

## Covenant and Inheritance: The Church as the Sons of God

If you have spent any amount of time around Reformed people, you have probably figured out that we like to talk about "covenant." Reformed theology is often described as "covenant theology" because of its emphasis on the biblical understanding of covenant. But what is a covenant?

### 1. Covenant

O. Palmer Robertson has defined it as "a bond in blood, sovereignly administered." This is a good description of the redemptive covenants that God has made with his people. The covenants God made with Abraham and Israel, for instance, fit this very nicely. But not all covenants involved a sacrifice. David and Jonathan made a covenant (1 Samuel 20:12-17) that did not include any sacrifice. Therefore a covenant, in and of itself, does not require blood. It is solely because of sin that blood is required for God's redemptive covenants.

Meredith Kline and other biblical scholars have explored the connections between the biblical covenants with the covenant-making that was common in the Ancient Near East. Kline's 1963 volume, *Treaty of the Great King* showed that Deuteronomy follows the basic pattern of treaty/covenants made by Ancient Near Eastern kings. The pattern is as follows:

1. Preamble--identifying the Covenant Mediator
2. Historical Prologue--giving the historical justification for the King's rule, and explaining why the vassal does not deserve such kindness from the King
3. Stipulations--how the vassal is to live in service to the King
4. Sanctions & Covenant Ratification--blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience
5. Dynastic Disposition/Covenant Continuity--how the covenant will be continued beyond the death of the King (or in this case, the Mediator).

Kline is undoubtedly correct in seeing this treaty pattern present in Deuteronomy. But it does not explain everything. After all, from the beginning God intended to be something considerably more than our King. He also desired to be our Father. And I would suggest that the covenantal language of the Scriptures connects to the language of sonship precisely because the covenant reflects the eternal relationship between Father and Son.

### 2. Covenant and Sonship

In Genesis 1:27 God created man in his own image and likeness. What does it mean to be created in the image and likeness of God? (Genesis 5:1-3) Just as Adam was in the image of God, so Seth was in the image of Adam. Luke 3:38 traces the genealogy of Christ back to Adam, the son of God. Paul connects the language of "image" with "firstborn" in Colossians 1:15 ("He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation,...the firstborn from the dead"). To be in the image of God is to be the son of God. Adam is created in the image of God--therefore Adam is created the son of God. In other words, Adam was created to look like God. Adam was created to be a reflection of the holiness and

righteousness of God. God created him to participate in the fellowship and communion of the Trinity. And Adam's fellowship and communion with God was expressed in a covenant. Covenant is the expression of the relationship between father and son.

Have you ever wondered why the covenant with Adam is expressed only in the negative? God tells Adam that in the day he eats of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, he will surely die. Why didn't God say, that if you obey me you will live forever? He didn't need to. Adam was his son. The son is the image and likeness of the father. The son knows that he will receive the inheritance of his father. The covenant with Adam is implicit in his very relationship as son to father. If the son continues in the fellowship and communion of the father, then he will receive the inheritance. If he continues to reflect the father, then of course he will live forever! That is inherent in the relationship of father and son. God gives only a warning: if you break covenant--if you disobey me--in other words, if you fail to reflect my glory, then you will die. If you do not live like my son--then you will not receive the inheritance. Or more precisely, you will inherit death from your new father--the devil. (Recall how Jesus spoke in this fashion to the Pharisees --you are of your father, the devil.) And notice how in the curse that God proclaims he distinguishes between the seed of the woman and seed of the devil. You will either be a son of God or a son of Satan.

Genesis 6 refers to this when it says in verse 2 that the sons of God began to intermarry with the daughters of men. Some have come up with fanciful interpretations that speak of angels intermarrying with humans--but this has no foundation in the word of God. Rather, chapter 5 has just told us that Adam's son Seth was in his image--just as he was in the image of God. Therefore we ought to see the godly line of Seth as the sons of God referred to in chapter 6. But the godly line--the sons of God themselves--are not reflecting the image of God. Therefore God brings judgment upon the wicked through the Flood, saving only Noah--the one who alone reflected the righteousness of God.

In this 'new creation' will Noah, the son of God, succeed where Adam failed? God makes a covenant with Noah--in which he echoes the covenant of creation: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth." Will Noah be a true son of the Father? You know the story. Noah fails just like Adam.

And yet in God's mercy the holy line is continued until we come to Abraham. Now Abraham is never called "the son of God." But the blessing God gives him in Genesis 12 is very clearly Abram's adoption.(Gen 12:1-3) God first removes him from his father's house--thereby establishing himself as Abram's father. Then he also promises Abraham an inheritance. Abram was the firstborn of Terah, and therefore would have expected to receive the blessing and birthright of the firstborn. But God calls Abram to be his son, and to look for an inheritance from Him. And as Paul tells us in Romans 4:13, this inheritance was not merely a piece of real estate in the middle east, but consisted of the whole world. The fact that Paul says that Abraham was promised the inheritance of the whole world ought to convince us once and for all that Abraham is indeed a son of God. He is no longer merely the firstborn of Terah, he is now the firstborn son of God.

But God wants to make it clear that HE is the one who chooses his own son. To be a firstborn according to the flesh is not sufficient. Abraham had a son before Isaac but Ishmael was born according to the flesh and not according to the Spirit (Galatians 4). Therefore Isaac was chosen to continue the covenant blessing. Likewise Isaac had two sons--and Esau was the firstborn; but God chose Jacob to

be His son. Indeed God renamed Jacob "Israel"--which means "prince of God." And when God spoke through Moses to Pharaoh, saying "Israel is my son, my firstborn," He was claiming Jacob (and all who belonged to his house) as his son.

