

One Covenant – One World in Christ

From the series: The One Covenant of Grace – The Salvation of the World

Text: Genesis 17:7; Ephesians 1:1-10; 4: 4-6

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan

World Wide Communion Sunday, October 4, 1987

Transcription of the spoken sermon

The story of human salvation begins in the barren womb of a ninety-year-old woman. Hidden in the closing paragraph of Genesis 11 just prior to the call of Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3 is the seemingly insignificant piece of trivia. There we read, "Sarai was barren; she had no child." The biblical writer did not by accident add that little piece of information. The barrenness of Sarah's womb was an eloquent sign of the barrenness of the human situation - a situation of alienation, guilt, fear and hopelessness - indeed, a situation whose remedy alone could be the intervention of God, Creator, new to become Redeemer, Saviour. Now the story of salvation begins, a story of grace embracing the aged couple, entering into a covenant relationship with Abraham to whom would be born the miracle child, Isaac, the gift of the God Who promised, "Your descendants shall be as numerous as the stars in the sky."

Today around the world Christians will gather around the Table of our Lord witnessing to their faith in God through Jesus Christ and, whether in the awesome beauty of St. Peter's in Rome or a gathering in someone's family room, they will be witnessing to their unity in Christ and will thereby be counted as Abraham's seed.

As we celebrate Holy Communion with the whole Church throughout the world, I want to introduce a theme we will be discussing for the next few weeks - the theme of "The One Covenant of Grace - The Salvation of the World." It is my purpose to unfold the historical track of God's saving action – from the inauguration of the Covenant of Grace with Abraham through the history of Israel, the event of Jesus Christ to the continuation of that Covenant in the Christian Church – indeed, to the present experience which is ours as Christ Community.

There is only one story of the Bible; it is the story of the gracious God working within the stream of history for the salvation of the human family and the realization of His eternal plan and purpose in the realization of God's Kingdom.

Paul witnessed to that eternal plan and purpose in that beautiful statement of God's cosmic purpose in Ephesians 1:9-10. Paul was amazed that he should have been given insight into God's hidden purpose now revealed in Jesus Christ. What was God's long-held secret?

The secret was a purpose which He formed in His own mind before time began so that the periods of time should be controlled and administered until they reached their full development, a development in which all things, in heaven and upon earth, are gathered into one in Jesus Christ.

That is an amazing claim; there one has a statement of eternal dimension and cosmic scope. Paul understood in the revelation given him by Jesus Christ what God intended eternally and what God was working out historically - a salvation of cosmic scope.

How was that eternal plan being effected within history? The answer is the one Covenant of Grace. Beginning in barrenness, God called Abraham to inaugurate the process. Now God would choose one to reach many; now God would make a particular choice with a universal intent. God gave Himself to Abraham in a binding covenantal relationship to which God pledged His faithfulness and steadfastness. The formal covenant statement appears in Genesis 17:7.

I will fulfill my covenant between myself and you and your descendants after you, generation after generation, an everlasting covenant, to be your God, yours and your descendants' after you.

That was God's strategy: Covenant relationship, a Covenant of Grace. God began small; one man, one woman, one family. From Abraham and Sarah came Isaac and then Jacob and then the twelve sons of Jacob whose name was changed to Israel. The twelve sons became the twelve tribes, the nation, and from the people of Israel issued Jesus in the wake of whose resurrection and ascension the Spirit of Jesus was given in full measure creating the Church. It is one line, the unfolding of the one Covenant of Grace.

Covenant is a rich biblical word. The Hebrew word is *berith*. The Greek word used to translate it in the Greek Old Testament translation is *diatheke*. There is a long, much debated discussion on the origin and meaning of these terms, but it is clear that the meaning of *berith* must be determined by its scriptural usage. That being the case, we are faced with the fact that the Greek and English translations do not in themselves adequately convey the Hebrew usage. Thus to translate *berith* by covenant is not enough, for this is no ordinary human agreement or contract involving mutuality and reciprocity. As John Milton writes in *God's Covenant of Blessing*:

The religious *berith* is in one sense unilateral: it is God alone who initiates the covenant always. It is intended to become a mutual agreement, and

does so become, by the response of man to it; but in its origin the *berith* is unilateral: it is God's covenant with man. (p. 5)

He adds,

The direction of the covenant is from God to man. The covenant originates with Him; He speaks the words: He lays down the conditions; it is His covenant, which takes on the aspect of mutuality when the people respond by accepting the terms and by promising to be obedient. (p. 6)

God takes the initiative; the Covenant is God's binding of Himself to the human person, the human family. It is not a necessary arrangement; it is a gracious arrangement initiated, ratified and guaranteed by the faithfulness of God. The human person is called to respond, to trust, to obey, to act faithfully toward the Covenant God. But God is the ground and guarantor of the relationship.

