

No.16, God's Eternal Purpose & the Covenant of Grace

In the course of a number of recent studies we have been focusing on the issue of God's eternal purpose with regard to the salvation of sinners. From all eternity God purposed to save sinners; and then in time He executes that eternal purpose so that His elect are brought into a state of grace.

In our last study certain questions were posed in order to see something of the nature of God's eternal purpose to save –

1. Who actually saves sinners?
2. How does God save sinners?
3. Who are the objects of God's saving grace?

The basic response to these questions is that God saves men by working directly and immediately in their hearts; and that this saving work was purchased for and applied to those whom the Lord purposed to save – His elect.

In Church history the eternal purpose of God to save sinners has always been presented by Biblical and orthodox teachers as being within the framework of the covenant of grace. This position is simply presented in our Shorter Catechism in the answer to Q.10 – *Did God leave all mankind to perish in the estate of sin and misery?* “God having, out of His mere good pleasure, from all eternity, elected some to everlasting life, did enter into a covenant of grace, to deliver them out of the estate of sin and misery, and to bring them into an estate of salvation by a Redeemer.”

In other words, according to God's eternal purpose to bring sinners into a state of grace or of salvation is accomplished on the basis of this covenant of grace. While it is not within the scope of this study to focus on the subject of this covenant, yet it is essential to make some necessary points since men are brought into a state of grace on the basis of the covenant of grace.

Protestant theologians have often spoken of the covenant as the *Evangelical Covenant of Mercy*. In the sovereign mercy of God provision was made for the salvation of a great multitude of humanity, hence the Evangelical Covenant of Mercy.

The Evangelical Covenant has two aspects. First, the aspect of redemption. This aspect of the Covenant of Mercy presents the view of Christ covenanting with the Father to fulfil all of the obligations of the Covenant of Works. This included, not only perfect obedience to the law which Adam failed to give, but it also involved suffering the penalty incurred by Adam's sin, the penalty of death.

The other aspect of the evangelical covenant -- the aspect of grace -- naturally follows on from the aspect of redemption: the grace extended toward sinners in the Gospel covenant is no more and no less than the application of the redemptive work of Christ. For this reason, Christ Himself is the great connecting link between Redemption and Grace in this Evangelical Covenant. Therefore, the Covenant of Grace must always be viewed in light of the centrality of Christ. The difference between the two aspects of the Evangelical Covenant -- redemption and grace -- is simply whether we view Christ standing for His people in purchasing redemption for them, or whether we view His people as they stand in the grace of Christ procured for them in redemption.

In the light of all these facts the best way to understand the Covenant of Grace is by exploring the place of Christ in all of the facets of that covenant. The true nature of the Covenant of Grace can be defined as follows -- it is a sovereign application to the elect of the grace purchased by, embodied in, and administered through the Lord Jesus Christ. This definition gives a clear summary of the role of Christ in this covenant.

**1. The grace of the covenant was purchased by Christ.**

In the redemptive aspect of the evangelical covenant, Christ and His people are in union with each other, so that Christ acts as their Substitute. By His substitutionary work He has provided grace for sinners. No grace could ever be bestowed on a sinner except upon the basis of Christ's substitutionary work by which He merits grace for them.

See Is. 42: 6 -- Christ Himself is called *a covenant* and is “given” to sinners; i.e., to fulfill all of their obligations due to their sin. As a consequence, they are graciously delivered as v.7 shows. See Isaiah 49: 8, 9.

See Luke 22: 29 -- the basis upon which Christ appoints or covenants to give His people a kingdom, is the Father having appointed or covenanted to give Him a kingdom for the fulfillment of the redemptive work of the Cross.

See Gal 3: 13 -- Christ became a curse in our stead that “the blessing of Abraham” (covenant blessing) “the promise of the Spirit” might be the portion of sinners, v.14.

