

Covenant of Grace – Intrinsic Biblical Reality or Contrived Doctrinal Rationale?

A question having been raised recently concerning the validity of the term “covenant of grace” and more specifically whether the term “covenant” can be applied properly (i.e., Biblically) to the relations within the Godhead in the eternal purpose to redeem men, it seemed appropriate to re-examine the Biblical data concerning the term covenant, the nature of covenants in general, and the accuracy of its application to God’s determinations for the salvation of sinners. This review is not intended to survey the use of the term in the wider context of what is generally described as “covenant theology” or the validity of that theological position especially in matters controverted between pædobaptists and credobaptists. The issue at hand being the use of the term itself, this study deliberately confines itself within the narrow limits of an adjudication of that matter alone.

It had been suggested in the original discussion of the question that the term covenant of grace, or more exactly its application to the Godhead, is of “recent vintage,” at least in the context of the chronology of historical theology, having been minted, as was posited, in those heady days of robust Presbyterianism that marked the Reformation and Puritan eras. Whatever (or whenever) its origins may be, no one surely would argue that the term “covenant” is found copiously throughout the inspired record, and in fact, forms the foundation of that phrase used to describe the two major divisions of Scripture – what we today call the Old and New Testaments is derived from the term that literally means “covenant.”

Yet, while acknowledging that the term and the doctrine received fuller exposition during the Reformation and Puritan eras, it was by no means absent from the writings of even the earliest of the church fathers. The anonymously authored *Epistle of Barnabas*,¹ Justin Martyr,² Irenaeus,³ Clement of Alexandria,⁴ and, of course, Augustine,⁵ with many others, made repeated reference to God’s covenants, with specific notice given to that covenant by which men are brought into redemptive union with God through Christ. Significantly, John Chrysostom contrasts the Old Covenant (ἡ Παλαιά – “the” Old one) with the “covenant of grace” (ἡ χάρις) in his Homilies on Galatians.⁶ The argument then that this term is of relatively modern origin cannot be sustained.

Surveying the Scripture text itself, in our English Bible the term covenant is found twenty-five times in the book of Genesis alone, and 255 more times in the remainder of

¹ *The Epistle of Barnabas*, 125-126, Ante-Nicene Christian Library, vol.1, eds. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (Edinburgh, 1867).

² *Writings of Justin Martyr and Athenagoras*, 140.

³ Irenaeus, *Adversus Hæreses*, ANCL vol. 4, eds. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (Edinburgh 1868), 5.1ff and 25.1.3.

⁴ Clement, *Stromata*, IV.17.487. *The Writings of Clement of Alexandria*, 2 vols. trs. W. Wilson, ANCL, vol. 4, eds. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, (Edinburgh, 1867–1869).

⁵ Augustine, *De Catechizandis Rudibus liber unus*, 96, trs. J.P. Christopher (Washington, 1926), and, *Enchiridion On Faith, Hope, and Love*, IX.30–32, ed. A.C. Outler, LCC VII (London, 1955).

⁶ *Patrologiæ cursus completus*, vol. 61, ed. Migne, Jacques-Paul (Paris, 1859), 620.

the inspired record. It is incontrovertible then that the word itself is a soundly Biblical one. But perhaps a keen intellect may raise the objection: “Yes, that is the term in English, but what of the original languages, Hebrew and Greek? Do they contain such words and is the rendering of them into English a faithful translation of them?” To answer that question immediate recourse must be had to the original languages, and both linguistic and etymological evidence must be submitted for examination.

Since most readers will not have expertise in the original languages, other witnesses, those with recognized credentials and long experience, will give testimony to the matter. Dr. James Strong in his exhaustive concordance identifies one Hebrew word, transliterated *berith* (pronounced “bereeth”), as that which is consistently translated “covenant” in the English version. The Puritan, John Ball, in his extensive work concerning the covenants, well summarizes the etymology:

The word translated Covenant, some derive of another that signifies to choose or to eat, because usually they had a feast at the making of Covenants; or it is a thing which two choose and of which they mutually agree and promise betwixt themselves, *although the word be used when one alone doth promise with a simple promise* (emphasis added)... Others derive it of a root that importeth to cut, divide, or smite, which being joined to the word Covenant signifieth to make or strike covenant or agreement.⁷

Ball’s analysis is supported by Dr. Strong, who refers *berith* to a root *barah* (“bawraw”), to which is assigned the meanings: choose, (cause to) eat, manifest, (give) meat.

In the New Testament, the English word covenant translates the Greek *diatheke* (“diathaykay”). This use of *diatheke* comes into the New Testament from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, where it is invariably the term used for God’s making of an “agreement” with man. (This is significant, because there was another, similar Greek word, *suntheke*, that *could* have been used, and was used in certain constructions, specifically to describe covenants between those who were equals.⁸)

The astute reader may here pause to raise the objection that this description of the Greek terms settles the matter. Had there been indeed a covenant among the Godhead, wouldn’t the word *suntheke* be used in the New Testament text to identify such an arrangement – an arrangement between absolute equals? Perhaps...but it will be best to leave the jury “out” on this matter until all the evidence has been considered.

⁷ Ball, John. *A Treatise of the Covenant of Grace*. London: G. Miller for Edward Brewster, 1645, 1.

⁸ “[W]here the *berith* is made between man and man and consists in a mutual agreement, the translators do not employ *διαθηκη* but *συνθηκη*, a word exactly corresponding to the word covenant; on the other hand, where the *berith* lies between God and man, even though it possesses equally the character of a mutual agreement, they never employ *συνθηκη* but always *διαθηκη*.” Geerhardus Vos. *Hebrews, the Epistle of the Diatheke*. The Princeton Theological Review Vol. 13 No. 4 (1915), 587-632.

As noted above, the use of *diatheke* as the Greek equivalent for the Hebrew *berith* sheds much light on its later use by the inspired human authors of the New Testament. While the Septuagint has no claim to inspiration and therefore infallibility, nevertheless, the Holy Spirit made use of several Old Testament texts from the Septuagint in the writings of the apostles. Thus, to fully understand its use in the New Testament context it is necessary to have some understanding of its “meaning” in the Septuagint, and specific to this study, how *diatheke* is understood as the best word to translate *berith*.

Geerhardus Vos, professor of theology at Calvin Theological Seminary (1888 – 1892) and Princeton University (1892 – 1932), provides important insight into the use of the term *berith*:

The sense of "contract," "agreement" does not belong to the essence of the *berith*-conception at all. This does not mean that sometimes in the Old Testament the *berith* does not appear in the form of an "agreement" between parties and that this may not be an important feature theologically considered. It only means that even in such cases what constitutes the agreement in a *berith* is not the two-sidedness but something else which equally well can appear where there is no compact at all. *This essential element is the absolute confirmation of the arrangement by means of a religious sanction or ceremony; in other words it is the introduction of the divine factor securing stability that gives to the berith its specific character* (emphasis added). This is so in the secular *berith* between man and man; but it is from the nature of the case more emphatically so when God is one of the parties entering into an arrangement with man. The circumstance that, in virtue of its *berith*-character the arrangements must derive its security not from man but from God, has for its necessary result that God, where He Himself enters as a party, acquires in the transaction a monergistic preponderance which from the outset excludes any idea that He parleyed and contractually negotiated with man in a manner derogatory to His divine position. It thus appears that even where there is a reciprocal relationship the *berith*-aspect of it is the very aspect that keeps it within the bounds of religious dignity and decorum. However bilateral the arrangement may be in its outcome, to God alone belongs the prerogative of initiating it and with Him alone lies the right of determining its content. God never deliberates or bargains with man as to the terms of the *berith* He condescends to enter into...The characterization of the Old Testament God as a God making contracts...derives its main support from the rendering "covenant"...[Yet, i]f regard is had, not to the modern associations of the word "covenant" but to the actual nature of the Biblical *berith* as ascertained by induction, no ground for criticism on that score exists.⁹

⁹ Vos, Geerhardus. *Hebrews, the Epistle of the Diatheke*. The Princeton Theological Review Vol. 13 No. 4 (1915), pp. 587-632.

