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GOD'S COVENANTS ARE CONDITIONAL

by G. H. LANG

IT is a good thing for those of us who have been habituated to the Reformed understanding of the ways of God with men to have our ideas challenged from time to time, especially when the challenge is presented from Scriptural premisses. Last year we published an article by Mr. E. H. Trenchard which aimed at presenting such a challenge in the realm of "Grace, Covenant and Law". Now the veteran expositor Mr. G. H. Lang, stimulated (as is fairly clear) by Mr. Trenchard's article, challenges our thinking in the same realm from another point of view. That God's covenants are conditional will be readily agreed if by that it is meant (as it is in the following article) that God, in making a covenant, may impose conditions. What cannot be entertained is the idea that God, in making a covenant, is in any way subject to conditions—apart, of course, from those which are bound up with His own character, since it is impossible for God to deny Himself. For this reason God's grace is described as free and sovereign, since it is answerable to no authority save His own. However, let Mr. Lang speak for himself.

IT IS important that it be stressed that God's covenant with Abraham is the continuous channel of grace in all ages, and that the Sinaitic covenant and law were interim and provisional. Upon this I enlarged in the recent third edition of my paper *The Gospel of the Kingdom* (44, sect. 4). It is important to maintain as a basic principle that

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree: that upon the Gentiles might come the blessings of Abraham in Christ Jesus; that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. Brethren, I speak after the manner of men: Though it be but a man's covenant, yet when it hath been confirmed, no one maketh it void, or addeth thereto (Gal. 3: 13-15).

This reception of the Holy Spirit by faith introduces the believer to the Christian position and relieves him from relationship to the law, as regards salvation. But it has been urged that when a believer fails to walk by the Spirit but returns to the fleshly life, it

is still not proper to apply the law to him. His recovery must be only by grace through the Spirit. This needs to be tested—by Scripture.

It was Paul's own "little children", believers who had received the spirit of sonship (Gal. 4: 19, 6; 3: 2), that he warns against the possibility that such may "fall away from grace" (5: 4). The Greek says "fall out of grace" (τῆς χάριτος ἐξείσατε). That is, there is a higher moral realm where God deals with us in Christ on the principle of grace; there is a lower moral realm where He deals on the principle of law. It is possible to lapse from the former into the latter. What then? Then surely such Scriptures apply as James 2: 13, "judgment is without mercy to him that has shewed no mercy". This is what the Lord taught to Peter in the parable of the slave who had been freely and fully forgiven all his debt but did not remit the small debt of his fellow-slave. He was thereupon himself delivered to the officers of justice till he should pay all the debt which had formerly been remitted. "So shall also my heavenly Father do unto you, if ye forgive not every one his brother from your hearts" (Matt. 18: 21-35). This parable is expounded at length in ch. xiv of my *Pictures and Parables*. It is enough here to note that by his base conduct the slave fell out of the realm of grace into that of law. It was no question here of an enemy of the king being executed; but of the way the heavenly Father will deal with brothers in His family if they cease themselves to walk in grace and enforce law against one another. They do not forfeit their eternal life received by the new birth, but they invoke law against themselves in practical present experience.

Paul, the chief exponent of grace, several times appeals to the law as bearing upon Christian conduct (1 Cor. 9: 8-10; 14: 21, 34). He also warns believers, again his own spiritual children, against such a sin as defiling another's wife, by urging that "the Lord is an avenger in all these things, as also we forewarned you and testified" (1 Thess. 4: 1-8). Here expressly he is writing upon the matter of the Christian's walk and sanctification and he appeals to the fact that God is the executor of His own law and avenges transgression. His closing words quoted reveal that such teaching was regular and urgent. He who would reject this warning as to breaking the law must be ready to forego the blessings attached to keeping the law; yet Paul reminds Christian children that a promise of blessing is attached to keeping the commandment to honour one's parents (Eph. 6: 1-3).

