

Difference between Two and Three Covenants

Two or Three Covenants?

At times discussions between churches become heated. One is about the free offer of grace. Another concerns the perspective on the Bible. Yet another is about two or three covenants. Certain theologians who believe in two covenants condemn the believer of a three-covenanter. That would be “soul-destroying” and “dishonoring to God.”¹ But when you ask a normal church member, “What is the difference between two or three covenants?” Then it remains silent. They could even less mention its ‘dangers.’ The question is, what then is the difference between two and three covenants? How does this affect the preaching and the hearer? Let us think about this.

The Covenant

The first question we can ask is: what is a covenant? It comes from the Latin word “*convener*” that means “agree” or “meet.” With a covenant this happens in a formal way. We could say: a covenant is an agreement. Two parties agree on certain rules. They bind themselves to each other. The clearest example is marriage. One man and one woman agree that they remain faithful to each other for the rest of their lives. They promise that. But if one of them does not keep to that agreement, then they also break the bond. This is also the true for the Bible when it concerns the covenant. Simply said, the Lord wants to enter into an ‘agreement’ with people. He promises that He wants to give them eternal life. He desires to be their God. The sinner then becomes the property of God. The covenants we are thinking about concern the salvation of sinners.² How does God manage to save people? For this, He makes use of a covenant. The question then is, what agreements are made? And with whom are they made? To whom does the Lord promise which things? That is the whole discussion when it concerns two or three covenants. Are there two or three agreements? For whom are the promises of that covenant?

First, it is fitting to mention the names of the covenants. They are called: the covenant of works, the covenant of grace, and the covenant of redemption. The latter is also called the counsel of peace. What does each covenant entail?

The Covenant of Works

Already in paradise, God promised eternal life to Adam. If Adam would love the Lord entirely, he ‘merits’ this life. This is what we call with a difficult word the covenant of works. Thus, man has to ‘work’ to receive eternal life. As a ‘head of state’, Adam does this not only do for himself, but also for all his descendants. In what way could he prove his love for God? For this purpose, the Lord has placed a tree in paradise. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If Adam would not eat of it, he would show that he loves the Lord. But the other side is also true. If he does eat of it, God will punish him. Then he will receive eternal death. This then applies both to him and all his descendants. There is no disagreement about this covenant of works. However, Adam has been disobedient. As a result, we can no longer obtain eternal life through this agreement. This means that the covenant of works has been broken. Man can no longer be saved by ‘working’. How is it then possible? Because God makes a new agreement about this matter.

The Covenant of Grace and the Covenant of Redemption

In simple terms, the Lord had to ‘think of a new way,’ so that man can still obtain eternal life. This must be an agreement where sinful humans cannot and does not have to contribute anything of their

¹ G.H. Kersten, *Meditatie, dS 9/11* (1928). K. van der Zwaag, *Afwachten of verwachten; de toe-eigening des heils in historisch en theologisch perspectief*, Heerenveen: Groen 2003, 600.

² <https://bijbel-statenvertaling.com/hellenbroek-hertaald/11-over-het-genadeverbond/>

own. It is all by grace. Thus, man receives something that he does not deserve. God the Father and the Son held a 'meeting' about this matter. We could call this a "counsel." We refer to it as the counsel of peace (Zech. 6:13). The Father asks by Himself, "How can I save sinful people?" (Jer. 3:19). The issue is that God is holy. So He cannot simply have a relationship with sinners or condone sin. It has to be paid for. The Son then says, "I will do it." The Lord Jesus says in Psalm 40, "Lo, I come ... I - delight to do thy will, O my God: yea, thy law is within my heart" (Ps. 40:7-8). When the Lord Jesus will do this, the Father gives Him a people (Isa. 53:10-12, John 17:6). Thus, this agreement or decree is the counsel of peace. Is it not about the peace between God and man? Others call it the covenant of redemption, because it concerns the redemption of man from sin. That such an agreement has taken place is agreed upon by two-covenanters and three-covenanters. What is then the difference? Essentially this: is the performance of this counsel in time the same covenant in essence, or is it indeed a separate covenant? A two-covenanter says the first, a three-covenanter the last. Hence, also two covenants or three covenants. It is about the number of covenants that concern the salvation of man. Let us now examine each perspective separately.