Vos goes on to an examination of *diatheke* as a translation of *berith*, noting that *diatheke* is a noun derived from the Greek verb *diatithesthai*, a middle voice verb (connoting reflexive action) which has as its meaning “to order or dispose of for one’s self.” This being its root Vos concludes, “The etymology of the noun διαθηκη is so perspicuous that it could never be entirely detached from its parent-stock still living with unimpaired vigor in the verb. A διαθηκη is so clearly the result of διατιθεσθαι that whatever the latter signified, the former also must have remained capable of signifying anew when occasion called for it.”¹⁰

These extended quotes from Dr. Vos make clear this primary thought: that both *berith* and *diatheke*, with their English counterpart “covenant,” must not be freighted with the baggage of modern understandings, especially popular understandings, of the term, but must be understood in their Biblical context and with the Biblical import given them by the Holy Spirit through the inspired writers. That context and import, according to Vos is, “the introduction of the divine factor securing stability.” If Vos’ analysis is correct that this is the emphasis the sacred writers give to the term, then it cannot be justly claimed that the Godhead is somehow denigrated by the use of the term “covenant” as though engaging in “negotiated agreements.”

What has this to do with the application (and applicability) of the term to the Godhead? By setting the term in its Biblical framework and understanding, Vos demonstrates that a covenant, specifically one in which Jehovah is concerned, carries in its meaning this principal idea of guaranteed permanence and performance – a guarantee founded upon the everlasting nature of Jehovah Himself. More than a half-century earlier, Baptist theologian Dr. John Leadley Dagg would succinctly state this similar conclusion: “The fullness of the Godhead dwells in each of the divine persons, *and renders the fulfillment of the covenant infallibly sure* (emphasis added) in all its stipulations.”¹¹ This seminal idea will show its significance farther along.

But after all, these are the opinions essentially of one theologian (though scores of other scholars concur in the analysis, e.g., Louis Berkhof,¹² Herman Ridderbos,¹³ John Ball,¹⁴ Francis Turretin,¹⁵ John Owen,¹⁶ Herman Witsius,¹⁷ John Gill,¹⁸ and J. L. Dagg¹⁹ to name but a few). Is there any Biblical confirmation of his analysis or can it be demonstrated by

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Dagg, John Leadley. *Manual of Theology and Church Order*, IV, 7, 255. Harrisonburg, VA: Gano Books (reprint of 1857 edition), 1982.

¹² Berkhof, Louis. *Systematic Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1949, 262-263.

¹³ Ridderbos, Herman. *The Epistle of Paul to the Churches of Galatia*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1953, 130-131.

¹⁴ *A Treatise of the Covenant of Grace*, 2-3.

¹⁵ Turretin, Francis. *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*. II, 12, 170-171. trs. George M. Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1994.

¹⁶ Owen, John. *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*. II, 28, 78-81. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1980.

¹⁷ Witsius, Herman. *The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man*. I, 1, I, 45. trs. William Crookshank. Escondido, CA: The den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1990.

¹⁸ Gill, John. *Body of Divinity*. II, 7, 214-215. Atlanta, GA: Turner Lassetter, 1965.

¹⁹ *Manual of Theology and Church Order*, IV, 2, 144-145.

the textual data that this “interpretation” is valid? Further, what evidence is there that a “covenant” – a *berith*, a *diatheke* – exists among the persons of the Godhead, since the linguistic evidence given above has in view primarily the covenantal relationship between God and man? Answers to these questions will form the bulk of the remaining pages of this analysis.

Thus far the data have shown that the term covenant is a valid (Biblical) one and that it may be, and is, appropriately applied to the arrangements God has been pleased to enter into with men *concerning salvation*. The final words of the previous sentence are emphasized as a critical reminder that God’s covenants with man as revealed in the sacred record always have as their primary focus man’s redemption. Issues of “covenant theology” (as it relates to membership in the visible church) aside, no divine covenant in Scripture addresses any mundane matter that cannot be immediately traced back to the outworking of God’s purposes in redemption. Jehovah’s covenants with men all partake of this singular feature, that they establish some further aspect of His purposes in redeeming grace, culminating in what is called by the Lord Jesus Himself, the New Covenant.

If that is the case, and a diligent perusal of each of the sublapsarian covenants beginning with the Noahic gives ample testimony to this fact, then it stands to reason that a covenant among the persons of the Godhead would as well inexorably concern this eternally important matter...*if such a covenant exists...*

Another introductory matter requires exposition – the meaning of the term “covenant of grace.” If the phrase is found to be misused or misapplied, then the concept itself is liable to be mired in obscurity or perhaps rejected out of misunderstanding. To say that the term itself is misused (disused!) and misunderstood in our modern religious environment is to speak in grand understatements! R. B. C. Howell, writing more than a century ago well expresses the precipitous decline in his own day of a proper understanding of the covenantal idea in Scripture generally. “[B]y whom among us are the different covenants clearly understood? To most men, you only need to speak on this subject, and you at once perceive that ‘Even unto this day, the veil is upon their heart’ (2 Corinthians 3:15). They fail to perceive what the covenants are in themselves, in their relations to each other, and consequently in their bearings upon the designs of God in the Redeemer. This darkness is lamentable in all its aspects, since falling short of the knowledge of these – ‘the rudiments of the doctrine of Christ’ – obscurity must necessarily rest upon the whole Gospel system.”²⁰ If it was appallingly so then, how much more does the church in the new millennium, with its disdain for theological precision and emphasis upon subjectivism, suffer from self-imposed ignorance on this sublime theme? Returning, however, to the last matter raised, how is the sincere Bible student to understand this term “covenant of grace”?

No more succinct description by way of contrast can be given for this phrase than by G.S. Bishop, when he wrote, “It is clear that there can be but two and only two covenants

²⁰ Howell, Robert Boyte Crawford. *The Covenants*. Richmond, VA: James. Williams & Gitsinger, 1855. in *The Cross & The Covenants*, Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, II, 1.

possible between God and men – a covenant founded upon *what man shall do* for salvation; and a covenant founded upon *what God shall do for him* to save him: in other words, a Covenant of Works and one of Grace.”²¹ That there was with Adam a covenant of works any careful student of Scripture cannot deny. That Adam broke this covenant and incurred all the curses pronounced upon his transgression is evident from the entire subsequent characterization of Scripture concerning our first parent. That the whole of the human race is involved in and guilty by Adam’s transgression only the most foolhardy Biblical skeptic would gainsay. Thus, that it is an eternal impossibility for man to be saved now on the grounds of another covenant of works is an inescapable conclusion. These premises being established, then only one means of salvation is possible to men who “like *Adam* have transgressed the covenant,” (Hosea 6:7), and that is by *a covenant founded upon what God shall do for him to save him*, i.e., a covenant of grace.

