

March 21st, 2021

The Covenant of Redemption: the Intra-Trinitarian Covenant

John 6:37-39; 17:4-6

Review

Last week we considered the **definition** of a covenant. A covenant is a commitment that establishes *a relationship* between two or more persons.¹ We considered the **details** of a covenant. There are four parts to every covenant: **1)** the parties involved; **2)** the promises made; **3)** the conditions required; and **4)** the curse threatened. And finally we considered the **design** of the covenant. Concerning God's covenant with mankind, there are only essentially two covenants: the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace; and all the other covenants, Noahic, Abrahamic, Davidic, etc. are outworking or expressions of the one Covenant of Grace. As the **WCF 7.6** says "There are not therefore two covenants of grace (or multiple) differing in substance, but one and the same under various dispensations (meaning under the Old and New Testament)."

What is the Covenant of Redemption?

Now before we look at the covenants that God had made with mankind, we must first look at the covenant that God made with *Himself*. Why did Jesus Christ come into the world? Because the Trinity made a covenant. Theologians call this "The Covenant of Redemption." The Puritan Thomas Goodwin said that this is 'the fountain of the gospel, the original which set all the wheels going from eternity. It is the story about the greatest affair, between the persons of the highest sovereignty and majesty, that ever was transacted either in heaven or earth, or ever will be.'² Here's our definition:

¹ *Covenant Theology: Biblical, Theological and Historical Perspectives*, Ed. Guy Prentiss Waters, J. Nicholas Reid, & John R. Muether, (Wheaton, IL.,: Crossway, 2020), pg. 589

² Thomas Goodwin, *The Works of Thomas Goodwin Vol. 5*, (Lafayette, IN.,: Sovereign Grace Publishers, 2000), pg. 7

The **Covenant of Redemption** is the holy agreement between the Persons of the Trinity in which the Father charges the Son to take on human flesh in the fullness of time to redeem His elect; and the reward purchased by the Son's willing sacrifice is the Holy Spirit *Himself* who establishes our communion with God for all eternity.

☆ A Historical Doctrine

☆ A Biblical Doctrine

☆ A Devotional Doctrine

I. A Historical Doctrine

The reformed

Not all Reformed theologians embrace the Covenant of Redemption. In fact, O Palmer Robertson who authored the book *The Christ of the Covenants*—a very helpful book—wrote “To speak concretely of an intertrinitarian “covenant” with terms and conditions between Father and Son mutually endorsed before the foundation of the world is to extend the bounds of scriptural evidence beyond propriety.”³ He would agree that there was an eternal decree to redeem, but would say *this is not the same* as a “pre-creation covenant between Father and Son.”⁴

What do the Westminster Standards teach?

I would argue that the Westminster Standards actually teaches the Covenant of Redemption, although it's not as clear as we would like it. What I mean is this: the Confession never uses the phrase “The Covenant of

³ O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*, (Phillipsburg, NJ.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1980), pg. 54. See *Covenant Theology*, pg.43, fn.1 for other dissenting voices.

⁴ Robertson, pg. 54

Redemption.” But I believe this is *mere* semantics.⁵ Their were some of the Westminster Divines who preferred to combine the substance of the Covenant of Redemption and the Covenant of Grace into one covenant, calling the combined covenants the Covenant of Grace. While others preferred to separate them into two different covenants. Case in point is the way the Confession and the Larger Catechism have two different answers as to who the parties of the covenant are. In **WCF 7.3** we read:

Man, by his fall, having made himself incapable of life by that covenant [i.e. the Covenant of Works], the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the covenant of grace; wherein he freely offereth unto *sinner's* life and salvation by Jesus Christ; requiring of *them* faith in him, that *they* may be saved, and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto eternal life his Holy Spirit, to make them willing, and able to believe.

