

**THE CONCEPT OF THE COVENANT IN ESTABLISHING AND  
MAINTAINING THE MEANING AND VALUE OF THE CHURCH**

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**THE CONCEPT OF THE COVENANT IN ESTABLISHING  
AND MAINTAINING THE MEANING AND VALUE OF  
THE CHURCH**

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## Foreword

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## ABSTRACT

'Covenant' is one of the dominant themes in the Bible. The covenant theme can serve as a concept to understand and synthesize biblical revelation. The covenant theme is important and significant because it helps explain God's dealings with mankind, and help describe His relation with His people. In understanding what the covenant them entails helps in gaining deeper insight as to the nature and function of the church, as God's people and covenant community.

There are various covenants in Scripture, and they are manifested in various forms. There are covenants made by people with each other, covenants made by people with God, and covenants made by God with people (divine covenants). The different and successive divine covenants (Noahic, Abrahamic, Davidic and the New covenant), each have their own uniqueness, but they also manifest great unity and complementarity. With each divine covenant, there is an element of freshness, but they harmonize as part of God's revelation and interaction with His people. God initiates the relationship and formalizes it with His people in covenantal form. The people become God's people and nation, who are subject to His rule, expressing loyalty and worshipping Him. The people (nation) become covenant partners with God, in carrying out His will and purpose.

Then, the covenant then helps in understanding that the church is God's possession. God started the church, by redeeming for Himself people who will serve Him. One also understands that the church in the New Testament era is connected and related with God's people in the Old Testament period. This is so because of God's salvation plan fulfilled and carried out through Jesus. Jesus is the founder and shepherd of the church. The unity of the church with the Father and Christ is made possible by the working of the

Holy Spirit. The church as covenant community reveals unity and fellowship, which exists because of their relation to God. The covenant community also exhibits aspects of being invisible and visible, of being an organism and an organization, and being exclusive and inclusive.

The understanding of the covenant theme makes it clear that the church is of great value and worth in God's scheme, in accomplishing His will on earth. The church is significant and of high merit because of the grace of God invested in its existence and nature. The church is necessary for believers, and in the society as a whole. The importance and function of the church is manifested through the marks of a true church i.e. preaching the Word, administering of sacraments and exercising of discipline.

## OPSOMMING

'Verbond' is een van die oorheersende temas in die Bybel. Die verbonds tema kan dien as n' konsep om die bybelse openbaring te verstaan. Die verbond is belangrik en betekenisvol want dit help om te verduidelik God's handeling met mensdom, en dit help om te verduidelik sy verhouding met sy mense. Om die verbonds tema te verstaan, kan n' mens dieper insig he oor die aard en funksie van die kerk, as God's mense and verbonds gemeenskap.

Daar is verskillende verbonde in die Skrif, en hulle manifesteer in verskeie vorme. Daar is verbonde wat gemaak is deur mense met mekaar, verbonde wat deut mense gemaak met God, en verbond wat deur gemaak is, met sy mense (goddelike verbonde). Die verskillende en agtereenvolgend goddelike verbonde (met Noah, Abraham, David en die nuwe verbond), het elkeen sy eie enigheid, maar hulle manifesteer groot eenheid and komplementeer mekaar. Met elke goddelike verbond, is daar n' kern van nuutheid, maar hulle harmoneer as deel van God's openbaring and interaksie met sy mense. God onderneem die verhouding met mens, en formaliseet dit in verbond vorm. Die mense word God's mense en volk, wat onder sy beheer leef. Die mense (volk) is verbond vennote, om die wil and doele van God uit te dra.

Dan, die verbond help om te verstaan dat die kerk is God's se besitting. God het die kerk gevorm toe hy vir Homself mense teruggekoop, wat sal Hom dien. Om die verbonds tema te verstaan kan n' mens ook verstaan dat die kerk in die Nuwe Testamenties tyd is na verwant en in verbinding tree met God's volk in die Ou Testamentiese tyd. Die eenheid van die kerk kan duidelik wees omdat die kerk staan in verhouding met God die Vader, Seun and Heilige Gees. Die kerk as verbonds gemeenskap is onsigbaar en sigbaar, is n' organisme en n' organisasie, is eksklusief en inklusief.

Om die verbond te verstaan, maak die waarde van die kerk baie duideliker in die Gdo's se plan in die wereld. Die kerk is betekenisvol want die is vol God's genade. Die kerk is

noodsaaklik vir gelowiges, en in die wye samelewing. Die kerk moet die Woord aankondig, die sakramente administreer en tug uitvoeg om sy funksie te vervul.

## PFUFHIFHADZO

'Mulanga' ndi inwe ya dzi thoho khulwane dzine ra dzi wana Bivhilini. Thoho heyi ya mulanga ndi ine ya shuma u kona u pfesesa dzumbululo ine ya wanala Bivhilini. Thoho ya mulanga ndi ya ndeme ngauri i farisa u talutshedza mishumo ya Mudzimu kha vhathu, na u farisa u talutshedza vhushakha ha Mudzimu na vhathu vhawe. Nga u pfesesa zwine thoho ya mulanga ya amba zwone, muthu a nga kona u wana ndivho nga ha vhuvha na mushumo wa kereke, sa vhathu vha Mudzimu, sa lushakha lwa mulanga.

Hu milanga minzhi ine ya vha Bivhilini, ine ya vha nga zwivhumbeo zwo fhambananaho. Hu na milanga ye vhathu vha ita nga tshavho, milanga ye vhathu vha ita na Mudzimu, ha vha na mulanga we Mudzimu a u ita na vhathu vhawe (milanga ya Mudzimu). Heyi milanga yo fhambanaho, ine ya tevhelana (na Noaxe, Aburhamu, Dafita na mulanga muswa) ndi ine ya dzumbulula u vha na vhuthithi na khwathisana. Kha mulanga munwe na munwe hu na zwiswa, mara ha dova ha vha zwine zwa vha zwithihi, zwihulwane nga mulandu wa u vha tshipida tsha dzumbululo ya Mudzimu na u shuma hawe na vhathu. Mudzimu ndi Ene ane a thoma vhushakha na vhathu. Hevho vhathu vha vho swika hune vha vhathu vha Mudzimu (lushakha lwa Mudzimu), vhane vha vha fhasi ha lufuno lwawe, vhane vha vho fanela u mu shumela na u mu luvha. Ndi vhathu (lushakha) vhane vha vha vhashumisani na Mudzimu, kha u vuledza zwine Mudzimu a funa u swikelela zwone.

Zwino, thoho ya mulanga i farisa u pfesesa zwauri kereke ndi ya Mudzimu. Mudzimu ndi Ene o thomaho kereke, nga u rengulula vhathu, vhane vha vho mu shumela. Thoho ya mulanga i farisa na u kona u pfesesa zwauri kereke ya tshifhingani tsha Testamennde Ntswa yo kwamana, nahone ndi nthihi, na lushakha lwa Mudzimu kha Thestamennde ya Kale. Ndi nga mulandu wa uri pulane ya Mudzimu ya u tshidza vhathu yo vuledzwa nga Yeso Kristo. Vhuthihi ha kereke (ha vhathu vha Mudzimu) vhu kona u vhonala nga mulandu wa vhushakha vhune vha vha naho na Mudzimu Khotsi, Murwa na Muya Mukhethwa. Sa vhathu vha mulanga, vha fanela u dzumbulula vhuthihi na u konana.

U pfesesa thoho ya mulanga zwi farisa kha u bvisela khagala vhudeme na vhuthogwa ha kereke kha zwine Mudzimu a shuma kha tshino tshifhinga. Kereke ndi ya thengo khulu nga mulandu wa tshilidzi tsha Mudzimu, tshe a tshi dzumbulula musi a tshi vha rengulula. Kereke ndi ya ndeme kha vhatendi na kha shango nga u angaredza. Mushumo wa kereke na u vha hayo ya ndeme zwi vhonele nga u divhadza Mafhungo-ngoho, u avhela dzisakaramennde, na u ita ndayo.

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

*The concept of the covenant in establishing and maintaining the meaning and value of the church*

Keywords: covenant, church

### 1.1. Introductory remarks

The dissertation is concerned with establishing and maintaining the value and meaning of the church. The meaning and value of the church is somewhat lost when one looks at society at large; but surprisingly so, when one also looks at the Christians themselves, one finds that there is a lack of understanding of what the church means for their faith and salvation. There are many Christians who do not regard the church as having any value for them, and subsequently, they do not see the use of being part of a church. Vorster (1991:473) mentions that the sociologist “Schreuder ag dus kerklike betrokkenheid en aktiwiteite in kerklik-institutêre bedrywighele nie as ‘n noodwendige noodsaaklikheid vir geloof nie”. Jones (1998:14) notes that there seems to be increasing numbers of people for whom the church is more negative than positive, and this is evident in the growing band of used-to-be members of churches. Vorster (1991:475-476) adds by saying that “buitekerklikheid as ekklesiologiese tendens berus dus daarop dat die moderne Christen hom nie meer aan die kerklike instituut kan (sosiologies) of hoef (teologies) te wy nie. Die moderne Christen het, volgens moderne sosioloë en verskeie

teoloë, die ruimte en die reg of ywer vir breë, Christelik-georiënteerde deelname in die wêreld buite die gevestigde kerk om.” The tendency of ‘outside-churchliness’ is evident in the growth of different Christian movements and organizations like Youth for Christ, whereas one finds that the membership in churches is going down. One can only hope that through the concept of the covenant, as manifested in Scripture, and developed throughout history in Reformed theological circles, the value and meaning of the church can be made clear to Christians, and to society.

## 1.2. Problem statement and substantiation

### 1.2.1. The choice of using covenant concept

One may ask, why use the idea or concept of the covenant? Is there no other idea or concept that can be used to achieve and reach a better estimation regarding the value and meaning of the church? Or more so, would it not be better to use a combination of concepts to arrive at a more comprehensive understanding regarding the church’s value and meaning?

Firstly, the covenant theme is focussed on because it is one of the central and major themes in the Scriptures. “A basic theme of Scripture is the covenantal structure of God’s work in the world in His relationship to people and the created world” (Van Gelder, 1994:190). Vos (1980: 234) recognizes the covenant theme as of Reformed origin; “At present there is general agreement that the doctrine of the covenant is a peculiarly Reformed doctrine. It emerged in Reformed theology where it was assured of a

permanent place and in a way that has also remained confined within these bounds.” It may happen that the covenant idea may be viewed as the most prominent and central idea in Scripture, and subsequently used as a central hermeneutical and dogmatical axis in understanding and interpreting Scripture and developing theological doctrines. This has led many to talk of covenantal theology, where the covenant is seen as the basic reference explaining the relationship of God and His people. Helberg (1996:223) explains that: “Die verbond word in hierdie teologie gesien as die basiese metafoor vir die verhouding God-Israel (die mensdom) en dit raak en beïnvloed byna al Israel se religieuse gedagtes en praktyke.”

Secondly, the choice of using the covenant concept stems from the fact and manifestation that the Scriptures are organized basically into two recognizable sections, i.e. Old and New Testaments. Theron (2002:130) supports this point by saying, “within the Reformed tradition the concept of ‘covenant’ has always been of pivotal importance. The mere fact that the Christian Bible is divided into two ‘Testaments’ (respectively: ‘covenants’) is proof enough that this emphasis has a strong biblical basis.” Odendaal (1989:143) stresses that “covenant will remain on the agenda of theological debate as long as the two parts of our Bibles are related to one another as the books of the Old and New Testament, that is of the Old and New Covenant.” This further manifests that God deals with mankind within the covenantal relation, when He reveals Himself to it, and when He saves and redeems mankind. This, then, relates to God’s way of gathering His people, and of them forming into a church.

Thirdly, the covenant concept also helps in understanding the distinctiveness of the people of God, as Odendaal (1989:146) points out that: "covenant proves, on closer examination, to hold the key to a question that has long occupied the attention of Old Testament scholars: the question of the distinctiveness of Israel's religious faith."

In using the covenant concept, one accepts the onus not to disregard the rich variety of the scriptural revelation. Disregarding it might lead to sacrificing the inherent dynamic to a one-sided static concept. However, it must be asserted that this mini-dissertation, in focusing on, and using the covenant theme in the investigation of the topic undertaken, is not a work of covenantal theology. This is so, because although one acknowledges the prominence of the covenantal theme, one must caution against the making of the covenant theme the absolute and solitary theme and concept, which one can use in approaching Scriptural revelation and organizing it into theological doctrines. There are other concepts, and one of them is that of the kingdom. One is advised not to pit the two against each other, but rather see them as complementary, because indeed they are inherently linked. "Die twee begrippe moet nie teen mekaar afgespeel word nie en dit gaan ook nie hier oor die kwessie van 'n sentrale lyn in die Bybel nie. Die verband tussen die twee begrippe moet egter raakgesien word. Die verbond funksioneer nie so baie in die Nuwe Testament nie, omdat baie sake wat in die Ou Testament onder die noemer van die verbond tuisgebring is, in die Nuwe Testament onder die koninkryk tuisgebring is"(Van Rooy, 1983:20). The reference point of the kingdom theme is the whole of God's work within all creation, and not only specifically to God's people, as the covenant theme might lead one to think. However, the inherent link between the covenant and kingdom themes means, "to be in a relationship," and is to be in a relationship with God with

certain privileges and responsibilities. To be in covenant is to understand God's broader purposes for His kingdom. To be in covenant is to see the corporate privileges and responsibilities of God's people as intrinsically related to His kingdom purposes in all of creation" (Van Gelder, 1994:193). "Covenant and kingdom are like two sides of a single coin ... covenant and kingdom are two ways of viewing the one all-embracing reality of God's way with the world. Covenant is kingdom looking back to its original and abiding character given with creation. Kingdom is looking forward programmatically towards the promised goal of perfect renewal" (Bartholomew, 1995:15).

#### 1.2.2. The situation regarding the church

Christian theologians and believers on the one hand, and non-Christians and the world in general on the other have divergent views and perceptions regarding the church . That is why, in this dissertation, it is deemed necessary to connect the covenant concept with the church, in accomplishing and maintaining a scriptural understanding of the value and worth of the church.

Firstly, one finds interesting views regarding when the church started or about where it came from. There are generally two answers given to that issue. Kuiper (1966:21) perfectly summarizes them by saying, "Christian theology generally says that the church originated in the Garden of Eden immediately after the fall of man, when God promised a Saviour and man accepted that promise in faith. On the other hand, many take it for granted that the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, a little more than nineteen hundred years ago, marks the birthday of the Christian church." The best and correct

answer is best decided in the light of the correct understanding of what the church is, and this is where one expects that, by understanding the covenant theme in Scripture, it will be achieved.

Secondly, one finds that there are those who do not see the need and value of the church for their lives of faith. Can the church impart saving grace to men? Is church membership essential for salvation? Or does the Scriptural teaching of justification by faith alone imply that membership in the church is of little importance? The Roman Catholic Church teaches that Christ has indeed wrought salvation by His atoning death, but that He has committed the dispensing of salvation to the church. Particularly through the instrumentality of the sacraments, the church is said to impart saving grace. "The historic teaching of Rome on this score can be understood only in the light of its basic error concerning the church – that the church is divine. It is said to be nothing less than Jesus Christ Himself in His earthly form, a reincarnation of Christ to the end of the continuation and completion of His redemptive work" (Kuiper, 1966:110). The other term is that which is termed sacerdotalism. This, in its simplest terms, means that God imparts the benefits of salvation to men directly, without the mediation of the church. This means, "if one believes on the Lord Jesus Christ, it matters little or nothing whether one is a member of the church" (Kuiper, 1966:110). There is also another group that conceives of the connection between the church and salvation as exceedingly loose. "Modernists ridicule as quite outmoded the notion that church membership and salvation go hand in hand. While they do not deny that by and large it is a good thing to be a church member, they insist that the one requirement for entrance into the kingdom of God is nobility of character, and they are very certain that a host of men and women who

have never committed themselves as undone sinners to the Christ crucified and have no desire to be members of His church, yet are loyal citizens of the kingdom. That certainly is rank heresy” (Kuiper, 1966:111).

One has to take into consideration also that meaning and value have different connotations for different people, and have assorted implications and inferences to different things and objects. The meaning and value of the church should be judged according to and based on the Scriptures – at least for a true church. One should not determine the meaning and value of the church by looking at the majority of people. The church has always been of value and meaningful. The meaning and value of the church have already been decided by the owner and founder of the church i.e. God. It is not up to mankind, based on his thoughts and likings, to decide if the church is meaningful and full of worth. Therefore, that is why it is a matter of importance to maintain and uphold what the Scriptures reveal as the meaning and worth of the church, using the covenantal theme and concept. Rejection or the undermining of the covenant theme may lead to the church losing its sense of direction, becoming disorientated and failing in its calling.

### 1.3. Research question

Hence, this mini-dissertation poses the question as thus: What does the covenant theme contribute to determining and maintaining the meaning and value of the church?