Thomas Boston, describing this covenant of grace, magnifies its divine character. “The *substance* of it...[is] a building of *mercy* for sinners of mankind, who were laid in ruins by the breach of the first covenant. This is the *new* building which free grace set on foot for us; into which they that believe are instantly, thereupon received, and where, once received, they shall dwell *for ever*; a *building of mercy*, in which every stone, from the bottom to the top, from the foundation-stone to the cope-stone, is pure *mercy*, rich and free mercy to us.”²² John Ball takes up a similar theme when he notes, “The Covenant of works is of justice, the Covenant of grace is of grace and mercy...in the Covenant of Grace he gives the reward of mere and rich grace, and that to the creature which hath deserved Hell.”²³ It is thus defined by its distinction from the covenant of works, i.e., the requirement of “do and live” (Gal. 3:12) set against the “I wills” of Jehovah (Jer. 31:33-34) in this better covenant. Francis Turretin provides yet further clarification when he adverts, “this covenant is called ‘the covenant of grace’ both causally because it proceeds from grace...and materially because all things in this covenant are gratuitous...and finally because by it God wished to manifest the riches of his grace.”²⁴

It is also designated in Scripture by terms such as the “covenant of peace” (Ezek. 34:25, 37:26), the “covenant of life” (Mal. 2:5), the “holy covenant” (Luke 1:72), and the “everlasting covenant” (Isa. 55:3). Each of these terms displays a facet of the diamond that is the covenant of grace. If it be objected that these are all Biblical terms, whereas “covenant of grace” is merely a theological convention, then we must also discard the term “trinity” from our theological vocabulary on the very same grounds. Further, it cannot be but that peace, life, holiness, and eternal blessedness come, ever as now, to the fallen descendants of fallen Adam by one, and only one, means – grace. As clearly pointed out by the theologians quoted just above, if we receive anything from God other than deserved justice, it will be in the way of “pure mercy, rich and free,” and “mere and rich grace” alone. Who then can truly object to the summing up of all these Biblical descriptions of this covenant in the comprehensive term “covenant of grace”?

²¹ Bishop, George Sayles. *Grace in Galatians*. New York, NY: Gospel Publishing House, 1913, 72.

²² Boston, Thomas. *A View of the Covenant of Grace*. Philadelphia, PA: Towar & Hogan, 1827, 10.

²³ *Treatise of the Covenant of Grace*, 15-16.

²⁴ *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, II, 12, 172.

Beyond this distinction between works and grace, this covenant may be further defined. Writing of the covenants of the Old Testament, Arthur Pink notes:

God made covenants with Noah, Abraham, David; but were they, as fallen creatures, able to enter into covenant with their august and holy Maker? Were they able to stand for themselves, or be sureties for others? The very question answers itself... Those subordinate covenants were nothing more or less than the Lord's making manifest, in an especial and public manner, *the grand covenant* (emphasis added): making known something of its glorious contents, confirming their own personal interest in it, and assuring them that Christ, the great covenant head, should be of themselves and spring from their seed.

This is what accounts for that singular expression which occurs so frequently in Scripture: "Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your seed after you" (Gen. 9:9). Yet there follows no mention of any conditions, or work to be done by them: only a promise of unconditional blessings. And why? Because the "conditions" were to be fulfilled and the "work" was to be done by Christ, and nothing remained but to bestow the blessings on His people... Hence it is that when the apostle Paul refers to the various covenants which God had made with men in Old Testament times, he styles them not "covenants of *stipulations*" but "covenants of *promise*" (Eph 2:12)... [E]ach of those covenants consisted of gracious promises *ratified by sacrifice* (Gen. 8:20; 9:9; 15:9-11, 18). Thus, those covenants were so many intimations of that method of mercy which took its rise in the eternal counsels of the divine mind.²⁵

Thus, Pink demonstrates that the temporal covenants are manifestations, illustrations of this one great covenant upon which all spiritual blessings to fallen men depend. These "covenants of promise" clearly point the way back to the covenant promise first revealed to man even as the curses pronounced on Adam's transgression were being executed – "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." Gen. 3:15. They reveal in portrait the only channel through which man's reconciliation to his offended Judge will be accomplished – Jehovah's condescending *covenant* grace!

Before concluding these thoughts it is necessary to consider one other matter, lest a charge of concealment of certain facts be leveled. Theologians, at least those of a more meticulous and precise strain, have sometimes differed as to whether there is a distinction between a covenant of grace and a covenant within the Godhead that established the Son as Head and Savior (Eph. 5:23). Dr. Owen exemplifies well those who take the affirmative: "we must distinguish between the covenant made *with men concerning*

²⁵ *The Divine Covenants*, 16-17.

Christ, and the covenant that he *made with his Son concerning men.*” The first, Owen says, “is commonly called the covenant of grace.” The second is “the personal compact that was between the Father and the Son before the world was.”²⁶ Yet the learned Dr. Gill just as unequivocally states, “[T]here is but one covenant of grace, and not two, in which the Head and Members, the Redeemer and the persons to be redeemed, Christ and the elect, are concerned...What is called a covenant of redemption, is a covenant of grace, arising from the grace of the Father who proposed to His Son to be the Redeemer, and from the grace of the Son who agreed to be so...wherefore there can be no foundation for such a distinction between a covenant of redemption in eternity and a covenant of grace in time.”²⁷ Should these positions seem to be at first glance contradictory, Turretin offers timely assistance in resolving this apparent difference.

“It seems superfluous to inquire...whether this covenant was made with Christ as one of the contracting parties and in him with all his seed...or whether the covenant was made in Christ with all the seed so that he does not so much hold the relation of a contracting party as of Mediator, who stands between those at variance for the purpose of reconciling them...because it amounts to the same thing. It is certain that a twofold pact must be attended to here, or the two parts and degrees of one and the same pact. The former is the agreement between the Father and the Son to carry out the work of redemption. The latter is that which God makes with the elect in Christ, to save them by and on account of Christ under the conditions of faith and repentance. The former was made with the surety and head for the salvation of the members; the latter was made with the members in the head and surety.”²⁸

Thus, the distinctions made by some, explains Turretin, are rather systematic than absolute, a condescension to our need to arrange such matters consecutively due to the frailty of our limited understanding of the infinite Mind rather than any real separation of decrees in Him to whom are “known all his works from the beginning.” Thomas Boston nearly echoes Turretin’s judgment when he writes, “[T]he covenant of redemption and the covenant of grace are but two names of one and the same...covenant under different considerations.”²⁹

Combining, then, all the facts of language, history, etymology, and biblical theology that have been expounded to this point, a fuller definition now can be offered. *The covenant of grace is the expression of Jehovah’s eternal purpose consisting in an ordered disposition made by Him alone and for His glory respecting the redemption of men fallen in time in Adam’s transgression, secured by the infinitude, eternity, and omnipotence of His Being, ratified in the sacrifice of the Son on the behalf of such fallen ones, all which is initiated, sustained, and completed through His mere, free mercy, by which He*

²⁶ *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, II, 28, 78.

²⁷ *Body of Divinity*, II, 7, 217.

²⁸ *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, II, 12, 177.