That, then, is God's strategy - to enter into a gracious, personal relationship with a person, a family, a nation, a people, having thereby an instrument by which to reach the whole world.

That God makes a covenant with men, whether it be with an individual or with a community of individuals, is the same as to say that he acts in relation to them with gracious purpose; that he seeks fellowship with them and offers fellowship to them; and not least, that he calls them into a holy partnership of service in relation to other men. The covenant is a way of interpreting history which recognizes the presence and activity of God in the historical process; which believes that God has set a goal for human history, and has given to men whom he has called a divine mission relevant to that goal ... God reveals himself in the making and keeping of covenant; the covenant which from the beginning had as its gracious purpose and goal the salvation of the world, a redeemed humanity, a people for God's own possession, a holy nation, (p. 15F)

Thus, in the strategy of calling a particular people, God has always had as a goal the salvation of the whole world.

Today the Christian Church which through Jesus Christ (Abraham's Seed) has entered into the Covenant Community witnesses to its recognition that it is essentially one body. Paul had no doubt about the oneness of the Church and in his Ephesian letter gives a moving call to

Spare no effort to make fast with bonds of peace the unity which the Spirit gives.

For, he goes on,

There is one body and one Spirit, as there is also one hope held out in God's call to you; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 4:3-6)

From the one gracious God issues the one covenant of grace, which creates one redeemed people, called to witness to the whole world until God's eternal purpose of salvation is realized.

Let me set four fundamental biblical words before you as you gather before this Table of our one Lord.

The first is predestination. How many specters does not that heavily freighted word conjure up! But, reflect for a moment; is not that precisely what Paul is pointing to in Ephesians 1:9-10?

The secret was a purpose which he formed in his own mind before time began...in which all things, in heaven and upon earth, are gathered into one in Jesus Christ.

That is a "Wow!" statement. Predestination points to God's eternal intention to effect salvation on a cosmic scale - a renewed heaven, a renewed earth, a renewed humanity.

The second word is *election*. That word, too, has been so disastrously abused, the source of religious pride and arrogant self-righteousness. But to what does it refer? To God's choice and call of a family, a nation, a people to be His special community for the bringing of light and salvation to all people. Election is not the choice of some to the exclusion of the rest, but the choice of some on behalf of the rest.

The third word is *covenant*. That word speaks of that gracious, personal relationship to which God gives Himself, in which He binds Himself to a people, whom He has called, chosen, to mediate His grace to the world; a people He loves, nurtures and faithfully preserves, having redeemed them and commissioned them to be His special people through which to reach the world.

The fourth word is *mission*. The eternal plan and purpose of God - God's pre-decision to be gracious, to redeem the world; God's election of a people to be the instrument of that gracious salvation; God's initiation of a binding covenant relationship with that chosen people - all of that has the end and goal in mind that the world might be saved. The salvation of the world is God's intention and the election of a Covenant Community is for the purpose of mission to the world.

Again - God chooses some, not to the exclusion of the rest, but on behalf of the rest.

Before us is set the Table of our Lord Jesus Christ. On the Table are bread and wine, signs of his body and blood, broken and poured out for the life of the world. In the bread and wine we are reminded,

In Eternity God determined to create and redeem the world; in the course of history He called a people upon whom from eternity He had set His love. With that people, He entered into a binding relationship initiated by Himself - a covenant relationship - in order that that people might be the means by which light and salvation will be brought to the world.

How ought we respond to such an amazing scenario?

Would it not be the only appropriate response to stand before God with wonder and awe? Should not being chosen fill us with amazement, humility and gratitude? And particularly - must we not be in solidarity with all sisters and brothers of the faith - for there is one Body, one Spirit, one hope, one faith, one baptism, one Lord, one God and Father of us all - and in solidarity with the whole world which seeing our unity, will see a sign of the unity of the Father and the Son - the love of God for the whole world? None other than Jesus prayed for such unity that the world may know...

*... may they all be one. ... that the world may believe ...
Then the, world will learn that thou didst send me, that thou didst
love them... John 17:20-23*

One day the whole world will know. The universal scope evident with the initial giving of the Covenant to Abraham will be realized.

I heard a loud voice proclaiming from the throne: "Now at last God has his dwelling among men! He will dwell among them and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be an end to death, and to mourning and crying and pain; for the old order has passed away! Revelation 21:3-4

Amen and Amen!