### 1.4. Research aims and objectives

The research aim of this mini-dissertation is primarily to gain a deeper and insightful understanding of what the Scriptures reveal regarding the church, using the covenant theme. The aim is to use the covenantal theme, to draw subsequent conclusions and points that are valuable in understanding the church, and to be able to establish and sustain the meaningfulness and value of the church as revealed in Scripture and formulated in the confessions.

The specific objectives of the mini-dissertation are:

The first objective is the delineation and formulation of an understanding of the concept and theme of the covenant, to be able to use it in gaining a scriptural view regarding the church. It should be noted that it is not the aim of this dissertation to investigate and say everything regarding the covenant theme.

The second objective and aim is that of gaining a view of what the church means for the believers and what God intended it to mean. The outcome is that the misconstrued views and perspectives regarding the meaning of the church will be dealt with, especially issues surrounding corporate-ness and individuality of God's community.

The third objective concerns the delineation of the value, worth and functions of the church for the believers, and in the world, drawn from the covenant theme. The outcome is that the believers will be able to attain a motivation for participation in church activities, and that the church will achieve a greater fulfilment of its God-assigned calling and task in the world.

### 1.5. Central theoretical argument

The covenant theme and concept bring weight to understanding, establishing and maintaining the meaning and value that the church has for believers, and in the world.

### 1.6. Methodology

The methodology to be employed in tackling the topic in the rest of the mini-dissertation, and to reach the aims and objectives set out above, is that of literature study. In that case, material will be studied that relates to the covenantal concept and theme, and the church. The different material will be studied, evaluated, and arranged to provide a logical presentation of how the topic is tackled and the solutions given thereof.

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## Chapter 2

### The covenant theme and concept

In this section, we envisage to look at the covenant theme and concept. In doing so, we have to understand the meaning of the word 'covenant' in the Scriptures; we have to look at the development of the covenant theme in Scripture, as God progressively revealed Himself to, and graciously dealt with His people; the various administrations of the covenant will be looked at, to see each one's uniqueness and the unity they have, to be able to understand the continuity of the covenant up to the present age. There will also be looked briefly at the covenant concept within Reformed theology.

#### 2.1. The meaning of the word 'covenant'

The term covenant can basically mean a formal legal agreement or contract, where there are promises made and obligations to be fulfilled between the parties concerned (cf. Hornby, 1995:268). It can be principally understood that the covenant brings two parties together into a relationship by means of a contract or agreement. However, the word has its own specific meaning as it occurs within specific contexts in the Bible.

##### 2.1.1. The word 'covenant' in the Old Testament

In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word used to denote a covenant is '*berith*' (cf. Winston, 2002:19). Kittel (1964:109) cautions that, although the usual rendering of *berith* is 'covenant', "this is not really a translation but a paraphrase. Hence we must use it with caution if we are to penetrate to the heart of the matter as presented in statements of widely divergent character."

There is no clear consensus among biblical-Hebrew scholars regarding the origin and etymology of the word '*berith*' (cf. Bartholomew, 1992:17; Kittel, 1964: 107; Berkhof, 1958: 262). There are many suggestions made. Some suggest that it originates from the Hebrew verb *barah*, which means 'to cut'; some think it is derived from the Assyrian word *beritu*, which means 'to bind', and therefore denoting a bond or contract. Therefore, putting aside the controversy and debate regarding the origin of the word, Berkhof (1958:262) asserts that for the word *berith*, in the OT, "its exact meaning does not depend on the etymology of the word, or on the historical development of the concept, but simply on the parties concerned." One has to look at the context within which the word occurs to determine the meaning and the kind of agreement referred to, whether it is dipleuric or monopleuric. Then, *berith* may denote a unilateral agreement (monopleuric), or it might be between two equal parties (i.e. dipleuric). Gordon J. McConville (*in* VanGemeren, 1997:747) stresses the point that the suggestions made regarding the derivation of *berith* from other languages is somewhat flawed, and mentions that "the catalogue of proposals concerning the meaning of *berith* illustrates the close connection between etymological derivation and theological interpretation that has characterized the attempt to understand covenant in the Bible ... In the end, the meaning of 'covenant' must be sought by means of a study of its usage." Usually, we find that with God and His people it is a

monopleuric agreement because God is greater than man is. Berkhof (1958:262) states, “naturally, when God establishes a covenant with man, this monopleuric character is very much in evidence, for God and man are not equal parties. God is the Sovereign who imposes His ordinances upon His creatures.” If it is between two equal parties, then it is more likely to be dipleuric.

In looking at *berith*, we have to take into consideration that the word might have a wider semantic reference than is widely recognized (cf. Van Rooy, 1983:13). Furthermore, J. Begrich (in Jenni & Westerman, 1997: 258) interpreted *berith* as “a relationship in which a more powerful party stands by a weaker party, wherein only the powerful party accepts an obligation and the (weaker) recipient plays no active role; only secondarily did *berith* come to be understood as a contract involving the rights and duties of the partners.” Then, *berith* may indicate a relationship, but more specifically, a determination, or obligation accepted by the subject of *berith*.

### 2.1.2. The word ‘covenant’ in the New Testament

In the Greek New Testament, the same as in the LXX (Septuagint), the word ‘*diatheke*’ is used, which is translated as either covenant or testament. *Diatheke* occurs 33 times in the New Testament – 17 in Hebrews, 9 by Paul, 4 in the Synoptic Gospels, 2 in Acts and 1 in Revelation, of which seven of these are direct quotations from the OT (cf. Van Rooy, 1983:20).

One finds that the word '*suntheke*' is regarded as the usual and common word in Greek to refer to a covenant or agreement; *diatheke* refers to a disposition or a testament (cf. Van Rooy, 1983:14; Berkhof, 1958:262). The use of *diatheke* and its subsequent translation as testament or covenant is because "in the Greek world the covenant idea expressed by *suntheke* was based to such an extent on the legal equality of the parties, that it could not, without considerable modification, be incorporated in the Scriptural system of thought. The idea that the priority belongs to God in the establishment of the covenant, and that He sovereignly imposes His covenant on man was absent from the usual Greek word" (Berkhof, 1958:263). Van Rooy (1983:14) adds that: "Die vertalers van die LXX wou dit egter nie gebruik nie, omdat dit eerder dui op 'n verdrag of ooreenkoms tussen gelyke partye, met wedersydse verpligtinge ... Wat die LXX betref, moet die betekenis van *diatheke* grotendeels bepaal word deur die betekenis van *berith*. *Diatheke* is waarskynlik gekies weens die Klassieke agtergrond waarvolgens dit wel op 'n ooreenkoms kan dui en die feit dat *suntheke* 'n ooreenkoms tussen gelyke partye aandui, wat nie pas by die *berith* tussen God en sy volk nie." Therefore, one has to understand that the prominence of the word '*diatheke*' in the New Testament was determined by the fact that it received a new meaning, as it became a 'vehicle of divine thought'. The meaning of the word in the New Testament can be said to encompass the classical meaning of the word i.e. disposition or testament, but that the covenant idea relating to the Old Testament is prominently in the foreground.

The New Testament term *diatheke* stands closest to the OT's *berith*. McConville (in VanGemeren, 1997:753) points to the actuality that *diatheke* "occurs chiefly in connection with the idea of new covenant, as taken up in the words of institution of the

Lord's Supper (Matthew 26:28; Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians 11:25). Here the OT covenant is evidently seen as having its fulfilment in the life, and especially the death, of Christ."

Therefore, we can accept that the tools of etymology are insufficient to adequately establish a satisfactory understanding of the words used for 'covenant'. As has already been referred to, a much more and illuminating principle for gaining an understanding of the biblical use of the words involved is to view their use in their biblical context.

## 2.2. General character of covenants in Scripture

### 2.2.1. Different types of 'covenant' in Scripture

Van Rooy (1983:15) recognizes that there are two types of covenants that are representative of God's relationship with His people. He chooses the two types from the four types that he mentions as also manifested by covenants made between the people or nations. He names the four types as, namely, "susereiniteitsverdrae (waarin 'n meerdere 'n mindere verpligtinge oplê), pariteitsverdrae, beskermheerverdrae (waarin die meerdere verpligtinge op himself lê tot voordeel van die mindere), en verdrae waar 'n meerdere 'n verdrag sluit tussen twee kleiner partye. Die twee soorte verbondsluitings wat in die Ou Testament voorkom, vertoon ooreenkomste met die eerste en derde van die vier soorte hierbo genoem, susereiniteits- (of vasal-) verdrae en beskermheerverdrae." The ability to understand 'covenant' in describing God's relationship with His people stems from the knowledge gained from studying the extra-biblical material. "Our knowledge of the

nature of the covenant was enhanced by those parallels. In view of the well-known elements of treaty like the preamble, the historical prologue, the stipulations, the document clause providing for the preservation and rereading of the treaty and finally the element of blessing and curse, one actually acquires a new perspective on similar elements in Scripture” (Odendaal, 1989:149). McConville (*in* VanGemeren, 1997: 747) correctly notes “the analogy of the treaties helps make the general points that Yahweh is Israel’s suzerain and that the covenantal relationship demands for its preservation a certain commitment from the people.” Therefore, we can describe the relationship between God and His people as suzerain and preservation type of covenants.

In looking at the extra-biblical material, in order to better ascertain the nature of the covenant between God and His people, raises the question as to the plausibility of the fact that the concept of covenant comes from human life and relationships, wherefrom it was then taken and used to express the relationship between God and His people. Berkhof (1958:263) points out that the covenant idea developed in history before God made any formal use of the concept in the revelation of redemption. However, he (Berkhof, 1958:263) explains that “this does not mean that the covenant idea originated with man and was then borrowed by God as an appropriate form for the description of the mutual relationship between Himself and man. Quite the opposite is true: the archetype of all covenant life is found in the Trinity, and what is seen among men is but a faint copy (ectype) of this. God so ordered the life of man that the covenant idea should develop there as one of the pillars of social life, and after it had so developed, He formally introduced it as an expression of the existing relation between Himself and man. The covenant relationship between God and man existed from the very beginning and

therefore long before the formal establishment of the covenant with Abraham.” The use of the covenant concept to describe the relation between God and His people is due, to a large measure, to God’s initiative taken to relate with His people. Therefore, Odendaal (1989:146) notes that the concept of the “covenant largely emerged as the product of a new world-view reflected in the understanding of the relationship between Yahweh and His people under the influence of the preaching of the eighth century prophets.”

### 2.2.2. Illustrations of covenants in Scripture

Covenant does not only and solely refer to and describe the relationship between God and His people. There are various examples of covenants made in the Scriptures. There are covenants made between men; between men and God; and between God and man.

#### 2.2.2.1. Covenants made between men

The Scriptures record a variety of covenants made between men. Covenants between human parties include a covenant of friendship with an implication of obligation and perhaps even sanction, (1 Samuel 18:3); treaties or agreements of parity between rulers or powerful individuals like the one made between Abraham and Abimelech (Genesis 21:27; 1 Kings 15:19; 2 Kings 11:4); treaties or agreements in which the more powerful party sets the terms (Exodus 23:32; Deuteronomy 7:2; Judges 2:2); or where the weaker party seeks terms (1 Kings 20:34; Hosea 12:1); and marriage (Malachi 2:14). Looking at the examples of covenants made between men, it might well appear that the covenant idea has the essence of an agreement or even contract in view. However, Winston

(2002:14) rightly cautions that all the references in the Scriptures to covenants do not all have the central idea of mutual pact or agreement. He (Winston, 2002:15) continues to add that “an excellent case may be made that the foremost thought contained within them is that of a sworn fidelity – faithfulness.” The concept therefore has certain flexibility. “Covenants can be contracted between individuals, or larger groups, or states. Moreover, they are not uniform in the clarity with which they spell out the commitments of the respective parties. Some clearly involve a mutual commitment ... others are close to commands, where the one party lays obligations upon another and makes no explicit corresponding commitment” (McConville *in* VanGemeren, 1997:748).

#### 2.2.2.2. Covenants made between men and God

Examples of covenant between men and God are found in Joshua 24:24, 25 and 2 Kings 23:3 and other instances where you find the people binding themselves to God in sworn fidelity. Winston (2002:17) adds, “this is not an agreement, nor a contract or a pact. Men bind themselves to be faithful to God by an open acceptance of His previously revealed will. The covenant is an unreserved declaration of unswerving loyalty and service to God. The covenant is a solemn sworn fidelity of faithfulness to God.” The allegiance sworn by men to God is based on God’s initiated relationship with them, and is further in the grace and love that God has bestowed on them before. It is not something that just comes from man’s own initiative or inventiveness, but it is in reply and response to God’s revelation, which was manifested in His Word and through His deeds.

#### 2.2.2.3. Covenants made by God with man (divine covenants)

The covenants made between God and men clearly show that it was God's initiative, and they are based on His love and grace. "Duidelik moet gesien word dat die meerdere (God) na die mindere kom (volk). Hy neem die inisiatief en lê sy volk sekere verpligtinge op, nie as harde eise nie, maar as iets wat volg op 'n sekere bewys van genade wat die verbondsluiting voorafgegaan het. So rus die verbond dus op die genade van God" (Van Rooy, 1983:16). Furthermore, Odendaal (1989:145) stresses that: "The notion of covenant emphasizes divine sovereignty and supremacy as well as His unswerving loyalty and proximity. By covenant, the bond between Yahweh and His people is guarded from degenerating into a natural physical union. But at the same time His people stand in a most intimate relationship to Him of knowing Him in a real and personal way." In dealing with His people, God progressively revealed Himself in different stages, and using different ways to administer and manifest His covenant relation with His people. This is where the precise meaning of the word covenant as used in the Scriptures becomes focused and urgent.

Now, having looked at the illustrations and types of the covenants in a general way, we go on to investigate each of the divine covenants. When we look at the covenants in a particular way, it will deepen our understanding of God's initiation of the covenant relationship, and also the relationship aspect that arises because of that covenant. This will also make us see the continuity of God's creation and redemptive purposes, which are universal and collective.

### 2.3. The different and successive divine covenants

It will suffice for the purposes and aims of this mini-dissertation to look at the divine covenants made with Noah, Abraham, Moses on Sinai, David and the New Covenant, as prophesied in the Old Testament by the prophets and fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

#### 2.3.1. The Noahic covenant

The Noahic covenant is revealed in Genesis 6:17-22; 8:20-22; 9:1-7 and 9:8-17. Winston (2002:20) rightly points out that it is God's covenant, because God devises, determines, and dispenses the covenant. Its scope is universal because it spans and includes future generations and descendants. God unilaterally commits Himself to not destroy the creation again – “God promises that He will not again destroy all flesh by the waters of a flood, and that the regular succession of seed time and harvest, cold and heat, winter and summer, day and night will continue” (Berkhof, 1958:294).

Robertson (1980:110ff) points out six characteristics noticeable in the Noahic covenant which are summarized hereunder:

(a) Firstly, the covenant with Noah emphasizes the close interrelation of the creative and redemptive actions of God. This is so because “the covenant with Noah binds together God's purposes in creation with His purposes in redemption. Noah, his seed and all creation benefit from this gracious relationship” (Robertson 1980:111).

(b) Secondly, it shows that God's grace is particular. The principle of particularity, as seen in God's favour to Noah, represents a theme that continues throughout God's dealing with man in redeeming him.

(c) Thirdly, the covenant with Noah shows God's intention to deal with families in His covenant relationships. This is evident in Genesis 6:18 where God says, "But I will establish my covenant with you, and you will enter the ark – you and your sons and you wife and your sons' wives with you."

(d) Fourthly, the covenant with Noah can be characterized as a covenant of preservation, where Robertson (1980:114) points out that: "God binds Himself to preserve the earth in its present world-order until the time of the consummation", and also that "the regularity of the seasons derives directly from God's determination to preserve the earth until deliverance from sin can be accomplished. The institution of the covenant indicated the purpose of God to restrain the evil inherent in humanity" (Robertson, 1980:121).

(e) Fifthly, the covenant of Noah possesses a distinctively universalistic aspect. The whole of the created universe, including the totality of humanity, benefits from this covenant - not only Noah and his seed, but also 'every living creature' (Genesis 9:10). "God's commitment to maintain a universal witness to the whole of humanity through the ordering of creation later plays a significant role in the missionary mandate of the apostle Paul ... Creation's witness of grace toward sinful man still provides the platform from which the universal proclamation of the gospel should be launched" (Robertson, 1980:122).

(f) Sixthly, the seal of the covenant with Noah emphasizes the gracious character of the covenant. God designates the overarching beauty of the rainbow to depict His grace. Berkhof (1958:294) sees the confirmation of this covenant with the rainbow as a unique feature that distinguishes it from the other covenants.

The features confirm that the covenant made with Noah is divine i.e. a God-instituted covenant. Winston (2002:20) supports this point by saying: “the covenant has its origin in the sovereign will and purpose of God and continues without change or cancellation solely on the basis of the unchanging sworn fidelity of God.”