²⁹ *A View of the Covenant of Grace*, 32.

communicates the blessings of that accomplished redemption to men. Pausing here for a moment to adore the infinite condescension of our God in this covenant “ordered in all things and sure,” Mr. Pink admirably sums up the practical implications of this covenant for us. “[I]t is utterly impossible for us to form any clear and adequate idea of what the Lord of glory died to achieve if we have no real knowledge of the agreement in fulfillment of which His death took place. What is popularly taught upon the subject today is that the atonement of Christ has merely *provided an opportunity* for men to be saved, that it has opened the way for God to justly pardon any and all who avail themselves of His gracious provision. But that is only a part of the truth, and by no means the most important and blessed part of it. The grand fact is that Christ’s death was the *completion* of His agreement with the Father, which guarantees the salvation of all who were named in it—not one for whom He died can possibly miss heaven: (John 6:39).”³⁰

Reference to John 6:39 (“And this is the Father’s will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing...”) in the quote above, provides a useful transition to the consideration of the formal Biblical data regarding the validity of the term covenant as applied to this arrangement within the Godhead concerning the salvation of men. The Lord’s own words in this text offer more than a small hint that such an arrangement existed. Those expressions, “the Father’s will” and “all which he hath given me,” are an obscurity if they do not refer to a previously ordered disposition between the Father and the Son that forms this “will” about these “all...given” in this text and in the larger context of John 6:37-39.

Clearly no one verse of Scripture sums up all that may be known about this covenant within the Godhead (just as no ONE verse in Scripture declares all that may be known about the trinity of God), but by a diligent search of all the Scriptures what is revealed can be brought to light. If such a covenant does exist, then the careful student should expect to find its features there delineated, and, anticipating the results of this research, he is not disappointed. While the following survey makes no claim to completeness, it can be described as comprehensive in that significant texts on the subject throughout the Old and New Testaments will be reviewed and expounded. Sufficient consideration will be given to each text so as to demonstrate its contribution to the body of revelation concerning the covenant of grace and the relations within the Godhead as parties thereto.

As noted much earlier, the Scriptures contain nearly three hundred references to the term covenant with the vast majority of those related to God’s establishing of covenants. Among these that have specific reference to Jehovah, a significant number are to be found in the Old Testament. The Book of Psalms holds not a few of those, and it is there that the first text for consideration is located.

Psalm 89 begins with a vow of perpetual song concerning the mercies of the Lord. Having exalted Jehovah’s mercy and faithfulness in verse 2, these extraordinary words from the inspired psalmist compose verse 3: “I have made a covenant with my chosen...” Stepping aside from the context for just a moment to consider only the grammar, the text clearly describes a covenant. This covenant has been made between two parties, the “I”

³⁰ *The Divine Covenants*, 24.

of the text and “my chosen,” or as Thomas Boston well observes, my “chosen *One*, for the word is singular.”³¹ This covenant, the text indicates, “I *have* made,” i.e., it is an established fact, not future – I shall make, nor uncertain – If I make.

Returning to the context the observant reader notes that the parallelism of Hebrew poetry leads to the second clause of the verse, “I have sworn unto David my servant.” And there many are content to leave the matter. “It concerns David and his house alone,” it is argued, “and therefore has nothing to do with eternal matters of salvation.” If that is the case, then how are we to account for such expressions in this same psalm as, “Thy seed will I establish for ever, and build up thy throne to all generations” (v. 4); “Then thou spakest in vision to thy holy one, and saidst, I have laid help upon one that is mighty” (v. 19); “Also I will make him my firstborn, higher than the kings of the earth. My mercy will I keep for him for evermore, and *my covenant* shall stand fast *with him*. His seed also will I make to endure for ever, and his throne as the days of heaven” (v. 27-29); “His seed shall endure for ever, and his throne as the sun before me. It shall be established for ever as the moon, and as a faithful witness in heaven” (v. 36-37). Surely none of these promises could apply to David even in the height of his kingdom and regal splendor, nor to any of his descendants. Boston again helps us to a right understanding of this promise and these texts: “The promise made to David...will flourish forever in Jesus Christ, the Top-branch of the family of David. How then can it be, but that, in the *perpetual building of mercy*, mentioned ver. 2, and the *establishing of David’s seed*, and ‘building up his throne to all generations,’ ver. 4, Christ himself is chiefly aimed at? And indeed, he only was the mighty One, fit for the vast undertaking of this covenant, ver. 19; and him the Father points out to us as his *elect* or *chosen One*, Isa. 42:1.”³²

Should it be objected, as some more modern critics do, that this is merely historical hyperbole by the psalmist, looking back with sentimental longing for the storied days of the great David’s reign, then the objection is lodged squarely against the angel Gabriel who in Luke 1:32-33 applies the exact sense of this psalm to Christ when speaking to Mary of Jesus’ miraculous incarnation, as well as Zachariah, who “being filled with the Holy Ghost” (v. 67), utters nearly the very words of Psalm 89:24 in exalting Jehovah’s redeeming visitation, 1:69. Let the objector then press his argument with that heavenly messenger and with the Holy Spirit!

The words of the text are unmistakable – I, Jehovah, have made a covenant with my chosen (One). This covenant being made with that One who is in other places called my Servant, the BRANCH, mine elect, can be none other than the second Person of the Godhead, He who being incarnated was named Jesus the Christ. The Person being beyond dispute, the “act,” that is, the making of a covenant with Him, is also put beyond dispute by this text. Further, the eternal Persons of the Godhead being the parties thereto, it cannot be but that the covenant is an eternal one. Significantly, the Hebrew of this “making” a covenant literally is “cutting off” a covenant. Whatever apprehension there may be to some minds about applying such a term to the Godhead, this text demonstrates there is clearly no such anxiety on the part of the divine Author of the Scriptures

³¹ *A View of the Covenant of Grace*, 13.

³² *A View of the Covenant of Grace*, 14.

concerning its use. Again, Boston's insight is helpful: "It intimates this covenant to be a *covenant by sacrifice*, wherein the party-contractor on man's side was the *sacrifice*, and Divine justice the sword that *cut it asunder*, according to Zech. 13:7."³³ That a covenant was made, and that it was made between the Persons of the Godhead, is by this text alone established conclusively.

Yet this is by no means the only verse that sets forth this truth. Psalm 40:6-8 has always been acknowledged as of Messianic application. That fact is forever settled by the Holy Spirit's commentary on them in Hebrews 10:5-10. In v. 8 of the psalm the coming One is said to "delight to do thy will, O my God: yea, thy law is within my heart." What *will*, it may be asked? Is this *simply* the fulfillment of the Mosaic precepts, as might be suggested by a superficial reading of the last clause of the verse? The inspired author of Hebrews corrects that impression when he writes in 10:9, "Then said he, *Lo, I come to do thy will*, O God. He taketh away the first, that he may establish the second." What *first*? There can be only one explanation – the first *covenant*. Yet there may be room to suggest that "first" is only a reference by synecdoche to the Mosaic law – had not v. 10 immediately followed v. 9 – "By *the which will* we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all." This *will* to which Psalm 40:8 refers has specific reference, according to the infallible commentary of Hebrews, to a definite purpose concerning the offering of Christ in sacrifice for the sanctification of those who in this passage are designated "we".