The Perspective of a Two-Covenanter

What does a two-covenanter argue? This counsel of peace is a covenant that God the Father makes with the Son in eternity. The same covenant is then carried out in time. This is given the name covenant of grace. It is about the granting of grace to man. This is in essence the same covenant as the counsel of peace. The only difference is that the decree of the counsel was made in eternity. Under the name covenant of grace, this is then carried out in time. The people that we speak about are the same group in the counsel of peace, and the covenant of grace. They are represented by the Lord Jesus. He is also called the "head" of the covenant of grace. At the same time there are two groups of people who are related to this covenant of grace. On the one hand, those who fundamentally belong to the covenant of grace. The true covenant people. The Lord Jesus only represents them. On the other hand, there are also people who are externally related to this covenant. For them, it is not true that the Lord Jesus is their head. They do have a connection with the covenant, but they are not truly part of it. This sounds quite complicated. Therefore, it is good to give an example.

Two countries are at war. One country is called Heavencountry. It is a huge and strong country. The king of this country is called Padero. He is a very powerful king. If he wants, he can wipe the other country off the map. The other country is called Earthland. Its king is called Filio. How is it that these two countries are at war? That is because of the previous king of Earthland. His name was called Adama. Together with his citizens, he fired rockets at Heavencountry. King Adama was immediately deposed as head of state. He is no longer allowed to do his work. They appoint a new king, whose name is Filio. You could understand that this crime makes King Padero furious. He declares war. Rightly so. However, the current king Filio has had contact with King Padero before this time. They are true friends. That interaction happened before the war. How then? They had already made an agreement between themselves. If Earthland would begin a war, they had a plan to restore peace. How then? Padero must receive an extremely expensive gift. Ten thousand diamonds, a thousand kilograms of gold, three thousand kilograms of silver and dozens of purple cloths. Padero and Filio put this agreement on paper and signed it. Now it is war. How do they solve this? After Adama was deposed, Filio has become king. He represents the citizens of Earthland during this war. He is the head of all those people. He again begins to have meetings with King Padero. He wants to bring peace. King Filio pays for the extremely expensive gift out of his own pocket. After that there is peace between Heavencountry and Earthland. However, the peace with King Padero does not have the same consequence for each person in Earthland. There are true citizens. They have a passport and civil rights. Only these people are offered peace. They do not have to do anything by themselves to receive this peace. Because King Filio has made peace, it is automatically applicable to them also. But in the country are also living vacation guests. They are originally from Demonland. That country is still at war with Heavencountry. King Filio allows them to live in Earthland for some time. They do experience a certain effect of the peace that has been established. Nevertheless, they have no right to

the full privileges of this peace. King Filio is namely not their head. He is not their representative. They have a certain relationship to the king, but they are not his subjects. They remain citizens of Demonland.

Let us work out this example with respect to the covenant of grace. Think of King Padero as God the Father. He dwells in heaven. That is the Heavencountry. The Lord Jesus is depicted in King Filio. These two have made an agreement before man would sin. The agreement between God the Father and God the Son happened in the counsel of peace. Then war begins. In the example this takes place because King Adama fires rockets. In reality, it happened because Adam ate of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. As a result, all of humanity is at war with God the Father. In the example, King Filio becomes head of state of the true citizens in Earthland. Spiritually, the Lord Jesus becomes head of His true children. Only to them applies the promise of everlasting peace. They obtain it 'automatically', because the Head has wrought and purchased this peace. What King Padero promises in the example, he must fulfill too. Spiritually speaking, if God the Father promises something, He will always fulfill it. God promises salvation. That will also happen for those who truly belong to the covenant. When the Lord would promise something, and would not fulfill it, then He is lying. That is certainly impossible with God. Therefore, the promise that belongs to the covenant of grace, is always performed in those who obtain this promise. They are the elect. In other words, the promises of the covenant of grace are only for the elect.

Who do believe this view of the covenant? In particular the Netherlands Reformed Churches, founded by Rev. G.H. Kersten. They made this clear with the named doctrinal statements of 1931.³ Men like Boston, Chaucey and Comrie also believed that there are only two covenants. We see the same reflected in the Westminster Catechism.