In the light of all these Scriptures the grace of the covenant is based on the meritorious work of Christ in His redemptive sufferings. This is clearly seen in Scripture in the concept of “the blood of the covenant.” Matt 26: 28, “*This is my blood of the new testament.*” There is no escape for man from the debt of the Covenant of Works but by the shedding of covenant blood, the blood of Christ. This is vividly portrayed in the O.T ceremonies and is fully revealed in the N.T fulfillment through Christ's death. Scripture is replete with references to the blood appeasing wrath, cleansing from sin, and purchasing all spiritual blessings.

## 2. The grace of the covenant is embodied in Christ

Christ Himself is the sum and substance of all the blessings and promises of the Covenant of Grace. Since He has purchased them by the shedding of His blood, He is God's covenant gift to sinners. When a sinner has Christ he has life; he has all of the blessings promised by God from all eternity. 1 John 5:12, "*He that hath the Son hath life.*" Note again Isaiah 42: 6; 49: 8 where the Father tells the Son that He has given Him "for a covenant of the people." Behind this language is the truth that the only way in which sinners could have a covenant relationship with God is for Him to give them a covenant; the essence of which is to be given a covenant Head, which is to be given Christ Himself Who is the Head, Surety, and Mediator of the covenant.

Thus in all ages, Christ is the embodiment of all spiritual blessings. Eph 3: 11 -- Paul asserts that God's "eternal purpose" was "purposed *in* Christ Jesus our Lord." Thus, as the covenant of grace is progressively revealed throughout Scripture, there is simultaneously a progressive revelation of Christ. J.C. Ryle -- "*In every part of both Testaments Christ is to be found -- dimly and indistinctly at the beginning -- more clearly and plainly in the middle -- fully and completely at the end -- but really and substantially everywhere.*"

Note the following examples:

- (a) Christ crucified was set forth in every O.T. sacrifice. 1Pet 3: 18. An unmeaning slaughter of innocent beasts could not please God; there had to be a distinct object in view -- the sacrificial sufferings of the Redeemer.
- (b) It was Christ to Whom Abel looked when he offered the "better" sacrifice. Heb 11: 4 -- Abel showed his knowledge of the vicarious sacrifice and of the need to trust in atoning blood.
- (c) It was Christ Who was set forth in the daily miracles performed before Israel in the wilderness. Pillar of cloud and fire to guide them; the daily manna to feed them; the water from the rock to quench their thirst.
- (d) It was Christ Who was typified by the judges and kings. All were raised up by the Lord to be emblems of Christ the Great Deliverer.
- (e) The prophets from Isaiah to Malachi dwelt on Christ's sufferings and glory, 1Pet 1: 10, 11.
- (f) Then in the N.T. Christ is everywhere. Living, speaking, acting in the Gospels; preached and proclaimed in Acts; explained and expounded in the epistles. From first to last Christ is all!

Thus, from the outset of Divine Revelation, Christ is prefigured, foreshadowed, typified, predicted, written of, & adored. He is revealed as Prophet, Priest, & King. His work is set forth clearly and unmistakably in the sacrificial system, in the lives of many individuals. So Christ is the embodiment of the covenant -- He is given for a covenant to the elect

## 3. The grace of the covenant is administered through Christ

Christ is the administrator of the Covenant of Grace in that He applies the fruit of His work to His people. Bestowing the blessings of the Covenant upon His elect is a responsibility that belongs to Christ as Mediator and to Him alone. For this reason He is called the *Messenger of the Covenant* -- Mal 3: 1. He brings to fallen men the message of grace and in this way, through Christ grace is mediated to the elect. See John 17: 2 -- Christ's authority to give eternal life to sinners. Throughout this great prayer in John 17, the Lord demonstrates that He is responsible for the eternal welfare of His people -- v.v. 6, 8, 9, 12, 14, 19 - 22. See also John 6: 37-40; 10: 11, 15-18, 28. These verses indicate that Christ personally administers the grace of the covenant to each one of His chosen people.

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