

Nature of the Covenant

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When talking about the Nature of the Covenant and how that affects the way we understand salvation, we need to make some clarifications.

Let us begin our discussion talking about the different ways in which we use the “elect.” We will look at the phrase from Paul in Romans – “Not all Israel is *Israel*.” What does Paul mean when he says this? Paul is talking about how the nation of Israel as a whole, that is, every single man, woman, and child, they are not all *Israel* (the elect remnant of true believers). Israel as a nation was an elect nation. God chose Israel over every other nation and people to bestow his love on.

But as we know, that within that elect nation, within that redeemed nation, there were those who were truly redeemed, and there were those who did not embrace the covenant that God made with them in truth. They were, as Paul says in Romans 2, circumcised in the foreskin of their bodies, but not in the foreskin of the heart (Rom. 2:28-29). A Jew could be a Jew outwardly, with all the identifying markers of what it means to be a Jew and to be in covenant with God (circumcision, Sabbath keeping, food laws, clothing regulations, the sacrifices, the feasts, etc.), and yet, if they did not have within their heart a true love for God and faith in him, they were not a *true Jew*.

So, there is then what we can call an External Covenant people and an Internal Covenant people. God called the whole nation to be His People (External). And there is within that Covenant, an Internal Covenant people. Not everyone who is in the External Covenant is in the Internal Covenant. Only those who truly have faith and love for God are in the Internal Covenant.

In Reformed Theology, it has been traditional to speak only of those who are in the Internal Covenant as “Elect.” They are the ones whom God had Predestined to eternal life. They are the ones whom Jesus died to save. They are the ones the Spirit

regenerates. They are the ones who will persevere to the end. In the Calvinistic system of Salvation, ONLY those are understood to be “Elect.”

However, in the Bible, God and Jesus and the Apostles do not speak *only* to those who are in the Internal Covenant, to those who are True Believers, to those who are Calvinistically Elect about the salvation and the redemption that Jesus accomplished. They speak to everyone who is in the External Covenant as though the promises *and* the responsibilities *and* the warnings of not believing are equally applied to them all – regardless of whether or not they were Elect and Predestined to eternal life in the Calvinistic sense.

For if the Bible only referred to the Calvinistically Elect as having the promises of salvation, then the warnings about the danger of falling away and apostatizing would be hypothetical, and the force of those warnings would be lost. What good would it do to tell a person who believed in Jesus that they need to make sure they continue to believe in Jesus and not fall away, if indeed they were decreetally elect and in the internal covenant and could never fall away? If we are to understand the way the Bible speaks, then we need to allow the Bible to define our theological categories for us, and not let our theological categories force the Bible to say what we think it ought to say.

An example of the Bible talking to those who are in Covenant with God and yet who are in danger of falling away from God is Hebrews 10.

*²⁶ For if we go on sinning willfully **after receiving the knowledge of the truth**, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, ²⁷ but a terrifying expectation of judgment and THE FURY OF A FIRE WHICH WILL CONSUME THE ADVERSARIES. ²⁸ Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. ²⁹ How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve **who has trampled under foot the Son of God**, and has regarded as unclean **the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified**, and **has insulted the Spirit of grace**? ³⁰ For we know Him who said, “VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY.” And again, “**THE LORD WILL JUDGE HIS PEOPLE.**” ³¹ It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.*

A person who is in covenant with God, had received the knowledge of the truth, could willfully sin in such a way that there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins for them. But instead, judgment. They are those who were sanctified (made holy, set apart) by the blood of the covenant, but they trample the Son of God underfoot and insult the Spirit of Grace. These are **God's People**, and the Lord will judge **His people** who do such things.

To say that those who fall away from the faith were not "Elect," or to say, they never "truly believed," or, they were never really "in Covenant" with God, or "they were not "regenerated," or they had not really received the knowledge of the truth, does not help us when interpreting this passage, and many other passages.

God has a people, who have been sanctified by the blood of the covenant, who have received the knowledge of the truth, who have been enlightened, who have tasted of the heavenly gifts, etc. and among whom there will be those who *draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, there will be those whose hearts are sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and their bodies washed with pure water. There are those who will hold fast the confession of their hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful; there are those who will love and do good deeds, and who will not forsake assembling together* (Heb. 10:22-25). And there will be those of God's people who will NOT do those things. They will fall away. And notice, they are called, "His People" (Heb. 10:30).

If only those who were Calvinistically and Decreetally Elect were "His People" then Hebrews 10 makes no sense whatsoever.

