

## Gratuitous — A Word from from the Beginning

Last time I mentioned the names of some theologians in The Netherlands who did not construct a contrast between the so-called covenant of *works* and the covenant of *grace*, as if Adam's obedience in Paradise would have been a meritorious work, while now God's grace excludes all human merit. Especially the Rev. S.G. de Graaf, the author of *Promise and Deliverance*, rejected the idea that eternal life would have been man's payment for services rendered. De Graaf proposed to speak of the covenant in Paradise as the covenant of God's favour. Dr. G.C. Berkouwer agrees with this position and states that we may never construe an antithesis between the covenants of "works" and "grace." I also mentioned the Dutch theologians J.G. Woelderink (1886-1956) and K. Schilder (1890-1952), but we ran out of space and I could not give some references. Let us again take up this timely topic of the so-called covenant of works and first listen to Dr. J.G. Woelderink.

Woelderink was a Dutch Reformed minister who received an honorary degree of doctor in theology at the University of Utrecht for his important publications about covenant and baptism, justification and sanctification, and, in general, the order of salvation. He saw the dangers of the Anabaptist movement and its influence within Reformed circles (*De gevaren der doperse geestesstroming*, 1941). He attacked subjectivism and strongly emphasized the dependability of God's promises and of the Word of God as the testimony of the Holy Spirit. One can only regret that at the end of his career Dr. Woelderink sought to enlist the help of Karl Barth. In his struggle against fatalism Woelderink joined Barth's attack on the doctrine of double pre-destination. But it is not the place here and now to elaborate on the significance of Woelderink's theology. I would only like to draw the attention of our readers to a passage from *De inzet van de Heidelberg Catechismus*, an explanation of Lord's Days 1-7 of the Heidelberg Catechism, published after Woelderink's death (Franeker: Wever).

Woelderink describes that Reformed theologians quite soon regarded the relationship of God and man in Paradise to be a covenant, and he does not raise any objection against this covenantal approach. Moses, or the prophet who wrote Genesis 1-3, knew of the covenant that the Lord God has established with His people Israel. Would it then be strange that this man of God pictured the relation of God and man as a covenant relationship right from the beginning? In Genesis 2 the covenantal name Yahweh is used; God's promise was visibly expressed in the tree of life, and God's demand had its visible manifestation in the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Therefore, Woelderink accepts the designation "covenant" for the relationship of God and man in Paradise. But he writes: "Helaas heeft men de onvergeeflijke fout begaan, dat verbond een werkverbond te noemen" (p. 46).

Alas, People committed the unforgiveable error of calling this covenant a covenant of works. Woelderink makes this sharp and pointed remark: While Scripture teaches that the desire to be justified by works is the very sin of man, people adorn this sin with a crown of righteousness in the covenant before the fall. If one objects to using the word "grace" before the fall, then one should speak of a covenant of sovereign favour, in which promise and demand have their place exactly as in the covenant of grace ("een verbond van vrije gunst, waarin belofte en gebod hun plaats hebben precies als in het genadeverbond"). There is a remarkable similarity in the approach of this Dutch Reformed theologian and the statement of the Rev. S.G. de Graaf, minister of the Reformed Church at Amsterdam.

In this survey of Covenant theologians from The Netherlands during the twentieth century, one name may not remain unmentioned: Dr. Klaas Schilder of Kampen. Although he wrote several essays about God's Covenant in the weekly *De Reformatie* and in other small publications, we now pay attention to his dogmatic *opus magnum*, his four-volume *Heidelbergsche Catechismus*. One could check the many passages that are mentioned under the caption "covenant" in the index, but let us begin with some remarks Schilder made in the exposition of Lord's Day 3 concerning the covenant between God and man (I, 317).

According to the unanimous testimony of almost the entire classical Reformed theology the covenant is *bilateral*, two sided. There is a mutual coming together of God and man as two parties; the covenant is a mutual agreement, although established by God Himself. The parties — God and man — are not similar; there is an infinite difference in quality. Nevertheless, the covenant is no mere divine one-sided disposition, but a real covenant. The dissimilarity of the parties may never lead to a dissolving of the covenant into a mere disposition. In his characteristic manner Schilder states: "In het verbond wordt niet maar iets *over* den mensch uitgesproken, doch wordt hij *aangesproken*." The covenant is no mere pronouncement *about* man, but a proclamation *to* man; he is not simply spoken of, but he is addressed. Covenant is a dealing *with* man rather than a treatise *concerning* him. Schilder touches a theme that was dominant also in his struggle against the identification of God's election and God's covenant in the controversies in the Reformed Churches of The Netherlands during the forties: God's covenant promise is spoken *to* man; it is no prediction *about* man. In the covenant man is addressed; he is addressed as responsible party in the covenant. Take man's responsibility away and he ceases to be a party in the covenant.

