simple faith, but merely receiving. Yet all that is required of the sinner is not in their ability, therefore, the conditions can only be met through the Spirit. This does not have to be made specific in every sermon. The need is to stress for the sinner to "Come" and to "Believe" and to "Persevere" and to "Trust and Obey", while trusting that the Holy Spirit is indeed the "Lord and Giver of Life" (Nicene Creed).

Let us remember in all pulpit ministry that faith is prescribed to all sinners as an evangelical condition of the Covenant of Grace. "*Whosoever believes!*" is both the promise and condition.

⁶³ Gentry and Wellum, pgs. 666, 668.

Because of God's good mercy and grace to His elect in Christ, faith is a gift that is given (Eph. 2:8-10). Faith is a working faith, but it is never a work in order to be saved. It is not *"Do this and you shall live"* but rather more graciously and happily *"Live, and do this!"* (or more precisely, *"Whosoever believes in Him shall not be put to shame"*, Rom. 10:11).⁶⁴ Faith alone as an instrument of receiving all of the righteousness of Christ is what God requires of all sinners, yet they are unable apart from the initiating grace and power of God (Eph. 2:1-5; John 6:37, 44). How are sinners to believe? God provides all that He requires of His people because of the grace and work of Christ the Mediator in their behalf.⁶⁵ It is important to note that all of the conditions required of the elect, all of the *"ifs" "ands" and "buts"* (as some of our mothers might use to say!) are given by God in Christ our Mediator. He is our fulness where we are empty; He is our life where we are dead; He is our strong Savior in whatever situation we find ourselves. Yet from the sinners' point of view, it is simply faith required, and the conditions must be met of faith, repentance, and obedience to God.

Anti-Legalism: Covenant as "Friendship" with God

There can be a danger in pulpit ministry of straying into legalism. This can happen when the conditions of the covenant are emphasized more than the great grace of God found in Christ. Legalism can result if the legal aspect of the covenant is overemphasized without the necessary correlative of the beautiful and intimate relationship and friendship with God. The magnanimous gift of God in Christ our Mediator, the love of God as it should be stressed in covenant, keeps us from legalism in the pulpit and pews. As mentioned before, covenant always means a friendship

⁶⁴ Herman Witsius, *Economy of the Covenants between God and Man*, Kindle Edition, Loc. 586.

⁶⁵ See Turretin's fuller explanation of this in Vol. II:17475.

with God. We should keep in mind as ministers Cocceius' teaching about the covenant being essentially "friendship with God"; this can be very helpful and encouraging for believers today. All that we need for life and godliness, all the fullness of grace that believers need, are found in Christ (cf. John 1:16; 2 Peter 1:3-11). And out of His fullness (John 1:16; Col. 1:19; Eph. 3:19), we will serve God gratefully, willingly, and fully as a friend.

Whether believers tend to be on the one hand "right-handed" believers who focus on orthodoxy, knowledge, preciseness in theology, or those who tend toward on the other hand "left-handed" to be focus more on the practice, the practical, the experience, this covenant as friendship reminds us that our God is precise, and we desire to be like Him, but there is also an important relational aspect, as the Risen, Lord Jesus reminds the church at Ephesus in the Book of Revelation. We need not "lose our first love" nor lose our orthodoxy. Though God is our King and Lord, Covenant is relational, and so He is also our dear and beloved Bridegroom and friend. This friendship should be emphasized. His promise is to be "our God" and the "God of our seed". This means to be our friend in a close communion or relationship with us. As the Lord Jesus says:

"You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵ No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you" (ESV John 15:14-15).

Anti-Antinomianism: Covenant as Grateful Obedience to God⁶⁶

Covenant implies that there should be a response of those who are truly covenanted with God from the heart. Against rampant antinomianism that is prevalent in the pews today, causing our congregations to be impure and unlovely, and perhaps tempting Christ to take away some of our

⁶⁶ J. V. Fesko points out that David Dickson said that the chief error of the Remonstrants (Arminians) of the 17th century was their unfamiliarity with the Covenant of Redemption. The same could also be applied to both legalism and antinomianism. See J. V. Fesko, *The Trinity and the Covenant of Redemption*. Christian Focus Publications, 2016. Kindle Edition, Loc. 252.

lampstands (cf. Rev. 2-3), the obligations of the Covenant of Grace should be stressed clearly in light of God's love and friendship. There is a goal, a plan of God for the fullness of the times and that is to make a holy people for a new creation. God has covenanted in Christ to restore humanity to be what it was designed to be: God-worshippers who dwell with Him in happiness and holiness. The Law of God is given to know the righteousness and holiness of God (Rom. 7:12), and to know how God demands His dear people to live. Law simply means to love God and others as ourselves, as our Lord Jesus taught clearly during his earthly ministry (Matt. 22:37-40). Law is the perfect righteousness of God, and we are redeemed in order to demonstrate this love to God and others. In fact, though the Law was powerless to save, and to transform us, yet we have been transformed by the Spirit in order that the "righteous requirements of the Law might be fully met in us who walk not after the flesh but after the Spirit of God" (Rom. 8:3-4; cf. Jer. 31:31-34).

