

111-E. Covenant and Baptism

At the time of the 1944 Liberation in The Netherlands, the views of Dr A. Kuyper on the doctrine of covenant and baptism became the focus of much criticism.

Dr Abraham Kuyper was a prominent leader and a prolific writer within the Reformed Churches around the 19th century. (He died in 1920). Although we can appreciate much of his work to reform the churches, we cannot agree with some of his teachings. We will try to explain in simple language what Abraham Kuyper taught about the doctrine of the covenant and the meaning of baptism. Of all the wrong theories he taught, this one caused the most unrest in the churches.

We'll first explain what the Bible teaches about the covenant and then compare this with what Dr A. Kuyper taught. We will start at the very beginning: Paradise.

THE COVENANT STARTS IN PARADISE

When God created Adam and Eve, He established a relationship with them. That relationship we call 'the covenant'.¹ In this covenant, God promised Adam that He would always be his Father and be with him *eternally*. That *promise* of God's everlasting Fatherly care was a great *blessing*. This



¹ Gen 2:8 mentions the name LORD (capital letters meaning YAHWEH), which means: God of the covenant. See also Hosea 6:7.

blessing was not only for Adam and Eve but would also include their children: all of mankind. Adam was the federal head, the first in the line of this covenant community to populate this earth.

God *demand*ed that Adam and Eve respond to his grace and kindness by always serving Him faithfully and staying away from evil (the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil). If they ate from that tree, God would punish them; they would surely die (Gen 2:17). This threat is known as the *covenant curse*.

In a nutshell, the covenant has three parts:

- a *promise* (blessing, eternal life),
- a *demand* (obedience)
- a *threat* (curse).

Sadly, Adam and Eve fell into sin, and the *curse* of eternal death was on them. Thankfully, God did not fully apply this curse immediately: God didn't instantly kill Adam and Eve. God promised that He would send His Son to die for them instead. The Father would send His Son as the *Covenant Mediator*. Christ would restore that covenant relationship by paying the penalty for Adam and Eve's disobedience (Gen 3:15). If Adam and Eve believed in Him and embraced Him as their Saviour and Redeemer, their death would not be eternal; one day, they would again live with Him eternally on the renewed heaven and earth.

This is God's amazing grace!

THERE IS ONLY ONE COVENANT

Many centuries later, God *renewed* this covenant with Abraham. This renewal is unique because God tells Abraham the promised Messiah would be born from one of *his* descendants. The nation of Israel would become God's exclusive people. To make that *promise* very real for Abraham, God told him that he must circumcise his sons. That circumcision would remind the people of Israel of

the *promise* that Christ the Saviour would come and that *He* would bear the *curse* - which *they* had deserved - on the cross. All Abraham's descendants would enjoy these *blessings* (forgiveness of sins and eternal life) *if they believed!* Circumcision was a sacrament that pointed to the *promise* of salvation. Please note it was not a *guarantee* of salvation!

To be faithful to His promises, God ensured that when the time came for Christ to come to earth, there would still be believing parents who embraced the gospel of Gen 3:15. God wished to preserve this gospel through the generations.

To remind the people of Israel of that gospel, God continued to send judges and prophets to warn them to repent, be faithful, and believe! He often punished them severely to bring them back to serve Him. Israel was very privileged with this special care and attention.

Ps 147: 19,20 makes this very clear:

*'He declares His word to Jacob,
His statutes and judgements to Israel.
He has not dealt thus with any nation.
And as for his judgements, they
have not known them.'*

The nations around Israel were left in their disobedience and, therefore, lived under the *curse* of the covenant. God did not send prophets to them except Nineveh. Jonah went to warn them of God's covenant curses.

The Bible teaches us that the covenant *blessings* are for those who *embrace* Christ as their Messiah and Redeemer. God's covenant *curses* are for those who *reject* Christ as their covenant Mediator and Saviour.

The late Professor K Schilder put it this way:

'The covenant is the judicial basis for all flesh'.

'Judicial basis means the basis on which someone is judged. In this case, God's covenant law.

Somewhere else, he writes:

'Please, never forget that from the beginning, all of mankind is in a covenant relationship with God!'

Yes, heaven and hell are *covenantally* determined.



Prof Dr. K. Schilder

WHAT DOES BAPTISM SIGN AND SEAL?

I am sure you have seen babies getting baptised in church. Maybe you've held one of your siblings when they were baptised.

Baptism has the same meaning as circumcision in the Old Testament times. It is a sign and seal of God's *promise* to forgive all your sins and give you

eternal life. **Baptism does not signify and seal the covenant; no, it signifies and seals the covenant promise.** The covenant has a promise and a curse. It is *the promise of the blessing* - not even the blessing itself - that baptism signifies and seals. Just because you are baptised does not mean you are saved! God must work

this faith in your heart. You can only be *regenerated* through His Word and Spirit.

You must understand this well! If you don't, read it again because this is important.

WHAT DID ABRAHAM KUYPER TEACH?

