

The Main Points Of The Doctrine of the Covenant

A Speech by **Dr. K. Schilder** (August 31, 1944)

Translated by **T. vanLaar** (1992)

This is a translation of a speech which was held in several places in the Netherlands during 1944 and 1945, the time of the liberation of the Gereformeerde Kerken from the so called Synodical Churches. One of the issues being debated at that time was the view of the covenant. In this speech Professor Dr. K. Schilder outlines what he and his reformed contemporaries confessed to be the Biblical view of the Covenant between God and man. As this topic is of constant interest, this speech has been translated from an uncorrected stenographic recording of Professor Dr. K. Schilder's speech as it was held at the Waalsche Kerk in Delft, the Netherlands on August 31, 1944. It very powerfully and insightfully presents the covenant as it is revealed by God in His Word.

T. vanLaar

K.S. Begins:

What covenant are we intending to discuss in this presentation? It is the covenant between God on the one side and - roughly speaking - his people on the other side; between God and the believers and their children, or Abraham and his seed. We all know that the covenant exists, just as surely as we know that Scripture exists and that our living and thinking comes forth from it. Nevertheless a difference of opinion has appeared in the last while within the church about the question of with whom this covenant is actually made. We can be thankful that this debate has raised interest in the covenant, although it is disappointing that the way in which the differences have been resolved is not the proper one and that more than one back has undeservedly been struck with the stick of a particular covenant doctrine.

All religion stands or falls with the covenant. According to Dr. H. Bavinck religion is always a covenant relationship; there is no religion, and no service of God, possible if it is not practiced in the form of a covenant.

Now we must first agree on one thing: we must believe in the reality of the covenant. Some say, also some in the Church, that we do speak of a covenant, but that it is not a real thing. This is because the great God and puny man cannot have a covenant. A giant and a child in a crib forming a covenant is foolishness, just as it is impossible for a grown man and a small newborn child to establish a marriage covenant. How can a man and a cow seal a covenant? An animal and (as is incorrectly

said) a reasonable moral being such as man are not matched parties. We can react by saying that this is correct. There is indeed a difference between a giant and a suckling child, between a man and a newborn child, between a human and a cow. Yet these differences are still relative, because both are created and therefore dependent on God. They are created by God, are both creatures, and the difference is still measurable. Between God and man, on the other hand, (it is correctly pointed out to us) there is an immeasurable difference; this difference is infinitely greater than that between a giant and a youngster, between an adult and a suckling born child, between a man and a cow. Here we have a totally different distinction. Therefore, so it is said, it is foolishness to speak about a real covenant between God and man, who has been created by God, whose breath and deeds depend every moment on God. Man cannot be a party with God. Yes, it is said,. indeed, the covenant is often referred to in Scripture, but this is figurative; there is really no covenant because there are no parties.

With these questions we find ourselves right in the middle of reality. We say that those who speak as was described above are completely correct; we would not say a word against it. If we ever received a covenant doctrine which would diminish the difference between God and man, that doctrine would be fundamentally wrong. There may be no covenant doctrine which does not fully maintain this difference which determines each relationship between God and man. Must we then, though, also say that the covenant is actually not real? No, the covenant is real! How can this be? This we answer with the well known and at the same time so thoroughly pious word: "What is impossible with man is possible with God." We cannot enter this covenant from our side; we can not say to God: "Come Thou to me; Thee and I and my children will, at my initiative, sit at the table to make an agreement with Thee." Away with that thought! God is in heaven and we are on earth.

It is impossible that people from their side present to God an agreement; on our invitation no covenant with God will ever come into being. But what is impossible with man is possible with God. God only, the initiative and reasons coming forth from Himself, wanted to and could speak of a covenant and create a covenant relationship. He did two things. He created man and also announced to that created man the covenant that He had established with him. It is not so that God created man and then those two (God and man) found it possible to establish a covenant, but God created man and also at the same time created the relationship between man and Himself. The fact that the covenant is created, coming forth from God's will to create, is what makes the covenant possible. This also makes it possible that God can begin a lawsuit with man (Micha 6). He speaks to him before His tribunal, before the covenant court: "My people, what have I done to you? And how have I wearied you? Answer Me." Seen from our side it may seem absurd that God begins a lawsuit with us (a giant with a man), but if God from His side makes a covenant relationship between Himself on the one side and man on the other side, then it is possible.