As Charles Hodge points out: “here the implication is that God and his people are the [two] parties”⁶ of the covenant. However in the Westminster Larger Catechism Q.31 asks:

Q. With whom was the covenant of grace made?

A. The covenant of grace was *made with Christ* as the second Adam, and in him with all the elect as his seed.

Here the two parties of the covenant are God and Christ. So what the Divines did was that they combined the two into one. I agree with Charles Hodge that it is better to distinguish “...between the Covenant of Redemption [as having the parties being] the Father and the Son, and the Covenant of Grace [as being]

⁵ Perhaps purposely so. See J.V. Fesko’s *The Need For Creeds Today: Confessional Faith in a Faithless Age*, (Grand Rapids, MI.,: BakerAcademic, 2020), pg. 82ff. Fesko argues that the divines often had a purposeful ambiguity in the confession over points that were not agreed upon by everyone.

⁶ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology, Vol. 2: Anthropology*, (Peabody, MA.,: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), pg. 358

between God and his people.”⁷ Later in that century, this is exactly what the Savoy Declaration (1658) and the London Baptist Confession (1689)⁸ did. They both amended the Westminster Confession by making it clear that there was in fact a covenant made between the Father and Son. London Baptist reads in **8.1**

“It pleased God, in His eternal purpose, to choose and ordain the Lord Jesus, his only begotten Son, *according to the covenant made between them both*, to be the mediator between God and man...”

Additionally, theologians such as Jonathan Edwards, Martin Luther, Theodore Beza, William Ames, Edward Reynolds, Anthony Burgess, Samuel Rutherford, John Bunyan, Thomas Goodwin, Wilhelmus A Brakel, Herman Witsius, and many more all held to the Covenant of Redemption.⁹ That’s our **first point**: the Covenant of Redemption is both a historical and confessional doctrine.

II. A Biblical Doctrine

Tri-theism?

Some have objected to the Covenant of Redemption on the grounds that if we say that the Persons of the Trinity can enter into a covenant with each other we are guilty tritheism (3 Gods), because such a covenant would involve three wills. How do we answer? Truly the Godhead is the greatest and holiest mystery that can be conceived. We must affirm that there is only one God, *and*

⁷ *Ibid*, pg. 358

⁸ These were essentially copies of the WCF—the Savoy was Westminster minus denominationalism, and the London was Westminster minus paedobaptism.

⁹ *Covenant Theology*, pg. 44-45

that there are three Persons in the Godhead.¹⁰ “If the Father and Son are distinct persons [then] the one may be *the object* of the acts of the other. The one may love, address, and commune with the other. And that is exactly what we see in Scripture: intimate dialogs between the Father and the Son. As Guy Richard has concluded:

“If we can say that there is genuine communication between the persons of the Trinity within the inner life of God without lapsing into tritheism, then it certainly seems reasonable to say that we can hold to the Covenant of Redemption—which...is simply a genuine dialog between the persons of the Trinity regarding the redemption of the elect.”¹¹

Is this covenant seen in Scripture?

So then, do we see this Covenant of Redemption in Scripture? Well, in order for their to be a *covenant*, what elements must be present? **1)** There must two or more parties who come to an agreement. **2)** There must be conditions set or commands given. **3)** There must be promises made. **4)** There must be a curse threatened. So let’s take these one at a time.

1. Was there an agreement between the Father and the Son?

Clearly the parties were God the Father and God the Son and *yes* there was an agreement between them. **Hebrews 10:5, 7** “Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said...‘Behold, *I have come to do your will*, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.”¹² Why did Jesus come into the world? Because He agreed to carry out the Father’s plan. Later, when Jesus was a boy and his parents lost him in Jerusalem, so you remember what Jesus said? **Luke**

¹⁰ SCQ. 6. How many persons are there in the godhead?

