

## Covenant Theology: The Shadow of the Plumb Line

Perhaps no other work in Scripture lays before us the truth of the "covenant" better than that of the prophet Amos. Amos was from the tribe of Judah (Southern kingdom) however he ministered to Israel (Northern kingdom). Authenticating his message as that of prophecy from God in the first two verses Amos proceeds to show God's wrath shed on the surrounding nations. We find nothing unusual here, and perhaps will even applaud the vengeance of God on the likes of these heathen nations. However our glee soon turns to confusion as both the Northern and Southern kingdoms enter the same fate as the nations (temporally speaking).

Chapter two, verse four finds judgment being spoken against Judah. Next in verse six we find the condemnation of Israel. And can you believe it, it is introduced with the same words, "Thus saith the Lord; For three transgressions of xxxxxxx, and for four I will not turn away the punishment thereof?" What no preferential treatment, the chosen people only get the same four chances as those heathen? This is a key to understanding the covenant, the election, and how the two interact with each other. As we lay the foundation then, let us remember that the pattern God has set in history with the nation of Israel, His chosen people, is that of the covenant.

Chapter three begins with a view of the whole of Israel as God's chosen people, as God reminds them He is the one who brought them up out of bondage in Egypt. Nonetheless, the warning is addressed to the Northern kingdom only. Chapters three through six lay out the charge against Israel (Northern kingdom) and calls her to repent. Chapter seven presents five visions representing divine justice against Israel that are averted by intercession.

However it is in chapter seven I want to try and open before us a painting of the covenant. It is in chapter seven, verse seven that a plumb line is set in the temple. Though not directly set forth in this passage, the plumb line is always among God's people and only those He has enabled to walk in its shadow shall know salvation and not the wrath of His judgment. We see this theme reinforced in Hebrews 4:17 where we read that judgment begins in the house of God (church). We cannot deny that when we speak of Israel in the Old testament, we speak of God's covenant people. Though all of the elect, those able to walk before God by the plumb line, will be of this covenant, the covenant as such, has absolutely nothing to do with eternal salvation. In the parable of the wheat and tares Christ paints the same picture for the church, not all of the church (covenant) have eternal salvation. Some disagree this parable points to the church, but rather to the world. True, but if the world only, why the question about removing the tares? As we will see later, the scope of the covenant and who is included is wider in the New Testament. The Jews did not and have not grasped this yet, and rely upon their birthright as children of Abraham, rather than as children of promise in the Messiah as the hope of their eternal resting place. Let us remember that the covenant according to the Westminster Larger Catechism question number thirty-one that the covenant of grace was made with Christ, and in Christ with the elect only. This will differ from those who see it as being with mankind, whereby all humanity are in the covenant, some to eternal damnation for being

covenant breakers, and the elect to eternal glory having the requirements of the covenant met by Christ in their behalf. I believe the Westminster Standards present the correct application of the Scriptures, and then choose the word select for who is in the covenant, which indeed has both elect and nonelect for the glory of God as we shall see in the following exposition of Amos.

We see in the New Testament the believers called "... a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation. His own special people that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy" (1 Pet. 2:9-10). Compare the choice of words by the writers of Holy Writ in comparing the church to ancient Israel, "priesthood, chosen people, holy nation, and a people." As with ancient Israel also, all who are of the church are not elected of God unto eternal salvation. The covenant covers a people to whom God has chosen to more overtly proclaim His direct revelation and through this people proclaim His glory to all the world. Note the word of God to the Pharaoh of Egypt and God's raising up of that office that God might in bringing His people forth show His power and glory to all the world. This is "hard" doctrine, and many will turn away from this sovereign God who will so use man. That doesn't change the revealed truth of God, nor hinder His right to have mercy upon whom He will have mercy. All mankind being dead in sin already leaves no place for the condemnation of God in such an action, nor impugns His righteousness and justice. Nothing changes from the Old Testament to the New Testament regarding God's purpose in calling a people to Himself in covenant. This covenant is both conditional and unconditional in two ways, that is we have a dichotomy within a dichotomy in the covenant. The covenant is made with two kinds of people, those whom God has determined to save in spite of their failure to keep the covenant on their own, and those whom God passes by in the covenant. God requires obedience in this covenant, and we find this as being a condition of the covenant. Yet to those whom He has elected, God gives the means to keep the covenant, so we could say it is unconditional in that God made the covenant, and God keeps the covenant for His elect through the gift of faith in the Messiah.

Notice the protection of the covenant however in that when the people without regard to election keep God's commandments, the people (nation) prospers. When the whole (majority) of the people do not obey God's commandment, without regard to the election, all suffer the wrath of God on them as a people (nation). We see this same thing in the New Testament when Jesus tells the story of the sower, and those nearby received the word and rejoiced, but because of the condition of their heart could not keep the word. This seems like a universal offer until we realize that all men have a heart of stone and unfit for the seed to take root, except God creates in them a new heart (Ezek. 11:19). It could be said then that God has "selected" a people consisting both of elect and non-elect to use as an example to the rest of mankind of the righteousness He exhibits both in His mercy and in His judgment.