Certainly the higher appeal and motive for holiness are found

in what grace has provided in Christ; but should the child of God suffer his heart to be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin (Heb. 3: 13), he compels the holy God his Father to deal with him according to law; for while it is true "that law is not made for the righteous" it is equally true that it *is* made "for the lawless and unruly" (1 Tim. 1: 8-11). This is the truth that balances the truth of grace in Christ.

The question is not as to the principle upon which the unregenerate can obtain justification and eternal life; in this case it must be by grace solely: but it is the question of how one of the royal family shall be dealt with should he defy the laws of the kingdom; and the answer is that he is amenable to the law like the rest of the King's subjects. The utmost extension of the grace of God does not admit that one of His redeemed children shall steal yet be protected from the criminal law. On the contrary, the Lord is Himself an avenger in all such things. It is the principle upon which God said to Israel that if the people of the land condoned an idolater, He would Himself execute the law against that man (Lev. 20: 4, 5). God, for Christ's sake, remitted the *capital* penalty to which David had exposed himself by adultery and murder, but He Himself avenged on David the wrongs done (2 Sam. 12: 9-14). Paul says He still does this.

It is very important that grace be maintained as against law in the initial matter of how a sinner shall gain access into a state of favour with God (Rom. 5: 1, 2): it is equally important to recognize that even in this, as well as later in the Christian life, grace is not an attribute in God isolated from His other attributes and free to act independently. When used to convey this last idea the common term "sovereign grace" is seriously misleading. "Grace *and truth* came through Jesus Christ" (John 1: 17): grace is indeed a regnant principle, but its sovereignty is not arbitrary and unconditioned; it "*reigns through righteousness*" (Rom. 5: 21). It does not override the other attributes of God. This raises the question whether the covenant of God with Abraham, while wholly of grace, was entirely without conditions, and therefore operates without regard to law or requiring anything from man. Can this be maintained theologically or scripturally? It is held by many, but is it warranted? In such a theory what room is found for such warnings as "receive not the grace of God *in vain*" (2 Cor. 6: 1); "look carefully lest there be any man that *falleth short* of the grace of God" (Heb. 12: 15); or doing "*despite* unto the Spirit of grace" (Heb. 10: 29)?

The idea is based upon a prior conception of God. It is allowed that in various matters God descends to human frailty and adjusts His ways accordingly, but in the instance of the covenant with Abraham this school of thought pictures to itself God as retiring into the lofty realm of His own sovereignty and there deciding that He will engage Himself to Abraham, and his descendants, by mighty promises which He will undertake to fulfil without requiring anything of Abraham. The covenant shall be on the principle of sovereign grace and therefore subject to no conditions that Abraham must fulfil. As this covenant is held to be the basis for ever of all God's dealings with Abraham and his seed, the logical consequence is drawn that, of course, law can never enter into God's dealings with the partakers in this covenant. Therefore, not only is salvation from hell received by grace without law, but every subsequent development in the believer is equally a guaranteed gift of unconditional grace, right on to his sharing the glory of God with the Son of God in the heavenly realm of God's kingdom.

Is there not here a supreme example of what I have elsewhere styled the danger of the subjective test? Is not this a merely human and subjective conception of God? Is it possible for the very Fountain of morality to enter into any engagement with any moral being to bless him in disregard of his moral state and his response to God? If this could be done, why should not God enter into covenant with Satan equally with Abraham, and bless *him* unconditionally? Would not His universal benevolence impel Him to this were it possible? But can God engage Himself to bless in spite of unbelief and disobedience?

Moslem theology has a similar conception of God as absolute. If today He rules that a certain act is wrong, that makes it wrong; if tomorrow He rules that the same act is right, this makes it right: in other words God can disregard morality.

