

# The Development of the Doctrine of the Covenant (2):

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## The Early Church, Part 1

In the last issue of the BRJ, I wrote of the importance of the doctrine of the covenant and the idea of the development of doctrine. I also presented three lines of support for the position that the covenant is a bond of friendship between the Triune God and His elect people in Jesus Christ. First, the covenant formula, “They will be my people and I will be their God,” speaks of the covenant in terms of a personal relationship. Second, Genesis 3:15, the first covenant promise, presents salvation as enmity with Satan and, hence, friendship with the Triune God. Third, the earthly symbols and figures of the covenant include marriage, the father-son relationship and the tabernacle/temple. Together the first two (marriage and the father-son relationship) picture the covenant as a strong, intimate bond of love. The third figure (the tabernacle/temple) speaks of God dwelling with His people which was realized in the Incarnation when God “dwelt” (literally “tabernacled”) with man (John 1:14).

Presbyterian and Reformed churches rightly confess the covenant as central to Biblical revelation and hence to theology. God is the covenant God in Himself enjoying the communion of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (theology). (Elect) man is the covenant creature with whom God graciously enters into communion (anthropology). Jesus is the covenant Christ who mediates God’s presence as Immanuel (“God with us;” Christology). The Holy Spirit applies to us the covenant blessings purchased for us by Christ thus enabling us to fellowship with the Triune God (soteriology). The church is the covenant community consisting of those who are God’s friends (ecclesiology). Finally, the future is the future of the people of God, for the development and culmination of world

history serves the consummation of God's covenant when the tabernacle of God will be with man (eschatology).

The early church,<sup>1</sup> however, unlike Reformed theology, did not make the covenant central. In fact, the early church did very little with the doctrine of the covenant. First, none of the fathers wrought a book on the covenant - that would await Heinrich Bullinger's *Of the One and Eternal Covenant of God* (1534). Second, the covenant was not treated as an element in the more systematic expositions of the faith, such as Origen's (c.185-c.254) famous work *On First Principles*. Third, the covenant is rarely developed in other works of the fathers. Thus we find that standard works on the theology of the early church do not have an entry in the index entitled "covenant."<sup>2</sup>

This benign neglect of the doctrine of the covenant in the writings of the fathers is partly to be accounted for in its not being mentioned in the *Apostles' Creed*. Thus Rufinus (c.350-c.410) could write his commentary on the *Apostles' Creed* and Cyril of Jerusalem (c.310-386) could expound the *Apostles' Creed* in his *Catechetical Lectures* for baptismal candidates without dealing with the covenant. Similarly, the covenant is not mentioned in the *Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed* (325, 381) or in the *Chalcedonian Creed* (451). The reason for this is obvious: these creeds were statements on controverted subjects (the Trinity and the Person and natures of Christ) upon which protracted and deep study was made. At that time the covenant was not an issue in the church and so it did not warrant treatment in the creeds.

But why in the purpose of God should the Trinity and the Person and natures of Christ be the first subjects over which intense controversy should

<sup>1</sup>In this article, the early church is used to refer to the post-apostolic church up to and including the Council of Chalcedon (451), with the exclusion of Augustine (354-430) whom we shall consider later in the series (DV).

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Robert R. Williams, *A Guide to the Teachings of the Early Church Fathers* (Eerdmans, 1960); Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 1 (University of Chicago Press, 1971); J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (HarperSanFrancisco, rev. 1978).

rage in the churches necessitating a creedal statement? The answer lies in the foundational nature of these doctrines. Satan recognized these doctrines as basic to the truth of all of God's revelation and attacked them first. Should these doctrines be lost in the church, he realized, there could be no salvation.<sup>3</sup> Christianity then would only be a Unitarian religion of moralism.

However, God's purpose in bringing these doctrines to the fore first is paramount. God desired that He be the first subject dealt with thoroughly in the history of doctrine. Moreover, logically God is first in the field of theology since He is all in all, the One who is before all things and of whom, through whom and unto whom are all things. Having established that salvation comes from the Triune God, the church next had to set forth the doctrine of the Person of Christ. In this way, salvation was seen to be not only from the true God alone but also through the true Christ alone.