Then there is a legal relationship, then there is blessing or (covenantal) curse, then He lures with promise or threatens with (covenantal) punishment. A small child can not

invite a giant to work out a covenant relationship with him, but a giant can say: "that newborn suckling I adopt and therefore I will engender in that child an understanding, a will and an inclination, and flowing from these deeds, so that as the child grows it can become my other party." In this we see a flash of the power with which God says: "You, O man, are a party beside Me." Here we hear thundering through the church building the mighty word of the prophet: "Your maker is your husband." (Isaiah 54:4) Not a single man on this earth can say that of his wife.

Not one can say your creator, your begetter, your maker is your husband. When a man is a begetter, he is a father, and the two of them can not marry each other because father and daughter are not equal parties. It only occurs here and can only occur here; God is our Maker; He is hundreds of times more than a begetter than we can say a father is, and at the same time He can say "I am your Husband"; that is, I make you and at the same time make the relationship between you and Me, which is called covenant. That is why the covenant is just as real as a cow in the pasture and a child in a crib, and a bench in the church, and the cloth this chair is upholstered with; the bond is created by God and is therefore real and genuine.

Therefore we reject the idea that speaking about the covenant is figurative; at the same time though, we maintain that we can learn something from the theory that it is figurative; namely, that although the covenant is real and exists, we will never be able to say everything about it or to understand it thoroughly. Because the two parties here are the little man and the infinite God, we will not be able to explain it in human language completely and precisely. God cannot do that Himself either. He can not use human language to convey completely and precisely all that is contained in the covenant. Why can He not do that? Because God has bound Himself to His own works. We people, with our finite understanding, can only know finite words, finite concepts, finite language constructs, so that we can never imagine or understand infinite reality. Thus God stood before a choice between two possibilities. The one is that He says in a perfect, pure and holy manner --in His own manner-- what the covenant is; He can express Himself in an infinite treasure of words; He can do this in heaven. But, because we cannot understand heavenly language, He chose the other possibility and speaks to us in human language. That is why God in the Bible must use a word that we all know; because otherwise we would not understand. He must speak about this unique relationship with a non-unique word. On earth many covenants are sealed; young persons are engaged and seal a marriage; kings sign attack or defence treaties; countries make all kinds of agreements. Among people, covenants of all sorts are possible. God has, to allow us to understand, served Himself with the use of a common word about this extraordinary matter. That is why He used our language, and now we must try, led by what the Bible weaves around it, to draw out of the word covenant the idea God intends to convey; in this way we may come, on the ground of what the Bible says, to a proper covenant view.

With our view of the covenant we must begin with the question: what is normally the hallmark of a covenant? It is this: in a covenant more than one party comes forward -- two or three or more parties who bind each other in an agreement. We see this, for instance, in an engagement. In an engagement free people say to each other, "yes, I

will!" There is a promise between two parties. Each covenant is only a real covenant when an agreement has been made between the parties. Sometimes the word covenant is also used about the binding of a matter in which no "yes" word is given between two parties. God sealed a covenant with the earth, with corn and wine, with the rain, that there will be much fruit in the hand of the owner, or that the water will not again destroy the earth, or the earth will be consumed by fire. In those cases the word covenant is used figuratively; the party earth, corn, water, fire, cannot say "yes". Indeed, the Bible also speaks of covenant when it is a matter between God and a created thing that cannot want, think or say yes. Here God speaks by means of a comparison to indicate something that is firm, is decided upon and cannot be changed.