Both ideas are contrary to the essential feature of Deity that God is restricted by the laws of His own being and nature: there are things He cannot do: "it is impossible for God to lie . . . He cannot deny Himself" (Heb. 6: 18; 2 Tim. 2: 13). But this is exactly what He would do; He would deny Himself as the Source of morality if He promised to bless any moral being irrespective of morality. It is true that only God can produce in a corrupted creature the moral state He can own, and therefore its presence is a gift and working of grace, *but it must be there*.

Moreover, theologians may forget what lawyers keep in mind, even that there are *implied* conditions, as well as declared conditions. Relations between intelligent and moral beings involve certain *inherent* conditions, which because they are constant factors are to be ever taken for granted. A prospective tenant may wish a clause to be inserted in the agreement that the premises shall be handed over by the landlord in a habitable state, but his lawyer will tell him that there is no need for this clause because in law the point is taken for granted; it is an *implied* condition of an agreement to let; and he may add that the Courts have ruled that, where in fact the premises were proved to be not habitable, the tenant was absolved from the agreement.

When God saw fit to create intelligent beings He assumed as Creator certain responsibilities toward them. For example, when He chose to create man to dwell on this earth there was an implied condition that He would as Creator maintain the atmosphere in that chemical balance necessary to enable man to live here as God had thought good to order. On the other hand there was implied the condition that the creature should maintain that loyalty to the Creator which properly belonged to the relationship between them, and on this would depend his natural right to the care of his Creator. This relationship and condition because it is inherent is permanent and basic; it cannot be set aside and must be taken as operating when God entered into covenant with Abraham or any other moral being. Therefore there cannot be any covenant which is strictly unconditional. It would be contrary to morality and public policy.

The argument to the contrary breaks down at its initial stage. It has been urged that a divine covenant is essentially unilateral and unconditional, so that the required attitude on the part of the recipient of the guarantee is not to be construed as an obligation which conditions the covenant but "simply the reciprocal responses of faith, love and obedience, apart from which the enjoyment of the covenant blessing and of the covenant relation is inconceivable." In other words, in a covenant of grace God alone works, promises, guarantees, and provides in His sovereignty, while the man of faith submits himself to receive the unmerited favour. Repentance and faith are not contributions, but simply the essential conditions for the reception of what is wholly God's in inception, operation and provision.

As the covenant relation is inconceivable without faith, love and obedience, then surely these qualities are conditions of the

covenant: therefore the writer quoted himself rightly added that repentance and faith are "the *essential conditions* [my italics] for the reception of what is wholly God's in inception, operation and provision". But is not this the contradiction of the argument that the covenant is free of conditions? It is most certainly true that man *contributes* nothing to the *benefits* provided by the covenant: all is of God and of grace. Just is the statement that "for a sinner anything out of hell is a mercy". But that man shall acquire benefits under the promise of God is *conditioned* by his repentance, faith, love, and obedience, and therefore the covenant is not free of conditions, and cannot be so.

It is a radical error in thought that grace cannot impose conditions and remain grace. John Bampton bequeathed money to found at Oxford the Lectures that bear his name. This was grace, for he was under no obligation to do so; nor was his grace impaired by his wisdom being displayed in attaching the condition that the Lecturers must have taken at least the degree of Master of Arts, so as to secure a certain standard of learning; with the further condition that the Lecturer should not be paid until he had printed the Lectures, so securing permanency to the instruction given. Cases have been known where one has bequeathed property to a legatee with no natural or other claim to it, so that it was a gift of grace; yet the conditions have been attached that the legatee shall reside on the estate and shall take the name of the testator. Such conditions for the enjoyment of the benefit do not lessen the fact that the bequest was an act of grace.

It has been suggested that in the New Testament "covenant" carries the idea of there being no conditions because the term διαθήκη is used and not συθήκη. The former means firstly a will or testament, in which only one party acts; the latter is more strictly a contract, by which two parties are bound. As regards the point of conditions being involved, the argument is nullified by the fact just mentioned, that frequently conditions are imposed in wills, not only in contracts; and also by the implied condition that the legatee shall accept the gift. Thus a will presupposes action by both testator and legatee: it is not a one-sided affair.