Salvation is indeed the key here. This was the issue for Athanasius (c.296-373) when he opposed the Arians,<sup>4</sup> who denied the Deity of Christ, and this was the issue for the orthodox in their battles with the Apollinarians,<sup>5</sup> the Nestorians<sup>6</sup> and the Eutychians,<sup>7</sup> who held heretical views of the Person and natures of Christ. Thus the *Nicene-*

<sup>3</sup>Cf. the *Athanasian Creed*:

Whosoever will be saved: before all things it is necessary that he hold the Catholic Faith: Which Faith except every one do keep whole and undefiled: without doubt he shall perish everlastingly. And the Catholic Faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity . . . Furthermore it is necessary to everlasting salvation: that he also believe faithfully the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . This is the Catholic Faith: which except a man believe faithfully and firmly, he cannot be saved (1-3, 29, 44).

<sup>4</sup>The Arians, named after Arius, a presbyter of Alexander, taught that *Christ is not God* but is created by the will of the Father.

<sup>5</sup>The Apollinarians, named after Apollinarius, Bishop of Laodicea in Syria, taught that while Christ has a body and a soul, *the eternal Son took the place of His spirit*.

<sup>6</sup>The Nestorians, named after Nestorius, Bishop of Constantinople, taught that Christ is *two* persons.

<sup>7</sup>The Eutychians, named after Eutyches, a presbyter and the head of a monastery in Constantinople, taught that Christ possesses only *one* nature.

*Constantinopolitan Creed* speaks of the Trinity and the Person and work of Christ as being “for us men and for our salvation” and the *Chalcedonian Creed* speaks of Christ as one divine Person in two natures “for us and for our salvation.”

Unless the Father *and* the Son *and* the Spirit are God, our salvation depends on God and two creatures, and thus we cannot be saved.

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**“Only if God is a living, communicating, personal God in Himself as Father, Word and Spirit can He fellowship with us and bring us into His own covenant life.”**

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Athanasius also argued in his *On the Incarnation of the Word* that only One who was truly God could reveal the Father to us. Furthermore, unless Christ has a true human nature (against the Docetists<sup>8</sup>) that is complete (against the Apollinarians) and distinct from His divine nature (against the Eutychians), He can not save the whole of man by His substitutionary atone-

ment. Also Christ’s human nature has to be inseparably connected to His divine nature in order to render His salvation effective.

But how is this related to the covenant? The doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of the Person of Christ are foundational to all of Christian theology and hence also to the doctrine of the covenant. This may easily be proved. All of the glorious attributes of God - about which the fathers wrote a great deal<sup>9</sup> - are necessary for us to have a deep, rich relationship with Him. But so also is the fact that He is the Triune God, the personal God who has life in Himself and is life. Only if God is a living, communicating, personal God in Himself as Father, Word and Spirit can He fellowship with us and bring us into His own covenant life.<sup>10</sup> Indeed it is only a personal God who can create other persons! Similarly, only a

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<sup>8</sup>The Docetists taught that Christ only *seems* to be a man.

<sup>9</sup>Cf. Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God*, trans. William Hendriksen (Banner of Truth, repr. 1991).

<sup>10</sup>Cf. Thomas C. Oden: “The very idea of person comes from early Christian theology” (*The Living God* [Prince Press, 1998], p. 218).

mediator who is truly God can give us the knowledge of God (cf. Matt. 11:27), something necessary for covenant friendship. Moreover only one who is truly and fully man can know our struggles and sympathize with us, something essential for real friendship. Thus the early church's doctrines of the Trinity and the Person of Christ are basic to the doctrine of the covenant.

Perhaps an analogy would be helpful. I Peter 1:23 speaks of regeneration as the planting of a divine "seed." In our regeneration we are given a new nature which is completely righteous and holy. We already possess all of our sanctification in this seed form. The continued operation of God will lead to the development of this new life over time. Similarly, all the doctrines of the Christian faith are organically related. Thus they are all implied in each other, though in various ways, with some being more directly implied than others. The mature plant of true doctrine which grows out of the seed is thus seen to be contained in the seed all along. This serves not only as an indication of the vitality of the church's traditional doctrines but also as a sort of verification of the truth both of the older and of the newer doctrinal development.

Clearly then the most important contribution of the early church to the doctrine of the covenant is its formulating the doctrines of the Trinity and the Person and natures of Christ. Upon this foundation later theologians would build their covenant views. In the next issue of the BRJ (DV), we shall consider two other areas of the early church's thought which concern the covenant.

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