

Two Different Covenants, Two Different Schools (2)

YEAR:

2004

VOLUME/YEAR:

80/2004

SERIES:

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Series:

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ISSUE:

Issue: 12, 3/15/2004

ARTICLE TYPE:

That They May Teach Them to Their Children

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The two different covenants compared and contrasted in the last installment are the conditional and the unconditional covenants. By the unconditional covenant of grace is meant the relationship of friendship that God sovereignly establishes with Christ (eternally) as the Mediator and Head of the covenant, and in Christ with all the elect. This covenant is not merely a means unto salvation, but is the very goal of God, namely everlasting covenant fellowship with His people. God establishes His covenant unilaterally with His chosen in the line of continued generations, that is, with believers and their seed. At baptism, God promises salvation, and He always keeps His promises. However, His promises are only for the elect children, even as the promises of the preaching are only for the elect hearer. Upon this foundation, Protestant Reformed schools are established.

The conditional covenant view holds that God establishes a covenant as an arrangement in which He will give the blessings of salvation to some members of the covenant. The covenant is not established with Christ as Head, and thus with the elect only; rather it is established individually, with each believer and every baptized child. According to this view, God gives to every child of believers the promises of salvation and seals the promises to each by baptism. Nonetheless, God's promises are conditional, and whether or not each child actually receives the promised blessings depends on the child's believing the promises, thus ratifying the covenant with God.

Reformed, Christian schools have ever been founded on the covenant of God with believers and their seed. Since the foundation of an institution determines much of its character, the school

established upon the doctrine of the unconditional covenant is different in many respects from the school established on the foundation of a conditional covenant. In order to set forth these differences, we will first examine the schools that are established by parents who maintain the doctrine of a conditional covenant. Next time, these schools will be compared and contrasted with those founded on the doctrine of an unconditional covenant.

Do recall the caution given in the last article, namely, that not all schools established on the doctrine of a conditional covenant will be entirely consistent with their foundation for various reasons. Hence, not everything presented in this article will be found in every Christian school in this group. Nonetheless, what is presented is the logical working out of the conditional covenant, and most has been corroborated by documents and/or experience.

First of all, an examination of schools associated with the conditional covenant produces the startling discovery that the covenant often is not specifically identified as the foundation. The covenant is usually mentioned as an element in the school. Other significant "stones" are more prominent in the foundation, especially that of preparing the students for service in the kingdom. (Recall the caution expressed in the first article, how other factors influence the school. One wonders how much of this is the result of the old AACCS [now ICS] movement.) The covenant is usually cited, not as the foundation for the instruction, but as a reason why a child should attend the Christian school. It is stated that God created a distinction between the children of believers and the children of unbelievers; believing parents must recognize this fact and send their children to the Christian school. Or it is stated that these children have been purchased by the blood of Christ; they ought therefore to be sent to a Christian school.

Secondly, the character and content of Christian education is shaped by the teachers' view of their students. How would teachers that believe in a conditional covenant view their students? To begin with, they would believe that each of their students has all the promises of God. They do not believe that all the students are regenerated, nor do they like to emphasize regeneration. They might well say that the question whether the children are or are not (yet) converted is immaterial. What is important is that they have the promises; God's promises do not fail. Yet, for the promises to be realized, the students must keep the demands that God placed upon them, which are especially faith and obedience.

On the basis of the conditional- covenant view, one would presume that a high priority of teachers would be to call the students to believe and obey—to fulfill the demands of the covenant so that they may enjoy the blessings. I have not found this to be the case, either in personal contact with these schools, or in various of their writings, though this may vary from one teacher to the next.

There are, however, clear indications that three other serious errors result from this covenant view. The first is presupposed salvation. Although conditional-covenant folks inveigh against Abraham Kuyper's view of presupposed regeneration (and rightly so), yet the logical conclusion of their doctrine of the covenant is that parents presume the salvation of their children. Consider that they insist (rightly) that God is sovereign, and thus His promises never fail. In addition, they maintain that God has promised salvation to the individual children. Even the actual act of faith, they agree, is by God's grace. The obvious conclusion is: All these baptized children are or will be saved. Even if they walk in sin for a while, God's promises are true, and these baptized ones have the promises of God guaranteed to them to the day of their death. So long as the child has not specifically become a covenant breaker by renouncing his baptism, the parents may (and do) take comfort in the thought that the child will come to salvation, for God's promises never fail.

Presupposed salvation is the logical working out of the conditional covenant.

A second erroneous inference of the conditional covenant is presupposed unregeneration. Generally, the adherents of the conditional covenant also believe in mediate regeneration, namely that God works through the preaching to give the new life of Christ. God works salvation through conscious knowledge. Such knowledge an infant does not have. This is in perfect harmony with their belief that the baptized children do not enjoy the benefits of the covenant until they fulfill the demands of faith and obedience. Clearly no infant can do this. At what age can this be done? No one is sure, but until that happens, the child is unregenerate. This is not openly stated, but it is a necessary conclusion of the conditional covenant.