The inspired histories of God's ways confirm these basic principles.

1. The first recorded covenant is that made by God directly after the Flood (Gen. 9: 8-17). This is the one unconditional covenant on record, but it was made with *non-moral* and *non-*

intelligent creatures equally with Noah and his family ; that is, birds, cattle, and wild animals are included—this is specified five times. If conditions had been attached it would have followed that, when mankind failed to fulfil these, the covenant would have been nullified as regards the lower creatures also. Therefore this covenant was of necessity free of conditions, so that all its subjects should benefit. But no unconditional covenant is recorded with intelligent and moral beings. This is clear from the text and principal covenant, that with Abraham.

2. Abraham being an idolater, the proposal that he should be the channel of God's purpose to recover and bless all the families of the earth was an overture of grace on the part of God. Yet the Source of all wisdom cannot act without reason for His action. Hence God's wisdom must have co-operated with His grace in choosing for His purpose this particular idolater instead of some other idolater. Hence grace did not act in isolation but was influenced by wisdom. A little later God reveals that He foresaw that Abraham would respond to His grace. Thus it is those whom God foreknows that He foreordains to some particular position and service (Rom. 8: 28-30), and grace is guided, not arbitrary.

It was in fulfilment of the first purpose and promise made by God to Abraham that all later promises and covenants were made. The later, being but a development of the earlier, conformed to the latter, which first and basic promise was conditional. Abraham was required to forsake his country and kindred. Until he had taken the former step God did nothing in fulfilment of His promise. The second appearance of God to Abraham was in the land of promise (Gen. 12: 1-3, 6, 7). The third approach by God, with enlargement of the promise, was after the second condition had been fulfilled by Abraham, "after that Lot had separated from him" at Abraham's suggestion (Gen. 13: 14-17).

3. In ch. 15 is the record of the first express *covenant* of God with Abraham. It is of special importance that Abraham had acquired righteousness by faith, that is, was accounted a righteous person, *before* God spoke of elevating His promise to the status of a covenant. Verse 6 precedes verse 18. Sovereigns do not make covenants with rebels. They may make promises to them, always upon the condition of submission ; but only after resumption of loyalty and obedience can the king enter into binding relations with the subject.

All theologians to the contrary notwithstanding, let there be adduced a passage of Scripture which includes pardon and justifi-

cation among *covenanted* privileges. Scripture speaks with divine exactness to show that covenants *follow* justification. It was to Abraham already justified that God proposed the covenant. It was with a people already redeemed and set free that the covenant at Sinai was made. Rom. 11: 26 f., speaking of Israel's future restoration to favour, says explicitly: "And this is the covenant from Me to them, when *I shall have taken away* their sins" (*aphelōmai*, aor. conj.; so Variorum, Darby). First the sins taken away, then the covenant. Justification and eternal life are free gifts without stipulations attached: "being justified freely (*δωρεάν*) by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus . . . the free gift (*χάρισμα*) of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 3: 24; 6: 23). They are free benefits offered by the Sovereign to rebels upon condition of due submission; they are not matters of a *covenant* between King and subject.

This covenant of God with Abraham was the emphasizing of His promise to give him the promised land (Gen. 15: 18-21). Its terms were limited to this earthly grant, nor is there basis in this declaration for extending it to things heavenly. It was a covenant ratified by sacrifice and it was not one-sided; there was not only a divine side but also a human side; for it was Abraham's part to prepare and guard the victims, so consenting to enter a covenant based upon atonement; which sacrifices God, on His part, accepted as ratifying the covenant, shown by the flaming torch which passed between the pieces of the victims (see Jer. 34: 18).