Another thing we need to pay attention to is the promise of redemption to the elect through out this demonstration of God's mercy and judgment. It is this truth that keeps

the elect from ever falling into complete or utter despair (2 Cor. 4:8-9). Likewise in the book of Revelation when the wrath of God is fully poured out on the earth, we see a pause in the midst of the turmoil of that period as God reassures the saints, and lets them know they are not forgotten (Rev. 7).

Thus we see the covenant made with a people, or nation, but within that people also exists an elect seed of God, for whom God has provided a redeemer. The covenant speaks of a people, first in the Old Testament as a nation and in the fullness of God's revelation in the New Testament a people of all nations. A shift in the overall inclusion of people (nations) in the covenant, but yet the election remains the same within both administrations of the covenant as the holy seed of faith in the promised Messiah. Thus a covenant that is both conditional and unconditional, a chosen people and an elect people. Add to this the experience of life and the various teaching among God's people and we should not wonder that the simplicity of covenant theology eludes most. Praise God that the simple fact His Son died for my sins is all the understanding required to grasp eternal life in Jesus Christ by grace through faith, and that the gift of God.

Nonetheless, we can watch the development of "covenant" theology in the history of the church bring much debate and even division among churches who all claim the Reformed title. I believe without digging into the eternal counsel, where perhaps we aren't even welcome, we can see from the clear word of God speaking in the Holy Scriptures that the election is the one ingredient necessary for eternal salvation in Christ. In making that election God set in place the things required to meet the conditions of the covenant to be provided for the elect, and in due time it will be made manifest in history through the working of the Holy Spirit within the heart of each elect person, the mysterious salvation God has established for the elect. Clearly then while God chooses to work through and in the covenant, it is not the covenant that establishes election but election is of God from the beginning and the covenant is the tool of election to make these things manifest in history.

I believe when we let the "simplicity" or clarity of Scripture rule, we do away with most of the arguments that have divided the church for so many generations. For example no true Reformed would use words to indicate it was ever possible for man to earn eternal salvation by the keeping of God's law. It is specifically spelled out in Scripture that the law has never and will never save any. Yet our dispensational brethren as a rule hold for separate program for the Old Testament Israel whereby in perfectly keeping the law was the way God chose to save them. I submit that the condition of obedience we see set in place at Sinai, at best if man were able to keep it, is that which indicates man is in the covenant, not eternal salvation. We may note that in several places God puts conditions on this covenant with words to the effect, if you will obey this law you will be my people and I will be your God. Being of the chosen people then is entry into the covenant, but not necessarily of the election to eternal life. The promise to the seed has always been of faith. I think this is the clue we need to understand what we do in baptizing our children. This brings them into the protection of the covenant, but not salvation which is of God in accordance to the election. This is not a step one then step two arrangement. Infants are baptized into the covenant, but flowing entirely from the grace of God the gift of faith

needed to please God is bestowed severally according to the eternal election of God. They are the children of God and in covenant with God, but with the ability to fall away remaining, and I don't think it too strong a word to say, will fall away from God in time, and that before standing before the judgment seat of Christ, unless they are also of the elect. Baptism then is the "official" sign and seal of entry into the covenant, the same as circumcision was in the Old testament (1 Pet. 3:21).

The standard set before those in the covenant of the ever present plumb line cannot be kept apart from the presence of the Holy Spirit so working in the heart of the individual, that it is of God for that person, to will and to do the good pleasure of God (Phlp. 2:13). To stand on the assurance then of the sacraments as signs and seals of our entry into the covenant is no more than the Hebrew people to stand on their right as the children of Abraham, to which our Lord said, God is able to raise up children of Abraham from the stones that line the road (Mt. 3:9). Notice Christ did not say that God was able to raise up true children of God or elect souls from those same rocks. I submit then that the words God can do all things do not mean that God will do all things. God will not violate His own Word, and that Word points both to a covenant and to an election. I believe from places like the book of Amos we can see the plumb line is not only the standard, but the same plumb line then becomes a dividing line between the elect and all others.

Though we have many who think and teach different, they do so in denial of the clearest interpretation of Scripture in my opinion. I believe if we will let the Scripture speak without our attempt at reducing the sovereign acts of God to that which fits man's logic, we will find a more pure and powerful church to confront the world. To debate and divide the church over the turn of a word surely cannot be of God's best for the church. Yet it seems each of us comes to the table with our own concept of what the Word of God really means, then attempt to move heaven and earth to defend that position. We find such division was the problem of the church at Corinth, where division was removing the discipline and attention to the things of God, that one or the other might appear more holy or of holier stock than another. So much so that the table of the Lord was a farce, and the worship of the church totally lacking in decency and order (1Cor. 1:13; 5:14).

Kuyper as I understand his overall theology almost had it right in that every person has a place and when each person finds their place in God's will the nation will prosper. This works for the elect's sake which are in that nation. However it is true that God does have a place for even the reprobate and that place is in the covenant and in obedience to God's law. Obedience isn't optional, it is commanded. It is only first by inclusion that God may appear vindicated among all the inhabitants of the universe in excluding any. Though as the Sovereign, God need not vindicate Himself, we find He has so chosen to show the glory of His justice through the covenant and the condition His law be obeyed. It is just as sure none can walk this line and remain in the shadow of the plumb line apart from the gift of faith from God in grace.

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