This has far-reaching implications for instruction in the Christian school. The teacher cannot rightly maintain that the student has the power to obey, for the child is probably not regenerated. He must be guided and channeled, but largely in the same manner as the child in the public school would be. The teacher could try to have some good influence on the child, and hope that one day (after regeneration) the instruction would be recalled and then lived with conviction.

It is worth noting that most who teach the conditional covenant also maintain that God bestows a common grace on all men, or at least on all baptized children. Perhaps the Christian schoolteacher has some hope that this common grace in the (unregenerated) baptized child will apply the instruction for his good. At the same time, this also places the covenant child at the same level as the child outside the covenant. The teacher in the Christian school would have no more hope or basis for influencing his kindergartner, at that time at least, than a teacher in the public school would have.

A third tragic consequence of the conditional covenant is a practical antinomianism. According to this view of the covenant, God has spoken His promise to this child by name and sealed it to him by baptism. A dissolute life does not dissolve those promises. In the best of situations, it is inevitable that a live-as-you-please attitude develops among some of the youth. However, the conditional covenant's conception of children will allow a certain toleration of such an attitude, a recipe for disaster. For, according to this view, until the child accepts the promises, no one can expect him to live as a child of God. One may remind the covenant youth that God has a claim on his life, but God has a claim on the life of every creature. One may enjoin the child to recall that God made beautiful promises to him, and that he must believe these promises and receive the blessings. But until the child has done so, he has not the power to live a sanctified life. Yet, he has the promises, and at any time in his life he may claim them. But for now....

These are some of the evil fruits of the teaching of a conditional covenant as it determines how children in the sphere of the covenant are to be viewed. These are not Reformed fruits. The effect on the instruction and atmosphere in the school is disastrous, insofar as the principles work through.

There are other implications of the conditional covenant for the Christian school. One has to do with the question: Is Christ the center of the instruction in the school? Christ-centered instruction is the mark of Christian education, as the very name demands. However, if the instruction is consistently in harmony with the conditional covenant, Christ will not be at the center of the instruction, for Christ is not the center of the conditional covenant. He is the Mediator of the covenant, not the Head. He earns the blessings of the covenant, but the covenant is with the individual, not with Christ. With consistent conditional-covenant instruction, Christ is off to the side, and the focus of the instruction is on the child. If this be the case, it is a serious indictment

of the covenantal foundation.

What are the implications of this covenant view for the antithesis, another significant Reformed doctrine? Is the antithesis maintained? The proponents of the conditional covenant would affirm that it is, holding that the antithesis consists in the fact that the children of believers are separated by God from the children of unbelievers. No doubt there is truth in that—covenant children are distinguished from the children of this world by baptism. Although believing parents do not establish covenantal schools on the principle of world flight, they do not either desire to send their children out into the world and immerse them in the filth and vile iniquity of the public school. A Christian school is for covenant children, for children of believers.

However, the antithesis is not maintained merely by sending the baptized child to a Christian school. This is plain, on the one hand, from the fact that the baptized children include elect and reprobate (witness Jacob and Esau), so in reality the antithesis between the godly and the ungodly is not being maintained. On the other hand, drawing the line thus will militate against living the antithesis. Living the antithesis demands living unto God and against sin, even when sin appears in the student in the next desk—in the Christian school. The reality is that in most conditional-covenant circles, the concept antithesis is rarely discussed, much less emphasized. If this same lack is reflected in the daily instruction, it is a serious weakness in the Christian school.

Discipline is a related concern in every school that bears the name of Christ. One would expect, logically, that the conditional-covenant schools would tend towards legalism, and that the discipline would be according to laws and demands. That has been the experience of this writer. To be fair, it must be acknowledged that virtually every Christian school struggles with good use of rules. Schools must maintain order, and rules must be made, and then enforced rather impartially. It is preferable that the school avoid endless rulemaking and operate out of principles. But the conditional covenant has law at its heart—demand and promise, conditions—and this ordinarily finds expression in the discipline exercised in the schools that maintain this covenant view.

Connected to that is the question of what is the motive for obedience in this system. The ordinary answer is: the motivation is the student's special status and privilege as a covenant child. The word gratitude is not ordinarily used in these discussions. Responsibility is! But not gratitude. The children are not called to live antithetical lives out of gratitude. Why not? Could it be that, while the child has the great privilege of being in the covenant, doing good is his duty in the covenant, part of the condition he must fill to maintain the covenant? And thus salvation as God's great work is not consciously emphasized as reason for grateful obedience?

It should be evident that there are serious implications of the conditional covenant, which are worked out, to one degree or another, in the Christian school that is founded on it. Many of these implications are contrary to the very heart of Reformed education.

On the other hand, there are significant implications for the school built on the doctrinal foundation of the unconditional covenant. Those implications, when worked out, mark significant differences between the respective schools. More on this next time.

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