A. There are three persons in the Godhead; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory.

¹¹ *Covenant Theology*, pg. 59

¹² A reciting and explaining of Psalm 40:6-8

2:49 “Did you not know that *I must be about my Father’s business?*”¹³ In other words, even at 12 years old, Jesus knew that He had agreed to come and accomplish His Father’s work. When speaking about His own teaching, Jesus agreed to teach what the Father told Him to teach. **John 12:49-50** “For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment—what to say and what to speak. And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me.” When speaking about the salvation He would bring, He said it was His Father’s will that He consented to. **John 6:37-38** “All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. *For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me.*” Prior to His crucifixion, He spoke of accomplishing the Father’s task. **John 17:4** “I glorified you on earth, *having accomplished the work that you gave me to do.*” To summarize, Jesus acknowledges that He came into the world to carry out his Father’s plans, to fulfill His Father’s business, to teach what the Father wanted Him to teach, and that He would accomplish all His work.

2. Were conditions *or* commands the Father gave the Son?

The Father *required* that Jesus would assume the nature the true nature of man. **Hebrews 10:5** “Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, “Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, *but a body have you prepared for me.*”¹⁴ The Father *required* that His Son be born under the requirements of the law. **Galatians 4:4** “But when the fullness of time had come, *God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law.*” The Father *required* that Jesus would perfectly obey this law. **Matthew 3:15** “But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.”¹⁵ The CEV captures the spirit of what Jesus is saying: “For now this is how it should be, *because we*

¹³ See ESV footnote

¹⁴ A reciting and explaining of Psalm 40:6-8

¹⁵ The NLT reads But Jesus said, “It should be done, for we must carry out all that God requires.”

must do all God wants us to do.” The Father *required* that Jesus lay down His own life. **John 10:18** “No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. *This charge I have received from my Father.*” To summarize, the Father required that Jesus take the body He had given Him, that He would submit Himself under the law, that He would fulfill all righteousness and lay down His life.

3. Was there a curse?

By consenting to all this Jesus agreed to take on the curse. “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us” (**Gal. 3:13**). Jesus *agreed* to be the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world (**Rev. 13:8**). The Father sent His Son to be the propitiation—the wrath bearing sacrifice—for our sins (**1 John 4:10**). He made Him who knew no sin, to be sin for us (**2 Cor. 5:21**). **Acts 2:23** “this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, [was] crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.” To summarize, the principle command that the Father laid upon Jesus would that He would die a cursed death, in order to release us from the curse of sin.

4. Were there rewards promised?

Yes in fact there were several things promised. 1) The Father promised to give Him the Spirit without measure. **John 3:34** “For he whom God has sent utters the words of God, *for he gives the Spirit without measure.*”

2) The Father promised Jesus would be fully satisfied in seeing the redemption of God’s elect. **Isaiah 53:11** “Out of the anguish of his soul *he shall see and be satisfied*; by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities.”

3) The Father promised to raise Him from the dead. **Psalms 16:9-10** “Therefore my heart is glad, and my whole being rejoices; my flesh also dwells secure. For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption.”

4) The Father promised that Jesus wouldn't lose any that would come to Him. **John 6:39** "And this is the will of him who sent me, *that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day.*"

5) The Father promised that Jesus would receive the nations as his inheritance. **Acts 2:7-8** "I will tell of the decree: The Lord said to me, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession."

6) The Father promised that Jesus would be supremely and universally glorified. **Philippians 2:8-9** "And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name,"

7) The Father promised to send the Holy Spirit, who is Himself our bond with God for all eternity. Why did Jesus die? So that He could secure the chief promise of the gospel, namely the Holy Spirit. **Galatians 3:13-14** "Christ redeemed us...[end of v.14] *so that...we might receive the promised Spirit* through faith." The Holy Spirit is the chief promise of the Father in the Covenant of Redemption. Jesus said in **Luke 24:49** "...behold, I am sending *the promise* of my Father upon you." As soon as Jesus finished redemption, as soon as He ascended into Heaven, He poured out the chief promise of the Father. **Acts 2:33** "Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, *he has poured out this* that you yourselves are seeing and hearing." Why is the Holy Spirit the chief promise of the Covenant of Redemption? Jonathan Edwards answers: "It is by partaking in the Holy Spirit, that [we] have communion with Christ [and His Father] in [their] fullness."¹⁶ Think of it this way: the Blessed Trinity is composed of the Lover (the Father) the Beloved (the Son) and the Spirit of Love who is the bond and eternal communion of their love. The Father promised to reward Christ's work by giving—His elect—that same Spirit so that we would be brought into