We need to understand that there is overlap in language and terminology between those who are in the Internal Covenant, and those who are in the External Covenant. Once we understand how the Bible uses language about God's Covenant People, then we can also understand how Jesus can die for a people, and yet there be those among those people for whom Jesus died, that ultimately rebel and fall away.

This is how Peter can say that there will be false teachers who bring in destructive heresies, who even deny the Master who *bought* them (2 Peter 2:1).

According to an online Bible Dictionary (Biblehub.com) The word “bought” is the Greek word *agorázō* (from *agorá*, "the ancient marketplace, town-center") – properly, to make *purchases* in the marketplace ("*agora*"), i.e. as *ownership* transfers from seller to buyer. ("acquire by purchasing") stresses *transfer* – i.e. where something becomes *another's belonging (possession)*. In salvation-contexts, (*agorázō*) is *not* redeeming ("buying back"), but rather focuses on how the believer now *belongs to the Lord as His unique possession* (J. Thayer). Indeed, Christ purchases all the privileges and responsibilities that go with *belonging to Him (being in Christ)*.

So yes, a person can “belong to Jesus,” be “in Christ,” be “in covenant,” be “a branch” connected to the vine and olive tree, have been “washed by the Spirit” and “enlightened” in baptism, have “tasted of the heavenly gift” of the Lord’s Supper, they can have all the benefits and blessings of salvation available to them because of the nature of their status as Covenant people and because of the gifts of God made available to the in that Covenant, and yet they can still reject that grace.

To restrict a person therefore from the sacramental means of grace because we are not certain if they are truly regenerated or truly elect, would be to then cut off every single person in the Church, because no one knows who is truly regenerated, and truly decreetally elect in the Internal Covenant Calvinistic sense. That sort of knowledge is not made available to us - at least not while we still live in this body on earth. We need to wait until we die to know those things for certain.

But this does not mean we lack assurance of our salvation. As GK Chesterton said in his book *Orthodoxy*, “*A man was meant to be doubtful about himself, but undoubting about the truth.*” The great thing about the New Covenant is that it is enacted on better promises than the Old Covenant. It actually has the power to accomplish what the Old Covenant couldn’t. Some people think that the difference between the Old and the New Covenant is the change from Corporate Covenant to Individual Covenant. But that is not it at all. The change in the Covenant’s has to do with the efficacy of the Covenant, as well as from Jew to Jew and Gentile.

Listen to the Truth of God’s Word about the New Covenant that Chesterton tells us we are not to doubt:

³¹ “Behold, days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, ³² not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, **My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them,**” declares the LORD. ³³ “But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the LORD, **“I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.** ³⁴ They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ **for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,**” declares the LORD, **“for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.”** Jeremiah 31:31-34

The covenant that God with Israel when they came out of Egypt, is a covenant which is characterized as a broken covenant, though God was their Husband. The new covenant that God will make with Israel will be characterized as one which will be kept, for God make them keep it. He will put His law within them, and write it on their heart, and therefore they will all know the Lord, from the least to the greatest (that includes children and adults), and he will forgive their sins.

Likewise, Jeremiah again says,

³⁷ Behold, I will gather them out of all the lands to which I have driven them in My anger, in My wrath and in great indignation; and I will bring them back to this place and make them dwell in safety. ³⁸ They shall be **My people, and I will be their God;** ³⁹ **and I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear Me always, for their own good and for the good of their children after them.** ⁴⁰ **I will make an everlasting covenant with them that I will not turn away from them, to do them good; and I will put the fear of Me in their hearts so that they will not turn away from Me.** ⁴¹ I will rejoice over them to do them good and will faithfully plant them in this land with all My heart and with all My soul. ⁴² For thus says the LORD, ‘Just as I brought all this

great disaster on this people, so I am going to bring on them all the good that I am promising them. – Jeremiah 32:37-42

Notice the good things that God promises to do. And notice who the Lord includes in those promises to do good to – the children!

Likewise, listen to the truth which Ezekiel proclaims:

*²³ They will no longer defile themselves with their idols, or with their detestable things, or with any of their transgressions; but I will deliver them from all their dwelling places in which they have sinned, **and will cleanse them.** And they will be **My people, and I will be their God.***
*²⁴ “**My servant David will be king over them, and they will all have one shepherd; and they will walk in My ordinances and keep My statutes and observe them.** ²⁵ They will live on the land that I gave to Jacob My servant, in which your fathers lived; and they will live on it, they, **and their children and their children’s children, forever; and David My servant will be their prince forever.** ²⁶ I will make a **covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant with them.** And I will place them and multiply them, **and will set My sanctuary in their midst forever.** ²⁷ My dwelling place also will be with them; **and I will be their God, and they will be My people.** ²⁸ And the nations will know that I am the **LORD who sanctifies Israel, when My sanctuary is in their midst forever.”**”*

All of these promises are given to Israel and their children and their children’s children. We are to expect that the New Covenant is a Covenant in which the vast majority of God’s people, including the children, will believe and walk in God’s ways, for David (Jesus) will be their King and His temple will be in their midst, which means, His Spirit is within them (2 Cor. 6:16-18).