### 2.3.2. The Abrahamic covenant

The covenant with Abraham occupies a significant and important position in the redemptive work of God. “In die voortgang van die Ou Testamentiese openbaring moet dit gestel word dat die verbond met Abraham die primêre plek inneem” Van Rooy, 1983:17). The covenant with Abraham occupies a unique and significant position in God’s revelation (cf. Reymond, 1998:513). Robert Raymond (*in* Winston, 2002:20) is quoted as writing that the promises of grace in the Abrahamic covenant are so significant that it is not an overstatement to declare the verses that contain the covenant as the most important verses in the Bible. The Abrahamic covenant is “essentially promissory and is fundamental to all biblical covenant, where the other covenants being ‘administrations’ of it” (VanGemeran, 1997:749).

Genesis 15:18 and 17:2 depicts the formal inauguration of the covenant made with Abraham, where God symbolically passes between the pieces (cf. Genesis 15:17), and makes a promise to Abraham (cf. Genesis 15:18ff). These passages relate in substance to the promises first made to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3, involving posterity, land, and blessing for the nations. Abraham and His seed receive in their flesh the sign of the covenant. According to Stek (1994:30) the seal and the stipulation of circumcision “appears simple and undemanding ... circumcision was to serve as ‘the sign of the covenant.’” Robertson (1980:128) suggests that the passage of Genesis 15, which appears to be the description of the formal inauguration of the covenant with Abraham, clearly indicates the essence of a covenant to be a “bond in blood sovereignly administered.”

Winston (2002:21) undeniably classifies this covenant as a divine covenant because of the divine promise made by God to Abraham that he will inherit the land of Canaan. The covenant with Abraham starts in God calling (or solemnly charging/ordering) Abraham to go from his country and kindred (cf. Genesis 12:1). Therefore, one can understand Robertson’s (1980:127) assertion that “nowhere does any suggestion of ‘agreement’ or ‘contract’ emerge ... the sovereign Lord God sovereignly dictates the terms of His covenant with Abraham.” The covenant with Abraham is a “unilateral divine will” (Winston 2002:21). Furthermore, in the covenant made with Abraham, it is God who undertook all the obligations, while the other received all the benefits. Winston (2002:21) also adds that the covenant also displays the feature of a union and communion with God – “it must not be forgotten that the highest possible relationship has now been established with Abraham, that of union and communion with God. With this in mind, it does not seem at all incompatible that a covenant of divine monarchist dependence should

incorporate conditions for its spiritual continuance. The keeping of the covenant is recognition of the great grace therein bestowed and an acknowledgment of the high spiritual relationship thus entered into” (Winston, 2002:22).

Therefore, the Abrahamic covenant occupies a very central place in the scheme of God’s dealings with His people. We find that New Testament believers (even though they are not Jews) are called ‘children of Abraham and heirs to the promises’ made to Abraham (cf. Galatians 3:29). The Abrahamic covenant is important and manifests the love of God, who calls people to Him, so they can walk with Him in faith.

### 2.3.3. The Mosaic (Sinaitic) covenant

Robertson (1980:167) notes that the covenant with Moses has provoked some of the greatest debates within Christendom’s history. “Modern as well as ancient Marcionites who reject the authority of the Old Testament Scriptures habitually direct their criticism toward the Mosaic administration of law. The precise relationship of the Mosaic covenant to the promises that preceded it and to the fulfilments that followed has proven to be one of the most persistent problems of biblical interpretation.” Then, the question arises as to how we understand the Mosaic covenant, which seems to be legalistic.

God’s deliverance of His people is the foundation of the Mosaic, or Sinai covenant, which we see unfolding in Exodus 19-24. This links it to the covenant with Abraham (cf. Exodus 3:7-14 and 6:2-5). That is why we can understand Berkhof (1958:297) when he says, “the covenant of Sinai was *essentially* the same as that established with Abraham,

though the form differed somewhat.” The main stipulations of the covenant are spelt out in the ‘Decalogue’ (Exodus 20:2-17), and supplemented by Exodus 21 to 23. Therefore, we have to understand that “the Mosaic dispensation rests squarely on a covenantal rather than a legal relationship” (Robertson, 1980:170). It is not law that is prevailing, but covenant. The concept of law is subservient to the broader concept of the covenant. This is so because of the recognition of the historical context in which the law is revealed. Israel was already in a covenant relationship with God. God’s covenantal commitment to redeem from the state of sin a people for Himself was in effect prior to the giving of the law at Sinai. Israel assembled at Sinai only because God had redeemed them from Egypt. VanGemeren (1997:749) makes it clear that although the distinctive characteristic of the Mosaic covenant is its setting of God’s laws regulating Israel’s life, this occurs within “the framework of a theology of the election of Israel by grace.” This distinctive feature is illustrated in Exodus 19:5-6 and by the prologue to the Ten Commandments (cf. Exodus 20:2). Covenant binds persons; external legal stipulations represent one mode of administration of the covenantal bond. Indeed, we are to see “the addition of law as a major development in covenant design to structure Israel’s life in the land” (Bartholomew, 1995:19) that God promised to them.

The institution of laws and the priesthood makes it evident that Israel, as God’s chosen people, were required to be holy and ‘separate’ or distinct from the other nations. Van Esteves (2001:85) makes it pointedly clear that Israel was a holy nation, because “not just the priests and Levites are holy but the whole nation.” The whole of life was holy and integrated. The *cultic* acts (temple, priests and sacrifices) were interwoven into the fabric

of the people's total communal life. Van Esteves (2001:86) deduces two things from the relation and integration of the cultic with the communal life, which are:

- firstly, the cult formed an important aspect of the total life of the Israelite community, and this is evident in the centralized cultic institution, namely, Jerusalem temple;
- secondly, the total life of the Israelite community was integrated, as there was no compartmentalizing life into the sacred and secular. This is rightly so, because "covenantal life is not limited to a few highly 'spiritual' moments in life" (Van Esteves, 2001:86), but encompasses marriage, schooling, labour, science, art and other activities.

The expression of the Mosaic covenant in the book of Deuteronomy points to the balance between promise and command, between God's initiative and Israel's required response. VanGemenen (1997:750) supports this idea by making the point that "Deuteronomy is notable for bringing together the patriarchal (Abrahamic) covenant, primarily a sworn promise focused on land and blessing in it, with that of Sinai (always Horeb in Deuteronomy), in which command comes to greater prominence." This points to the fact that God reveals Himself to His people, and redeems them to be His own; He further goes on to reveal to them and make it clear, the way in which they should go about in serving Him and being His people.

#### 2.3.4. The Davidic covenant

Robertson (1980:229) observes that in the Davidic covenant, God's purposes to redeem a people to Himself reach their climactic stage of realization as far as the Old Testament is concerned - "God's covenant with David centres on the coming of the kingdom. The covenant serves as the formalizing bond by which God's kingdom comes among His people." The position of the Davidic covenant in the scheme of God redeeming His people is explained by Bartholomew (1995:19) as engrafting the "monarchy onto the Sinai covenant and is envisaged as part of the fulfilment of the Abrahamic promises and as a charter for humanity."

The Davidic covenant is formally introduced when one looks at 2 Samuel 7, where it establishes God's covenant commitment to David. The passage further places particular stress on the essence of the covenant concept. "Uniquely the passage describes the manner in which God had continued to identify Himself with His people: 'I have not dwelt in a house since the day I brought up the sons of Israel from Egypt, even to this day; but I have been moving about in a tent, even in a tabernacle'" (Robertson 1980:231). This shows that in Israel's sojourns, God sojourned with them. His glory housed itself in a tent, even as Israel lived in tents (see also 1 Chronicles 17:5). God showed His readiness to identify with his people by travelling with them (cf. 2 Samuel 7:9 'I have been with you wherever you have gone').

McConville (*in* VanGemenen, 1997:750) explains the promissory nature of the Davidic covenant by explicating the point that "the account of the institution of this covenant (2 Samuel 7:8-17, though the term 'covenant' is not used here) contains no explicit conditions and therefore has a strong promissory dimension. It is described in 2

Chronicles 13:5 as a 'covenant of salt', an expression intending to convey permanence (cf. Leviticus 2:13; Numbers 19:19)." The provisions of the Davidic covenant centre on two promises. One promise concerns the line of David, and one promise concerns the locality of Jerusalem. The history of the Davidic monarchy as recorded in the books of Kings repeatedly emphasizes these two points. Jerusalem. God preserved the dynastic line of David. The unique faithfulness of God was manifested to David in preserving his line, even when there were many kings who were evil. The endurance of David's dynasty contrasts vividly with the experience of kings of Israel to the north, where the kingdom of Israel only managed two dynasties of any significance. Furthermore, the stability associated with Jerusalem contrasts vividly with the instability of the capital of the northern kingdom. Jerusalem stood without question as God's chosen city. The royal residence and the place of worship were situated in the city of Jerusalem. The stability associated with the royal throne in Judah seems to have had great significance for the people of God. Robertson (1980:241) makes the point that: "It stood in starkest contrast with the nomadic condition that had marked the life-style of Israel from the days of Abraham. Now God's people were no longer tent-dwellers, always on the move, pilgrims without a permanent dwellingplace. Instead, they were inhabitants of a kingdom, settled and secure. No longer was Israel exclusively looking forward to the coming of the kingdom; actually, God's kingdom had come. Indeed, the level to which the kingdom of God was realized in Israel under the line of David had decided limitations. This 'kingdom' must be placed in the category of an 'anticipative' realization in proper keeping with the entire scope of Old Testament experience. The shadow-kingdom of Israel was real. God was reigning in their midst. But it was nonetheless only a shadow of the reality to come." Robertson (1980:249) further adds that while God actually was

manifesting His lordship through David's line, "this human monarchy was serving at the same time as a typological representation of the throne of God itself. David's reign was intended to anticipate in shadow-form the reality of the messianic Redeemer who was to unite with finality the throne of David with the throne of God."

Looking at the Davidic covenant, one sees that the king maintained a unique role in relation to the covenant. To be king is to be in covenant relation to Yahweh. The king in his position as national head mediates the covenant to the people. By virtue of his office, he functions as mediator of the covenant. Robertson (1980:235) explains that: "This distinctive role of the king as covenant mediator is made apparent at the time of David's coronation at Hebron (cf. 2 Samuel 5:3) ... Integral to David's establishment as king in Israel was his role as covenant mediator for the people. The reform instituted by Josiah emphasizes the role of kings as covenant mediator. When the neglected book of the covenant is discovered in the temple, Josiah takes the initiative on behalf of the people. He calls the assembly. He reads the law. He makes the covenant (cf. 2 Kings 23:1-3). Zedekiah also functions as covenant mediator in the crisis of Nebuchadnezzar's invasion. The king makes a covenant with all the people in Jerusalem, specifying obedience to the legislation of Moses (cf. Jeremiah 34:8). By virtue of his office as king, he possesses authority to bind the people in covenant obligation." One has to understand that the king not only represents God in His authority as covenant Lord to the people. He also represents the people to God. As head of the people, he represents them and their cause before the Lord. The role of king as covenant mediator can be seen as a significant aspect of the Davidic covenant. The previous leaders like "Moses and Joshua may have anticipated this role in their capacities as leaders who mediated the covenant. But

distinctive to the Davidic covenant is the permanent establishment of one who shall serve in this vital role” (Robertson, 1980:236).

#### 2.3.5. The New covenant

The enactment of the covenant curse, when Israel was exiled from Canaan vivified the necessity for some new form of covenantal administration having a more lasting effectiveness than the form by which the covenant was administered through Abraham, Moses, and David. The prophets (Isaiah, Jeremiah, etc.), as spokespersons for God, spoke of hope beyond devastation in the form that the people will return to the land, and thus, expected restoration. One unifying motif, having to do with these restoration expectations, involved the anticipation of a new covenant relationship. Although judgment was inevitable, God would establish a new covenant with His people.

Jesus represents and indicates the point of formal inauguration of the new covenant. This was done at the instituting of the covenantal meal of the Lord’s Supper (cf. Luke 22:20). Robertson (1980:43) explains, “at that crucial moment, Jesus communicates by word and deed that the distribution of the cup representing his blood is to be understood as the inauguration ceremony of the new covenant. No longer is the covenant promise to be anticipated. It is a reality to be enjoyed.” Therefore, Christians celebrate the reality of this new covenant relationship each time they participate in the Lord’s Supper. That is why one finds that Paul seems to recognize this supper to be a covenantal feast (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:25) in echoing the Lord’s words: “This cup is the *new covenant* in my blood”. Therefore, one can conclude, “the covenants of Abraham, Moses and David find

fulfilment in the reality of the new covenant of the present day. God's covenants throughout the ages are one. This oneness finds splendid testimony in the consummating character of the new covenant" (Robertson, 1980:44).

This covenant supersedes God's previous covenantal administrations, and thus, Robertson (1980:272) terms it the 'covenant of consummation'. This is so, because it brings to focal realization the essence of the various covenants experienced by Israel throughout their history. The heart of this consummative realization consists of a single person, who achieves in Himself the essence of the covenantal principle: 'I shall be your God and you shall be my people.' He is the Christ who consummates the covenant. In its establishment and accomplishment "this new covenant of God with men is directly dependent, first, upon the work of God's Son, and second, upon the work of God's Spirit, it is these personal activities of God Himself which give the Christian gospel its crowning supremacy" (Stibbs, 1959:32). This is so because Jesus Christ is the 'surety' or 'guarantee' (cf. Hebrews 7:22) and 'mediator to the covenant which is superior to the old one, and it is founded on better promises' (cf. Hebrews 8:6).

The prophets prophesied about the new covenant: Jeremiah is one example (Jeremiah 31:31-34) - "The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them, declares the Lord. This covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my

people. No longer will a man teach his neighbour, or a man his brother saying, 'Know the Lord' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." It is directly fitting that the second part of the Bible is called the 'New Testament' or 'Covenant'. Stibbs (1959:32) is of the view that "this is its great theme, the fulfilment of God's promises of better things for His chosen people." Robertson (1980:275) notes that the blessings associated with the new covenant are a development of a perspective previously known to God's people. For the new covenant, the expectation is that the redemptive intentions of God displayed throughout the ages will come to fruition. Furthermore, the new covenant is unique in the fact that the covenant people are transformed in their hearts. "The new covenant boasts a unique feature in its power to transform its participants from within their hearts. This uniqueness sets the new covenant apart from the previous covenantal dealings of God with His people" (Robertson 1980:276). The new covenant is also characterized by the pardon of all sins, which is associated with the renewed hearts of the covenantal participants. The new covenant is an everlasting one. The other previous covenants have an everlasting aspect in them, "but the everlasting character of the new covenant seems to imply an eschatological dimension. It is not only the new covenant; it is the last covenant. Because it shall bring to full fruition that which God intends in redemption, it never shall be superseded by a subsequent covenant. Men shall come to Zion to join themselves to the Lord in an everlasting covenant that will not be forgotten (Jeremiah 50:5)" (Robertson, 1980:277). The previous covenants are everlasting insofar as they are realized and fulfilled in the new covenant.

Indeed, the covenants formed stages in God's intent to relate to all of creation and bring back to right relationship all that was broken. This was accomplished in Christ's redemptive work at His first coming and will be brought to its fullness with His second coming. The work of Christ was "anticipated and developed in the Old Testament through a series of biblical covenants that looked forward to Christ's work" (Van Gelder, 1994:195).

Now, it is a matter of importance that we understand the unity that is portrayed in the covenants.

#### 2.4. The unity of the divine covenants

There is unity in the divine covenants. Every time God institutes a distinctive relation to His people, an element of freshness and newness will emerge. It is clear and evident that the covenants are one. "God's multiple bonds with His people ultimately unite into a single relationship. Particular details of the covenants may vary. A definite line of progress may be noted. Yet the covenants of God are one" (Robertson, 1980:28).

The covenants are united structurally and thematically. This is evident in the unity of the Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic covenants. The historical surrounding of each covenant emphasises unity and continuity of the relationship between God and His people.

##### 2.4.1. Unity in historical experience

The commonality of the history that the people share under the different administrations expresses the unity of the covenants. They are basically the same people, coming from the same place, under different times. Their historical references are the same, with the latter generations having experienced God's more advanced revelation.

#### 2.4.1.1. Covenantal inauguration

Each successive covenant with Abraham's descendants advanced the original purposes of God to a higher level of realization. God delivered Israel through Moses because of the covenant God had made with Abraham. This is what one notices even in the Davidic covenant, where "both God's words to David and David's response to the Lord reflect on the past experience of God's delivering of Israel out of Egypt as a people for himself" (Robertson, 1980:31). The Israelites in the time of David, share the same historical experience with the people of the time of Moses. This is so because "the God who institutes his covenant with David is the same God who 'brought up the sons of Israel from Egypt' (II Samuel 7:6)" (Robertson, 1980:31). Robertson (1980:32) further points to the fact that "the crucial points of covenant inauguration under Moses and David reflect the continuity of the covenants. As God institutes a fresh covenant with the nation of Israel, he orders the occasion so that it reflects specifically continuity rather than a discontinuity with the past." Then, we must understand and accept that all covenant participants of the different covenants, including those of the New Testament, have a share in the redemptive events that take place in the Noachic, Abrahamic, Mosaic and

Davidic covenants. Of course, this should be seen in light of Christ, in whom also those who are not under the new covenant also share.

