

# Two Different Covenants, Two Different Schools

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**Book:**

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I Corinthians

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14

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Every builder will testify that the foundation of a building is of crucial importance for the building as a whole. The foundation not only determines the size and the shape of the building, but affects its value and longevity. A well-constructed building on a sure foundation should stand strong and function well in the purpose for which it was constructed.

The foundation of the Christian school (not the school building, now, but the school itself) is likewise crucial. The foundation of the school will reflect its conceived purpose and what motivated the parents to establish the school. In the history of the Reformed churches, the foundation of the Christian school has been God's covenant of grace with believers and their seed.

Christian schools have a long and honorable history within the Reformed camp, dating back to Calvin, and especially maintained in the Reformed churches in the Netherlands. Believing parents have considered it an obligation of the covenant to establish parental, Christian schools where the covenant seed might be reared in the fear of God and taught His truth. The great Synod of Dordt made reference to Christian schools and/or teachers in three separate articles of the church order.

The doctrine of the covenant is also the heart of the Reformed faith. It ties together all the doctrines of the Reformed truth. The covenant gives warmth and beauty to the doctrines of Calvinism. The covenant is religion! It determines our relationship to God as well as our walk of life. The doctrine of the covenant of grace has uniquely a Reformed heritage.

Sad to say, there is much disagreement within the Reformed camp on the doctrine of the covenant. Different views of the covenant have been set forth by theologians since the Reformation. These differences on the covenant came into sharp contrast in the controversy in the Protestant Reformed Churches resulting in the split of 1953. That controversy made plain that there are essentially but two covenant views possible, namely, a conditional covenant, and an unconditional covenant.

The question that we face is this: How does the particular covenant doctrine affect the schools that believers establish for their children? The point of this article is that the covenant view of the parents and teachers has far-reaching effects on the school. As the foundation of the building determines many significant elements of a building, so the covenantal foundation of the school determines the character of the school, including the purpose, content, and focus of the instruction, the discipline administered, and the very social life within the school.

A word of caution is in order. Parents, school boards, and teachers are not always consistent, and they may not necessarily establish and maintain a school that follows the principles of the covenant that they confess. Foundations can be forgotten, even abandoned. That can be true of Protestant Reformed schools, as well as Christian Reformed schools, or Canadian Reformed

schools, or Netherlands Reformed schools. And, on the other hand, there are "happy inconsistencies" in schools where the (erroneous) principles have not yet been carried through to all the instruction.

In addition, it should be evident to all that there can be other significant influences on the Christian school than merely the doctrinal foundation of the covenant. Other beliefs and practices can have an impact for good or for evil. The doctrine of common grace, particularly if it posits good in the activities of the ungodly, opens the floodgates to the world's influence. The AACS movement (now centered in the Institute for Christian Studies, ICS, in Toronto) forces the instruction into the post-millennial mold that ever directs students to dominate the world for Christ.

Hence, in this evaluation, allowance must be made for possible inconsistency in application of the principles, as well as the possibility of other influences in a school. Nevertheless, so determinative is the doctrine of the covenant in the school, that we maintain that these two different doctrines of the covenant will produce two different kinds of Christian schools.

These articles will highlight the differences between schools founded on the basis of a conditional covenant, and those maintaining an unconditional covenant. There are obvious difficulties in this enterprise. It is difficult for one committed all his life to the unconditional covenant to get a handle on the character of a school founded on the conditional covenant, and that with limited firsthand experience in such a school. School handbooks and mission statements are brief, and do not always even specify that a school is based on the covenant. Thus some of the conclusions will be based on the logical implications of the conditional covenant, and then substantiated as much as possible by the experience of others and the writings that are available.

It is necessary, first of all, briefly to set forth these two opposing views of the covenant, that is, conditional and unconditional. As any regular reader of the Standard Bearer knows, the Protestant Reformed Churches are solidly committed to the doctrine of an unconditional covenant of grace, and this is the view explained here.