A covenant, you see, is put on paper, established, sealed with a signet ring, and in every case officially confirmed. So at times God says that He makes a covenant with the earth, the sun, or some other thing, because it is something that is established and cannot be changed. With man this is not the case, because each covenant that God establishes comes after the creation. Before the creation there was room for the covenant in God's plans, but the sealing of the covenant comes only after there is something else that is not God. That is why the covenant is there only after creation. God maintains what He created and pushes it on; that is the language of the Catechism: upholding and governing --the two concepts of God's providence. Upholding is that God has upheld since Genesis 1:1 all things that exist today. The water in the ditch and the bricks of the church are a continuation of Genesis 1: 1, because then God created the water and the materials for bricks; in each created thing there is today a link with Genesis 1:1 that is the upholding. Governing is God moving forth in such a way that what was created in Gen 1:1 comes properly to its goal of Revelation 22:21. Upholding comes from alpha; governing means what is today goes to the omega; therefore each deed of providence is a deed between alpha and omega, between beginning and end; a connection from the beginning and a connection toward the consummation.

Now, God can never deny His work. He feeds and upholds and governs; each covenant which God makes, comes after creation and builds forth on what there already was. The covenant is thus really natural, in the sense that it joins itself in the world to what exists. A cow remains a cow, but a man also remains a man. A cow is made without responsibility to God's moral laws! Therefore the covenant between God and man has to be connected to man's responsibility. All reasoning which reduces the covenant to an abstraction —and this includes that of many synodicals around the time of the liberation (1944)— hollows out the covenant. In the covenant the reality is that we are responsible; this responsibility must be understood as real and must be taken fully into account. This must be done fully and generously; otherwise the covenant will be hollowed out. A magazine has recently stated that we (who are liberated) are hollowing out the covenant. However, those who say this are more inclined to do this themselves. When they point to our "responsibility" they say it becomes moralizing -- they know of no covenant blessing. They insist that the covenant means election and that one must not say that wrath is threatened when one breaks the covenant -- this wrath doesn't exist according to them. But we say that all such reasoning, which robs the covenant of

its primary call to responsibility, is devaluating the covenant in its entirety, because the covenant comes forth out of the creation and it unfolds what is in man in its full riches.

Every covenant causes the parties to develop to their full glory; an engagement develops into a marriage, in which the man develops into a father and the woman into a mother, and the marriage comes to its purpose when both parties in their two/one-ship come to full development. When, now, God as party on the one side and man as party on the other side, come to a covenant, there is also development. God can, obviously, not develop because of His infinite, holy being, but He unfolds Himself in His revelation. In His uncovering Himself before man's eyes He is unfolding Himself. The covenant makes Him rich in His revelation, in which the Creator reveals Himself as the Recreation, the Father, Who can make us and break us, but Who pulls us out of the mire into which we have sunk through our sins and never breaks us again; everyday He becomes more beautiful to see. Man also unfolds himself in the covenant; out of him appears what lies in him; either saying "yes" to God, or revealing himself in his rebellion against God as covenant breaker. Only then does man stand in his own natural place when he, before the fall through God's favour and after the fall through God's unearned grace, from the crown of his head to the sole of his foot, is in a relationship with God.

This is actually the answer to the question with respect to what is the position of the parties in the covenant. The covenant is onesided, say some; it cannot be two-sided, they say, because God is always the last. Because God is God and cannot be a created being, God and man are not equal. The covenant must be a one-sided act of God: He begins with it, and establishes the terms, and so on. Far be it from us to deny the one sidedness of the covenant; we agree readily and totally that God alone devises and makes the covenant, but that is also why He can make it two-sided. I cannot do it. He can. God can make it two sided if it pleases Him to place me in the covenant relationship. That is the context of His constitutional primal-responsibility, otherwise the covenant would be brought back to before creation. which is impossible. The covenant is made two-sided by God; He makes me the other party, even though I am not His equal, because God has conceived of me and made me as a party. He has considered this in His decision before creation and has in creation made me a party with responsibility, and to stimulate my will has made this known to me in His declaration to me in father Adam in Paradise. Thus there are two parties: they are really there. Through His power and will there is that typical relationship that makes a covenant, a two way street; there is a way from Him to me, and from me to Him there is also a way. Those who say the covenant is one-sided only see one direction in this relationship (that from God to man), and not the reverse. That one-sided covenant has been made with the sun or with spring, but not with man.