#### 2.4.1.2. History of life under the covenants

The unity of the covenants is clear in the common history that the different participants share. The preceding covenant is foundation to the following covenant, and the later covenant participants look back to the preceding covenants, where their fathers were the participants.

Despite the emergence of the Mosaic covenant, the significance of the Abrahamic covenant continues. In the extent of the history of the Mosaic covenant, the Abrahamic covenant found a basic fulfilment. It was Israel's violation of the stipulation of the Mosaic covenant that finally determined the inevitability of their captivity. This is what Robertson (1980:34) seems to point out in saying: "the history of God's covenant people indicates that the covenants are basically one. The Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic covenants do not supplant one another, but they supplement one another. A basic unity binds them together."

#### 2.4.2 Unity in genealogical administration

The genealogical dimension of the covenant concept occurs repeatedly with respect to the various covenants of Scripture, even stretching to the New Testament dispensation. Therefore, it is not surprising for Robertson (1980:34) to suggest that the "genealogical

administration of the covenant underscores the connection of each successive covenant with previous administrations." God made His arrangement a genealogical one when He related covenantally with His people. This is what we occasionally see in the reference to the concept of 'the seed'. Looking in Deuteronomy 5:2, 3 and 29:14ff, one sees the arrangement of the covenant being made with future generations. God did not make the covenant with the present persons only, but it included their descendants or offspring.

Now, how far does the genealogical principle stretch? One finds that it is an everlasting or eternal covenant; it is an eternal succession. This is what Robertson (1980:37) seems to point out when he makes the points that "never will the line of the faithful be cut off completely. In every generation the line of God's covenant people shall be maintained." The covenant made in the Old Testament dispensation with Abraham, Moses and David stretches and continues even into the new covenant - "The genealogical provisions of the covenants with Abraham, Moses and David extend even into the new covenant" (Robertson, 1980:38). One should see the receiving of the Holy Spirit as related to the blessing of Abraham, and encompassing God's people in all generations (cf. Atwood, 1998:23). Galatians 3:13ff speaks of the non-Israelites being ingrafted into the covenant made with Abraham (cf. Genesis 17:12, 13). The covenant people are not an ethnic community, restricted to the Israelites only. The people of other nations have been grafted like branches to the olive tree (cf. Romans 11:17, 19). People from all nations may become a vital aspect of the branch of God's people by faith. The ingrafting concept relates to the genealogical principle. "By the process of 'ingrafting' the Gentile becomes an 'Israelite' in the fullest possible sense (Galatians 3:29). From this point of ingrafting, his subsequent seed becomes heir to the promises given to Abraham. His line now stands

as legitimate heir to the genealogical promises given to the patriarch” (Robertson, 1980:39). Not only must one consider the ingrafting principle, but also the ‘pruning’ principle. New branches can be grafted into genealogical relation to Abraham, but also the natural seed can be removed (cf. Romans 9:6, 13). Believers do not only relate to Abraham by naturalness, but it must be more so by faith.

This should make us recognize the importance of families in the scheme of God’s redemption outworking.

The covenant structure of Scripture manifests a marvellous unity. God, in binding a people to himself, never changes. For this reason, the covenants of God relate organically to one another. From Adam to Christ, a unity of covenantal administration characterizes the history of God’s dealings with His people.

#### 2.4.3. Thematic unity of the covenants

The covenants are not only structurally united, but they also manifest a thematic unity. Robertson (1980:45) maintains that this unity is the heart of the covenant as it relates God to His people. The thematic unity of the covenants is manifested by the phrase that seems to recur: ‘I shall be your God, and you shall be my people’. Robertson (1980:46) rightly designates this phrase the ‘Immanuel principle’.

##### 2.4.3.1. The connection of the Old and New covenant

The running of the covenant in the Old Testament ends in a climax , but still incomplete. It then shows and points forward to the time of the new covenant that is to come. "The unity of the two testaments is only then apparent when the continuity of divine revelation is acknowledged and the historical progression is not denied, and the consequent domination of the Old Testament over the New" (Odendaal, 1989:146). The Old Testament contains a developing story of God's covenants with His chosen people. The Old Testament is characteristically forward-looking. In various ways, it abounds in promises of One who is to come, who is to fulfil in His Person, and by His work, the destiny of the people of God.

The new covenant implies a concept of newness, a break with the past. God redeems His people in a way that is unfamiliar to them. However, one must also recognize that there is a connection with the old covenant. "The newness of the covenant must not stand in absolute contradiction to the previous covenants. A factor of continuity must be recognized ... while the new covenant is at radical variance with the old covenant with respect to its effectiveness in accomplishing its goal, the substance of the two covenants in terms of their redemptive intention is identical" (Robertson, 1980:281). The forgiveness of sins is foundational in the establishment of the new covenant. The sacrifices that were offered, according to the law, emphasized the issue of forgiveness. "The constant renewal of sacrifices for sins under the old covenant gave clear indication of the fact that sin actually was not removed, but only was passed over. The provisions of the old covenant, founded on such animal sacrifices, could not effect the actual removal of transgressions. ... The subject of the forgiveness of sins thus provides a significant basis for analyzing features of continuity and newness in the relation of the new covenant

to the old. The new factor of forgiveness anticipated in the new covenant is the once-for-all accomplishment of that forgiveness. Continuity is seen in the constant typological representation of the reality of forgiveness under the old covenant” (Robertson, 1980:284).

Therefore, we must recognize that the themes of salvation and forgiveness are prevalent in the covenants, albeit in different administrations and stages of God’s covenantal dealing with His people. Furthermore, the covenant in the different dispensations is basically grounded on the love of God (cf. Konig & le Roux, 1994:41).

#### 2.4.3.2. The connection of the Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic and the new covenant

The phrase first appears in Genesis 17:7 in connection with the establishment of circumcision as the seal of the Abrahamic covenant.

The starting point of covenant theology is “that there is one covenant of grace which has been operative in human history since the fall, the substance of which is the divine promise made to elect sinners, ‘I will be your God and you shall be my people’” (Kingdon, 1973:20). The Word of God is a unity, and God has progressively and singularly acted and revealed Himself to mankind. Kingdon further points out that “from the first disclosure of grace in the ‘protoevangelium’ (Gen. 3:15), to the final vision of John the apostle, ‘Behold the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and be their God (Rev. 21:3), Holy Scripture shows that there is but one covenant of grace throughout all ages.’”

From this it is concluded that there has been one church of God since the beginning that still is and will be in all ages. This church is “purchased with the blood of Christ, which embraces the people of God in all ages and in all places” (Kingdon, 1973:20). The covenant of grace is one covenant although it exhibits diversity in administration in time of promise and fulfilment.

Under the covenant of Sinai there was the demands law, which made condemnation and death certain. By contrast, under the new covenant the Spirit gives new life and endows God’s people, his church, with the power for its practical expression in fulfilling the demands of God’s righteousness. Stibbs (1959:33) explains that: “in fulfilment of the promised new covenant, God makes sinful men partakers of salvation and of fullness of life in two complementary ways – in Christ, and by His Spirit.”

The covenants express and manifest the grace of God in attaching Himself to save man, and also for man to respond in obedience and commitment to God.

#### 2.5. Relationship and communion with God

One finds that the main feature of divine covenants (covenants between God and men) involves a relationship with God. This aspect is evident in the attempt by Winston (2002:23) to define a divine covenant as “a sworn fealty and faithfulness from God in which man may arrive at a relationship with God that has as its crowning glory a union and communion with God Himself.” In understanding the covenant theme, we must take

cognisance of the element of relationship between God and His people, and the communion that subsequently follows.

#### 2.5.1. Initiative of God to have relationship with His people

In making a covenant with His people, God enters in a relationship with them. In doing this, God reveals Himself as God who is able to engage with His people in relationship. Van Rooy (1997:312) sees this revelation as a fact pointing to the superior and good nature of God in comparison with the gods of the Canaanite or Semitic and African religions. The deities in these religions are too impersonal and the worshippers cannot relate to them in an intimate way. God, on the other hand, in dealing with His people in a covenant relationship, is a loving God. This is evident in the fact that “God is the one who looks for man after man has rejected God; God restores the broken fellowship, even in his judgment ... the consequences for the covenant are that, if ever there should be a covenant bond between God and humankind, God would have to take the initiative” (Van Rooy, 1997: 314). Indeed, the covenant theme in the Bible shows the fact of God relating to His people, where He is the One that starts, initiates and maintains the ensuing relationship. He relates to His people because He loves them.

On the other hand, Stek (1994: 37) is of the opinion that the covenants made by God with His people are due to the crisis situations of uncertainty and doubt that came up - “all the covenants put in place by Yahweh – with Noah, the patriarchs, Israel, and David – were instruments of kingdom administration. They were *all commitments made on oath in situations fraught with uncertainties.*” These uncertainties arose not from the unreliability

of God but from the fallibility of humans – their faltering faith and their wayward hearts and lives. This means that the covenants that God made with His people exist because there were doubts about desired or promised action; their purpose was to add a guarantee to promises made in such situations. This notion is evident in the royal grants (preservation) and suzerain treaties of the secular type, which correlate with the divine covenants – “God’s covenants with humans of which we read in Scripture were modelled in form and function after human covenants commonly employed in the ancient Near East” (Stek, 1994: 26). This leads to the view that covenants were only necessary because of sin, with the implication that in a perfect world they would be unnecessary. Stek (1994:39) also sees the “wide practice of defining ‘covenant’ as this or that kind of *relationship* as misguided. Covenants in the Bible function within relationships but do not constitute relationships. Biblical covenants can no more be defined as some sort of relationship than can a contract or a will.” Therefore, when God initiated a covenant relationship with His people, He was not starting a relationship, but the relationship was already existent, and the covenant served to affirm God’s rule and kingship to His people who were prone to faltering and unfaithfulness to Him.

Helberg (1996) ties in with the view of Stek (1994), where the initiative of God to make a covenant with His people, in other words to enter in relationship with His people, is viewed as overemphasized and not expressed in Scripture as such. Helberg (1996:227-8) asserts that God relates to people, and not to places or concepts, like that of covenant. He reveals Himself as the One God, who wants personal relation with His people, based on His grace. However, Helberg (1996:234) also views the existence of covenant relations of God and His people as forced because of circumstances – “n’ verbond word tot stand

gebring waar gevaar dreig dat die verhouding in gedrang kan kom.” This is so because God related with man in an informal way, and when man faltered, it was necessary to institute formal relations in the way of a covenant. This is evident where Helberg (1996:230) discusses the differences between the covenant between God and His people, and those between the victorious and conquered, where the relation of God and His people is essentially inward – “dit gaan om ‘n ware persoonlike verhouding wat nie bloot uitwendig formeel van aard is nie, maar innerlik van aard. Die mens word in sy hart geraak. Hierdie verbondsverhouding is dus uniek.” Basically, the institution of covenant serves to formalize the relationship already existing, and it does not necessarily institute a relationship.

However, Bartholomew (1995: 20) is of the view, that we should not view the covenants as basically and primarily initiated as emergency measures – “the divine covenants are much more than exceptional means in crisis situations.” The view of seeing the covenants as emergency measures is due to the limited view of covenant, focussed only on the commitment and oath. Furthermore, it is not right to reduce the relational aspect of the divine covenants. Bartholomew (1995:22) rightly sees that Stek works with a “reductionistic understanding of covenant that undermines the relational element in the semantic range of the word, and this prevents him from seeing the constitutive and regulative relational aspects of the divine covenants.” Therefore, it must be affirmed, “the biblical understanding of covenant is strongly relational and covenant does function as a metaphor for the God-Israel relationship. Because the divine covenants formalize the God-human relationship at critical points in the history of redemption, the formalizing is inextricably bound up with mapping out the parameters of the God-human relationship at

particular stages of God's purposes" (Bartholomew, 1995:25). The divine covenants formalize and constitute the God-Israel relationship. The divine covenant operates within existing relationships, but "it shapes and gives direction to the relationship ... the divine covenants do more than formalize relationships, they also constitute them and in the process become metaphors for God's relationship with His people" (Bartholomew, 1995:25).

Putting the debate aside, the main point asserted is that God initiates relationship with mankind. It might be an 'informal' relationship, or 'formalized' in the sense of the covenants made in the different stages of the Old Testament. Although we can concede to the fact that covenants served as an affirmation in times of doubt and uncertainty, we must also understand and consider the reality that the covenants formed a completely new intensity in God's dealings and relation with His people. We must recognize covenants between God and His people as unique because they define the relationship in an enhanced manner.

#### 2.5.2. Partnership

Covenant functions within the context of the sovereign rule of the God of the whole earth, who revealed Himself as Yahweh to Israel whom He freely elected to be His covenant partner and instrument in the manifestation of His universal claim and kingship. The content of covenant is the creation of a new relation based on undeserved salvation or redemption, which liberates the saved people of God to a life of obedient surrender and service in the covenant gift of a land. The scope of the covenant where the central

command of 'no other gods' has been accepted can only be one thing, that is, the universal acceptance of the sovereign rule of the great king. Spykman (1992:360) explains this point by saying, "the biblical covenant involves a lifelong, exclusive relationship between God and his people which knows no bounds of time or space. It cannot tolerate 'rival lovers' or divided allegiances. As Maker and Keeper of the covenant God regards his people with the holy jealousy of a husband toward his wife, a father toward his child, a master toward his servant, the owner of all toward his steward." The nation of Israel understood that God redeemed them, and wanted them to be His people. That is why we find on many occasions the relationship between God and Israel, Christ and the church, described and compared to the marriage relationship between husband and wife. Not only are the people of God to serve and commit to Him as their only Lord, but there is also communion that exists between God and His people.

Furthermore, the covenants have the dual aspect of being in a relationship and the responsibility of being God's agents, in carrying out and witnessing His love and will to the world. Van Gelder (1994:195) asserts that each covenant focuses new dimensions of the relationship of God to His special people - "To be in covenant is to be in relationship with God. On the other hand, each covenant also focuses the attention of His special people toward the world. To be in covenant is to be in mission to the world ... God chose to maintain a covenant relationship with His people as the basis of carrying out His broader kingdom purposes." This is so because in instigating a covenant relationship with His people, God makes His people a partner. The nation of Israel becomes a partner who God uses, and works together with, in advancing His kingdom and revealing His glory.

### 2.5.3. Promise and faithfulness

The covenants made by God with His people are full of promises made by God to His people. God is faithful, and His faithfulness is manifest in His keeping and fulfilling the promises He made to His people. On the other hand, the other covenant partner – mankind or the nation of Israel – shows lapses of unfaithfulness to God. God, in getting into covenant relationship with His people, makes assurances and provides signs to remind His people of His faithfulness to them, and their need to be faithful to Him.

#### 2.5.3.1. Assurances of promises made

The divine covenants are beset with the promises of children, land, and ultimately the coming of the Messiah and His return. We find signs and seals accompanying the making of the covenants. The visible seals confirmed the graceful approach of God to man, and the offering of Himself to be their God, and the blessings He promised them. That is why, in God's dealing with Noah, there was the sign of the rainbow. In dealing with Abraham, there was the sign of circumcision. "Circumcision was a sign and seal put upon each male Israelite's body, that God had pledged Himself to be their God, and intended them to be His people. It was a necessary and visible mark indicating membership, first, in Abraham's household, and later, within the nation of the Israelites" (Stibbs, 1959:14). God, in making the covenant with Abraham also confirmed His commitment and promises by 'passing through' the slain pieces of the animals (Genesis 16:7ff). Therefore, God used and adopted familiar means and ways to human usage in assuring His people that they were indeed to be His people, and they would enjoy the fulfilment of His

promises. That is why the writer to the Hebrews explains that it is how men make their fellow men doubly sure: Having given their word, they confirm it by oath – “men swear by someone greater than themselves, and the oath confirms what is said and puts an end to all argument. Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of His purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, He confirmed it with an oath. God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged” (Hebrews 6:16-18).

x In the congregation of Christ in the new covenant there are the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s Supper. “They confirm God’s words of promise. They are seals of God’s covenant with His people. In baptism God’s name is invoked, and a visible seal put upon the individual’s body, thus are God’s promises, to make us His, visibly signed and sealed. In the Lord’s Supper, on the other hand, ‘the pieces’ used remind us of Christ’s sacrifice ... in the receiving of the sacraments we are meant to be assured that we are God’s people, and that He and all His promised benefits are ours” (Stibbs, 1959:15). We must understand that the signs and seals are meant for the covenant people to be certain of God’s commitment to them. They were not meant for God to remind Him of the covenant, because God is faithful and showed commitment in fulfilling His promises even though the covenant people did not show faithfulness to Him.

#### 2.5.3.2. Commitment and obedience

There were worship rituals and feasts that accompanied the institution of the covenant relationship between God and His people. The covenant people expressed their thankfulness and commitment to God in worshipping Him. Kingdon (1973:16) also makes the point that God deals with that people whom he purposes to redeem based on covenant, by declaring and manifesting himself to be their God. Therefore, the call to obedience should be seen as "the manifestation of grace which, as the New Testament clearly shows, calls forth the loving obedience of those who enjoy the blessings of the covenant." Covenant did not only mean worshipping God in the worship rituals, but it encompasses the whole life of God's people. They had to obey Him as a nation, as family and individuals in all the things that they did.

