

Chapter VII.

Of God's Covenant with Man

Section I.—The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of him, as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God's part, which he hath been pleased to express by way of covenant.

Section II.—The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam, and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience.

Exposition

Man is naturally and necessarily under a law to God. This results from the necessary and unalterable relation subsisting between God and man, as the one is the Creator, and the other his creature. God might, therefore, if he had pleased, demanded all possible obedience of man, without making any promise securing his establishment in a state of innocence and enjoyment, and his advancement to a state of still higher felicity, as the reward of his obedience. And though man had gone through a long course of obedience, without a single failure, he could not have laid his Creator under any obligation to him, or been entitled to any recompense. But God graciously condescended to deal with man by way of covenant, and thus gave him an opportunity to secure his happiness by acquiring a right to it—a right founded upon stipulation, or upon the promise. "Man," says the celebrated Witsius, "upon his accepting the covenant, and performing the condition, does acquire some right to demand of God the promise; for God has, by his promises, made himself a debtor to man; or, to speak in a manner more becoming God, he was pleased to make his performing his promises a debt due to himself,—to his goodness, justice, and veracity. And to man, in covenant, and continuing steadfast to it, he granted the right of expecting and requiring that God should satisfy the demands of his goodness, justice, and truth, by the performance of the promises."

A covenant is generally defined to be an agreement between two parties, on certain terms. In every covenant there must be two parties, and consequently two parts—a conditional and a promissory; the one to be performed by the one party, and the other to be fulfilled by the other party. If

either of the parties be fallible, a penalty is often added; but this is not essential to a covenant.

There are two important truths to which our attention is here directed. First, That God entered into a covenant with Adam, promising him life upon condition of his perfect and personal obedience. Secondly, That this covenant was made with Adam, not only for himself, but for all his natural posterity.

I. That God entered into a covenant with Adam in his state of innocence, appears from Gen. ii. 16,17: "The Lord God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely die." Here, indeed, there is no express mention of a covenant; but we find all the essential requisites of a proper covenant. In this transaction there are two parties; the Lord God on the one hand, and man on the other. There is a condition expressly stated, in the positive precept respecting the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which God was pleased to make the test of man's obedience. There is a penalty subjoined: "In the day thou eatest thereof, thou shalt surely die." There is also a promise, not distinctly expressed, but implied in the threatening; for, if death was to be the consequence of disobedience, it clearly follows that life was to be the reward of obedience. That a promise of life was annexed to man's obedience, may also be inferred from the description which Moses gives of the righteousness of the law: "The man that doeth these things shall live by them,"—Rom. x. 5; from our Lord's answer to the young man who inquired what he should do to inherit eternal life: "It thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments,"—Matt. xix. 17; and from the declaration of the apostle, that "the commandment was ordained to life."—Rom. vii. to. We are, therefore, warranted to call the transaction between God and Adam a covenant. We may even allege, for the use of this term, the language of Scripture. In Hos. vi. 7 (margin), we read, "They, like Adam, have transgressed the covenant." This necessarily implies that a covenant was made with Adam, and that he violated it.

II. That this covenant was made with Adam, not only for himself, but also for all his natural posterity, is a doctrine which has met with much opposition. It is denied by Pelagians and Socinians, who maintain that he acted for himself alone, and that the effects of his fall terminated upon himself. Arminians admit that the whole human race is injured by the first sin, but at the same time controvert the proposition, that Adam was their proper representative. This truth, however, may be easily established. The Scripture represents Adam as a figure or type of Christ,—Rom. v. 14; and wherein does the resemblance between them consist? Simply in this, that as Christ was a federal head, representing all his spiritual seed in the covenant

of grace, so Adam was a federal head representing all his natural seed in the covenant of works. In 1 Cor. xv. 45, 47, the one is called the first Adam, the other, the last Adam; the one the first man, the other the second man. Now, Christ was not the second man in any other sense, but as being the federal head or representative of his seed; and, therefore, the first man must have sustained a similar character, as being the federal head or representative of all his natural posterity. The extension of the effects of Adam's first sin to all his descendants, is another strong proof of his having represented them in the covenant made with him. That he has transmitted sin and death to all his posterity, is clearly taught in the 5th chapter of the Epistle to the Romans; and unless his public character, as a representative in the covenant, be admitted, no satisfactory reason can be assigned why we are affected by his first sin in a way that we are not affected by his subsequent transgressions, or the transgressions of our more immediate progenitors. We know that "the son shall not bear the iniquity of the father" (Ezek. xviii. 20); and had Adam been merely a private person, his sin could have affected us no more than that of our immediate parents. The conclusion is inevitable,—that in the covenant of works, our first parent not only acted for himself, but represented all his natural posterity.