We who confess that God's covenant is unconditional define this covenant as the relationship of friendship that God sovereignly establishes with His elect in Christ. This emphasizes that the covenant is God's. He planned it, determined what it would be, how it would be realized, as well as with whom it would be established. Such a covenant is one-sided (unilateral); the covenant is all of God.

Christ is the Mediator of God's covenant, as well as its Head, with whom God established the covenant eternally. Christ is not only the Seed of the woman referred to in the "mother promise" ([Gen. 3:15](#) <sup>[1]</sup>), but also the Seed of Abraham in [Genesis 17](#) <sup>[2]</sup> with whom God established His covenant (cf. [Gal. 3:16](#) <sup>[3]</sup>). In Christ, God established the covenant with all those who are in Christ, namely, the elect.

Thus, God's covenant is eternal, being before the time and history of this world, and continuing after the time and history of this present creation. This covenant is established with believers and their seed in the line of continued generations.

This covenant is not a conditional agreement, but an unconditional relationship formed by God. God takes His people unto Himself and makes them to be of His own party. Within the covenant,

they become living and active in the life of fellowship with God. Therefore, this covenant is not a means to an end, not the means to save, which means can be done away with once it has accomplished its purpose. Rather, the covenant is itself the goal of God, namely, it is God's purpose to live in covenant fellowship with His people forever, in and through Christ.

Standing in contrast and opposition to that conception of the covenant is the conditional covenant. It may be defined as the arrangement that God makes with believers and their children in which the blessings of salvation are given to them, on condition of faith and obedience. In this covenant, God comes to His covenant people with both promise and demand.<sup>1</sup> The promise is eternal life. The demand is faith and obedience. God makes the promise to every covenant member, but the actual receipt of the promises depends on the demand being met by the individual.

The proponents of the conditional covenant teach that the covenant is unilateral in its establishment, but bilateral in its manifestation. God and His people are two parties in the covenant, each with his own necessary activity. God takes into His covenant all believers and all their baptized children. The covenant is a means to an end, the goal being to give the blessings of salvation to some of them.

In this view, Christ is the Mediator of the covenant, but not the Head of the covenant. The covenant is not made collectively with Christ and His people, but individually. Election is taken into account only as an explanation of who is saved—after the fact. Election must not be introduced into the discussion of the covenant. Election unto salvation is narrower than the establishment of the covenant with its members.

That brings up the place of children in the covenant. In the conditional covenant conception, all baptized children (Jacobs and Esaus alike) are members of God's covenant. At baptism, God declares that He establishes His covenant with the child, and promises eternal life and redemption in the blood of Christ—objectively.<sup>2</sup> In addition, God promises that the Spirit will dwell in this child and will apply all these blessings subjectively. The Reformed form for the administration of infant baptism is interpreted to mean that the Father and Son promise existing realities, but that the words "the Spirit will dwell..." mean something different. Most of those espousing a conditional covenant insist that these words are not a continuous future, that is, the Spirit will dwell with you constantly. Rather, they insist that "will" means "desires to" or that He "will under certain conditions." Such are the promises in the conditional covenant.

But, they aver, God also makes demands on the child in the covenant (by which is meant every baptized child), namely faith and obedience as a condition. They would insist that this is not a condition in the Arminian sense. Rather, it is a condition as a necessary way by which God has determined to save. Such insist that God is not giving a condition to get into the covenant, because He lays these demands upon the children who are already in the covenant. And finally, it is affirmed that because God's promise is inseparable from the demand as condition, that God always keeps His word. He punishes the covenant breakers, and blesses the faithful.

In this covenant doctrine, all the baptized are sanctified. This is drawn from 1 Corinthians 7:14 <sup>[4]</sup>, where Paul writes, "...now are your children holy." This is understood to mean that all the children of believers are "sanctified," that is, not necessarily made holy, but sanctified in the sense of being set apart from the children of unbelievers, and identified as God's. God has a claim on them, as His children.<sup>3</sup>

In harmony with that, it is claimed that grace is bestowed upon all these baptized children. Different explanations are given as to what this grace really is. For some, the promise itself is grace in some undefined way. For others, a kind of common grace works within each child, enabling each to make the choice of whether or not to believe God's promise. Some are so bold as to teach that at baptism God promises to the child, "You are one of my elect."