If man is a responsible creature who has to act according to independent thought and as an independent being, which can be called a person, then the covenant becomes, because of the nature of man, a two way street. This covenant is characterized by two parts: at baptism we are told that in all covenants there are two parts. Those two parts (not parties) are: first the promise, second the obligation. Thus it is also in a marriage: the young man promises something to the girl, and demands

something from her as well; and the reverse: the girl demands something from the man, which he has promised, and promises what he demands. When A promises something to B and B demands that of A, and at the same time B demands something from A and A promises that to B, the covenant has been sealed in both its parts. With God and me it is thus: God promises something to man and man may demand that from God (Psalm 8 1: Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it) and I must promise something to God, which He may demand of me; without that the covenant is a dead thing. The covenant lives only through promise plus demand: we may never separate those two. Today some are saying that God has chosen His covenant children from eternity. God promises them His grace, and only there where He pours out His grace, is man actually in the covenant. They say the covenant has an inward side and outward side; only the inward side is the real covenant. They say the covenant contains from the Lord's side, as a complete gift in election, eternal salvation: that is the covenant. No, say we, that we will never accept! Those people who describe the promise in this way so that it is stripped of the demand are gutting the covenant of its significance!

Now people are saying to us: yes, but you are hollowing out the covenant -- you are saying to the people "you must and you shall," you are singing the song of labour, you are making a preaching of laws out of it. If it is true that we are letting the covenant become a preaching of laws or a theory of morals, then that allegation is entirely just. Both groups are hollowing out the covenant: those who preach the promise and shove the demand into the background, and those who because of the demand neglect the sweet music of the promise; both have slipped away from the covenant. What God has joined together, man shall not cut asunder, neither inside nor outside of the Synod or the study. If God before or after the fall promises something in the context of a covenant, He immediately demands too. No less than an oyster grows outside its shell, no less may the promise be peeled out of the shell of the demand. On the other hand if God in a covenant poses a demand that is never an empty preaching, but He brings along the promise. He says "I am the LORD, your covenant God," and then He follows that with ten long words in which sound the booming music "You shall." First, however, He has said: Who has led you out of the land of bondage, out of the house of compulsion, out of the house of slavery.

Therefore we do not want to speak of a covenant which can only be called that because it touches only the elect. Such a covenant cannot exist because a covenant has two parts: the promise and the demand. When something is promised, then something is said to which the other must clearly and loudly answer "Yes".

He who demands does not force his will on the other, but says or writes what he asks of the other. When is any specific person ever addressed as an elect or chosen person! Never! The children are baptized with a formula in which the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit promise them something and demand something from them. For all children there is only one Form for Baptism, with the same demand. There is no separate promise, either in spoken words or written with the ink of Scripture, which is only addressed to a specific person as elected. God does think about the elect; He

thinks about them to their good and what He thinks is indeed bone and marrow of the covenant, His glorious promise. But what He says at baptism is not that He establishes His covenant with a specific person as an elect child. At baptism it is not said to a specific person that he is chosen or elect; this is only thought about in the election in God's counsel. The covenant does not originate in what He thinks; in His thinking there is no promise or demand. God's counsel is not spoken or written.

If the covenant depends on election a covenant child must be someone who is spoken to in the language of the church or of Scripture in his quality as covenant child. But such a promise to the elect does not exist; there is no promise written personally or individually to a specific person. Here we see the hollowing out of the covenant and also of the promise. People today speak of the promise to the elect, and say that is the real promise, it is as if they are trying to measure the size of the clouds with a pair of dividers. The covenant is with people on the earth. Here, on earth, God speaks, God demands on Sinai and Horeb, and Paul, from his prison table, writes his letters; here God speaks and writes His promise and His demand. That is why we must speak of hollowing out the covenant when people say that the actual covenant promises are not given to those who are not elect, but that the promise can really only be considered in connection with the elect. Please tell me when or where a specific person is addressed as elect, with a special formula, for I don't know. I cannot imagine any promise which has not been promised, but is only an imaginary idea.