4. This covenant, still limited to earthly privileges, was reaffirmed by God (Gen. 17: 1-14), and declared to be everlasting, that is, of perpetual validity; and a condition was imposed upon which each individual of Abraham's earthly descendants could obtain a share in its benefits; that is, circumcision. It was further declared that succession to the covenant should be through Isaac, not Ishmael (20, 21); that is, not all circumcised descendants of Abraham are heirs, but only those through Isaac.

5. In ch. 18: 17-19 there is the unique and touching scene of God, in human form, walking and talking with Abraham and *soliloquizing*, talking to Himself about His friend. He could not hide from Abraham what He was about to do, seeing the place Abraham had been given in His counsel and purpose that all the nations of the earth shall be blessed. Thus the matter moving the action of God toward Abraham was still based upon the original promise made on the first occasion that God had approached

him; and even as that promise was conditional upon obedience of faith on the part of Abraham, so here Jehovah said: "For I have known him, *to the end* that he may command his children and his household after him, that they may keep the way of Jehovah, to do justice and judgment; *to the end* that Jehovah may bring upon Abraham that which He hath spoken of him." Thus it was God's way that God's end should be reached by a certain line of life on the part of Abraham and his family. Their after history to this present time reveals that only when and as far as Abraham's descendants have so walked in the way of Jehovah has He, on His side, been able to further His end with and for them. That is, the covenant requires a right moral state in its subjects or it is not fulfilled by God.

6. Ch. 22 narrates the supreme test of Abraham by God, and the supreme response of faith and obedience on the part of Abraham, in the offering up of Isaac. It was on this occasion that the promise was confirmed by the oath of God, "that by two immutable things [promise and oath], in which it is impossible for God to lie" (Heb. 6: 13-20), both Abraham and all his spiritual descendants may have strong encouragement to walk in faith and obedience. The ground and terms of this divine oath are plain and impressive; they go beyond possession of the land, which was the limit in chs. 15 and 17, and repeat the full promise of the original undertaking in ch. 12: 1-3. It is shown with unavoidable clarity that the promise was conditional:

By myself have I sworn, saith Jehovah, *because thou hast done this thing*, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son, that in blessing I will bless thee . . . and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed; *because thou hast obeyed My voice* (16-18).

Had the promises of the covenant been absolutely unconditional, a simple fiat of God without respect to the parties concerned, it could not have been afterward said that God would fulfil them *because* Abraham had done certain things.

7. Finally, when after Abraham's death God confirmed this covenant to Isaac He said (Gen. 26: 2-6):

I will establish the oath which I swear unto Abraham thy father; and I will multiply thy seed as the stars of heaven, and will give unto thy seed all these lands; and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; *because that Abraham obeyed My voice*, and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes, and My laws.¹

¹ Cf. the following words from an article on "Modern Dispensationalism and the Law of God", by Professor O. T. Allis (THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY, July, 1936, pp. 272 ff.): "We come now to what may not inaptly

That even a sworn promise of God is to be deemed conditional is shown in Numbers 14. God had sworn to that generation that came out of Egypt that He would bring them into the land as He had sworn unto their fathers ; but on account of their faithlessness and stubbornness He had now to say that He would *not* take them in, though He had "lifted up His hand", that is, had taken oath to do so. "Ye shall know My alienation", or (as Darby), "My estrangement", or (as R.V. margin) "the revoking of My promise" (ver. 34). So fully are divine promises conditional. That the sworn promise to their fathers was thus revocable against the distrustful and rebellious shows conclusively that the covenant with Abraham was conditional. This whole most solemn incident in Israel's history shows that God never entered into an engagement to bless in disregard of moral conditions. That this is a permanent and unavoidable feature, and that it applies to Christians today, is shown by the repeated use made of this experience of Israel in the New Testament. Its warning is applied firmly in 1 Cor. 10: 1-13 ; Heb. 3: 1-4; 13 ; 6: 1-8 ; 12: 25-28.