Often has this part of the divine procedure been arraigned by presumptuous man. The supposition that God called Adam to represent us in a covenant, into which he entered with him long before we had a being, and to the making of which we could not personally consent, is, it has been alleged, inconsistent with the divine goodness, and contrary to moral justice and equity. To this it might be sufficient to reply, that this transaction being the proposal and deed of God, it must be fit and equitable. "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" "He is a God of truth, and without iniquity, just and right is he." But though we ought to acquiesce in the propriety of this transaction, simply because it was the will of God, yet it might be evinced, by various considerations, that it was not only consistent with equity, but manifested much of the divine goodness. If Adam had fulfilled the condition of the covenant, and thus secured happiness, not only to himself, but also to all his posterity, no one, certainly, would have complained that Adam was constituted his representative; and why should that transaction, which, in this event, would have been deemed just, be pronounced unjust on the contrary event? Adam, being made after the image of God, was as capable of keeping the covenant as any of his posterity could ever be supposed to be; that he should fulfil it was as much his personal interest as that of any of his descendants, his own felicity, no less than theirs, being at stake; and he was intimately related to the persons whom he represented, and had the strongest inducement to take care of his numerous offspring, as well as of himself. Adam having such peculiar advantages and inducements

to perform the demanded obedience, it may be fairly presumed that, had it been possible for us to be present when the federal transaction was entered into, we would have readily agreed that it was more eligible and safe for us to have our everlasting felicity insured by the obedience of our first parent, as our covenant head, than that it should depend upon our own personal behaviour. And who would complain of his being represented by Adam in the covenant of works, since God has opened up a way for our recovery from the consequences of the breach of that covenant, by another and a superior covenant?

Section III.—Man, by his fall, having made himself incapable of life by that covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the covenant of grace: wherein he freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ, requiring of them faith in him, that they may be saved, and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto life, his Holy Spirit, to make them willing and able to believe.

Exposition

In entering upon the exposition of this section, it is proper to remark, that, at the period when our Confession was framed, it was generally held by the most eminent divines, that there are two covenants connected with the salvation of men, which they called the covenant of redemption, and the covenant of grace; the former made with Christ from everlasting, the latter made with sinners in time; the righteousness of Christ being the condition of the former, and faith the condition of the latter covenant. This distinction, we conceive, has no foundation in the Sacred Scriptures, and it has long since been abandoned by all evangelical divines. The first Adam is said to have been a figure of Christ, who is called the second Adam. Now, there was not one covenant made with Adam, the condition of which he was to perform, and another made with his posterity, the condition of which they were to fulfil; but one covenant included both him and them. It was made with him as their representative, and with them as represented in and by him. In like manner, one covenant includes Christ and his spiritual seed. The Scriptures, accordingly, everywhere speak of it as one covenant, and the blood of Christ is repeatedly called "the blood of the covenant," not of the covenants, as we may presume it would have been called, if it had been the condition of a covenant of redemption and the foundation of a covenant of grace.—Heb. x. 29, xiii. 20. By the blood of the same covenant Christ made satisfaction, and we obtain deliverance.—Zech. ix. 11. We hold,

therefore, that there is only one covenant for the salvation of fallen men, and that this covenant was made with Christ before the foundation of the world. The Scriptures, indeed, frequently speak of God making a covenant with believers, but this language admits of an easy explication, in consistency with the unity of the covenant. "The covenant of grace," says a judicious writer, "was made with Christ in a strict and proper sense, as he was the party-contractor in it, and undertook to fulfil the condition of it. It is made with believers in an improper sense, when they are taken into the bond of it, and come actually to enjoy the benefit of it. How it is made with them may be learned from the words of the apostle,—Acts xiii. 34: 'I will give you the sure mercies of David,' which is a kind of paraphrase upon that passage,—Is. lv. 3: 'I will make an everlasting covenant with you, even the sure mercies of David.' God makes the covenant with them, not by requiring anything of them in order to entitle them or lay a foundation for their claim to the blessings of it, but by making these over to them as a free gift, and putting them in possession of them, as far as their present state will admit, by a faith of his own operation."