But precisely within this context in which he stresses the genuine character of the covenant between

God and man as a relationship between two real parties, Schilder argues that the covenant is built on the *distinction* of Creator and creature. Equality is excluded. The whole relationship is determined by the dissimilarity of the parties. There is no moment in the covenantal conversation, no explanation of the covenantal stipulation, no appeal to the covenantal relationship, in which the infinite qualitative distinction of God and man is not taken into account. Also the character of man, his nature and legal position are in view here, after the fall but also before man sinned. Let us hear Schilder in his own language:

Zoo staat het na den val, zoo stond het ook reeds voor den val. Is er bij den mensch sprake van "werken"? Maar het kunnen werken is hem gegeven, is geschapen. Is er bij hem sprake van "loon"? Maar deze beloning geschiedt niet uit verdienste, doch uit "gunst"; of, zoo men een minder duidelijk, maar toch ook in vr. 12 voorkomend woord wil bezigen: deze beloning geschiedt niet uit verdienste, maar uit "genade." God Zelf legde, schiep, verband tusschen werk en loon; werk en loon beide zijn gegeven; alle roem is uitgesloten, ook in het paradijs (I, 320).

Schilder argued that in the so-called covenant of works, the possibility to work was *given* to man and his ability was *created*. If there is spoken of a reward in Paradise, then this reward is not of merit, but of "favour." If you want to use a less clear word — a word from answer 12 — you may say: this reward is not of merit but of "grace." God Himself made and created the connection between work and reward; both work and reward are given; all boasting is excluded, also in Paradise.

Schilder loved playing with words and he summarized his broad expositions in one sentence or expression, printed on the top of the page. We read on p. 392: "*Gratis, een woord ook van 't begin*. Gratuitous, a word also from the beginning. Here Schilder writes about the dogmatic idea that man would have obtained eternal glory, if he would not have fallen into sin. God had spoken to man: You, second party in the covenant, may enter into My Sabbath in the way of obedience.

Maar al komt deze zaligheid over den mensch "langs den weg" der gehoorzaamheid, ze overkomt hem niet "om" zijn gehoorzaamheid. *Loon* in den zin van *apodosis* (*Verschuldigde* uitkering van wat hem *rechtens*, en dan wel op grond van eigen prestaties, zou toekomen) is er aan zijn werken niet verbonden: *wat heeft hij, dat hij niet ontvangen heeft?* (vgl. I Cor. 4.7). Zijn beloning geschiedt hem, niet uit verdienste, doch uit gunst.

This eternal bliss would have come upon man *in the way of obedience*, not because of his obedience. There is no *apodosis*; there is no payment legally due to man on the basis of his achievements. To speak in the words of I Cor. 4:7: What does man have that he did not receive? His reward is not of merit, but of free favour.

Again the idea is the same as in the quotations of S.G. de Gaaf, G.C. Berkouwer and J.G. Woelderink. There is no contrast of *works* and *grace*, as if the covenant before the fall would have been a covenant of merit rather than favour.

There is one other passage in Schilder's *Heidelbergische Catechismus* that should have our attention for a moment. Often when one brings forward the concept of the covenant of Paradise as a covenant of favour, one hears the objection that this obscures the doctrine of Christ's merits. The reasoning goes as follows: If you do

not want to speak of merit in Adam, how can you then speak of merit in Christ, the last Adam? The question is important and it should receive an answer. Let it, for the time being, suffice to state that Schilder dealt with our topic in the context of the satisfaction of God's justice.

When he discussed Lord's Day 5, he came to the familiar words that God will have His justice satisfied; therefore we must make full satisfaction to the same, either by ourselves, or by another. Dr. Schilder stressed that we are to be subject of the satisfaction; we are to pay to God's justice. But can man ever participate in satisfying God's righteousness? Do we not diminish the honour of Christ our Saviour who has fully satisfied the justice of God? Do we not fall back into the track of Roman Catholics who spoke of human satisfactions and of human merit on the basis of good works?

In answer to these questions Schilder argues that to pay does not mean to merit. Strictly speaking, to merit is impossible for man. If in the state of integrity Adam satisfied God's justice, did he then merit anything? No, if he had even desired to merit anything, he would have violated the honour of God and forgotten his own origin as creature. He would not have given to God what is God's. To satisfy God's justice means for us that we consciously deny the possibility of merit and that in faith we acknowledge the favour of God before the fall and the grace of God thereafter. To pay does not mean to merit: if one pays his taxes, does he merit anything? God is our Father, also in Paradise. When you have done all what is commanded you, say: We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty (Luke 17:10). Schilder writes:

De perfecte betaling (beantwoording aan de wet) is bij den "blooten" mensch het tegenbeeld van de verdienste — *ook voor zijn denken*. Want hoezeer de *betaling* nimmer imaginair mag zijn, de *verdienste* is het immer voor wat ons ("bloote" menschen) betreft. Zoowel in het paradijs, als in het land van onze excommunicatie, alsmede in dat van onze wederopneming in Gods gunst (II, 24).

Perfect satisfaction (obedience to the law) in mere man is contrary to merit also in man's thought. Satisfaction may never be imaginary, As far as we, mere men, are concerned, merit is always in Paradise, in the land of our excommunication, and in that of our restoration into God's favour. It is clear that to Schilder the idea of merit is a wrong imagination, also for the situation of Paradise. Gratuitous, free, is the word also in the beginning: amazing favour.

J. FABER

## II Corinthians 6:1, 2

*Working together with him, then, we entreat you not to accept the grace of God in vain. For he says, "At the acceptable time I have listened to you, and helped you on the day of salvation." Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.*