This coming One is further said to *delight* to do this will of God. Here then is the expression of the Son as acquiescing with absolute satisfaction to that will expressed by the Father. But when – at His incarnation, in His public ministry, on the cross? Yes, all these are blessedly true – as the *consummation*. But these words were penned by inspiration a thousand years before the events in Bethlehem, Galilee, and Jerusalem. Yes, they look forward, but they also look "back" as it were, to that timeless eternity in which *thy will* being the expression of the Father, the Son did willingly agree, submit, *delight* to do it – everlastingly. Pink strikingly describes this glorious scene: "the language...is most obviously couched in *covenant* terms: the whole displaying so blessedly the voluntary engagement of the Son, His perfect readiness and willingness in acquiescing to the Father's pleasure. It was at the incarnation Christ *fulfilled* that precious type of Himself found in Exodus 21:5. Out of love to His Lord, the Father, and to His spouse the church, and His spiritual children, He subjected Himself..."³⁴ This is why, in a similar sense, the Apostle Paul would write that Christ, "took on him the form of a servant, and was found in fashion as a man" (Phil 2:7). Note carefully the inspired order, Christ's voluntary servanthood *preceded* His incarnation. "Now it was that the Father became Christ's 'Lord' (Ps. 16:2, as is evident from vv. 9, 11; Mic. 5:4), and now it was that the Son became the Father's 'servant' (Isa. 42:1), undertaking the work appointed."³⁵

The words of this text, then, demonstrate that in the expression of the Father's will to reconcile men to God there was a contemporaneous willingness, a *delight*, of the Son to

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ *The Divine Covenants*, 23-24.

³⁵ Ibid.

fulfill it and that by becoming the appointed sacrifice. Hence, that essential element of the *berith* that was so well described by Dr. Vos, *the divine element securing stability*, is here clearly in view – the Godhead, in the Father’s proposing and the Son’s delighting, establishing by mutual expressions an eternal agreement upon the foundation of omnipotence. Once more, Boston’s comments are illuminating: “Though he [Christ] did not actually take on him the nature of man until the ‘fullness of time’ appointed by the Father, yet forasmuch as he had from eternity consented to take it on, and it was impossible that his consent should miss to take effect, he was reckoned in law, to all intents and purposes thereof, as if he had actually been incarnate.”³⁶

Turning from the Psalms to the Prophets, references to the covenant are not wanting in their writings. Isaiah 42:1-7 and 49:1-9 are unquestionably to be understood as prophecies concerning Christ, and specifically the counsel between the Father and the Son respecting the intent, extent, and success of the Son’s great work in redemption. Those who object that the servant in Isa. 49 refers only to Israel (“Thou art my servant, O Israel...” 49:3), must then explain the text’s later distinction between Israel and the “servant” (“Though *Israel* be not gathered, yet shall *I* be glorious in the eyes of the Lord...” 49:5). Likewise, those who argue that it must refer only to Isaiah will be under obligation to expound how it is that Isaiah (who never even preached to the Gentiles) could be described in such glorious terms, “I will also give thee for *a light to the Gentiles*, that *thou mayest be my salvation* unto the end of the earth” (49:6, cf. 42:6). No, these texts can be only spoken by and spoken of One – the Lord’s Christ. “[T]he servant of Jehovah who is presented to us here is distinct from Israel, and has so strong an individuality and such marked personal features, that the expression cannot possibly be merely a personified collective. Nor can the prophet himself be intended; for what is here affirmed of this servant of Jehovah goes infinitely beyond anything to which a prophet was ever called, or of which a man was ever capable. It must therefore be the future Christ.”³⁷

Being a definite prophecy concerning Messiah, the Holy Spirit records this declaration by the Lord (the Father) to the Servant (the Son) in v. 8, “Thus saith the Lord, In an acceptable time have I heard thee, and in a day of salvation have I helped thee: and I will preserve thee, and *give thee for a covenant* of the people, to establish the earth, to cause to inherit the desolate heritages.” It should be noted that this is the second occurrence of this very phrase, having first met with it in Isa. 42:6, “...and will keep thee, and *give thee for a covenant* of the people, for a light of the Gentiles.” Twice then Jehovah promises, not so much the establishing (or even the renewing) of a covenant with the people, as He promises particularly the giving of His Servant *for a covenant*.

But how (and when) is it that Jehovah’s Servant is given for a covenant? Both here in Isa. 49:8 and earlier in Isa. 42:6, the verb “give” is the same Hebrew verb, and has as one of its primary meanings, to appoint. Delitzsch in his commentary on Isaiah translates this verb in 42:6, “set,” and in 49:8, “make,” thus emphasizing the force of the original more

³⁶ *A View of the Covenant of Grace*, 50.

³⁷ Delitzsch, Franz. *The Prophecies of Isaiah*. Vol. II, 174, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament*, trs. James Wilson, in Clark’s Foreign Theological Library, Vol. XLII, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1892.

clearly. Dagg cogently observes concerning the language of these verses in Isaiah 49, “the stipulations between the Father and the Son are presented almost as if they had been copied from an original record of the transaction.”³⁸ This dialogue between the divine Persons unquestionably partakes of the character of stipulation and affirmation, promises one to the other concerning “salvation to the ends of the earth” (49:6). Equally as significant is the phrase from 42:6, “I *have called* thee in righteousness,” – past, or more specifically, perfect tense – indicating completed past action. This calling then was done before, long before, the prophet proclaimed this truth to ancient Israel.

Bringing together all these linguistic facts, it becomes clear that the Servant is “given” by sovereign appointment, appointed by a past “act” with abiding result, and now openly declared to be the sum and substance of “the covenant.” Having been *called*, He is “set” or “made” a covenant uniquely in His Person – “give *thee* for a covenant.” “[T]he servant of Jehovah appears here not only as one who is the medium of a covenant to the nation, and of light to the Gentiles, but as being *himself* the people’s covenant and heathen’s light.”³⁹ And when was it that He was appointed “for a covenant”? The only satisfactory answer can be, in those counsels of the eternal day that Jehovah alone inhabits, of which appointment the Apostle Peter writes, “Who verily was *foreordained before the foundation of the world*, but was manifest in these last times for you” (1 Pet. 1:20). And having been given *for a covenant* it would be requisite that He first had been *called in righteousness* to perform its obligations “before the foundation of the world.”

Isaiah once more in chapter 55 speaks of One in whom the covenant is secured: “...and I will make an everlasting covenant with you, even the sure mercies of David. Behold, I *have given him* for a witness to the people, a leader and commander to the people. Behold, thou shalt call a nation that thou knowest not, and nations that knew not thee shall run unto thee because of the Lord thy God, and for the Holy One of Israel; for he hath glorified thee” (v. 3-5). Should there be any doubt to whom the Holy Spirit refers in this text, He seals the application of it to Christ by the Apostle Paul’s message in Antioch – Acts 13:34. John Calvin offers a literal translation of the words of this text with, “I will strike a covenant of eternity with you,” calling attention to the original language’s emphasis upon both its institution before time and its perpetuity, and commenting upon the merciful “content” of the covenant, he captures its essence with this exquisite expression: “...it was a covenant of free grace; for it was founded on nothing else than the absolute goodness of God. Whenever, therefore, the word ‘covenant’ occurs in Scripture, we ought at the same time to call to remembrance the word ‘grace.’”⁴⁰ In these two sentences Calvin has fitly expounded and summarized much of the argument of this treatise!

Finally, it cannot escape notice that the verb in the phrase, “I have given him for a witness...” (v. 4) is again in the perfect tense – completed past action. But this prophecy

³⁸ Dagg, John Leadley. *Manual of Theology and Church Order*, IV, 7, 255. Harrisonburg, VA: Gano Books (reprint of 1857 edition), 1982.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 180.