The Perspective of a Three-Covenanter

How does a three-covenanter think? In eternity a meeting took place between the Father and the Son. This meeting is called the counsel of peace. A three-covenanter refers to this as the covenant of redemption too. It is about the redemption of man. The Son agrees with the Father that He will pay for the sins of the elect. However, *after the fall* God makes a new agreement with man about his salvation. This is *a different agreement* than that between the Father and the Son. The agreement with man is called the covenant of grace. God reveals the first principles immediately after the fall. Then the LORD speaks of the Seed that will come (Gen. 3:15). However, God actually establishes the covenant of grace with Abraham and his descendants. Therefore, God directly makes an agreement with man when it is about this covenant. He *promises* them not only salvation, but also that He *wants* to be their God. This also has a new challenge. Now, on the side of man it is needed to repent and believe. He is supposed to be active with it. With a difficult term we call this the "consent of the covenant." He must wholeheartedly agree to the conditions set by God. This means that he can be saved by free grace only. At the same time that faith and repentance must be present in his life. Meeting these conditions is necessary to actually receive what the LORD has promised with this agreement. Thus, there is a difference between *promising* and *receiving* what has been promised. A three-covenanter, of course, does not advocate that sinful man can believe or repent by himself. This is actually the work of God. He firmly believes that the natural man is dead in sins and trespasses. From man, ultimately, no good can be expected. However, the covenant does have a condition. This means, therefore, that not every promise of God is automatically fulfilled. What God promises is always true. He cannot lie. How could then a promise not always be fulfilled? That issue is on the side of man. He is the party that breaks the agreement. He does not meet the conditions of faith and repentance. As a result, it frees God from the obligation to grant salvation. Perhaps that is difficult to understand. How can God promise something and yet not fulfill it? Is that not fundamentally lying? No. The best example we see in Scripture is what God promised to the people of Israel. He said that the people enter Canaan. This also happened. However, not every Israelite entered Canaan personally.

³ Dr. M. Golverdingen (2004), *Om het behoud van een kerk*, 49.

Most of them perished in the desert. Why? They did not believe that God would fulfill this promise. They murmured. They sinned against God. So the problem was on the side of the Israelites, not on that of God. He did fulfill His promise. But at the same time, not every person to whom this was promised received the benefit of it. According to a three-covenanter, the same is true with the covenant of grace. The Lord promises salvation. But man must earnestly ask and plead the Lord for this. He must repent from his sins by grace. Only in this way does a person receive what the Lord has promised. What then is the role of the Lord Jesus in the covenant of grace of a three-covenant? He is not a representative of an elect sinner. Thus, He is no covenant head. He is only a Mediator who stands between an angry God and sinful man.⁴ He mediates between these two hostile parties. He brings these two together. It is useful to work out this perspective with a similar example.

We look again at the war between the two countries. How does a three-covenanter see the process to get peace? Both countries are at war. One is Heavencountry with its king Padero. The other country is Earthland with the ruler Filio. The previous king of Earthland was named Adama. He launched rockets at Heavencountry. This made king Padero furious. Also in this case, Filio has had already contact with king Padero. The two are true friends. They originally come from the same noble family. They have made an agreement. If both countries would go to war, Filio will pay a high price for this. Ten thousand diamonds, a thousand kilograms of gold, three thousand kilograms of silver and dozens of purple cloths. They made it official on paper and signed it. At this time, war has broken out for already a few weeks. King Adama has been deposed. The country is no longer governed by a king. It is now a republic. Currently, every citizen is directly at war with king Padero. How can peace now be established? They no longer have a head of state. Filio knows that King Padero wants to establish peace with the citizens of Earthland. He has meetings with King Padero again. However, he is no representative or head of state of Earthland. He only wants to mediate through an official channel between the angry King Padero and the hostile people of Earthland. What do they agree on? Filio will grant the gift to King Padero. This will serve as a foundation for peace with the people of Earthland. But that does not mean that every citizen of Earthland will automatically receive this peace! Oh, no! King Padero wants to make an agreement with every citizen as well. He proclaims to them by heralds how they can obtain peace. He wants every citizen to come to him personally. He must then express his regret and confess the guilt of the war. What is now Filio's task? He will mediate between King Padero and every citizen confessing his guilt. He tells both that the price for peace has already been paid. The promise of peace is therefore ready for everyone who wants to come to King Padero. However, this promise of peace does not automatically mean that every citizen will also have peace. For what happens if a citizen of Earthland does not want to come? Then that personal war between King Padero and this citizen remains. Thus, peace is possible, but only if a resident wants to express his regret. Will he not do that? Then King Padero will ultimately come to take revenge. So if there comes no peace, that problem is not on the side of King Padero. No, the blame then is with every hostile citizen. During this war, every citizen, and even vacation goers, has the same rights to receive peace from King Padero. The king offers his peace to everyone in Earthland. It is, therefore, up to every resident of Earthland whether they receive it or not. However, the foundation of this peace is anchored in the signed agreement between King Padero and Filio. The latter has paid for the peace and mediated it. But the actual implementation of this depends on what every citizen does.