Often the figure of a bank check is used to illustrate the conditional promise of God to the baptized child. It is said that every child receives at baptism what amounts to a check, written out to the child, and signed by God. The check promises eternal life to the child.

That child can do one of three things with this check. He can shred it, and thereby indicate that he wants nothing to do with this God or the promise of life. By this act he becomes a covenant breaker, and there is no hope for him. A second possibility is that the child never cashes it, which is to say, never claims the promise. Perhaps he merely takes pride in the fact that he has this wonderful promise from God. Perhaps he wanders far from the church and godliness. But if he never cashes it, the "check" becomes worthless, and he dies without receiving the eternal life God promised him. A third possibility is that the child endorses the check. He does that by believing the promises of God. He then receives all that God has promised, and has eternal life.

Thus, what every baptized child is taught amounts to this: "The promises are for you, personally. Your baptism is a guarantee that God spoke the promises to you. God promises you the blessings of salvation. The promises were sealed to you personally at baptism. Claim them! Take hold of the promises. Believe that God means what He says."

In contrast to that is the teaching of the unconditional covenant concerning the place of children in God's covenant. Since this has been set forth a number of times in the Standard Bearer and in this rubric, we can be brief. We maintain that with the elect children of believers alone does God establish His covenant of friendship. The promises at baptism are spoken to the elect, as are all the promises in the preaching only to the elect. They are sealed only to the elect in baptism. And God keeps His promises to them, unfaithfully. Those promises include faith as God's gift. God works faith, but not as the fulfillment of a condition. Faith is rather a fruit of the promises, a work and gift of sovereign grace, and is thus part of God's work of salvation in His chosen people.

The unconditional covenant teaches that these elect children are sanctified in Christ, really so! They are regenerated, and thus made holy in principle. The Holy Spirit does dwell in each and apply the blessing of the cross.

There are demands made of these children, but not as covenantal conditions. God comes to the elect seed with many commands, as for example, Repent of your sins! Believe in Christ! Obey Me! The baptism form teaches the same: "Whereas in all covenants there are contained two parts, therefore are we ... admonished of and obliged unto new obedience...."

These covenant children live in fellowship with God and are to show their thankfulness by an obedient life. They are called to live as God's friends by living the antithetical life. Obviously, that demands obedience to the Word of God.

How does this apply to the schools? What differences will exist between schools that maintain the conditional covenant and those who hold to the unconditional covenant? That will be the focus next time.

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<sup>1</sup>Some have adopted a form for the administration which uses that language, specifically. The form used by the Canadian Reformed Churches reads: "Third, since every covenant contains two parts, a promise and an obligation...."

<sup>2</sup>I freely admit that I do not know what it means to have the blessings of eternal life and redemption in the blood of Christ objectively, as here presented. It is maintained that these blessings are really the property of the child, objectively, but that if the child never believes, he will never have the benefits of the cross of Christ. That seems to imply Christ died for all the baptized children of believers, but whether they receive the forgiveness of sins and eternal life is conditioned on faith. That is virtually identical to the Arminian teaching of the atonement, except that here it is limited to the covenant. The more Reformed proponents of the conditional covenant would reject that. However, I have yet to find an understandable, consistently Reformed explanation for the idea that these blessings belong to every baptized child objectively.

<sup>3</sup>The third form for the administration of infant baptism found in the 1957 edition of the Psalter Hymnal of the Christian Reformed Church includes the following: "God graciously includes our children in his covenant, and all his promises are for them as well as us.... We are therefore always to teach our little ones that they have been set apart by baptism as God's own children." Though not explicitly stated, it appears to be teaching that all the baptized children are God's children. The first prayer in the form adopted by the Canadian Reformed Churches asks God to "look upon this child of Thine and incorporate him ..." (my emphasis, RJD).

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**Links:**

[1] <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?version=9&search=Gen.+3:15>

[2] <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?version=9&search=Genesis+17>

[3] <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?version=9&search=Gal.+3:16>

[4] <http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?version=9&search=I+Corinthians+7:14>