"It is the Bible's response to that kind of religion that reflects and justifies some social structure, certainly one function of religion in the ancient world. The cult of Marduk in Babylon, for example, was intended to celebrate the pre-eminence of Babylon among the nations. The participation in the cult was based on their representation of the deity; their earthly rule was kind of guarantee of the god's favour. Religious rituals had a similar function of ensuring this. In place of this Babylonian, and indeed Canaanite, view, the OT knows of one God who freely enters into a relationship, at once historical and ethical, with a people of His choosing. That people are not 'determined' by the necessities of an impersonal natural order, but relate freely to one knowable, personal, holy God, who reveals that the way of life consists in communion with Him. Covenant, therefore, becomes a way of speaking of all of life in subordination to a loving God ... more importantly, it reveals the unfathomable depth of the love of God, who endures a profound inner conflict (Hosea 11:8-9) for the sake of sustaining His relationship with

His people” (McConville *in* VanGemeren, 1997:753). The covenant, then, expresses the relationship connection that God has with His people, and what He does and will do for them.

## 2.6. Reformed theology and the covenant theme

The use of the covenant concept, as well as the reference to it, has a long history, which stretches back to the Middle Ages. There have been many theologians that have used the covenant concept and expounded on it, albeit in various degrees and attributing different values to it; however, in this section I tackle mainly the concept of the covenant among Reformed theologians of the Reformation and Post-Reformation period.

### 2.6.1. Before the Reformation (pre-16<sup>th</sup> century)

The covenant concept was expounded upon and used by the church fathers. Among them, Winston (2002:25ff) mentions Augustine and Irenaeus. Le Roux (1991:9) notes that Augustine used the covenant concept (*testamentum*) to show that from Adam there exists one universal church and that all the saved are saved through Christ.

### 2.6.2. The Reformers and the concept of covenant

With the arrival of the sixteenth century, Winston (2002:29) makes the assertion that the concept of the covenant was rediscovered – “It was at this time that the doctrine of the

covenants received great impetus from the inquiring and organizing intellects of the foremost Reformers.”

#### 2.6.2.1. Martin Luther

Martin Luther, in dealing with the question of knowing and finding a graceful God, actually deals with “die problematiek rondom ‘n persoonlike verhouding met die lewende God opnuut in die branding van die teologiese besinning gestel word’ (Le Roux, 1991:110). On the whole, Winston (2002:30) evaluates Martin Luther as having contributed minimally concerning the development of the covenant concept. The minimal contribution made by Luther is due to his discussions surrounding the Lord’s Supper, where he referred to the cup as the ‘cup of the new testament’, and Baptism, where he was of the view that God commits Himself to the believer in a gracious covenant, whilst the believer commits to faith in God.

#### 2.6.2.2. Ulrich Zwingli

Zwingli mentions the terms ‘testament’ and ‘covenant’ in developing his view on the Lord’s Supper as referring to the same thing. Winston (220:30) makes the observation that: “as early as 1523 Zwingli considered the two terms interchangeable and that they were really descriptive of the relationship into which God graciously enters with man.” Furthermore, as Zwingli developed his view on baptism, in drawing comparison between circumcision and baptism, he “saw that the covenant was not an obligation that man

entered into with God, but rather it was a relationship which God enters into with man” (Winston 2002:31).

#### 2.6.2.3. John Calvin

Calvin used the covenant concept, but not as an all-encompassing concept, on which his theology hinges. “In Calvin mention is made of the covenants. However, his theology was built on the basis of the Trinity, and therefore the covenant concept could not arise as a dominant principle in his case” (Vos, 1980:236).

Le Roux (1991:12) points out that Calvin refers to the concept when he distinguishes between general and special election. Calvin also refers to covenant when he supports the doctrine of child baptism, where he makes the point in the 4<sup>th</sup> book of his Institutes, that God did not make a covenant with Abraham only, but with Abraham’s descendants as well. Calvin considers the concept of covenant when he deals with the issue of infant baptism as typifying and corresponding to that of circumcision (cf. Calvin 1981, volume 2, book 4, chapter 16, para. 5 and 6: 531-2). He further discusses the issue of covenant in relating it to the false and true church (cf. Calvin 1981, volume 2, book 4, chapter 2, para. 12:313).

Winston (2002:33) takes the view that Calvin is the reformer who fully developed a covenantal hermeneutic as a tool for biblical interpretation, but the covenant “could not become the dominant principle of his works but a significant subordinate within it.” It should be asserted that for Calvin, the use of the covenant concept does not mean that one

should refer to Reformed as covenant theology. This is so, because “verbond is vir hulle gewoonlik genadeverbond ... hier is egter geen verbondsteologie in die sin van verbond as sentrale begrip van waaruit die Evangelie verstaan moet word nie” (Le Roux 1991:14).

### 2.6.3. The post-16<sup>th</sup> century

#### 2.6.3.1. Johannes Cocceius

Cocceius is the theologian traditionally credited with the title ‘Father of covenant theology’, although mistakenly so as is evident through modern research into the background and development of covenant theology (cf. Winston, 2002:35). Winston (2002:37) points out that Olevianus influenced Cocceius greatly. The prominence of Cocceius is due to the notion that he was the first to make the covenant idea the dominant concept of his system, of which Vos (1980:234) takes the view that there is some truth in that notion. Vos (1980:235) further specifies that: “What was new in Cocceius was not his covenant theology as such, but rather the historical conclusions for the ceremony of redemption which he drew from the covenant concept.”

Dutch, German, Swiss and British theologians further developed the concept of covenant (cf. Winston, 2002:38ff; Vos, 1980:237ff).

### 2.7. Concluding remarks

The covenant theme portrays the love and grace of God towards His people. The covenant theme expresses the relationship that God has with His people. The terms used in the Old and New Testament, to describe 'covenant' show this fact in a clear way. The fact that God cuts a covenant with people does not mean that God and man are equal in the relationship, but God is the suzerain and preserves man. The different and successive covenants, at the different times, were renewals of the one covenant of grace of God with His people. What we see is that God initiates the covenant relationship, and works to maintain the relationship between Himself and His people. This relationship culminates in the coming of Jesus Christ. The covenants are united in structure and theme, and they are unique and complement each other. In the covenant relationship, God does many things for His people, and promises and assures them of many things in the future; however, there is the call and responsibility of His people to be obedient and committed to serve Him alone. They serve Him as partners in doing His will and manifesting His glory. The theme of covenant indeed proves to be a wonderful view-point from which to view scriptural revelation and understand God's redemptive works. This is also seen in the various works of Reformed theologians and the place they ascribe to the theme.

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## Chapter 3

### The meaning of the church based on the understanding of the covenant theme

Having grasped what the covenant theme entails, we proceed to deal with the issue regarding the meaning of the church. In this chapter, we are concerned with what the church is in the light of the covenant theme and concept.

This section seeks to provide answers to the following questions: Why does the church exist? How did it come to exist? What is the church and what are the characteristics of the church? Therefore, in answering these questions, we will have look at the origin of the church; and then the characteristics or aspects of the church.

In doing so, the goal and outcome is that we will understand the church's being, and subsequently be able to deal with the different and misconstrued views regarding what and how the church is. This is so because the covenant theme provides us with a sense of history and destiny. This is so too when we look at what the covenant with God meant for Israel. Odendaal (1989:150) puts it thus: the covenant concept "provided Israel with the possibility to understand who they were, it enabled them to explain their past and to face their future. Covenant presents itself as a hermeneutical instrument and furnished Israel with the keys to interpret their total destiny. Covenant also provided meaning (sense) to

every good or bad event that happened to them. It tied prosperity to fulfilment of promise and catastrophe to chastisement, which they deserved because of their failures. Because of covenant Israel escaped absurdity and they knew where they came from and where they were going". Basically, the covenant theme connects Israel or God's people in the Old Testament with the church in the New Testament dispensation, and as in the case of Israel, the covenant then makes it possible to understand where the church comes from, and how it (the church and its members) should manifest the covenant relationship with God.

### 3.1. Origin and existence of the church

In looking at the origin of the church, it is necessary to understand what the word church denotes and where it comes from. It is important to understand why the word church is the term used to refer to God's people today because it brings to light some important insights to consider in understanding what the church is.

#### 3.1.1. The derivation and denotation of the word 'church'

The word church comes from the Scottish word '*kirk*' and German word '*kirche*', which are derived from the Greek '*kuriakos*', meaning to belong to the Lord (cf. Reymond, 1998: 805). In the Old Testament, the words used to denote the people of God were '*yedah*', which means 'to appoint' or 'to arrange a meeting'; and '*qahal*', which means 'assembly' or 'congregation'. In the case of Israel, a gathered people are described as *edah* or *qahal* and they are those who, in accordance with the covenant, live out and

demonstrate their obedience to Yahweh (cf. Spykman, 1992: 429; Van Esteves, 2001: 98). The Septuagint translates 'yedah' as 'synagogue' and 'qahal' as 'ecclesia' (cf. Reymond, 1998: 806; Spykman, 1992:429). People of God assembled and gathered before God due to their being redeemed by Him.

We find that the nation of Israel was constantly summoned to assemble before the Lord. Reymond (1998:809) fittingly stresses that "the national assemblies marking reformation, covenant renewal and the people's festal assemblies before the covenant God show the importance of the 'assembly' on occasions when they were observed. To 'enter into assembly and stand before God' was tantamount to being numbered, externally at least, among the people of God. Indeed the covenant assembly constituted the people of God and became the visible, external expression of the redeemed." This supports the fact that God's people are not invisible Their communing or assembling together before God manifests their belonging to God and their being in a relationship with Him.

In the New Testament, '*ekklesia*' is used to refer to God's people. Reymond (1998:805) further notes that biblical translators chose to translate the Greek word '*ekklesia*', which occurs some 114 times in the Greek New Testament, with the word church. The word '*ecclesia*' expresses vividly what it means to be people of, and a covenant community of God, i.e. God's redeemed possession assembled before Him. Further, the *ecclesia* is those called out by God. God calls His people, this means that He saved them and gave them life. Vorster (1994:514) expresses what the word *ekklesia* means: "dit beteken dat die gelowiges is uit die 'dood van die sonde' gered is. Dit is die primêre betekenis. Die roeping beteken dat die sondaar bevry word van die gevangenskap van die sonde; dat hy

in beginsel sy onvermoë oorwin en sy gebrokenheid kan hanteer ... die roeping beteken ook dat hy in 'n nuwe verhouding tot God staan ... die nuwe verhouding tot God bring ook 'n nuwe verhouding met ander gelowiges mee." The word *ekklesia* further expresses that the church is the believers, God's people that gather before and in the name of God. The event of their gathering is not their focus, but, as Van Esteves (2001:100) rightly points out, "their gathering is an expression of their identity as those who have been called by God ... it is the community of people gathered around God as their centre, who meet regularly at a given place and a given time for a given purpose."

The word 'church' helps us to recognize the church as a people called and redeemed by God; they then express their devotion and gratitude to God through worshipping together.

### 3.1.2. God's purpose in making the church exist

The church did not come out of nowhere, neither is it a human invention, but on the contrary, the church owes her existence to God, who within His unfathomable knowing, planned and executed the means for the church to come into being. This is what one sees throughout the Scriptures, from the preparation in the Old Testament, to the fulfilment of that end in the New Testament. That is why one can understand Stibbs (1959:7) in saying, "the chief end of God in the creation of man was to have a people of whom He could say: I am theirs, and they are mine. I will be their God and they will be my people." Stibbs (1959:10) further makes clear the observation that it is God's unmistakable purpose to have a people of His own; and "by His amazing grace it is the utterly undeserved privilege of all who belong to Christ to belong to this community, the people

of God.” Even though man fell into sin, God saw fit to elect some and choose for Himself a people for Himself. Kuiper (1966:21) indeed supports this by saying that “in the counsel of God the church existed from eternity.”

In having a people of His own, God calls His people into a personal relationship with Him. The people of God (the church) call upon God’s name (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:2). The church is in a personal relation with God on both a corporate and individual level, in a formal and an informal way. The marriage covenant or union between husband and wife ‘near-perfectly’ illustrates the relation between God and His people. Stibbs (1959:8) explains that “for as man chooses a bride and voluntarily invites a woman to become his, so we find that God has freely acted, according to His own will and pleasure ... furthermore, God has solemnly and repeatedly pledged Himself in covenant to the children of Israel.” God wanted and started a relationship with His people, His church, by making relationship with them. God initiated, established and maintained the relationship with His people.

That is why one can understand the Scriptures as bearing the remarkable story of the way in which God still continued with the purpose of gathering His people, even after, and in spite of, man’s fall into sin. “In the Bible we learn how, in a fallen and sinful world, in and through earthly history, God is still gathering for Himself a people, a people to whom He is pleased to give Himself and the enjoyment of His abiding presence as their God” (Stibbs, 1959:7). God chooses and gathers some among mankind who is fallen and depraved, so that no age is left without experience of His mercy.

Indeed, this contrasts with and dismisses the views that regard and date the beginning of the church with the coming of Jesus Christ or the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Spykman (1992:422) makes the point that indeed the church was not born on Pentecost, although – “with the outpouring of the Spirit, the *qahal*, the consolidated people of God in the Old Testament, became the *ekklesia*, the ‘called out’ body of believers in the New Testament. This historical redemptive transition reflects both continuity and discontinuity with the past. At Pentecost the church was not born, but reborn. An updating took place.” This is so because God’s people were there even before that, and at Pentecost it was a culmination of God’s revelation and relation to His people. The point is clearly made in the Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 21 (in dealing with the article of the Apostles’ Creed about the holy catholic church), where it says, “God, out of the whole human race, from the beginning to the end of the world, gathers, defends and preserves for Himself, by His Spirit and Word, in the unity of the true faith, a church chosen to everlasting life” (cf. Williamson, 1993: 94). Throughout history, God worked in grace to call His people.

One can see God’s purpose of gathering for Himself a people of His own, and building His church throughout the Bible, starting from the Old Testament.

### 3.1.3. God building His church in the Old Testament

In the initial stages i.e. the Old Testament, God, in His providence and by His Spirit, deliberately acted in such a way that He prepared men’s minds for the proper appreciation of the ultimate fulfilment of His purpose in Christ. The Old Testament is a

record of God's special dealings with a chosen people, and in that, one finds a pattern revealing itself, which further indicates the governing principles and the successive stages of the divine plan.

The church has been existent throughout the different dispensations. It was there during the patriarchal period. "In the patriarchal period, the families of believers constituted the religious congregations; the church was best represented in the pious households, where the fathers served as priests" (Berkhof, 1958:570). There was a distinction between the children of God and the children of men. "At the time of the flood the church was saved in the family of Noah ... And when true religion was again on the point of dying out, God made a covenant with Abraham, gave unto him the sign of circumcision, and separated him and his descendants from the world, to be His own peculiar people" (Berkhof, 1958:570). Indeed, in the Old Testament, the history of God's people, Israel, begins with the election and call of Abraham. God did it out of predetermined pleasure. "Also, this initial movement of God towards Abraham indicates and emphasizes that God elects and calls men individually, by name, one by one, into intimate personal relationship with Himself. In the ultimate vast community of God's people, therefore, every individual member is meant similarly to be sure of his own personal election and calling." Stibbs (1959:11).

The book of Exodus complements the witness of Genesis, where one finds that God not only deals with a single individual only, but with a whole community. God redeems people to be His people. This is what happened to the Israelites, when God redeemed and delivered them from Egypt. After the exodus, the people of Israel constituted the nation

of God. Stibbs (1959:12) appropriately points out, "Before they could fully become God's people, and belong only to Him, they had to be redeemed." In Exodus 6:6 and 7, it says, "I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am the Lord your God, who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians." The nation of Israel manifested the church or God's people in the Old Testament, as part in the stages of God's revelation and relationship with His people. However, "the church did not yet obtain an independent organization, but had its institutional existence in the national life of Israel" (Berkhof, 1958:570).

We have to understand that before God sent His Son, He had to prepare men's minds to appreciate what He was intending to do in saving humankind. "His treatment during the Old Testament period of a chosen race as His special people, and their connection, by His providential ordering, with a promised land and a holy city, are all figurative of the ultimate truth and correspond to the divinely predestined, heavenly realities, namely God's choosing of an elect people in Christ, and they being in possession of an eternal inheritance in the heavenly Jerusalem or true city of God" (Stibbs, 1959:51). Indeed, in the Old Testament Israel denotes the people in covenant with Yahweh; and *ekklesia* (church) denotes the people in covenant with Yahweh in the New Testament.

Then, can we then speak of two churches in the Bible? Did God have the one church in the Old Testament (i.e. Israel) and now in the New Testament, the *ekklesia*? How should

we view and understand the choosing of Israel as God's people in relation to the existence of the church in the New Testament?