The supposition of two covenants for the salvation of mankind sinners, is encumbered with various difficulties. One is obvious. In every proper covenant, there are two essential parts—a conditional and a promissory. If, therefore, there be a covenant made with sinners, different from the covenant made with Christ, it must have a condition which they themselves must perform. But though our old divines called faith the condition of the covenant made with sinners, they did not assign any merit to faith, but simply precedence. "The truth is," as Dr Dick has remarked, "that what these divines call the covenant of grace, is merely the administration of what they call the covenant of redemption, for the purpose of communicating its blessings to those for whom they were intended; and cannot be properly considered as a covenant, because it is not suspended upon a proper condition." The Westminster Assembly, in this section, appear to describe what was then usually designated the covenant of grace, as distinguished from the covenant of redemption. But, though they viewed the covenant under a twofold consideration, as made with the Surety from everlasting, and as made with sinners in time, they certainly regarded it as one and the same covenant. "The covenant of grace," say they, "was made with Christ as the second Adam, and in him with all the elect as his seed." The doctrine of our standards on this deeply interesting subject, may be summed up in the following propositions: -

1. That a covenant was entered into between Jehovah the Father and his co-eternal Son, respecting the salvation of sinners of mankind. The reality of this federal transaction, appears from Ps. lxxxix. 3: "I have made a covenant with my chosen, I have sworn unto David my servant." The speaker,

in this passage, can be no other but the Lord, who is mentioned in the beginning of the Psalm; and it cannot reasonably be questioned, that the words spoken have their ultimate and principal fulfilment in Jesus Christ, and assert a covenant made with him, of which the covenant of royalty made with David, King of Israel, was typical. In other places of Scripture, though the word covenant does not occur, we have a plain intimation of all the essential parts of a proper covenant. In Is. liii. 10, we have the two great parts of the covenant—the conditionary and the promissory; and the two glorious contracting parties the one undertaking for the performance of its arduous condition—the other engaging for the fulfilment of its precious promises: "If his soul shall make a propitiatory sacrifice, he shall see a seed which shall prolong their days; and the gracious purpose of Jehovah shall prosper in his hands."—(Bishop Lowth's Translation.)

2. That this covenant was made with Christ, as the head, or representative, of his spiritual seed. This is confirmed by the comparison between Christ and Adam, which is stated by the apostle,—Rom. v.; 1 Cor. xv. 45, 47; which clearly establishes the truth, that Adam and Christ severally sustained a public character, as the federal heads of their respective seeds. Christ and his spiritual seed are called by the same name (Isa. xlix. 3),—a plain evidence of God's dealing with him as their representative in the covenant. Christ is likewise called the Surety of the covenant (Heb. vii. 22); and the promises of the covenant were primarily made to him.—Gal. iii. 16; Tit. i. 2.

3. That this covenant originated in the free grace and sovereign will of God. The Scriptures uniformly ascribe this transaction to the good pleasure of Him who worketh all things according to the counsel of his own will, and represent it as conducing to the praise of the glory of his grace.—Eph. i. 3-6. On this account this covenant is, with great propriety, called the covenant of grace, because it originated in the free grace of God, and conveys the blessings of salvation to sinners in a manner the most gratuitous.

4. That this covenant was established from eternity. The covenant of grace is called the second covenant, as distinguished from the covenant of works made with Adam; but though the second in respect of manifestation and execution, yet, with respect either to the period or the order in which it was made, it is the first covenant. The Head of this covenant is introduced (Prov. viii. 23), saying, "I was set up from everlasting, from the beginning, ere ever the earth was;" i.e., he was set apart to his mediatory office and work,—in other words, to be the head of the spiritual seed in the covenant of grace from everlasting. The promise of eternal life is said to have been given us in Christ "before the world began" (Tit. i. 2); and the covenant is frequently styled an everlasting covenant.—Heb. xiii. 20.

5. In the administration of this covenant, God "freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ, requiring of them faith in him, that they may be saved." Though Christ, in this covenant, represented only a definite number of mankind, who were "chosen in him before the foundation of the world, yet, in the administration of the covenant, a free offer of salvation by Jesus Christ is addressed to sinners of mankind indefinitely and universally.—John vi. 32; Is. lv. 1; Rev. xxii. 17. This offer is not restricted, as Baxterians allege, to sensible sinners, or those who are convinced of their sin, and their need of the Saviour; for it is addressed to persons sunk in total insensibility as to their own miseries and wants.—Rev. iii. 17, 18. This offer is made as really to those who eventually reject it, as it is to those who eventually receive it; for, if this were not the case, the former class of gospel-hearers could not be condemned for their unbelief.—John iii. 18, 19.

