

Doctrine of Three Great Covenants

Covenant of Works * Covenant of Grace * Covenant of Redemption

1. In the *New Testament* the word translated most often “*covenant*” is *diatheke*, which is not the usual Greek word for covenant. The normal word is *suntheke*. The question arises as to why the usage of *diatheke*.
2. Though *diatheke* includes the idea of a contract it does place emphasis on the *disposition* of those making the agreement whereas *suntheke* emphasizes the legality of the contract. “*The idea that the priority belongs to God in the establishment of the covenant, and that He sovereignly imposes (monopleuric, not dipleuric which denotes a mutual voluntary agreement) His covenant on man was absent from the usual Greek word*” (Louis Berkhof).
3. The concept of a covenant developed in history long before the actual usage of the word in the revelation of redemption.
4. Before God established His covenant with Noah and with Abraham He made two covenants with Adam.
5. Reformed Theologians call the first the Covenant of Works. Matthew Henry calls it the Covenant of Innocency. It could also be called a Covenant of Obedience. The second is called The Covenant of Redemption.
 - *Genesis 2:15 And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the Garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it. 16 And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: 17 But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.*
 - *Genesis 3:15 And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.*
6. In this Covenant of Works “*man’s continuing in a happy life is promised, upon condition of perfect personal obedience, to be done by him out of his own natural strength bestowed upon him at creation*” (David Dickson).
7. The promise of a happy life is implied by the negative threat of death for disobedience. Genesis 3:17b “*in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.*”
8. Adam and Eve accepted the terms of the Covenant of Works. They gave a formal consent that death should be the proper penalty if they were to disobey reflected in the conversation of Eve with the serpent.
 - *Genesis 3:2 And the woman said unto the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden: 3 But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die.*

9. Once the terms of the Covenant of Works were violated by Adam God honored His part of the Covenant agreement and man died.

- *Romans 5:12 Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned:*

10. Because the Covenant of Works had no provision for redemption (for none was needed), God established another covenant with man which Reformed theologians call the Covenant of Grace.

11. This Covenant of Grace is the visible manifestation of an eternal over arching Covenant of Redemption made between the Father and the Son in eternity past.

12. All the elements of an eternal Covenant of Redemption are present:

- ◆ contracting parties,
- ◆ a promise or promises,
- ◆ and a condition.

13. In Psalm 2:7-9 the parties are mentioned and a promise is indicated.

- *Psalm 2:7 I will declare the decree: the LORD hath said unto me, Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee. 8 Ask of me, and I shall give thee the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession. 9 Thou shalt break them with a rod of iron; thou shalt dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.*

14. In simple language, in the Covenant of Redemption made between God the Father and God the Son before the foundation of the world it was decreed that

- there would be a creation,
- there would be a Fall,
- but, after the Fall there would be gathered a people to be given to the Son for an inheritance. The number of this elect people would come from the heathen nations of the earth.

John 6:37 All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.

Rev 14:6 And I saw another angel fly in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach unto them that dwell on the earth, and to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people,

Revelation 5:9 And they sung a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation;

15. In the eternal Covenant of Redemption, Christ is pre-eminent and holds a two-fold position.
- ◆ Christ is Surety (Greek, *egguos*). A surety is one who becomes legally responsible that all contractual obligations of another will be met. *“In the Covenant of Redemption Christ undertook to atone for the sins of His people by bearing the necessary punishment, and to meet the demands of the law for them”* (L. Berkhof). *Hebrews 7:22 By so much was Jesus made a surety of a better testament.*
 - ◆ Christ is Head. By *“taking the place of delinquent man Christ became the last Adam, and is as such also the Head of the Covenant, the Representative of all those whom the Father has given Him. In the covenant of Redemption then, Christ is both Surety and Head”* (L. Berkhof).
16. Concerning the function of a surety. In Roman law there were two kinds of surety.
- ◆ *Fidejussor*. This function of a surety was conditional. Only if the person could not render legal satisfaction would the surety be held responsible.
 - ◆ *Expromissor*. This function of a surety was unconditional. Rather than wait for an uncertain outcome the surety would immediately assume all legal obligations thereby relieving the guilty part of his responsibility at once.
17. Some theologians believe that the Old Testament saints enjoyed no complete forgiveness of sins.
- *Romans 3:25 Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission (paresis, not aphasis) of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God;*
- Special Note.*
- The word *paresis* is used, not because the individual believers in the Old Testament failed to receive complete forgiveness of sins but because during the old dispensation the forgiveness of sins assumed the form of a *paresis*, as long as sin had not been adequately punished in Christ, and the absolute righteousness of Christ had not been revealed in the Cross (L. Berkhof).
18. Others believe that Jesus unconditionally took upon Himself the burden to render satisfaction for His people and therefore became a Surety in the specific sense of an *Expromissor*.
- ◆ **Argument.** Old Testament believers received full justification or forgiveness, though the knowledge of it was not as full and clear as it is in the New Testament dispensation.

- ◆ There was and is no essential difference between the status of the Old Testament believers and the New Testament saints.
 - *Psalm 32:1 Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.*
 - *Psalm 32:2 Blessed is the man unto whom the LORD imputeth not iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no guile.*
 - *Psalm 32:5 I acknowledged my sin unto thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the LORD; and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin. Selah.*
 - *Psalm 51:1 Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions. 2 Wash me thoroughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. 3 For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me.*
 - *Psalm 51:9 Hide thy face from my sins, and blot out all mine iniquities. 10 Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me. 11 Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy Holy Spirit from me.*
 - *Psalm 103:3 Who forgiveth all thine iniquities; who healeth all thy diseases;*
 - *Psalm 103:12 As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us.*
 - *Isa 43:25 I, even I, am he that blotteth out thy transgressions for mine own sake, and will not remember thy sins.*
 - *Romans 3:3 For what if some did not believe? Shall their unbelief make the faith of God without effect?*
 - *Galatians 3:6 Even as Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness. 7 Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham. 8 And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed. 9 So then they which be of faith are blessed with faithful Abraham.*
- ◆ In no way did Christ ever become a conditional Surety, as if it were still possible that the sinner should pay for himself. God's provision for the redemption of sinners is absolute (L. Berkhof).

19. The Character of the Eternal Covenant. For Christ it was still a Covenant of Works. In other words, though the Father had agreed to give to the Son precious souls based upon blood redemption, the Son Himself had to keep the original demands of obedience. *“As the last Adam Christ obtains eternal life for sinners in reward for faithful obedience, and not at all as an unmerited gift of grace”* (L. Berkhof).
- *Romans 5:19 For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous.*
20. In all of this discussion it is instructive to remember that the Covenant of Works has never been terminated. If a person were to perfectly obey God in word, thought, and deed, the argument could be made that such a person would not be in need of redemption. Certainly there would be no basis of condemnation.
21. The validity of this consideration is found in the fact that even fallen men invite to be judged on the basis of their works and the Lord does just that.
- *Revelation 20:11 And I saw a great white throne, and him that sat on it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away; and there was found no place for them. 12 And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God; and the books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life: and the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works. 13 And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and hell delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works.*
22. Fallen men reflect in their religious activity a natural striving to return to the covenant of works naturally engrafted into the heart by way of creation (Rom. 2:14). Of course, this is not possible. All men can do is to strive and in the striving pervert the covenant of works. In the perversion men make a counterfeit ‘bastard covenant of works.’
23. When men place their confidence of salvation in their works, God is displeased. However, good works in and of themselves do not displease God.