What is the difference with the previous example? In the previous example, Filio was king and head of state. He only represents his true citizens. Only they have the right to peace. Spiritually speaking, the Lord Jesus is Head of the elect church. He represents only them. In the latter example, Filio is only a mediator. He does not speak on behalf of all citizens. He only tries to unite the two parties that are at war. Spiritually speaking, the Lord Jesus is only the Mediator of the covenant of grace. Therefore, He mediates between God the Father and sinful mankind. In the previous example, all true citizens 'automatically' receive peace, because King Filio brings causes it to happen and pays for it.

⁴ <https://www.refoweb.nl/vragenrubriek/2239/drie-verbondenleer-in-cgk/>

They do not have to do anything about it themselves. Even if they express regret to King Padero, this is not a condition to receive peace. In this example, a citizen does not receive the promised peace automatically. This happens only when an inhabitant of Earthland goes to King Padero and asks for forgiveness. He must personally deal with this matter. Spiritually speaking, a sinner only receives peace from God by believing and repenting. In this example, King Padero is not a liar if he promises peace but does not grant it. In that case, an inhabitant of Earthland has not fulfilled its conditions. Spiritually speaking, this is the difference between a two- and three-covenanter. With a two-covenanter, God promises peace to all the elect. They will also receive it. That is independent of any specific conditions on the part of man. The payment and fulfillment of it happens because of the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus. He is their representative. But with a three-covenanter, God promises salvation to all hearers in the church. This means that he has to do his duty. He must then ask for forgiveness and repent. Therefore, it does not make God a liar if He does promise salvation but does not grant it. In that case, man has not taken his responsibility. The fault therefore lies with him.

Who do advocate this covenant perspective? In particular, the Free Reformed Churches of North America are known for this. However, they have never made an official doctrinal statement regarding it. Who else believes in this covenant perspective? Some three-covenanters point to Herman Witsius, Zacharias Ursinus and the authors of the baptismal form. In it, they seem to speak of all baptized as true covenant children. Each of them has the right to plead on the promise of salvation.

Consequence of the Covenant Perspective

What is the consequence of the covenant perspective for preaching and the hearer? Ultimately, the question is: who in the church has the right to plead the promises of the covenant of grace? Does this apply to all people who are baptized? Or is it only for those who are converted? A three-covenanter says: "All baptized individuals may point the Lord that He has promised salvation to them. He has promised to be their God." However, this does not mean that God is their property. For this, regeneration is necessary. Nevertheless, baptized members may say, "Lord, Thou hast promised to be a God unto me. Thou promised me salvation. Wilt Thou grant that to me also? Wilt Thou cause that to happen in my heart and life?" But this goes way too far for a two-covenanter. An unconverted person cannot and may not simply plead the promises of the covenant of grace. They apply only to those in whom the Lord has wrought. They know Christ. However, he does say that a baptized person may pray to the Lord for grace, faith, and repentance. But pleading a promise is only for the children of God.⁵

⁵ Steenblok, Gereformeerde Dogmatiek, 220 (Sacraments > Baptism)