Our thoughts must be led by the fact that promise and demand are two parts of every covenant. The covenant is established with the believers and their seed; that is according to God's own word! There are those who do not say "yes" to those words and by that become manifest as falling away, and there are others who do say "yes" (Yes, LORD, here I am). God has thought differently about them, according to what Calvin calls the awe-inspiring decree of election and reprobation, but what He thinks to Himself is for Him, what He says is for me! Only the latter is the covenant and that is why all believers with their children are real covenant children, and they are really baptized; only if we accept that we can throw out the anchor into the river which is navigable for the church and have it catch in the firm bottom of God's spoken word. If a believer thinks "I am baptized, but of what use is that to me; it could have been a mistake, and not a real baptism (only some drops of water)", then he will never have rest. But what is promised and demanded you may consider as something that you have coming to you, as a right, and that gives certainty.

For a heathen child the covenant is something strange. However, a baptized child has that grace and that demand which he is allowed to have, which have been promised, and which, with his saying "yes" have already become his eternal possession. Yes, people say, but then man must again do something from his side. Isn't man addressed with a condition? Because of this a report in the paper of a recently held speech spoke of a third view of covenant which has one condition that man must meet. I answer quietly that what I have just said is the continuing view of all reformed theologians through the ages. These critics speak in their dogmatics of conditions of the covenant; by this they mean that the promise does not come to man if it is not accepted

through faith. Now someone has said that actually you are speaking as a Remonstrant, because the Remonstrants teach that faith is the condition for salvation. No, no, we respond! You must watch out.

The Remonstrants teach that man must do that and make this good work the ground for salvation (faith seen beforehand by God is ground for salvation). We do not teach this. We say that God makes and devises everything. That God has also created my saying "yes" and my faith. Any good that comes from me is God's gift and is from Him alone! Yet we must speak of conditions: I will not receive it if I do not comply, with the demand —faith is the first demand. The Catechism says about the first commandment that God demands faith, and for the second time faith, and for the third time faith. Promise and demand are, in the service of God, very closely connected together. God does not say "I promise you" as a special decree, but He speaks to me with a concrete condition: immediately the demand of faith is put forward. Promise and demand belong together; the two are one. Therefore God chooses the form of speaking with a condition; not that I earn salvation with my faith. No, God is silent about the question whether a specific person shall receive faith through election, and about the question whether that specific person shall appear later to have been elected. Totally silent about the question whether I am elected, He speaks to me with a living voice about promise and demand: the goods lay in the promise; if you accept the promise then it is for you.

The sequence in the concepts is so beautiful: the children are sanctified in Christ, the Holy Spirit will sanctify them. Through the promise of the washing through the blood of Christ they have the right to righteousness, and now the Spirit wishes to continuously sanctify them, so that they increasingly and all the more earnestly say "yes" to God. So we must let the things stand properly in their connection and let God speak in a conditional manner. Let us never speculate about the question of whether I am elected! My saying "yes" is evidence of my election, because that fruit, that simply saying "yes" is from Him. For these reasons we maintain the unity of the parties and the unity of the parts of the covenant. The covenant has only one history; we do speak of a covenant of works and a covenant of grace, as if there would be two covenants, but this is in fact not correct. God and man are in a covenant from the beginning through the creating decree of God.

In the beginning God and man stood in a relationship of friends without Christ as "Christ". Christ, with His shedding of blood, appears for the first time after the fall. When God wishes, after the fall, to maintain the covenant that has been broken from man's side, He appears as Re-creator by restoring the covenant through Jesus Christ. Christ says "I will stand in the breach by fulfilling the demand of the covenant, and the punishment for the breaking of the covenant and the demand," so that He gives man again the promise of eternal life. Jesus Christ has died because of the covenant. In this we see the covenant in its horror: on Golgotha the covenant breaking is punished. But Golgotha makes the right to eternal life free again and through Jesus Christ begins the second phase of the covenant, the covenant of grace. But the old relationship remains; God and man were friends; first without Christ as "Christ" over the first Adam, now

through grace with Christ as "Christ" over the first Adam. Immediately God's revelation becomes richer, because that God, Who before the fall was Creator, is now apparent as the God of re-creation; He becomes richer in His virtue of grace and in His virtue of right and righteous dealings; God is revealed in all his virtues of grace and justice.