If God makes these promises, then we are to believe them! That is what it means to be a believer – obviously. It is not consistent with a profession of belief to disbelieve the promises of God. So as believers in the New Covenant we believe that what God says He will do, He will do, for all those whom he says He will do it for.

The Old Covenant was characterized by unbelief and judgment, the New Covenant is characterized by belief and blessing. We are to assume that God will keep his Covenant Promises to bless us and our children. However, we also are to understand that that comes about by way of faithfulness on our part, a perseverance which God promises to give.

If we fall away from God's glorious covenant promises, it does not mean that God has failed. It mean we have failed. *"What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? By no means! Let God be True and every man a liar"* (Romans 3:3-4). We are liars because we brake our covenant vow to be faithful.

God's faithfulness to His promises is not compromised however because there are those who break their vow and oath and do not believe, because God promises are made sure for His Elect, in the Calvinistic Decretal Election, sense. For this is Paul's argument in Romans 9 –

*...⁴ who are Israelites, to whom belongs the adoption as sons, and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and **the promises**,⁵ whose are the fathers, and from whom is the Christ according to the flesh, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.*

*⁶But it is not as though the word of God has failed. For they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel;⁷ nor are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants, but: "THROUGH ISAAC YOUR DESCENDANTS WILL BE NAMED."⁸ That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the **children of the promise** are regarded as descendants."*

So, again, there are promises, as in v. 4, which are for all the people of God; and there are *promises*, as in v. 8, which are made effectual only to the decretally elect. There are promises given to all the children of God in the external covenant, and there are *promises* given to the *true children of God in the internal covenant*.

And what we need to say is, those promises to both groups are the same promises. They will sound the same to both groups. But the fulfillment of those promises is only made effectual for the decreetally elect. And just because there are those in the external covenant who do not believe those promises, does not mean God is a liar for not making them effectual to them. For those who are true children of God will believe those promises, because God chose them to believe. God will have mercy on whom He will have mercy, and He will have compassion on whom He will have compassion. But when we consider who is at fault for the non-elect not believing, it is not God. For what does Paul say in Romans 11

*¹⁹ You will say then, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." ²⁰ Quite right, **they were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand by your faith.** Do not be conceited, but fear; ²¹ for if God did not spare the natural branches, He will not spare you, either. ²² Behold then the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell, severity, but to you, God's kindness, **if you continue in His kindness**; otherwise you also will be cut off. ²³ And they also, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God is able to graft them in again.*

You stand by your faith...If you continue in His kindness! You see, out of the same apostle comes the teaching about God's promises to God's decreetally elect people, and the responsibility to persevere in faith in those promises. The doctrine of Decretal Calvinistic Election is always given in the context of the necessity of perseverance. Because, though God knows those who are truly His, we do not. We need to make our calling and election sure (2 Peter 1:10).

So with that, is it acceptable and appropriate and biblical to use the language of salvation for those who are not actually decreetally elect and in the internal covenant? Yes. We can say that a person has been washed from his sins, he partakes of the heavenly gift, he has been sanctified and made holy, he has been bought and belongs to the Master, he has been given promises, Jesus is his king, he is the temple of the Holy Spirit, he is a child of God, and all of the rest.

Why? Because we know the secret decree of God for whether that person is truly elect? No. Because God gives his promises to all His Covenantal People (External and Internal, Israel and *Israel*) and it is through the preaching of the word of God and the administration of the sacraments that the Holy Spirit makes those promises truly effectual to those who are the Truly Elect. But that part is God's business, not ours. Ours is to continue in His kindness towards us, to make our calling and election sure, to work out our salvation with fear and trembling, and to believe what God has spoken to us.

It is because of the promises of God that baptize our children, because we believe God's promise to them. That is why we bring our children to the Lord's Table, because of God's promise to them. Reformed Theology is Covenant Theology, which is just another way of saying Promise Theology. God makes promises and we must continue in His promises by faith. That is the nature of the Covenant.