¹⁶ Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards Vol. 2*, (Carlisle, PA.,: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), pg. 5

everlasting communion with Him. Those are the promises that the Father gave Jesus in the Covenant of Grace.

In eternity

When did the Father and Son agree to these commands, curses and promises? In eternity past. This was God's predestined and predetermined plan (**Acts 4:27-28**). Jesus was foreordained before the foundation of the world (**1 Peter 1:20**) and decreed for our glory before the ages began (**1 Cor. 2:7; 2 Timothy 1:9; Ephesians 1:3-4**).¹⁷ All these things point to a pre-temporal intra-Trinitarian Covenant of Redemption. As Charles Hodge says here "The Father gave the Son a work to do; He sent Him into the world to perform it, and promised Him a great reward when the work was accomplished. Such is the constant representation of the Scriptures. We have, therefore, the contracting parties, the promise, [the curse] and the condition. These are the essential elements of a covenant."¹⁸ Therefore the Covenant of Redemption is a Biblical doctrine.

III. A Devotional Doctrine

This covenant is a window into the joy of the Trinity

What if I told you that that this Covenant has been the greatest delight of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? Thomas Goodwin said "...there was never such joy in Heaven as upon this happy conclusion and agreement. The whole Trinity

¹⁷ Ephesians 3:11; Luke 22:22

¹⁸ Hodge, pg. 360. "The parallel so distinctly drawn between Adam and Christ is also a proof of the point in question. As Adam was the head and representative of his posterity, so Christ is the head and representative of his people. And as God entered into covenant with Adam, so He entered into covenant with Christ. This, in Romans 5:12-21, is set forth as the fundamental idea of all of God's dealings with men, both in their fall and in their redemption." *ibid.* Also see *Covenant Theology*, pg. 57-59. There the author explains that the COR and the COW are mirrors of each other; while the COR and the COG are intimately related—the former being the root and the latter the fruit.

rejoiced in it...their chiefest delights were taken up with this more than in all their [other] works...God's heart was never taken so much with anything..as the thoughts of this business."¹⁹ Do you want proof? Please turn with me to **Proverbs 8:30-31**. This passage answers the question "What as God doing before He made the world?" Let's look. **v.30** "...then *I* was beside *him*, like a master workman." Stop for a moment. The *I* here is the pre-incarnate Christ. Look at **v.22-24** "The Lord possessed me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth. When there were no depths I was brought forth." Solomon is speaking about the eternal begotten-ness of the Son. He is the the Wisdom in this chapter standing forth personified. The NT clearly tells us that Jesus Christ is the Wisdom of God (**1 Corinthians 1:24**). Back to **v.30** "...then *I* was beside *him*, like a master workman." *Him* being God the Father. Oh what were they doing together? Halfway through **v.30** "...I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always." Here was the first thing. They delighted and adored each other. "The Father that He was able to beget such a Son like Him"²⁰ and the Son rejoiced that He has such a Father as He. Infinite, unbridled happiness. And just this very thought is enough to overwhelm us. The joy of the Lord is where we find our strength.