There is nothing that Israel did to earn or deserve this relationship. God did not choose Abraham, Isaac and Jacob because of their goodness. God chose them out of his mere good pleasure. And when God sent Moses to bring his people out of Egypt, it was not because of the righteousness of the Israelites. Rather, as Exodus 2:24 says: "So God heard their groaning, and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob." God remembered his promises. He remembered the covenant that he had made with his son. And now he called to Pharaoh: "Israel is my son, my firstborn. So I say to you, let my son go, that he may serve me!" Israel cannot live like the son of God so long as he is in bondage. As long as the Israelites are slaves, they cannot serve God in the manner that he desires. Because a son is supposed to serve his father--not a foreign king (here we see how God's kingship and his fatherhood are bound together in the covenant).

Indeed, the service that God requires from his son is none other than the service of worship. If being in the image of God is to be the son of God; And if covenant is the relationship between father and son; Then service/worship is the response of the son to the father. God calls Pharaoh to let Israel go, so that Israel may sacrifice to Him in the wilderness. The sticking point in the negotiations with Pharaoh always comes back to the fact that God demands that the whole of the congregation of Israel (not just the men) sacrifice to him in the wilderness (not in Egypt). Sure, it is plain to Pharaoh that Moses *really* intends to lead the Israelites out of Egypt never to return. But in all the negotiations, that is never explicitly stated. The whole point is that Israel is called to worship Yahweh, in the place and in the manner that Yahweh has determined; and so long as they serve Pharaoh they cannot serve God properly. The son of God cannot serve two masters.

And in Jesus Christ, the firstborn Son of God has come. In Galatians 3-4 Paul sets this forth plainly: 3:21-4:7. Paul portrays the whole history of redemption as a history of the son of God. The history of the Old Testament is the history of the son of God in his minority. Israel was the son of God--the true heir of God; but so long as he was a child, he was no better than a slave. The law was a pedagogue--a servant employed to discipline the children. But then in the fullness of time, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman (the promise of the seed of the woman), born under the law so that he might redeem those under the law. He is the faithful son--the true Firstborn Son of God, who now has redeemed us that we might receive the adoption as sons. He is the embodiment of Israel--the son of God *par excellence*. Jesus is all that Israel was supposed to be.

Therefore all those who are baptized into Christ are sons of God through faith in him. You are Abraham's seed--according to the promise. You have been adopted among the true sons of God, you have been grafted into the true vine. If Israel was the son of God in his minority, Jesus is the Son of God come of age. And if you are in Christ, then you are also come of age. All that Israel was supposed to be has come to fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

Paul expands on this in Romans 8. Romans 8:3 starts by showing us how Jesus is the Son of God come in the likeness of sinful flesh, so that he might fulfill the "righteous requirement of the law" in us who walk "according to the Spirit" (v4). [Read v14-30.] The language of covenant and new creation brings us back to the language of firstborn, son, and inheritance. (Cf. Hebrews 2:5-18).

### 3. The Trinity and the Church

I'd like to close with some reflections on the Nicene Creed. Have you ever wondered why the Nicene Creed has four "I believes" instead of three? I believe in God the Father, And in one Lord Jesus Christ, I believe in the Holy Spirit, and I believe one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. One might think it a bit presumptuous to make the church an object of faith together with the Triune God! And, quite frankly, it would be presumptuous for me to say that you must make this church an object of faith. That's why the Creed is so careful. The "One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church" is the church that you are to believe. You might think, "ah, but back then there was only one church! It would be so much easier if we had that today!" Don't kid yourself. At the time that this was being written, there were two orthodox churches in Antioch that refused to have communion with each other (not to mention the heretical Arian church). They managed to maintain the unity of the church on the regional level in most places, but every few decades one regional church would excommunicate another regional church for better or worse reasons. For them it was as much as an article of faith to say "I believe One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church," because twenty years before, there had been an ecumenical council that had published a heretical creed!

No, the confession, "I believe One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church," is a confession of faith that is rooted in the confession of the Triune God. The Arian Controversy had wrestled with the question of what it meant for Jesus to be the Son of God, and the Church had become convinced that if Jesus is the Son of God, then the we who have been united to him have been made partakers of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4), and heirs of eternal life with him. To be in covenant with God means to be his children. And if we--as a body--are children of God, then the Church shares both in Christ's suffering and in his glory. To confess, "I believe One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church" is to confess an eschatological reality. We believe that it is already true--even when it doesn't necessarily look like it! Even though Antioch is divided, we still believe it. Even though Athanasius--the great champion of orthodoxy--has been excommunicated for the third time this decade, we still believe "One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church."

In Jesus Christ, God has been pleased to exalt humanity to his right hand. Yes, he has exalted one man. It is the incarnate Son of God who is seated at the right hand of the Father. But in seating Jesus at his right hand, God exalts the new humanity--all those who are in Christ. As one early Father put it, "He became all that we are by nature, so that we might become all that he is by grace." Notice how that is said. He is one substance with God and with us. Our Lord Jesus Christ is one person, with two natures. (Persons act; natures exist--in other words, there are not two centers of consciousness or activity in Christ; rather there are two sets of characteristics out of which the one person acts). The Church does not have such characteristics. We have one. We are human. When we say that we partake of the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4), or that we become all that Christ is by grace, we mean that we are so united to him, that we partake of him and all his benefits, by the power of the Holy Spirit. The presence of Jesus Christ as the life-giving Spirit is the energizing power that gives life to our mortal bodies.

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