3.1.4. The relation and unity of the church of the old and new covenants (the new and old Israel)

The covenant theme provides us with the evidence that there is an inherent link between Israel, as the people of God in the Old Testament, and the Christians, or the people of God in the New Testament. This is so because God continued to gather for Himself His own people. Berkhof (1958:571) maintains, "The New Testament church is essentially one with the church of the old dispensation." Kuiper (1966: 23) supports this point: "The church of the new dispensation is the continuation of the church of the old dispensation". Christ's church embraces all the ages of human history. McConville (*in* VanGemeren, 1997:754) suggests that Paul in Romans 9:11 considers the relationship between Israel and the Church. McConville's view appears to be that neither of the two remain as separate entities - nor that the church 'replaces' Israel; rather, "the church is in strong continuity with the ancient people, as a new realization of the covenant." The church is the new Israel and "counterpart of the Israelite community" (Van Esteves, 2001: 87).

Although the old and new Israel is different from one another, where the new supersedes the old, one has to recognize that there is continuity between the old and the new. The true Israelites of the Old Testament times belong to the one Israel of God, just as surely as do present-day believers in Christ. Paul makes this clear in the picture he uses in Romans 11:17ff, where the original branches of the olive tree were Jewish. When they

were fruitless, they were broken off in judgment, and wild olive branches ingrafted into the olive tree. One has to understand that “the divine mercy which makes it possible for unworthy outsiders to be brought in, equally makes it possible for Jews who have been cast out because of their unbelief to be reinstated, if only they will come, as Gentile outsiders come, to acknowledge Christ, and to believe in Him” (Stibbs, 1959:59). This is so because Christ is the cornerstone and foundation of the church (God’s people), started by God from the beginning of time.

### 3.1.5. Christ’s relation to and work in the building of the church

God Himself has chosen in Christ from before the foundation of the world to have a people who are to be peculiarly His own, who are ‘to be holy and blameless in his sight’ (cf. Ephesians 1:3-6). The one true church is the church of God’s eternal purpose. It consists of the elected and saved in Christ.

#### 3.1.5.1. Christ the promised One of the Old Testament

In the Gospels, there is evidence of Jesus being the promised Messiah, as witnessed and hoped for in the Old Testament. During His public ministry, Jesus unmistakably acted and preached as the One whose calling and purpose it was to establish a new community. With this goal in view, Jesus prepared for it during the whole period of His ministry, by gathering around Himself a circle of disciples, and by significantly ordaining twelve (cf. Mark 3:13-19) to be His constant companions, and thus providing for the beginning of the foundation of a new Israel. It was necessary to build a new community or nation, as

God renewed His commitment to His people, in fulfilling His purpose and intent of saving man.

Many of the Jews rejected Jesus, in order to hold fast to their earthly temple and ceremonial law. They failed to understand that the ceremonies and the laws in the Old Testament were pointing forward, to what Christ fulfilled. The things they were holding on to had served their purpose as figures of the truth, as represented in Christ. God raised a new Israel (a spiritual seed). In Matthew 21:43, Jesus, in response to the unbelief of the Jews and their leaders, says, "I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit."

#### 3.1.5.2. Christ the founder and foundation of the church

Jesus is the founder of the church. In the New Testament, the church is also God's assembly and is "specifically founded on Jesus Christ as the Messiah and Son of the living God and on His confessing apostles as His authoritative teachers of doctrine" (Reymond, 1998:836). In Matthew 16:18 (on the occasion that Peter confesses Jesus as the Christ) Jesus says, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it." About the simple statement: 'I will build my church', Stibbs (1959:37) suggests that it reveals the Lord's intention to have a church, and also makes us aware that "He is the beginning and the end of the true church, both her author and her owner. He does the building; and the church which He builds is for Himself." The two essential elements in the building of the church is acknowledgment by

men of His Person in considered confession and self-committal; and the accomplishment of His work, a work that involved facing death, and triumphing over it in resurrection.

#### 3.1.5.3. The good shepherd who gave His life to His flock

Christ is the shepherd of the church. Jesus explains His relation with His church as being that of Shepherd and flock. As the good Shepherd, Jesus willingly gave His life for the sheep. He is the great shepherd of the sheep (cf. Hebrews 13:21). "Those who share in the one flock, which thus emerges, possess all their individual and corporate privileges because of their common personal relation to Christ. Their new life and experience, their new fellowship with one another, become theirs in Him. Its full enjoyment and expression depend upon the active maintenance of their personal relation to Christ in both dependence and devotion" (Van Gelder, 1994: 170).

The true church is the community upon which Christ has set His love, and for which, He gave Himself, to purchase it to Himself and to God, to sanctify and cleanse it by His blood shed on the cross. Christ did away with the enemies of His people, that were enslaving His people i.e. sin and its penalty, death.

#### 3.1.5.4. Christ is the Head of the body

The church is also described as a body, with Christ as the Head (cf. 1 Corinthians 6:12-20; 10:14-22; 12:4-8; Colossians 1:15-20, 24-27; 3:15; Ephesians 1:10,22,23; 2:16; 5:22,23).

All the parts of the body are to be joined to Christ if they are to fulfil their particular functions. They are nourished by being connected to Christ as the Head. Ephesians 4:15ff says, "We will in all things grow up unto him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work." Colossians 2:19 supports this point by adding that by not serving others, the person has lost the connection with the Head, to which all the parts of the body (members of the church) are united: "He has lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow." Therefore, by refusing to be part of the body, one severs himself from the head; by disconnecting from the church, one disconnects from the Head i.e. Christ.

Stibbs (1959:41) cautions against the overemphasis of the body metaphor because there are some of those who give unhealthy prominence to the church, the special ministers and ordinances of the church. "They virtually teach that relationship to Christ, and the reception of life and grace from Him, are to be enjoyed through being joined to the Church, and through depending on these other members of the body whose special ministry it is to mediate Christ and His grace to the body as a whole. The dangers of such a teaching being accepted, with all its consequent errors in thought and practice, are increased, and made almost inevitable, if the 'body' phraseology about the Church is interpreted literally, and then applied generally, instead of being – as it plainly should be – interpreted metaphorically, and then applied within the limits of the particular use and explicit qualification of the metaphor made in the relevant scriptural passages. For,

important as fulfilling his place in the larger fellowship of the whole body is, both for every member and for the church as a whole, it is also important to remember that Christ has promised to be personally accessible and to give Himself to seeking souls both one by one, and in twos and threes.”

Nevertheless, the metaphor of the body shows and suggests that the different members complement one another. That’s what Stibbs (1959:40) seems to redress in saying, “they have a measure of interdependence. They are meant to realize and to enjoy life in Christ together, and in the service of one another. But the place of each member in the body, both his vital connection with it, and his power to function in it in his own particular way, depend on direct personal relation to Christ as Head. Living functionally in the body is not entered into just by being connected with the body. Every member must be vitally and personally connected with the Head”. Therefore, when many Christians are together, as all sharing in this common personal relation to Christ, they are referred to as one body. Romans 12:5 says, ‘So in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.’

#### 3.1.5.5. Christ is the true vine from which the branches are to draw nourishment

The fact of Christ being the vine is pointed out in John 15:4 and 5, where Christ says, “Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.” Stibbs (1959:39) then explains the significance of Christ’s

words by explaining that: “He made it explicitly plain that individual life and fruitfulness, as well as one’s place in the fellowship which He thus unites and makes one, depend on direct personal abiding in the personal Christ Himself.”

Christians, and the Christian church, are described as being ‘in Christ’. They are saints ‘in Christ Jesus’ (cf. Philippians 1:1). God makes every blessing of theirs ‘in Christ’ (cf. Ephesians 1:3). Their baptism is a sign and seal of initiation ‘into Jesus Christ’ (cf. Romans 6:3). They have ‘put on Christ’ (cf. Galatians 3:27). They live all aspects of life ‘in Christ’ (cf. Colossians 2:6, 7). They are to show love, render appropriate submission and service to one another ‘in the Lord’ (cf. Romans 16:2; Ephesians 6:1).

### 3.1.6. The presence and activity of the Spirit in the church

Christ gave the promise that His Father will send “another Counsellor to be with you for ever – the Spirit of truth” (cf. John 14:16), who “will guide you into all truth” (cf. John 16:13). These promises came true with Pentecost. The Spirit unites and binds the church with the Father (cf. Galatians 4:6) and with Christ (cf. 1 John 3:24). Furthermore, the Spirit empowers the church “to serve as a witness, model and agent in the coming of the kingdom, which encompasses our entire life in God’s world” (Spykman, 1992:424).

The Holy Spirit is given to all who believe, “the body of believers as a whole shares in Spirit-baptism (1 Corinthians 12:12-13)” (cf. Spykman, 1992:428). Paul, in Romans 8:9, makes the similar point by declaring, “if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ.”

In considering the work of the Holy Spirit in making the church exist, we must not think the Spirit's activity happened only in the New Testament. Reymond (1998:313) notes that there are many striking references regarding the work of the Holy Spirit among covenant people of God.

Having dealt with the issue of how the church came about, it is now fitting to tackle the matter concerning the way the church is or should be, as it manifests its covenant relation with God.

### 3.2. Characteristics and aspects of the church

There are characteristics and features that manifest the meaning of the church, and of how the church should be. It is of utmost significance that this section deals with the characteristics that the church, being the covenant community of God, must manifest.

#### 3.2.1. The unity and community of the covenant people

The essence of the church is not in the external organization of the church, "but in the church as the *communio sanctorum*" (Berkhof, 1958:564). The church is simply the community of the saints; it is the community of those who believe and are sanctified in Christ, and who are joined to Him as their head. The church as a communion of saints is united under the Headship of Christ. Calvin (Institutes 4, 1, 6) says, "For if they are truly persuaded that God is the common Father of them all, and Christ their common head, they cannot but be united together in brotherly love, and mutually impart their blessings

to each other". The unity of the covenant people of the church is firstly with Christ as the Head, and then it is with each other as body of believers (cf. Reymond, 1998:839).

In connection with the issue of communion of saints, which believers must manifest visibly, Van Esteves (2001:96) refers to people of God as having a 'sense of community'. This is something that is taken from the examples of the early Christians. The sense of community manifested itself in their worship and in the totality of their lives. This is what Israel, as covenant community of God, manifested. Their communion with God was expressed in communing together, before the Lord and among each other. In the next chapter we will elaborate further on this point in dealing with the issue of worship.

However, Spykman (1992:442) throws a spanner in the works by pulling us back to recognize the reality of the disunity among believers. He points out that "the church's oneness is certainly not a self-evident fact of life. We are struck rather by its all-too-obvious absence. Disunity among ecclesiastical bodies constitutes a crisis of major proportions in an age captivated by the ecumenical spirit." This leads many young people leaving the church, as Atwood (1998:21) explains, "young people aren't particularly happy with South Africa's Reformed churches these days, and sometimes for good reason. Instead of receiving clear, vibrant biblical teaching, some youth are fed empty theological clichés while witnessing their divinely appointed role models engage in ecclesiastical cat-fights that rival the carnally minded power struggles between non-Christians." The leaders are preoccupied with fighting each other and disunity that affect the carrying out of their task to preach the Word of God clearly and appropriately.

Therefore, Spykman (1992:443) suggests that we get closer to Christ – “The closer we get to Christ, the closer we get to each other. This is the central biblical norm for church life, its antidote to a splintered Christianity. The unity of the church centres on Jesus Christ.” In trying to point to the reality of the unity that is absent, Spykman seems to be arguing for another ideal, which is right, that of unity in Christ. However, Spykman (1992:444) goes on to admit that history is punctuated with painful reminders of earnest efforts aimed at reforming a deformed church, which ended in separation. Unity is an imperative and an indicative (cf. Spykman, 1992:334), which means that we should strive to maintain unity, based on what we believe and confess.

### 3.2.2. The visible and invisible feature of the church as God’s people

The church is both visible and invisible i.e. the church of God is on the one hand visible, and on the other hand invisible. This does not mean that there are two churches, but rather this refers to two aspects of the one church of Jesus Christ. The church is said to be invisible because “she is essentially spiritual and in her spiritual essence cannot be discerned by the physical eye; and because it is impossible to determine infallibly who do and who do not belong to her” (Berkhof, 1958:566). The distinction of the visible and the invisible church allows one to distinguish between the elect and non-elect without dividing the church, since no one is able to know who the elect are. Indeed, the talk of the visible and the invisible is not about two churches, but it helps the visible church to come “face to face with the concept of a spiritual, invisible church, which depends on God’s sovereign election for its existence” (Baker 1933:24). Baker (1933:5) refers to John Calvin, where “Calvin insisted that the invisible church is not to be thought of as distinct

from the visible.” Baker (1933:13) makes the point that “Calvin shared his distinction of the church as visible and invisible with Zwingli. However, Calvin emphasized the importance of the invisible church more than Zwingli ever did. For the concept of the invisible church, Calvin followed the Pauline conception of the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 1, 2, 5; Colossians 1). For the idea of the visible church or the covenant community, Calvin relied upon the covenant of the theocratic community in the Old Testament ... Calvin also followed many ideas of Augustine’s *City of God*, where Augustine spoke of a pilgrim society made of those who love God.” The mention and reference to the visible and invisible church is something that is taken from the Scriptures, and is not merely a theological invention. That is why Calvin (Institutes 4, 1, 7) says, “I have observed that the Scriptures speak of the church in two ways. Sometimes when they speak of the church they mean the church as it really is before God – the church into which none are admitted but those who by the gift of adoption are sons of God, and by the sanctification of the Spirit true members of Christ.”

The invisible church consists only of those who are predestined and, as a consequence, believe. Also, the invisible church is not just composed of those who have lived since the New Testament times, but its limits include all the elect from the beginning of the world: “It not only comprehends the saints who dwell on the earth, but all the elect who have existed from the beginning of the world ... the name church designates the whole body of mankind scattered throughout the world, who profess to worship one God and Christ” (Institutes 4, 1, 7). Faith in Christ is a necessity for entrance into the invisible church, and election will always include the means whereby a person who is elected will come to faith. It is essential to be part of the invisible church.

In the Old Testament, one finds that God's chosen people form a distinct and visibly recognizable community. "Such distinction was made the more unmistakable by outward marks which all could recognize, such as belonging by birth to the seed of Abraham, being circumcised, and joining in the public and regular acknowledgment of God, for example by calling upon the name of the Lord, keeping the weekly Sabbath, and observing the annual ordinance of the Passover. By such marks as these, it was easy for others to distinguish the Israelites, and to know whether any individual did, or did not, belong to them" (Stibbs, 1959:16). It is clear that even in the Old Testament, there is distinction between the true believer and the false believer, between the true and nominal (in name only) members of God's community. This is what even Paul attests to when, in Romans 9:6, he mentions that: "It is not as though God's word had failed. For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel." In other words, not all who belonged to the visible community were genuine Israelites. It is difficult to recognize the true and false member, and to be able to draw dividing lines in classifying each individual.

Indeed, the inevitable distinction between the visible and the true is, in principle, still one of great relevance to the community of God's people, which is to be found in Christ's church.

We can recognize the members of the true church by their confession of faith, by their godly manner of living, and by the partaking in the sacraments (cf. Institutes 4, 1, 8). Calvin was not interested in some abstract definition of the church's essence, but he was interested in showing that true spirituality and faithfulness as seen in the 'notae' are the

evidence of a true church.” Calvin’s point is not that the true church has no form, but its form is not as the Romans conceive it to be. Its form consists in the pure preaching of the word and the administration of the sacraments, which Christ instituted. David Willis (*quoted by Baker, 1933:19*) supports this point by saying, “Moreover, Calvin’s concern for the church is not for the abstract theological question of what is its essence but for how, in fact, the people of God live in the world and how they can be recognized.”

Baker (1933:20) makes the observation that in Calvin’s thought, “the invisible church is seen to encompass only those persons who are among the elect, whether living or dead. The visible church is the organized church that is seen by men; the invisible church is the organism that is only seen by God (as to its exact membership). The invisible church is composed of those who are gifted by the Holy Spirit for service, while the visible church is the God-ordained sphere and avenue for that service. The invisible church is seen through the ministry of the true visible church. In the visible church there are included hypocrites, while in the invisible church only those who are willing subjects of Christ are included.” The two aspects of the one church are constantly striving to converge, as the members of the visible church are exhorted to seek conformity with the ideal.

Furthermore, Berkhof (1958:566) adds an important point in mentioning that the invisible church “naturally assumes a visible form.” The church becomes visible in Christian profession and conduct, in the ministry of the word and of the sacraments, and in external organization and government. “These are not two churches but one, the *communio sanctorum*, but the invisible church is the church as God sees it, a church which contains only believers, while the visible church is the church as man sees it, consisting of those

who profess Jesus Christ with their children and therefore adjudged to be the community of saints” (Berkhof 1958:564).

The visible church consists of all who are enrolled as church members, and they are easily determined through their names appearing on the registers of churches. “However, it cannot be denied that there may be, and actually are, unregenerate persons *in* the visible church. Hence, it may be said to comprise both believers and unbelievers, such as are truly Christians and such as are merely professed or nominal Christians” (Kuiper 1966:26). It has to be maintained that membership in the visible church does not guarantee eternal life. The invisible church consists exclusively of those who by the grace of the Holy Spirit have been born again.