⁴⁰ Calvin, John. *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah*, III, 160-161, trs. William Pringle, in *Calvin’s Commentaries*, Vol. VIII, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1984.

was several hundred years before the coming of Messiah into the world. How is it then that He can be spoken of as already “given”? Only upon the grounds that His mediatorial offices were everlastingly foreordained, and if so it cannot be but on the basis of His having been appointed to them by mutual agreement with the Father (cf. Luke 22:29).

Before leaving the Old Testament, several other texts should be mentioned briefly that bear upon the subject. 2 Samuel 23:5 is the record of David’s response to Jehovah’s promise to build a house far more illustrious and lasting than that which was in David’s heart to build for the Lord. David’s then confesses, “he hath made with me *an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things, and sure*: for this is all my salvation.” Similarly, in David’s second of the seven Penitential Psalms, he finds his confidence for forgiveness and deliverance upon this, “The secret of the Lord is with them that fear him; and he will shew them *his covenant*” (25:14). The prophet Zechariah describes the coming King who “shall speak peace unto the heathen: and his dominion shall be from sea even to sea, and from the river even to the ends of the earth. As for thee also, by *the blood of thy covenant* I have sent forth thy prisoners out of the pit wherein is no water” (9:10b-11). And the last prophet of the Old Testament speaks of One who would suddenly come, who is “*the messenger of the covenant*” (Mal. 3:1). Each of these texts emphasize the covenantal foundation upon which blessings are conferred, the sacrifice is accomplished, or the appointed office undertaken. Should it be demurred that these all have reference to the New Covenant established by Christ’s atonement, the conspicuous fact is that these texts, whatever their prophetic character, are undeniably prior to the consummation of that atoning sacrifice, yet they speak of a *covenant already* firmly established – an *everlasting covenant, his covenant, thy covenant, the covenant* – eternally certain and fixed, abiding, that was the basis for the mediatorial sacrifice and that secured blessings to men.

As the light of the New Testament shines brilliantly, illuminating the types and shadows of the Old, so it gives further clarity to the understanding of the covenant. The Gospels and Epistles are replete with references to this covenant arrangement. While only a comparative few will be surveyed they are representative of the mass of texts that describe the reality and the details of this covenant.

The Lord Himself on numerous occasions made reference to the details of this divine covenant. Reference has been made already to Luke 22:29 – “And I appoint unto you a kingdom, *as my Father hath appointed unto me.*” The word “appointed” is the aorist form of the verb from which is derived the noun *diatheke* – covenant. The aorist is the predominant tense used to indicate simple past action, thus the meaning is undeniable – the Father covenantally conferred upon the Son a kingdom and that in a “time” precedent to that in which He was speaking. Risking the charge of redundancy, it is unavoidably necessary to repeat the observation that if the “Father” has appointed – *dietheto* – “covenanted” anything then it must be, by the nature of the One appointing, an eternal purpose. i. e., He conferred this dominion to the Son everlastingly. And upon what ground? Upon the Son’s willing subjection – a willingness as co-extensive as the Father’s eternal conferring of the kingdom – to be the Mediator, Phil. 2:6-11, Eph. 1:20-22.

But notice as well what is so obvious in the text it is easily missed: between whom this kingdom is covenanted. It is the Father's appointing and the Son's receiving, plainly intimating that this *dietheto*, this appointing, this conferring, this *covenanting*, is between the *Father* and the *Son*. The parties who are concerned in this completed disposition are the divine Persons of the Godhead and there being a promise made upon a condition fulfilled, what more appropriate term can be used than that of "covenant".

Mark as well the connection of this idea with that of Luke 22:22: "And truly the Son of man goeth, *as it was determined*." Determined when? And how? As a part of this "disposing" concerning the kingdom can be the only consistent textual answer. What is the textual proof? "The Greek participle, *orismenon*, is in the passive voice, and...can be found no where but in the perfect and pluperfect tense...it does not refer to what Judas or the Sanhedrin were determining or about to determine"⁴¹ This participial phrase (*kata to orismenon*), which literally translated would be "according to the had-been-determined thing," is exclusively, as noted by Seth Williston, a past tense verbal form, denoting a completed action in the past. This determination was as "old" as the conferring of the kingdom by the Father to the Son, it was the appointment of the Son as the "Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" (Rev. 13:8) annexed to the promise of this kingdom to Christ upon the consummation of that "had-been-determined thing" in His substitutionary death, as evidenced by His triumphant resurrection (Rom 1:4). Williston notes further concerning this determining, "Matthew (26:24) and Mark (14:21) say, The Son of Man goeth *as it is written* of him...The quotation in John (13:18) makes it evident, that one place where this had been written was Psalm 41:9. By comparing all the Evangelists, we learn this important truth, That whatever thing was written in the word of God, as certainly future, was also *determined*."⁴² Thus the determination, written aforehand of Christ, and the appointing of a kingdom by the Father to the Son, are a summary of the covenanted purpose within the eternal Godhead concerning redemption.

Further, John's record of the Gospel offers several unique accounts of the Lord's own expressions pertaining to this appointment. Reference has already been made above to John 6:37-39. These verses alone are sufficient to confirm that there was an expressed will of the Father, consented to by the Son, which will involves the destinies of those "given to" the Son by the Father. Pink's comments are particularly illuminating: "Three things are there to be seen: (1) Christ had received a certain charge or commission from the Father; (2) He had solemnly engaged and undertaken to execute that charge; (3) The end contemplated in that arrangement was not merely the announcement of spiritual blessings, but the actual bestowal of them upon all who had been given to Him."⁴³

Similarly, in John 10:16, Christ speaks of "other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also *I must bring*." Notice He says not, *I will bring* (though that is certainly true, cf. John 6:39!), but *I must bring* – this is the language of "obligation," of a responsibility to

⁴¹ Williston, Seth. *A Vindication of Some of the Essential Doctrines of the Reformation*, Hudson, NY: Ashbel Stoddard, 1817, 12.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ *The Divine Covenants*, 19.

be fulfilled. Only two verses later (John 10:18) Christ instructs His ever-present enemies, the Pharisees, “No man taketh it [my life, v. 17] from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. *This commandment have I received of my Father.*” Nor is this a solitary expression from the Savior. Again in John 12:49, “For I have not spoken of myself; but the Father which sent me, *he gave me a commandment*, what I should say, and what I should speak,” and in 14:31, “...*as the Father gave me commandment*, even so I do,” He uses nearly identical language. But how could the Son, co-eternal and co-equal with the Father, say of Himself that He had received commandment from Him? This can only be accounted for on the supposition that the Son had voluntarily taken upon Himself an “economical” subjection to the Father founded upon an ordered disposition regarding His incarnation, obedience, and substitutionary death. It was in this arrangement that it could now be said of the Son, that he “took upon him the form of a servant,” and on this basis the covenant – the *berith*, the *diatheke*, the accord – between “superior” and “inferior” (rather than the *suntheke*) could be established while at the same time retaining that primary feature described so gloriously by Vos, “...*the divine factor securing stability that gives to the berith its specific character*,” since it is the Godhead *alone* that is responsible for its initiation, sustaining, and completion. Who, beside the triune Jehovah, could devise such a covenant and fulfill all its terms personally!