That God "requires of sinners faith in Christ that they may be saved," admits of no dispute. The part assigned to faith, however, has been much controverted. Many excellent divines, in consequence of the distinction which they made between the covenant of redemption and the covenant of grace, were led to speak of faith as the condition of the latter covenant. But the term, as used by them, signifies not a meritorious or procuring cause, but simply something which goes before, and without which the other cannot be obtained. They consider faith merely as a condition of order or connection, as it has been styled, and as an instrument or means of obtaining an interest in the salvation offered in the gospel. This is very different from the meaning attached to the term by Arminians and Neonomians, who represent faith as a condition on the fulfilment of which the promise is suspended. The Westminster Assembly elsewhere affirm, that God requires of sinners faith in Christ, "as the condition to interest them in him." But this is very different from affirming that faith is the condition of the covenant of grace. That faith is indispensably necessary as the instrument by which we are savingly interested in Christ, and personally instated in the covenant, is a most important truth, and this is all that is intended by the Westminster Divines. They seem to have used the term condition as synonymous with instrument; for, while in one place they speak of faith as the condition to interest sinners in the Mediator, in other places they affirm, that "faith is the alone instrument of justification," and teach, that "faith justifies a sinner in the sight of God, only as it is an instrument by which he receiveth and applieth Christ and his righteousness." As the word condition is ambiguous, apt to be misunderstood, and is frequently employed in an unsound and dangerous sense, it is now disused by evangelical divines.

6. That God promises his Holy Spirit to work in his elect that faith by which they come to have a special interest in the blessings of this covenant.

This implies, that a certain definite number were ordained to eternal life, and that all these shall in due time be brought to believe in Christ.— Acts xiii. 48. It also implies, that they are in themselves unwilling and unable to believe (John vi. 44); but God promises to give them the Holy Spirit to make them willing and able.—Ezek. xxxvi. 26. Faith, therefore, instead of being the condition of the covenant of grace, belongs to the promissory part of the covenant.—Rom. xv. 12. It is the gift of God, who worketh in us both to will and to do of his good pleasure.—Eph. ii. 8; Phil. ii. 13.

Section IV.—This covenant of grace is frequently set forth in the Scripture by the name of a testament, in reference to the death of Jesus Christ, the testator, and to the everlasting inheritance, with all things belonging to it, therein bequeathed.

Exposition

In the authorised English version of the New Testament, the covenant of grace is frequently designated a testament; and it is generally admitted, that the original word signifies both a covenant and a testament. There is, at least, one passage in which it is most properly rendered testament, namely, Heb. ix. 16, 17. Some learned critics, indeed, have strenuously contended against the use of that term even in this passage; but the great majority allow that the common translation is unexceptionable.

Section V.—This covenant was differently administered in the time of the law, and in the time of the gospel: under the law it was administered by promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the paschal lamb, and other types and ordinances delivered to the people of the Jews, all fore-signifying Christ to come, which were for that time sufficient and efficacious, through the operation of the Spirit, to instruct and build up the elect in faith in the promised Messiah, by whom they had full remission of sins, and eternal salvation, and is called the Old Testament.

Section VI.—Under the gospel, when Christ the substance was exhibited, the ordinances in which this covenant is dispensed, are the preaching of the Word, and the administration of the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper; which, though fewer in number, and administered with more simplicity and less outward

glory, yet in them it is held forth in more fullness, evidence, and spiritual efficacy, to all nations, both Jews and Gentiles; and is called the New Testament. There are not, therefore, two covenants of grace differing in substance, but one and the same under various dispensations.

Exposition

The doctrines laid down in these sections are the following:—

1. That there are not two covenants of grace, differing in substance, but that the Old and New Testament economies are only two dispensations of the same covenant. The Jewish and the Christian dispensation are meant by the first and second—the old and new covenant.—Heb. viii. 7, 13.

2. That believers who lived under the old dispensation, as well as those who live under the gospel, were saved by faith in Christ, and lived and died in the hope of a blessed immortality.

3. That the New Testament dispensation of the covenant of grace is, in many respects, superior to that which preceded the coming of Christ in the flesh. The present dispensation exceeds the past, in the superior clearness of its manifestations—in its substantial ratification by the death of Christ—in the more abundant outpouring of the Holy Spirit—in the introduction of a more spiritual form of worship, and in its extension to all nations.

In concluding this chapter, let us reflect how admirably adapted the covenant of grace is to the situation of those who are ruined by the violation of the first covenant. Its condition being fulfilled by the glorious Surety, a full salvation is freely offered to the chief of sinners. But what will it avail us that this gracious covenant has been revealed, unless we obtain a personal interest in it, and are made partakers of its invaluable blessings? Let us, therefore, "take hold of God's covenant," and let us labour after the fullest evidence of our interest in this blessed covenant. Then, amid all the troubles of life, we may "encourage ourselves in the Lord our God;" and, even when all other things fail us, we may experience that strong consolation which David enjoyed under his complicated trials, and in the immediate prospect of dissolution; and to which he gave utterance in these his last words: "Although my house be not so with God, yet he hath made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things, and sure; this is all my salvation, and all my desire."