There are various viewpoints surrounding the problem of the true and false Christians that are part of the visible church. Throughout the history of the church there have been groups which insisted on what is known as the ‘pure church’ idea. They “restricted the membership to such as were conscious of having been born again and could give a more or less glowing account of their conversion” (Kuiper, 1966:28). This places undue emphasis on subjective religious experience. It also overlooks the inability of men to determine who are regenerate and who are not. On the other hand, there are others who have adopted a ‘laissez-faire’ policy and simply ignore the problem posed by the existence of non-believers in the visible church. Therefore, this means that they would exercise no judicial ecclesiastical discipline on those manifesting wrong conduct. However, we must know that “the Word of God unequivocally commands the church to cast out wicked members” (Kuiper, 1966:29). Kuiper (1966:29) continues to point to a

third view, which is correct, which espouses and admits that the visible church cannot be kept perfectly pure. It “insists firmly that the church is in sacred duty bound to keep itself as pure as is humanly possible and to that end must exercise discipline.”

After having dealt with the invisible and visible aspects of the church as God’s people, this leads us to look at the other aspect, closely related to this one: that of the church as organism and organisation or institution.

### 3.2.3. The church as an organism and organisation/institution

The Bible speaks unmistakably of the church as both an organism and an organization or institution (cf. Kuiper, 1966:114). Scripture (in Romans 12:5 and 1 Corinthians 12:13) likens the church to a living human body. It conceives of the church as an organism. It is just as clear that the Bible regards the church as an organization. Kuiper (1966:115) points to the references of the church as a building, which ties in with what Christ said in Matthew 16:18 – “on this rock I will build my church” – which points to Christ’s church as an external organization. It was also the practice of the apostles to form an ecclesiastical organization wherever there was a group of believers (cf. Acts 14:23).

Nowhere does Scripture speak of an unorganized group of Christians as a church. Therefore it is hardly proper to “suppose that one group of believers constitutes the church as an organism, while another group of believers constitutes the church as an organization. A voluntary association of Christians conducting a Christian day school, constituting a Christian labour union, or establishing a Christian recreation centre is

sometimes denominated the church as an organism, but such language does not excel in precision. It has no basis in Scripture ... The truth of the matter is that one and the same group of believers is at once the church as an organism and the church as an organization” (Kuiper, 1966:115). The church is both an organism and an organization.

This ties in with what Van Esteves (2001:93) sees as unsatisfactory in the Kuyperian view of the church as organism because the contention is made that the church is present wherever believers are gathered or where they confess their faith, and this reduces the church to a sum total of its individual members. Van Esteves (2001:93) then corrects this view by maintaining that the church is foremostly a community; “even though it is made up of individual parts it may not be defined in terms of each individual part. The Scriptures do not permit us to say that where this part or that part is there is the church. This is like saying that where a South African is there is South Africa ... the individual part does not define the whole.” Then, it is correct to call them church members in action in the world.

There have been Christian groups that have stressed that the church is an organism to the practical exclusion of the truth that it is an organization (cf. Kuiper, 1966:116). They would then maintain that they are only bound by their common faith; they would have nothing to do with ordained ministers and other officers. Kuiper (1996:116) rightly notes that the logical conclusion of this viewpoint is the “total disregard of the ideal of organizational unity for the Christian church as a whole.” This also leads to the conception of independency, according to which “each congregation is a law unto itself and is independent of every other congregation” (Kuiper, 1966:117). Then on the other

hand, Kuiper (1966:117) points to the other viewpoint, where there are some who stress the fact that the church is an organization out of all proportion to its being an organism. This is evident where you find that the pastor is more concerned about the size of his church than about its purity. "He (*the pastor*) is more interested in church management than in teaching the Word of God, and he would rather be known as a good organizer than as a faithful shepherd" (Kuiper, 1966:118). Therefore, we have to hold to the Scriptural teaching that the church is both an organism and an organization, and this helps to maintain a balanced view of the church.

Sometimes the emphasis on the organism aspect of the church is to correct the focus on the church as institution or the cultic aspect of the church. This is where one compartmentalizes Christian life, and focuses on church activities and neglects the other aspects and spheres of life. Spykman (1992:430) makes the point that "being church means more than maintaining a societal institution. Christian life is not confined to participation in the ministries housed in a building on the corner with its pulpits and pews, its liturgies and collection plates. For basically the church is people, and secondarily structures." Taking that into consideration, we must hold in balance the organism and organisational aspects of the church, because as Van Esteves (2001:94) rightly observes, "the church as the people of God needs some form of organization. An amorphic mass of people without some organizational structure does not constitute church."

Then, we must recognize the fact that the church is at once an organism and an organization. This means that it is invisible but also visible, heavenly and therefore not of the world, yet for the present definitely in the world.

#### 3.2.4. The holiness and distinctiveness of God's people

The biblical image of the church as a holy nation or people (cf. 1 Peter 2:9) expresses most visibly the church's self-understanding and position in the world. We also see this manifested in the existence of Israel as God's people, where there was the expectation of holiness, the consequence being that they are distinguishable as God's people from among the other peoples.

Regarding the matter of holiness, we must understand that believers are not perfect, and so is the church. "The church is not perfect. Its individual members are imperfect, and collectively they cannot be otherwise. The very best church member is a poor Christian; therefore the very best church has many spots and wrinkles" (Kuiper, 1966:56). That is why one finds some mistakes and defects in the church. We must understand that although perfection, or complete sanctification and holiness is not achieved in this life, it remains the obligation of the believers and the church to strive toward that goal. Calvin (Institutes 4, 1, 17) makes it clear by saying, "the Lord is daily smoothing its wrinkles, and wiping away its spots ... its holiness is not yet perfect ... the church makes daily progress, but is not yet perfect; it daily advances, but as yet has not reached the goal."

The church, then, has to aspire after holiness and perfect purity, while God attributes to them the purity that they have not yet fully attained. The members of the church have been regenerated by the Holy Spirit, and “in principle they are perfect, and their lives manifest the beginning of the perfect obedience” (Kuiper, 1966:57). The church must constantly be at war with the enemy that would destroy its holiness (the world, the devil and the flesh). In addition, the church “may not rest satisfied with the degree of holiness that it has attained. It must ever strive toward greater heights. To progress in holiness the church must endeavour more deeply into the truth of God’s holy word, and must maintain its holiness by disciplining those of its members who indulge in flagrant sins of the world” (Kuiper, 1966: 59).

The church is holy because it is set aside and taken or ‘called out of the world’ (*ecclesia*) for the service of the holy God. This is an honour, which God bestows on His church. While not *of* the world, the church is by divine appointment *in* the world.

### 3.2.5. The inclusivity and exclusivity of the church

The other feature of the church, which is raised by looking at the theme of covenant, is that of inclusiveness and exclusiveness.

The church in the past periods insisted upon faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as a prerequisite of membership (cf. Kuiper, 1966:281). That makes the church an exclusive organization; however, the church is also characterized by inclusiveness. The church is inclusive because firstly it should include all races of men. This is so because in Christ all

the separating diversities have ceased. "The ultimate solution of the race problem is found in Christianity. No matter how great the differences among the races may be, in Christ they are one, and believers of all races are members of His body" (Kuiper 1966:282). This means that every congregation should manifest the body of Christ, and subsequently, there should be room for men of all races, not only in the church universal, but also in every constitutive portion of the universal church. Secondly, the church should include all strata of society. The church should embrace persons from every stratum of society and must not favour one over the other. This is what one finds James advocating in James 2:1-4. Thirdly, the church should be inclusive of different Christian persons. This is so because it takes all kinds of true believers to make a church. "There is need of quiet members and talkative members, meditative members and bustling members, conservative members and progressive members, timid members and courageous members, members with five talents and members with one talent, sanguine members and phlegmatic members, constructive critics and enthusiastic promoters, leaders and helpers" (Kuiper, 1966:288).

Jones (1998:97) continues to stress that one of the great things about the church is that it isn't self-selecting. The church is a mixture of ages, races, colours, economic circumstances, life experiences – a rich, diverse melting-pot of individuals made in the image of God, being built into a wonderful temple that will reflect his character to the surrounding neighbourhood. We must guard against discriminating and making distinctions, where one chooses some and excludes others.

### 3.3. Concluding remarks

Indeed, the covenant theme provides us with the background and foundation to understand what and who the church is. To understand what the church is, is very important. The covenant theme helps us to understand that the church is not a modern-day phenomenon, or something started by people. However, the church is God's institution, because He works to gather His people, who belong to Him. The church's origins stretch way back, because from time immemorial it was God's intention to have people of His own, His church, His nation. He worked through the Old Testament, revealing Himself to the Israelite nation as His nation, and using them to bring Jesus Christ. The covenant theme and concept helps us to understand that the believers and people of God in the Old and New Testaments are one, and are founded on Jesus Christ. This is so, because through Jesus Christ, God works to gather people to Himself.

Then, we are also able to understand with insight the aspects that characterize the church. The church is one and manifests as a community and nation of God. The unity is based commonality of God's work and in serving one Lord. The church is also visible in that it is organized, but it is also invisible. More so, the church, as the covenant people of God, is called to be holy in expressing their oneness with God. These aspects are expressed in the way the church functions.

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## Chapter 4

### The value and function of the church

With the background of understanding the covenant theme and meaning of the church, we proceed to look at the value the church has (or is supposed to have) for believers and in the world.

It is important to know and understand the reason and function of the church, to be able to be a part of the church. Jones (1998:31) states: “knowing what the church is for is pretty vital if we’re going to ally ourselves with it. After all, we don’t buy a major consumer durable – fridge, washing machine, CD player, car – without knowing what it does, how to get the best out of it and what it’s going to cost to buy and run it. It is amazing how few of us do anything approaching a similar analysis with our churches – though, given the state of many of them; it’s just well we don’t.” To understand what the church is for and its worth, one can ask the questions: If your church disappeared tomorrow would you miss it? What would you miss? Therefore, in establishing and determining the value and worth of the church, one has to look at what the church does (or is supposed to do). This will help in affirming the value and worth of being a member and active participant in the church.

#### 4.1. The value of being God’s people

We must recognize that there is great value and significance in being part of God's people. The value is due to the fact of God redeeming His covenant people to be His own.

1 Peter 1:18 and 19 makes it clear that "it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect." The way in which God redeemed His people, His church has a very high price – He gave "His one and only Son" (cf. John 3:16). We must see the value of the church in the fact that the church came into existence at great cost. This shows that God's love is great and wonderful, because He 'spent' a lot to redeem His people. The importance of the church is not due to the people being of high price, because maybe they were important, but it is due to God's love and the way in which He showed that love in redeeming His people.

We must also recognize that the church is of great worth and value because it belongs to God. God is great, mighty and powerful, and it is wonderful that He wanted to save and relate with His church as His special possession or people. Peter declares that the church is "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9; and see also Isaiah 43:21). Therefore, Reymond (1998:868) makes it clear that the church "is to view itself primarily as a 'trophy' of God's mercy and grace, and sees its first duty to be that of living doxologically before God, praising him in both its belief and its behaviour for his superabounding grace." To belong to God, who calls His

people to serve Him is a great thing. Spykman (1992:356) explains the fact that the church is chosen for God's service by saying that "for the church as well as for Israel, God's electing love comes as a wholly unmerited favour. It is a gift, not an achievement. It therefore radically excludes every notion of self-aggrandizing privilege. It leaves no room for superiority complexes. God's free sovereign grace is rather an urgent call to service, even sacrifice and suffering, certainly a summons to share these riches with others."

#### 4.2. Devotion and worship of the covenant community

Because man is created in God's image (cf. Genesis 1:26), the first obligation of every man is to worship and serve the Creator (cf. Romans 1:18-25). Then, Reymond (1998: 868) asserts that if this is man's first obligation simply because he is God's creature, all the more, "in view of the fact that the church has experienced God's redeeming mercies, is it the church's first obligation to worship and serve the Triune God (Romans 12:1)."

Belonging to God implies that the church must worship in the way that God wants and directs. This is evident in the covenants that God made with Israel, where He gave them regulations and laws that directed and regulated the way in which they were to worship Him. This further stressed their uniqueness and distinctness as God's people, by worshipping Him alone in the way He commanded.

Jones (1998:32) notes that one of the reasons why people won't like to attend church is because of the style of worship, and this leads to dissatisfaction felt by young people

because of irrelevance of church culture to their lives. Then, in the face of that kind of situation, the church might want to employ and practice worship in a manner that is attractive to the 'world'. In most cases, the church ends up losing that distinctive character of God's covenant partner. Therefore, Reymond (1998:872) insists that Christians must do in worship only those things which God commands, clearly perceiving that 'what is not commanded is forbidden' and just as self-consciously rejecting the dictum that 'what is not expressly forbidden is permissible'; He goes on to maintain that "this approach to worship will produce a worship that is biblical, spiritual, simple, weighty, and reverent. It will produce a worship centred upon God, substantial and life transforming. It will prohibit a worship that is superficial in character, complicated by ritual, stimulated by props, and flippant tone." God reveals the way in which He wants to be worshipped; this means, therefore, that the church, as God's people, must strive to reveal their being in a covenant relationship with God.

One of the dominant images of the church in the mind of the faithful and the undecided alike is that the church is about worship, and that worship has mainly to do with singing. Jones (1998:34), in giving comment on the Greek work *leitourgeo*, which was used in the surrounding culture to describe duties performed towards God, points out that it was used 15 times in the NT: 6 of those times it refers to what the Jewish priests did in the temple; 3 of them refer to Christians giving aid to needy people (Romans 15:27; Philippians 2:25,30); 1 to secular rulers' service to society (Romans 13:6); and 2 to the help given by angels to God's people. He (Jones, 1998:34) comes to the conclusion that the word seemingly was not used to describe what the church did when it gathered together. Even in the letters that Paul wrote, Jones asserts that Paul does not expound a view that a

person goes to the church primarily to worship. This is so because “worship in the early church was a way of life, not a special activity undertaken once a week on a holy day” (Jones 1998:35). The implication of this is that worship is a matter of lifestyle, of living the truth in a right relationship with God. Therefore, Jones (1998:37) maintains that when the early Christians met together, “they did not do so to receive forgiveness for sins or to pray to God or to worship him. All those things they received through Jesus and enjoyed at any time and in any place. They did not gather for religious reasons to do religious things.” Devotion and worship to God, in all spheres of life, is characteristic of the covenant people or the church. However, the gatherings and worship services of the church play a vitally important instrumental role in the life of the church members. Spykman (1992:432) asserts that the “proclamation of the gospel, which is the heartbeat of worship, is meant to equip God’s people for implementing the ‘liturgy of life’ all over creation (cf. Romans 12:1).” The worship services serve to strengthen the church members in fulfilling their callings in different areas of life and during the times and days when they are not gathered together.

Now, the reality that worship encompasses the whole of a person’s life, and not only certain times and places, may lead some to think that the church is not necessary for their lives of faith.

#### 4.3. The worthlessness and irrelevance of the church

In present times, many people (Christians and non-Christians alike) reinvestigate and ask about the significance and value of the church. Some Christians believe that they can

effectively exist and function as Christians outside the church, or not being actively involved in it. This view is supported by the sociologist, Schreuder O, (in Vorster, 1991:472), where he questions the relation between religion or spirituality and the church, and then stresses that church membership and active participation in the church is not necessary and essential for a person's faith. This tendency culminates in inquiring whether Christian religion needs the church.

However, the concept of church fought or reacted against is not the biblical ideal-type of what the church is and how it should be, but it is against the traditions that have evolved over the ages. This point is made by Vorster (1991:473) in saying that "met 'kerk' in hierdie vraag word nie die bybelse ideaal-tipesie omskrywing van die kerk bedoel nie, maar die kerk as tradisie, as oorgegewenheid uit 'n vorige kultuurperiode ... Volgens hierdie seining is die kerk 'n historiese werklikheid; 'n groot struktuur met baie simbole, rituele, tradisionele uitsprake en vorme wat al hoe minder verstaanbaar word."

Informality and 'looseness' is advocated over and above the rigidity and formality of the church. "Teenoor die tradisionele gestalte van die kerk word gesoek na soepelheid en informaliteit as reaksie teen die 'rigiede' en 'formele' kerkwees van die verlede (Vorster, 1991:472). Vorster further points out that "kerklikheid as betrokkenheid by die instituut is nie meer van belang nie en geld nie noodwendig meer as groeibodem vir godsdienstigheid nie." The church is seen as unnecessary to one's spirituality, religiosity, and faith; in other words, it hinders more than it contributes.

No wonder Jones (1998:14) notes that there seems to be increasing numbers of people for whom the church is more negative than positive, and this is evident in the growing band of used-to-be members of churches – “There is a vast ‘congregation’ of Bible-reading, Jesus-loving people who just do not go to church on a Sunday or who do not take an active part in the life of their local church. These people would maintain that they are Christians, but they do not attend any church; they read the Bible, and try to do what God wants at work and home – but they do not see the point of church. Their attitude might be due to the unpleasant experiences they might have encountered with and in the church, and consequently do not see the point of joining the church.”