Pressing yet further into John 17, that high priestly prayer of the Savior reveals these same features once again. Here are found statements by the Savior such as, “thou *hast given him power* over all flesh, that he should give eternal life to as many as *thou hast given him*” (v.2), “I have glorified thee on the earth: I have finished *the work which thou gavest me to do*” (v. 4), and “Father, *I will* that they also, whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am; that they may behold my glory, which thou hast given me: for *thou lovedst me before the foundation of the world*” (v. 24), to mention but a few. Verse 2 unquestionably declares that Christ had been given both power over all men and a definite people to whom He would give eternal life. Again the past tense of these statements is highly significant – this power over all flesh and those given to the Son were both acts of past accomplishment, need we say again, of *eternal* decrees. Equally, *the work* of verse 4 is said to have been given (same verb as v. 2) the Son in the past, an appointment to a task to be accomplished in the fullness of time, but which appointment was made – *eternally*. Of verse 24, Mr. Pink once again provides rich insight to its meaning, “There Christ was claiming something that was due Him on account of or in return for the work He had done (v. 4). This clearly presupposes both *an arrangement and a promise* on the part of the Father. It was the surety putting in His claim. Now a claim necessarily implies *a preceding promise* annexed to *a condition to be performed* by the party to whom the promise is made, which gives a right to demand the reward.”⁴⁴ How gloriously, and clearly, then are the leading features of that covenant expressed by the Savior Himself in those most sacred moments of communion with His Father before His agony and crucifixion – His appointment as the Surety, the work given to Him from everlasting, the promise pleaded and the reward claimed – and all in this intimate communication between eternal Father and Son *alone*!

⁴⁴ *The Divine Covenants*, 19.

Proceeding now to that great exposition of the old and new covenants by the Apostle Paul, the epistle to the churches of Galatia abounds with instruction for the serious student. Chapter 3 introduces the substance of Paul's argument contrasting the law with faith. In the midst of his discourse on the necessity of justification by faith alone, he writes, "Brethren, I speak after the manner of men; Though it be but a man's covenant, yet if it be confirmed, no man disannulleth, or addeth thereto. Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ. And this I say, that the covenant, that was confirmed before of God in Christ, the law, which was four hundred and thirty years after, cannot disannul, that it should make the promise of none effect" (Gal 3:15-17).

Two items of significance to this analysis are found here. First, the intimate connection, the apposition, that the Apostle exhibits between "covenant" and "promise" in these verses is unambiguous. The words as used by the inspired writer become not only synonymous but characterize one another in this text. Note the interchange between the terms – "Though it be but a man's *covenant*..." (v. 15); "Now to Abraham and his seed were the *promises* made..." (v. 16); "And this I say that the *covenant* that was confirmed..." (v.17); "...the law...cannot disannul, that it should make the *promise* of none effect" (v. 17). If anything may be affirmed from these verses, it is that the terms "covenant" and "promise" are made, by the Holy Spirit, divine "equivalents," each describing and defining the other. Thereby "covenant" gives solidity to the intent of "promise" and in turn "promise" illuminates the meaning of "covenant".

It has been suggested that "promise" is a more appropriate term for the arrangements of the Trinity respecting the redemption of men, "covenant" having certain undesirable characteristics when applied to the Godhead. By his use of the terms practically interchangeably, Paul clearly demonstrates he had no such hesitation. The import of the text, at least in relation to these two words, argues rather for the use of the term covenant as the most appropriate to describe the dispositional arrangements within the Godhead concerning salvation. If any will assert that "promise" is a fitting term to describe the expression of God's salvific decree, it will not be denied. If, however, it is alleged that, 1) "promise" is *better* than "covenant," and/or, 2) "covenant" is *not an appropriate term* for Jehovah's redemptive plan, these contentions can in no way be endorsed, and the proof of this is made out in the infallible record inspired by the Spirit of God Himself in Galatians 3 wherein "covenant" and "promise" have equal force. Is "promise" an acceptable term? Surely it is, and yet having consented to that, "covenant" is equally, nay rather, more valid as is to be seen from what follows.

The second item that calls for attention is the phrase in 3:17, "...the covenant, that was confirmed before of God..." To whom was this covenant confirmed, or to use the language of the text itself, to whom "were the promises made"? The inspired answer is, "to Abraham and to his *seed*...which is Christ" (v. 16). While stipulating to the fact that the covenant promises were indeed made to Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3, Gen 15, Gen 17:1-7), Paul identifies a far more significant "recipient" of these promises, Abraham's *seed*, Christ, and he reinforces this identification again in verse 19: "till *the seed* should come to whom the promise was made." Herman Witsius highlights this important truth of these

verses: “the apostle *twice repeats*, not that Christ was promised to us, nor that salvation was promised to us through Christ (though that be also true), but that *the promises were made to Christ Himself*...It is evident therefore that the word διαθηκη does here denote some covenant or testament, by which *something is promised by God to Christ*”⁴⁵ (emphases added). Will it then be argued that the promise made, the covenant confirmed, was done so only upon the incarnation of the Son of God? The words of the Greek text in verse 19 flatly contradict such a conclusion since the verb phrase “the promise was made” translates the single Greek word *epaggeltai*, a perfect tense participle, which tense, as noted several times previously describes completed past action.

How can it be that a promise was made (past) to a *coming* seed (future)? Only upon the irresistible conclusion that the coming Seed had existence prior to His “coming,” i.e., His appearing in flesh as the descendant of Abraham. This can *only* be asserted of Christ, as Paul had previously informed the Galatians in v. 16 – “his seed...*which is Christ*,” and is no less than what the Son affirmed of Himself: “Verily, verily, I say unto you, Before Abraham was, *I am*” (John 8:58). Thus, the Apostle proves not only that *the promise* (v. 19) was made to Christ as the future Seed of Abraham, but undeniably states that it was confirmed in the form of *a covenant* (as it is in the original Greek), confirmed *before* by God to the eternal Son. And to restate what has been observed repeatedly, if it was made and confirmed before between God (the Father) and Christ as the text clearly demonstrates, the inescapable conclusion must be that it was done *everlastingly*.

One last text will be considered for the purposes of this survey from the epistle to the Hebrews. This incomparable exposition, well named by Geerhardus Vos, the epistle of the *diatheke*, sheds significant light on that “better covenant” (Heb. 8:6) which the inspired writer expounds so fully in its thirteen chapters. In Hebrews 13 the author’s benediction begins in verse 20 with these words: “Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep, through *the blood of the everlasting covenant*.” Pink here forcefully reasons, “that one phrase is quite sufficient to establish the fact that an organic connection existed between the covenant of grace and the sacrifice of Christ.”⁴⁶ Additionally, repeated reference has been made in the exposition of earlier texts to the inescapable conclusion that a covenant existing between the Persons of the Godhead, by Their nature must be one of eternal existence. Here, the Holy Spirit confirms categorically that this covenant *is* indeed of such a character for He denominates it the *everlasting* covenant.

If any will contend that the sense of everlasting here means “never to be replaced or superseded,” that will not be denied, but that cannot be *all* that is meant. To limit the meaning of the Greek word *aionios* to that only is to ignore both its etymological connection to its root, *aion* (an unbroken age, perpetuity of time, eternity – Thayer), or its consistent usage in the New Testament to describe fundamentally that which is “without beginning or end, that which always has been and always will be” (Thayer). Rather, the inspired writer throughout the epistle has been contrasting the temporal and temporary nature of the old covenant, containing its endless repetition of sacrifices offered by a

⁴⁵ *The Economy of the Covenants*, I, 2, 107.