Some are saying, and the Synod (1944) is pushing this idea through, "No that is not true; the covenant knows only God from His friendly side; the covenant is a covenant of grace, and speaking of God's justice is hollowing out the covenant and making it a legal case." Yes, we say, of course it is so, as long as it is a Divine lawsuit. If God is justice and mercy, then because of that we know of only one covenant. If there is no justice, then the embracing love of God does not come to us either; however with the enforcement of justice, which gives to all children the promise, God is grace. God cannot be cut into pieces: so many percent grace, so many percent justice. God is always one hundred percent grace and one hundred percent justice. Woe to the poor person who calculates the attributes of God in percentages! Everything He is, He is one hundred percent: He encompasses the framework of justice, but also the framework of the grace of the covenant.

In the second phase of the covenant, after the fall, grace becomes more decisively grace; history shows us how grace is established until Christ and the Spirit of Pentecost. The covenant of grace administers grace. Therefore the punishment is that much greater for him who defile's this covenant. Even the hellish punishment is determined by the covenant of grace. This is because promise and demand are the two parts; with the promise comes something else, and with the demand too. With the promise comes as extra the prospect of a reward, and with the demand comes as extra a threat of punishment; do this and you shall live; don't do it and the wrath of the LORD will be terrible. The covenant uses pleasant words as well as harsh words; in it we hear the noble strings of God's mercy, but also the thunder of God's anger, and these are never to be separated. Not even in heaven, because in heaven, at the sea of glass, they sing Hallelujah when the smoke goes up in all eternity; through the glass we see there the smoke and say Hallelujah also because of the justice that is evident from the smoke. That is one hundred percent reverence for God in his unity. Men say unjustly that we hollow out the covenant; they say that the promise is the essence of the covenant, otherwise it is not a covenant of grace. We say, of course, but that is exactly why there is wrath for those who say "no" to God and disdain His promise.

They sometimes also say that the wrath only occurs in the Old Testament, and falls away in the New Testament; then, however, they get into all kinds of difficulties. For Israel only begins at Sinai and the covenant was there before Moses. Was there then no wrath from Adam to Moses? The Scripture begins with Moses, but wrath with the flood. The wrath of God becomes apparent in heaven, there every virtue is revealed in its indivisible nature by means of the New Testament, which makes everything richer, the grace and the wrath (see Romans 22:20-22, Heb 10:28-31, Heb 12:25). We must accept it all, the reward that lures, and the punishment which threatens. These two, in

law and gospel, and both to the glory of God; God Who reaches His glory in the radiation from His Being. Thus the covenant comes into being in the first conversation with man after creation; and it shall find its fullness as it develops and comes to its historic end when the day of days comes. But even after that day it will remain and will appear then in all places of God's dominion: in the new heaven and on the new earth and in hell also. In hell will be all the covenant breakers, and each will be there as a covenant breaker. There are people who have had no contact with the covenant of grace; they will be beaten with stripes, but those who have rejected the covenant will be beaten with many. In Adam all people are covenant breakers, and the punishment of hell is covenant punishment. God is there as Covenant God, and just as in a country in which law and order exist the prison is the instrument by which the glory of the head of state of that country is seen and radiates forth, so also in hell will shine forth the glory of the Head of the State, of God Himself, Who is covenant God even with respect to the revelation of hell.

As far as heaven and earth are concerned, the covenant will exist there not only in traces and reminders of creation, but it will be living and powerful there; God, Who eternally says "yes", and man, who produces that "yes". There will be, together with each other, the permanent promise and the continuing demand; neither of the two parties will be able to bring about a breach! And the Head of the covenant there is God Himself, the LORD, and before the eyes of His surprised church, and of God Himself, Christ will be openly there as the Mediator of the covenant. In that age it will be evident who are the believers and their seed, but it will also be evident that God, in the way of promise and demand, through word and deed, fulfils His counsel. The covenant will appear there to be the revealed way along which God, for certain rejected people has made the curse the worse, and for all His chosen has made the blessing the greater.

We will also see there that for each of those who have accepted the covenant here in time the entry into heaven has brought still richer promises than the old covenant stipulations themselves, but on the other hand, all that is new was contained in the old, so that we may understand that faithful word: "my grace is sufficient for you," says the LORD, the Almighty, your Creator and your Re-creator in Christ Jesus.