Then there is the view that further sees the church’s activities as that belonging to the era of the first Christians. R.G. Scholten (*in* Vorster, 1991:475) stresses that point: “Volgens hom hoef kerklike deelname nie altyd direk vanuit die instituut te wees nie. Die tyd van direkte deelname (byvoorbeeld erediens en kerkbesoek) was funksioneel in die vorige eeu, maar dit kan in die veranderde verhouding van kerk tot samelewing nie meer geld nie”. This view is further supported by evidence that there are church members who do not ‘really believe’, and there are those who are outside the church who seem to be ‘better believers’.

In giving an answer or solution to remedy the irrelevance of the church in modern society, Schreuder (*in* Vorster, 1991:474) suggests the doing away with the institutionalism of the church. He goes on to say that “die Christelike geloof ‘n onsigbare grootheid moet wees wat in die wêreld aanwesig is en dat dit nie tot vergestaltung hoef te kom in ‘n sigbare kerklike insituut nie.”

The church is further viewed as being a closed circle, which excludes other people. Therefore, because of that experience, and for the church to be better, some see it as a movement that has to do good social actions. Hoekendijk (in Vorster, 1991:474) propagates this view where he mentions, "I believe in the church which is the function of the apostolate that is an instrument of God's redemptive action in this world." Therefore, according to this view, "kan die kerk dus nie 'n struktureel kenbare geïnstitutionaliseerde *religious community* wees nie, maar 'n beweging wat geken word aan sy sosiale dade" (Vorster, 1991: 474).

#### 4.4. The importance of the church

The visible church is at the same time important, and believers must be loyal to the visible church, because the visible church has good effects on the elect and the reprobate, because the visible society of the covenant has an effect upon the lives of all those who come in contact with it. "The visible church does function to govern the passions of men generally and the elect particularly, by teaching piety and by cooperating with the civil government in the disciplining of immorality" (Baker, 1933:48). The visible church is a vital body that does have effect on men, because of the glorified Christ, who works through it in communicating grace to men. "God has so willed to use the visible church to minister the Word to men that the rest of the world is like a spiritual desert. The visible church is important because it is the mother who feeds, cherishes, and instructs the elect, while it stands forever as the judge of the reprobate" (Baker, 1933:48). Baker (1933:12) rightly points out "Calvin's emphasis upon the visible church was due to his conviction

that Christians need the ministry of the true visible church in order to prosper spiritually. The ministry of the Word and Spirit is found in the holy activity of the visible church.” Baker (1933:22): “Calvin held that God uses the visible church as His instrument, both in the salvation of the elect and in the leavening of society. The church is at once the product of God and His instrument for sanctification. Also, Calvin did not mean to leaven the loyalty of the saints for the visible church; his teaching that there is no salvation outside the church is found in a context where the church is spoken of as ‘the mother of believers.’” Calvin did admit the possibility of men being saved apart from the ministry of the visible church; however, he did not mean to give men license to depart from the visible institution (cf. Institutes 4, 1, 5).

The visible church is the place where faith is born and where it is nourished. The visible church is the sphere of God’s redemptive activity. Calvin believed that the visible church is the instrument used by God to make manifest the invisible church and its benefits. To the visible church, Calvin believed, was given gifts and gifted men that God employs in His activity of encountering men personally (cf. Institutes 4.1.1). Because God is active through the preaching of the Word and through the administration of the sacraments, Calvin believed that wherever the visible church carried on its proper activity there would be effects. “God uses the visible church to carry out His eternal decrees. He either brings men to salvation by means of the visible church, or He hardens them” (Baker, 1933:30).

The purpose of the church, which makes it very important and always relevant, is the edification (the building up) of its members through their God-given ministry to each other. Jones (1998:39), in explaining the purpose of the church, compares the church with

a “feeding-station to nourish the followers of Jesus Christ. It is a builders’ yard where lives are constructed that will point to Jesus through the working week. It is a place of nurture, support, help and sustenance for Christians seeking to live as Jesus did at home and work. It is a place where we learn of the mercies of God to us in Christ, and where, in wonder and adoration, we offer him our lives, lock, stock and barrel.” Furthermore, “church is not the goal of Christian faith; the transformation of the world is. Church is not the end (or goal) of faith; it is a means to an end ... the church is the primary way that the story of what God is doing in the world gets told in the world” (Jones, 1998:43). Spykman (1992:432) also resorts to popular metaphors to explain the function, purpose and importance of the church – the church “is a recruitment station to enlist ‘soldiers of the cross’, a training centre, equipping God’s people for wielding ‘the sword of the Spirit’ in a life of Christian discipleship. It is, once again, a refuelling, recharging station along that highway of life known as the Christian pilgrimage.”

The church is important and necessary because the church is God-assigned to dispense the means of grace – the Word and the sacraments. God uses one means to impart faith to men – His Word, the Bible. Romans 10:17 say, “Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.” It is the function of the church to feed its members, as a mother feeds her children. “By the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments the church nurtures her members and builds them up in the faith ... the fact remains that God has committed to the church the means for spiritual growth” (Kuiper, 1966:113). The church has to plant and water, but it is God that gives the increase. The church has the glorious distinction of labouring together with God unto the salvation of men (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:6-9).

We must understand that “church is a gift. It ought to be a place of life and growth, a place where we meet, get to know, learn from, help, support, and are kept going by people we wouldn’t normally come across, people God has chosen to put in the melting-pot that is his body on earth, the church” (Jones, 1998:105).

#### 4.5. The value and worth of the church is in fulfilling its marks

There are basically 3 marks that distinguish the true church from the false one. These distinctive marks characterize God’s people, in following Him and serving Him. The marks are basically delineating the functions of the church, through which one can establish and affirm the value and worth of the church. This ties in with what one sees in the covenant community of God in the Old Testament and in the church of the New Testament.

##### 4.5.1. The value of the church’s preaching the word

The church is founded on Christ, and it is founded through the preaching of the Word. Preaching refers to the instruction or preaching of sound doctrine. “Whenever a preacher is used as God’s mouthpiece to preach the promise of forgiveness through Christ, God makes the promise and whenever His promise is heard with faith, the hearer’s sins are forgiven” (Baker, 1933:31). Preaching is the most important of the services of the church. “Men react differently to the Word because the Holy Spirit makes the human heart receptive, and He only does that for those who are elected. As a consequence, the Word

softens some (the elect) and hardens others (the reprobate). It saves the elect and condemns the reprobate” (Baker 1933:32). The wicked reject the Word and thus stand condemned and under the judgment of God (cf. Calvin’s Institutes 4.1.5).

God is present in His church, building it up by the preaching of the Word. “The effect of preaching of the Word on the elect, therefore, is edification. The goal of this preaching is one of faith and obedience” (Baker, 1933:32). This preaching is so important in Calvin’s eyes that men are forbidden to forsake the preaching of the visible church because they can profit enough from private meditation (cf. Calvin’s Institutes 4.1.5. The believers are furnished with the necessary arms for defeating evil and wickedness through the preaching of the Word.

The church is also a place of learning. This is done through preaching and bible study, but more so through modelling. “Church is a place for mentoring. Not only are we taught the faith, but we also see the faith modelled around us in the lives of people who have been Christians longer than we have, or who have a different life experience from ours” (Jones, 1998:100).

#### 4.5.2. The value and effect of the church’s administration of the sacraments

Although God is capable of making His people perfect in an instant, He willed that the process of sanctification be incomplete in this life. That is why there is need of the aids in growing in grace. God uses the visible church to administer the sacraments. “Therefore, men are commanded to use God’s means of grace and are not to speculate whether God

could use other means to save men with. The church is the divinely ordained institution, and that institution is authoritatively and permanently binding upon us” (Baker, 1933:35). A sacrament confirms the promise of the Word and seals the promise the Word gives.

#### 4.5.2.1. Baptism

The primary benefits of baptism are for the elect. The sacrament of baptism is “the occasion for the baptized to demonstrate to everyone that they are identifying themselves with Christ’s death and resurrection and also His blessings. Baptism identifies a person as desiring to belong to Christ and to be identified with the visible church. The sacrament serves as the token of several things such as: the believer’s cleansing from sin; the believer’s union with Christ; and serves as the ordinance of entrance into the visible church” (Baker, 1933:40). In baptism, the faith of the believer is confirmed, and assurance of forgiveness is given, which was already received at the initial time of salvation. Children of believers are to be baptized. However, baptism does not insure the future of salvation, and therefore, provision must be made to bring the child up in such a way that he will believe. Then, Atwood (1998:22) sees that baptism is a precious gift for those baptised as infants, because of the fact that the Christian child has a share in the covenant blessings, but with those promises come curses when the person breaks the covenant by being unfaithful.

Baker (1933:42), based on Calvin’s theology, sees the value of the church’s administration of baptism on the reprobate as well: “That benefit is that of being baptized and then becoming a member of the society of the covenant. The reprobate person

therefore becomes privileged to be set apart as a member of the visible church. As such, he is often the subject of prayers of the godly and he is the receiver of the Word of grace, the gospel. However, these benefits do not affect a real regeneration, although the person may be moulded into a better citizen and individual.”

#### 4.5.2.2. Lord's Supper

The Lord's Supper is the sacrament that shows the mystery of Christ's secret union with the devout. The Lord's Supper also serves to establish and strengthen faith in God's forgiveness toward the believer, and testifies the believer's union with Christ (cf. Calvin's institutes 4, 17, 2). “For Calvin, the believer is continually in communion with Christ but the Supper is a time of strengthening and of joyous remembrance of the passion, and also on occasion when believers grow with Christ into one body” (Baker, 1933:46). Regarding the benefit that the reprobate gets from the Lord's Supper, there is none whatsoever – cf. Institutes 4.17.33 and 1 Corinthians 11:27, 29. Whenever the reprobate partakes of the Supper, which is sweet and delicate for the pious, it becomes a poison for them. “In the Supper, the wicked bring judgment upon themselves by participation. What consequently happens is that the reprobate become their own accusers and hears witness of their own condemnation” (Baker, 1933:47).

The blessings of the visible church are reserved primarily for the believers, the elect. The proclamation of the Word and the administration of the sacraments are meant for the elect's edification. “The reprobate may receive the blessing of being made a member of the covenant society by baptism, but generally the sacraments are empty for the one

without faith. The reprobate do not receive a great deal from the Word and they are judged by the offer of grace” (Baker, 1933:47).

#### 4.5.3. Exercise of discipline

“Discipline must be exercised by the visible church to enforce the exhortations of the Word. The sermon is followed by personal exhortations, and when these fail, reproof must follow and finally excommunication ... the aims of discipline are glorifying God, keeping the fellowship pure and the repentance and reconciliation of the offender” (Baker, 1933:33). Believers are teachable and brought to submission by the discipline of the church, due to the operation of the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, as in the ministry of the Word, when enforcement of the Word is attempted in discipline, the reprobate are only hardened.

Some distinction must be made between God’s chastening of His sons and His destruction of the reprobate. “This aspect of the conditional character of the covenant emphasizes both the typological form of the experiences of God’s people under the old covenant and the temporary aspect of the life of God’s people in the present age. Under the old covenant, the chastening of God’s sons often was intermingled with the destruction of the reprobate” (Robertson, 1980:248). In either the situation prevailing under the old covenant, or the situation prevailing under the new, the certain outcome of God’s covenant is not disturbed. The presence of threat of judgment on the condition of disobedience does not imply inherently a collapse of the certainty that God ultimately will succeed in His covenantal intention to redeem a people to Himself.

Churches are regrettably full of people who make assumptions about each other, people who judge others by their appearance. “By picking and choosing who in the kingdom of God we’ll relate to, we are breaking the law of God (cf. James 2:8-9). But we are also robbing ourselves of the opportunity to grow in the faith through forming deep, life-changing relationships with people we are not usually attracted to” (Jones, 1998:104).

#### 4.6. Concluding remarks

The church is relevant and useful in God’s plan of saving His people. The church is important because of the fact that it *is* God’s chosen people and nation. Then, it has to express its being the covenant people of God by devoting to and worshipping the Lord. The value and importance of the church is primarily based on the fact that it belongs to God, and it serves Him. Although there are many defects in the way the church is, this does not take away its importance in God’s scheme. It serves the believers in building them up in faith and service to God. This is done in preaching the Word, administering the sacraments and exercising discipline. The church is not only important and relevant when one looks at the believers, but it is also important in society at large. It acts to show society the right way that God wants His people to live.

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## Chapter 5

### Conclusion

The covenant theme in Scripture provides an axis by which we can gain deeper understanding of the church. The covenant theme closely connects with the kingdom theme, and both the concepts are like two sides of a coin.

Is the covenant theme a viable concept to use in understanding the church? Can the covenant concept contribute something in determining the meaning and value of the church? And if so, how?

In the preceding sections, we looked at the covenant theme and tried to relate and apply what the covenant theme entails in understanding what the church is and how important it is.

In looking at the covenant theme, the covenant does prove to be dominant throughout the Scriptures, especially in the Old Testament. This is so, not only due to the two-part division, but also due to the different covenants made in different times in the Old Testament and leading to the New Testament. Our understanding of the covenant is not due to etymology or comparison with other forms of covenant or treaties of that time, (of which there is sufficient evidence that there is similarity) but it comes from the revelation and administration of the covenant in the different times and contexts. This is where we

see God making covenants with Noah, Abraham, Moses, David and in the new covenant, through Jesus. The different covenants are unique, and exhibit freshness and newness in God's dealings with mankind. In those covenants, we see the abounding love and grace of God. God is the One who initiated the covenants, and in so doing, started relations with His people, even though they faltered repeatedly. That is why it is somewhat acceptable to maintain that the covenants were 'intervention measures in crisis situations', as is the view of Stek (1994). However, as shown, that is not the whole story, because the determinative element of the covenants was also put forward, as in the case of Bartholomew (1995). We must also recognize that the covenants determined, shaped and formed a relationship between God and His people, as well as the fact that they acted in formalizing and renewing the existent relationship between God and man. Furthermore, the divine covenants exhibit strong unity with each other. We must not see them as many covenants, but as part of one covenant with God, in which He reveals Himself and redeems His people. The divine covenants in the Old Testament culminate in the new covenant in the New Testament. The fact that Christ fulfils promises of the covenants and prophecies made in the Old Testament bears testimony to the continuity and unity between the divine covenants. Of course, it is clear that the new covenant, in Jesus Christ, is very superior and new, compared to other covenants, and also so, when looking at the whole scheme, in which God relates with His people. The covenant idea makes it explicit that God enters in relationship with His people, where the loyalty and obedience of God's people are required. Furthermore, the covenant reveals the reality of community and communion, based on God's grace and redemptive actions, and manifested in the communion the people show in serving God together. The covenant also makes it clear that there is a partnership between God and His people. God is the

great, strong and faithful partner, whereas man is weak, small and unfaithful. Even so, God binds Himself to His people, with the purpose that they will serve to advance His will and kingdom.

The covenant theme then helps us to notice these following points regarding the meaning of the church:

Firstly, the church belongs to God. The church is not a human invention; it is not primarily a human institution.

Secondly, the church is not a 'nowadays' phenomenon, but its history goes a long way back. The church existed before the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. The Old Testament believers formed God's church in the Old Testament.

Thirdly, the covenant idea helps us to link Israel with the New Testament believers. This is where we must take cognisance of the truth that the promises made to the Old Testament people include the New Testament believers. Abraham is the father of the New Testament believers as well.

Fourthly, the covenant idea helps us to gain deeper insight into the communal aspect of being God's people. The covenant community is one. This is due to God's grace that leads to the subsequent fellowshiping of the covenant people.

Fifthly, the church, as a covenant community, is holy and distinct, in the sense that it clearly shows that it belongs to God. This is evident in the following of regulations that direct the service and obedience to God.

Sixthly, the covenant idea shows that the covenant community was visible. However, this does not mean that everyone was a true member of the covenant community. This helps us to recognize and understand the visibility-invisibility and organism-organization aspects of the church.

The covenant theme is useful in maintaining the worth and value of the church. This is so because it spells out the functions that the church must carry out as the covenant community of God. This is evident in the following manner:

Firstly, the church is of value because of what God did for it, and due to the way in which it came to exist – the expensive redemption price. The church is of value because it is saved for the purpose of being God's possession, and of serving God in the world. The views and comments made by the sociologists and different people maintaining that the church is worthless, useless and irrelevant in today's world are false. This is so because views are based on a wrong understanding regarding what the church is and what it should do, as spelled out by being in the covenant relation with God.

The church is furthermore important for the believers and in the world. The church serves to edify and nourish the believers and therefore, it is highly suspect if a believer does not see this purpose.

Secondly, the covenant idea shows us that it is indeed important to gather as covenant community. These gatherings are not ends in themselves, but serve to help and strengthen believers in serving God, carrying out their mandate in the different areas of their lives.

Thirdly, the covenant idea strengthens the marks of the church i.e. preaching the Word, sacraments and discipline. The covenant theme shows that God provides the church with means to His grace.

Therefore, the covenant theme establishes and maintains that the church is useful and very important.

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