⁴⁶ *The Divine Covenants*, 21.

constant succession of priests, with God's eternal purpose in Christ (Heb. 1:1-12), and the infinite superiority of His once for all sacrifice (Heb. 10:10-14). The Holy Spirit reinforces the everlasting character of the covenant earlier in the epistle by emphasizing the eternal features of its ratification by His sacrifice:

Neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained *eternal* redemption for us. For if the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh: How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the *eternal* Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? And for this cause he is the mediator of the new testament, that by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first testament, they which are called might receive the promise of *eternal* inheritance" (Heb. 9:12-15).

If there be eternity in these particulars of the Lord's atoning work, then it also must be in the entire ordered disposition that ordained His mediatorial office...and so it is – the *everlasting* covenant.

Neither should the import of Hebrews 9:27-28 be missed in relation to this subject. Oft is Heb. 9:27 quoted alone – “And as it is *appointed unto men* once to die, but after this the judgment:” but its connection to verse 28 is nearly as often overlooked: “*So Christ* was once offered...” It is *appointed* (*apokeitai*, from *apokeimai* – to be laid away, laid by, reserved – perfect tense) unto men once to die. So *Christ* is *appointed* is no small part of the inspired “argument”. And if men's appointment to death, “by which it is fixed that men shall die, and how long they shall live, and when they shall die, so that they can't die sooner or later...and this statute and appointment of God...reaches to all men,”⁴⁷ is of eternal determination, as it must be for an eternal God, then, concludes the inspired writer, *so Christ*, His once being offered must partake of that same eternity of determination.

Returning to Hebrews 13:20, this covenant, declared to be an everlasting one, having that same eternal quality as that of the redemption, the Spirit, the inheritance, described in Heb. 9:12-15 and its blood offered by Him who was appointed as certainly as men's appointment to death is fixed by eternal decree, what then can be deduced other than that here is indeed a covenant, a *diatheke*, having all the requisite conditions to denominate it as such and that an *everlasting* one. Thus Charles Simeon wisely (and admirably) observes,

Here he traces up every thing to a covenant; a covenant made from all eternity between the Father and the Son, and in due season ratified and confirmed with the Redeemer's blood. In that covenant, the Son of God engaged to assume our nature; and in that nature, to expiate our guilt by his own obedience unto death. The Father promised to accept his

⁴⁷ Gill, John. An Exposition of the New Testament, III, 441 in *An Exposition of the Old and New Testaments*, IX, London: Matthews and Leigh, 1809, repr. Primitive Baptist Library, Streamwood, IL, 1976.

vicarious sacrifice, and to give him a people who should be his joy and his glory through eternal ages. In accordance with this covenant, Christ had laid down his life: and in agreement with it, the Father had now raised him from the dead, and empowered him to perfect the work he had undertaken. What a field of mysterious information is here opened to our view! Every thing connected with our salvation is traced up to an everlasting covenant. Is God reconciled to us, and become a “God of peace?” Has he, under this character, “raised from the dead the Lord Jesus?” Has he, for the accomplishment of his gracious purposes, invested his dear Son with “the pastoral office,” and committed us to him as “his sheep?” All has been effected in conformity with an everlasting covenant, and from respect to that blood by which the covenant was confirmed.⁴⁸

One final aspect of this everlasting covenant requires examination and that is its relation to mankind. The writer of Hebrews prays, on the basis of this covenant and the blood that was shed to ratify it, that his readers may be made “perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is wellpleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ” (v. 21). How can it be that mortal men may have an interest in and benefit from a covenant that is everlasting? How is it that Jehovah can say through the prophet, “and I will make an *everlasting covenant with you*, even the sure mercies of David” (Isa. 55:3)? Only in this way – an *everlasting covenant* must be made with an *everlasting person*, on behalf and in the stead of those to whom the interest and benefits are to be communicated. As Thomas Boston magnificently inquires, “How could an eternal covenant be originally made with creatures of time, but *in* their eternal head and representative? Or, how could an eternal covenant be personally made with them...had it not been from eternity made with another *as* their head and representative?...God in his infinite love married to himself all the spiritual seed, in and by JESUS CHRIST as their representative, not only before they were capable of consenting, but *before they were at all*.”⁴⁹

Is this not the constant and unvarying declaration of the Scriptures? Eph. 1:3-4 – “He hath chosen us in him *before the foundation of the world*.” Eph. 3:11 speaks of “the *eternal purpose* which God purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord.” 2 Timothy 1:9 – “He hath saved us, and called us, with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose, and grace, given us in Christ Jesus, *before the world began*.” Then this phrase, IN HIM, contains within it infinitely more than what the mere words themselves would seem to connote. Herein, “[o]ur covenant oneness with Christ is clearly revealed...It denotes not merely a recommendatory passport from Christ, but a real union with Him, whereby we are incorporated into His mystical body, and made as truly partakers of His righteousness as the members of the physical body partake of the life which animates its head.”⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Simeon, Charles. *Horae Homileticae*, XIX, 551. London: Holdsworth and Ball, 1833.

⁴⁹ *A View of the Covenant of Grace*, 29.

⁵⁰ *The Divine Covenants*, 19.

What then was the instrument by which we were incorporated “in Him”? No other than the *everlasting* covenant made between the eternal Persons of the Trinity! Let Dr. Gill further explain: “The covenant of grace is ordered in all things and sure; this testament, or will, is founded upon the immutability of the divine counsel...Whatever is given in this will, is given to Christ *first* to be disposed of by him...he was set up as the mediator *from everlasting*, was prevented with the blessings of goodness, or had them *first given to him*, he was possessed of a fullness of grace, and *grace was given to the elect in him before the world began.*”⁵¹

The title of this study posed the question whether the covenant of grace was a Biblical reality or the contrivance of men seeking to further a doctrinal *idée fixe*. It was further inquired whether the concept of covenant could rightly be applied to the triune God. Having surveyed the historical, linguistic, theological, and Biblical evidence, the volume of testimony should leave no reasonable doubt that the verdict must be – these things are so; the covenant of grace is an indisputable Scriptural verity; there is, and gloriously so, an eternal covenant in the Godhead that orders and disposes all things for the salvation of all for whom Christ came to die. Dagg perfectly summarizes all that has been stated:

The salvation of men is a work of God in which the divine persons concur. It is performed according to an eternal purpose; and in this purpose, as well as in the work, the divine persons concur; and this concurrence is their eternal covenant. *The purpose of the one God is the covenant of the Trinity.*⁵²

And lest there be an inclination in some to regard these matters as mere speculative reasoning, unconnected to the “weightier matters” of the daily life of saints and sinners alike, then perhaps Mr. Pink may be allowed to disabuse such persons of their opinion. “*The sacrifice of Christ owes all its validity from the covenant: the holy and blessed Trinity, by counsel and oath, having appointed it to be the true and only propitiation for sin.*”⁵³ This is no mere idle, academic speculation. Upon the covenant rests all the saint’s hope and the sinner’s plea for eternal life. If there is no covenant, no everlasting covenant in the Godhead, no covenant of grace, no *berith*, no *diatheke*, then salvation is merely the hastily manufactured response of a baffled God resulting in a fond dream resting upon an insecure foundation of potential possibilities that men will “decide for Christ” since there is no eternal certitude in either the initiation, the implementation, or the outcome of it. Against such a possibility is the immutable affirmation of the inspired record that there *is* a “covenant, ordered in all things and sure, which is all my salvation!” Soli Deo Gloria!

⁵¹ *Body of Divinity*, I, 14, 242-243.

⁵² *Manual of Theology and Church Order*, VII, 1, 254.

⁵³ *The Divine Covenants*, 24.