This same abhorring by God of His sworn covenant, as made with David, sorely perplexed Ethan the Ezrahite, but the fact was undeniable (Ps. 89: 34-39). He remarks that the covenant seemed absolute (vv. 28, 29), yet was conditional (vv. 30, 31, "If").

Surely Scriptural theology and Scripture history declare forcibly that the covenant with Abraham was *not* "essentially unilateral and unconditional". Such a conclusion is reached only by an *a priori* conception of God and of grace, instead of by the safe and proper process of collating facts as recited in the inspired histories. In this last vital matter the children of science and of law are often wiser than the children of theology.

One further question. Where does Scripture tell us, that before time began, the Father and the Son entered into an *eternal covenant* as regards the affairs of man ? Covenants are made to bind to a stated course parties who might otherwise take different courses.

be called the Old Testament obituary of Abraham, as distinguished from the great New Testament obituary in Hebrews 11. It is contained in Gen. 26: 5, 'Because that Abraham obeyed my voice and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws.' With these words Abraham's life of faith is summarized in terms of obedience and this obedience is given as the reason the promise is now confirmed to Isaac, Abraham's heir, the child of promise. . . . Here is certainly a key-verse for the understanding of the Dispensation of Promise" (p. 279). ED.

Surely the Father and the Son did not need to enter upon contractual obligations one to the other, nor can I find that Scripture sanctions the idea. Heb. 9: 12 speaks of a redemption that is eternal, and ver. 15 of an inheritance that is eternal, obviously meaning a redemption the virtue of which will continue for ever, and an inheritance that will never fade away (1 Pet. 1: 4). In these connexions "eternal" looks forward, not backward. Similarly, Heb. 13: 20 speaks of "the blood of a covenant eternal". The insertion of the definite article, "the eternal covenant", and the transposing the adjective to before the substantive, are unwarranted and misleading, by raising the notion of some one covenant that stems from eternity. The adjective following an anarthrous noun simply declares a feature of the covenant, "a covenant which is eternal", that is, which will prove to be of eternal validity, in contrast to the covenant at Sinai which was but temporary. This is no sufficient basis for the theory that there exists a formal compact between two persons of the Deity made before time began.

That the Son knew fully the mind of the Father, including all that would be involved for Himself, was necessarily the fact, as also that He heartily concurred, and came to earth to fulfil the will of the Father; but this was really an unavoidable element in their oneness as God and in no wise requires or allows that they made a formal covenant with each other upon the subject, least of all that this covenant was limited to certain "elect" persons to the exclusion of the vast majority of mankind. Are not these ideas imported by theology and not derived from Scripture?

In conclusion I wish to raise a matter on which I refrain from speaking definitely. Hebrews 11: 8-19 reveals, what it seems would not otherwise be known, that God opened to Abraham the prospect of sharing in a heavenly city and country, not only a prospect of earthly blessing. Where is it shown that this supreme glory was included in the covenant and oath before considered? This is not stated in Hebrews 11; and in Romans chs. 9-11 and Galatians 3: 1-14, while it is shown that Gentiles equally with Jews inherit by faith through Abraham, the benefits thus secured are not carried beyond freedom from the law and its curse, with the imputation of judicial righteousness and receiving the gift of the Spirit. But these benefits belong equally to the earthly calling of Israel and the saved nations and do not rise to the realm of heavenly dignities. This is seen in Jer. 31: 31-34 and Ezek. 36: 22-38, where the new heart and spirit are placed in connexion

with renewed possession of the land and other earthly benefits. It is not questioned that it is as spiritual sons of Abraham, of the like faith and walk with him, that we partake of his spiritual and heavenly privileges, but are these included in any sworn covenant of which Scripture speaks? I shall welcome light on this radical matter. It goes to the root of Calvinistic thought on this subject.

But if the prospect of place and dignity in the heavenly regions did not attach to Abraham through the covenant which extended only to the earth, how did that prospect become his? How does it become ours? Is not the answer this—through MELCHIZEDEK?

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