From the pulpit, the moral Law of God, or the obligations of living gratefully for God in covenant must be stressed. There must be an emphasis on both the indicative realities of what God in Christ has done for us, but there also must be an emphasis on the imperative-commands of how we are to be like Christ. Christ is first in priority our Lord and Savior, yet He is also our example for us to imitate. In fact, the covenant signs and seals that God has granted to His people in baptism and the Lord's Supper are to help God's people to have the means of grace, and all the blessed fullness of God in Christ for every need, to be transformed by His grace, and to respond with the obedience of faith, faith working through love, producing good fruits, and adorning the blessed Gospel of God's grace for all the world to see. The congregation of God's people should be a microcosmic mirror of what the new humanity looks like, a foretaste of what the Age to Come in the New Heavens and New Earth will be like. Sin must not be tolerated in our

congregations—we are called to purity and to live as those who are unleavened through the final sacrifice of our beloved Passover Lamb (1 Cor. 5:6-8).

Covenant Corporate and Individual Worship: Fear of the LORD

Communion with and worship of all three Persons of the Godhead, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit should be emphasized. God must be worshipped and glorified. The relationship God has graciously brought us into is so that we might know Him, that we might grow up into Christ our Head, into maturity of faith and works, and to bring glory to God. To be a people of Christ's own possession who are purchased in order to be zealous for good works (Titus 2:11-14). This covenant should be reflected in our individual and corporate communion with God, and be especially focused in our public worship as the people of the Triune God. The Covenant of Grace would give a biblical, inspired order of worship or liturgy, whereby we as God's people could hear from our God in Christ, and respond to Him covenantally, gratefully, obediently as we gather together each Lord's Day in His special presence.

Understanding the Covenant of Grace as both unconditional and conditional, as both unilateral and bilateral in light of the greater Covenant of Redemption, helps to promote a healthy fear of the LORD in the life of God's congregation. A healthy pulpit ministry should place the "gospel threatenings" before the church in covenant with God ("warning...and teaching", cf. Col. 1:28). This will help to produce by God's good Spirit a healthy fear of the LORD. This is the beginning of wisdom, and it is one of the primary works of the Holy Spirit upon His Church. Our covenant privileges as God's people always imply covenant responsibilities as well. As our Great friend, Jehovah (LORD) promised through His prophet Jeremiah:

“I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear me forever, for their own good and the good of their children after them. ⁴⁰ I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them. And I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me” (ESV Jeremiah 32:39-40).

Fear of the LORD is to be in the believer’s hearts; this is at the heart of the Covenant of Grace; this is what defines a true recipient of the God’s covenant in Christ. Fear of the LORD is not servile, slavish fear or dread of God’s condemnation, but rather the honor or reverence of an obedient son to a father. The Fear of the LORD could be summarized as an awe-struck, reverent, grateful obedience, that is lost in the Father’s love as it is revealed in Christ Jesus the Mediator. There are glorious privileges of God’s covenant, but there are duties, nay there are privileges that can be done in the fear of the LORD with delight as His dear children who “dread offending Him worse than death”!⁶⁷

Covenant Corporate and Individual Worship: Discipline

Covenant has implications for the important need of discipline in our church. Covenant reminds God’s people that we are a corporate people, and a little leaven leavens the whole lump. The sin causes uncleanness to the whole congregation and must be purged out. God’s covenant is to make not merely individuals holy, but to be the place wherein the Triune God makes His holy home with His people as the God with us, for us, and in us. God makes us His treasured possession in order that we be holy as He is holy and to let our lights shine before the world, showing forth to others what it looks like to be recreated in Christ, being restored in His image, and delighting in our duties as God’s children as He has commanded us, enjoying communion and worship of God as we were designed and created and built to do. Enjoying freedom from the

⁶⁷ John Calvin wrote in his first catechism about fear of the LORD: “True piety consists in a sincere feeling which loves God as Father as much as it fears and reverences Him as Lord, embraces His righteousness, and dreads offending Him worse than death.” See I. J. Hesselink, *Calvin’s First Catechism: A Commentary*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox), 46-47.

slavery of sin, the freedom from condemnation that hangs over this present age and world, and the freedom that comes from not being fearful of death, hell and devil because of the victory of Jesus Christ on our behalf. Sin is not to be tolerated. We are a holy people in covenant-friendship with God.

Because there are laws and obedience required, and conditions that God has commanded in the Covenant of Grace, we should never think these are part of the Covenant of Works or what some will snidely refer to as “legalism”. Rather, the obligation, and gracious commands of God, the law that is revealed holiness and righteousness, the very way man was created to live, are all part of the response true believers make in reliance upon God’s grace.

Conclusion

Though we see in the historical outworking of progressive redemptive history what appears to be conditions in the Covenant of Grace, these conditions are all graciously provided powerfully by the Triune God in Christ before the foundation of the world. This pre-temporal Triune, Eternal Covenant of Redemption clarifies what appears to be conditions and demonstrates the glorious sovereignty, and steadfast love of God the Creator and Redeemer who unconditionally elects a people in Christ, provides the way for them to be holy in Him, to possess all of the equipment for entering the covenant and remaining in it in Christ Jesus, and enduring to the end, all through the working of the Triune God. And all this is all to the praise of His glorious grace!

“Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant,²¹ equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen” (^{ESV} Hebrews 13:20-21).

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