They rejoiced in the this unspeakable Covenant

But they were delighting in something else. **v.31**, They were "...rejoicing in *his inhabited world* and delighting in *the children of man*." Here's the question: who are *these children of man* that they are delighting in? It can't be mankind considered in their rebellion and sin. **Genesis 6:5-6** says "The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the Lord regretted that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart." It can't be that part of mankind. Could it be Adam and Eve in their state of innocence before the

¹⁹ Goodwin, pg. 32

²⁰ *ibid*

fall? No that doesn't correspond with the plurality in v.31, it says "*the children of man*" which indicates more than just two. Neither does it correspond with the breadth of v.31 which speaks of "*his inhabited world*" which indicates there were people from every tribe and tongue and nation who were his delight. Besides all this, Adam and Even were only in their state of innocence for a short time, and that wouldn't have filled the Triune God with eternal pleasure. No, Goodwin says:

"[Their] delights...were most in this, to think that [Christ] should win to [the Father] and gain the love of these accursed rebels whom He Himself loved so dearly, and that He should show His love, by an unheard of way, that should amaze angels and men, to take away their sins, and reconcile them to Himself again by the Incarnation and death of His Son; and tie them to Him by an everlasting knot, which their sins [could] not untie [ever] again, nor separate from...His love. This took up [Their] delights; [They] delighted to think of it again and again; [Their] double delights were in this, insomuch as [They] glad [Themselves] with the continual thoughts of it again and again."²¹

What was God doing before He made the world? Infinitely rejoicing in the Covenant of Redemption.

²¹ Goodwin, pg. 32-33. Goodwin further unpacks this delight of the Trinity in the Covenant of Redemption in Psalm 40. Now we already considered v.6-8 in their New Testament context from Hebrews 10:5-7. But immediately before these, the Psalmist says in v.5 "You have multiplied, O Lord my God, your wondrous deeds **and your thoughts toward us.**" Goodwin says here: "His mind hath ran on them from everlasting, that his thoughts cannot be numbered. There are many works of wonder which he hath done for us, which hath exercised these his thoughts towards us, but above all in this we have been speaking of; therefore he passes by all other works, and mentions this very transaction, and calling of, and covenant with, his Son, which we have all this while been speaking of, as that wherein these his thought have been most spent and exercised with delight. So v.6-8 "In sacrifice and offering you have not delighted, but you have given me an open ear. Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required. Then I said, "Behold, I have come; in the scroll of the book it is written of me: I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart."

This covenant is the foundation of all our assurance and love

Finally what this means, is that the Covenant of Redemption is the surest guarantee of our salvation. The great Dutch theologian Wilhelmus A Brakel mentions several practical applications of this glorious covenant.

First he says that "...the salvation of the elect is unmoveably sure."²² If Both parties of the Covenant—the Father and the Son—were mutually satisfied and agreed about our salvation in eternity past, then nothing can undo that. "Our salvation was in sure hands, even before the world was; for God and Christ had engaged themselves by covenant each to [each] other for us, the one to die, the other to accept it for us."²³

Second, Brakel says "the elect...need [not] to merit salvation, nor add anything, ...for by this covenant all the weighty conditions were laid upon Christ. He would bear the punishment; He would fulfill the law on their behalf; He would keep them; and He would lead them to salvation."²⁴

Lastly, Brakel says "this covenant reveals a love which is unparalleled, exceeding all comprehension. How blessed and what a wonder it is to have been considered and known in this covenant, to have been given by the Father to the Son, by the Son to have been written in His book, and to have been the object of the eternal, mutual delight of the Father and the Son to save you! The parties of this covenant were not moved to include any of the elect on the basis of foreseen faith or good works. They were not moved by necessity or compulsion, but by eternal love and volition. "I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you" (**Jeremiah 31:3**)...Oh, how blessed is he who is incorporated in this covenant and, being enveloped and irradiated by this eternal love, is stirred up to love in return, exclaiming, "We love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19).²⁵

²² Wilhelmus A Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service Vol.1: God, Man, and Christ*, (Grand Rapids, MI.,: Reformation Heritage Books, 1992), pg. 261

²³ Goodwin, pg. 33

²⁴ Brakel, pg. 262

²⁵ *ibid*, pg. 263