Abraham Kuyper taught that the covenant was only for the elect! Baptism didn't seal and signify the *promise* of the covenant blessing. No, he said that because a baby from believing parents is a covenant child, and therefore elect, this little boy or girl will be saved. Full Stop. The water of baptism shows and confirms that this baby is saved!

Some theologians asked: "But if later in life this person turns his or her back to the LORD, is this person still saved because he or she was baptised?"

Baptism does not signify and seal the covenant; no, it signifies and seals the covenant promise.



Prof Dr A. Kuyper

Kuyper responded: "We baptise a baby on the *presumption* that he or she will come to faith and on the *presumption* that this child will receive the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit when he grows up. If this does not happen, then the baptism was not real!" (Just spilling of water!) Kuyper taught that

baptism was a sign of God's *election*.

But that is not true.

This understanding of baptism leaves parents in limbo. Parents who lost their child in infancy would never know if their baby's baptism had been real.

The baby had not come to faith yet. The baby hadn't shown evidence of regeneration. It would be a 'wait and see' situation for any baptism, depending on whether the child would come to faith or not, depending on whether the Holy Spirit would regenerate the child.

The rich promise sealed in baptism had disappeared. The rich promise that this child belongs to the Lord because it is a child of believing parents!

THE WESTMINSTER CONFESSION ON BAPTISM

Regrettably, the Westminster Confession makes the same mistake.

Question 31 of the Larger Catechism asks the following question:

'With whom was the covenant of grace made?'

Answer:

The covenant of grace was made with Christ as the second Adam, and in Him with all the elect as His seed.'

As Abraham Kuyper taught, the Larger Catechism states that the covenant of grace was made after the fall into sin with the elect only and Christ as the second Adam.

This doctrine is false.

When God gave Adam and Eve the mother promise in Gen 3:15, He did not make a *new* (second) covenant, as the Westminster Larger Catechism states (Q. & A. 32-35), but He *restored* the covenant He made with Adam and Eve in Paradise, which *they* had broken. It is the *same* covenant with its promise, demand, and curse.

In Gen 3:15, God tells Adam and Eve that He will send his Son to bear the covenant curse, the penalty of death *they* deserved! He tells them that He will continue to be their Father and give them and their children His blessings: the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. He will do so if they *believe* in

Christ and accept and embrace Him as their Mediator, Who appeased God's covenant wrath in their place (Art 21 BC) That *promise* of those blessings is signified in circumcision and baptism.

'He who believes the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.'

John 3: 36

COVENANT OF LOVE?

We often hear the term 'covenant of love' being used to describe the character of the covenant. This is not entirely correct.

It is true that 'God so *loved* the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life' (John 3:16). It is also true that because of Christ's sacrifice, we may call God our Father and may know that our Father *loves* His children very much!

However, the covenant is also a covenant of *wrath!*

God's covenant *wrath* removed Adam and Eve from paradise, placed a curse on this earth, and pronounced the death sentence on mankind (Gen 3:17-19).

God's covenant *wrath* caused all the people on earth, except Noah and his family, to drown in the flood.

God's covenant *wrath* demanded that the seven Canaanite nations be annihilated because the measure of their sin was complete.

God's covenant *wrath* drove the people of Israel into exile as punishment for their disobedience.

God's covenant *wrath* nailed Christ to the cross. It is God's covenant *wrath* that will pour out over this world in the many plagues and calamities that Revelation describes:

"And behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every one according to his work" (Rev 22:12).

God's love and God's wrath are two sides of the same coin.

To use the term 'Covenant of Love' distorts and blurs the seriousness of the covenant and tells only half the story. Our form for baptism uses the term 'Covenant of grace', which describes the covenant's character more accurately.

God's love and God's wrath are two sides of the same coin

INSIDE OR OUTSIDE THE COVENANT?

Sometimes, we hear that God's children are *in* the covenant, and unbelievers are *outside* the covenant; this is not correct, as explained above. All of mankind are God's creatures, descendants of Adam, and therefore accountable to Him. Nobody can ignore God and say: 'You do not have any authority over me! You can't tell me what to do! I make up my *own* mind, and I don't need You!'

Through the fall into sin, all of mankind comes under God's covenant wrath. In his grace, God has given us a route of escape in the gospel of Gen 3:15. That is why God commissioned His church to

preach the gospel to all nations: believe in Christ, the covenant Mediator. He is the only way to escape God's covenant wrath (John 3:36):

'He who believes in the Son has everlasting life, and he who does not believe in the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.'

BAPTISM IS A BEAUTIFUL SACRAMENT

Are you baptised?

If so, you are very privileged because God *promised* you the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. It is the richest and most beautiful promise you'll ever receive!

What is your response to your baptism?

'I believe, Lord, help my unbelief!' (Mark 9:24)



QUESTIONS

1. How many covenants did God make with mankind?
2. What are the three parts of the covenant?
3. What is God's covenant promise?
4. What is God's covenant demand?
5. What is God's covenant curse?
6. What does baptism signify and seal?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. What is the difference and connection between covenant and election?
2. What would the effect be on your life of faith if baptism were not a sign and seal of the *promise* but the *possibility* of forgiveness of sins and eternal life?

ⁱ This chapter is written by H. Ballast