

CIRCULAR LETTER,

BY

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The elders and messengers of the several churches met
in Association at Philadelphia,

October 23d, 1781.

To the several churches in union -with this Association, send
greeting.

DEARLY beloved in the Lord, — In the connection of divine truth, and progress of our order, we come to write to you, in the next place, of what, in our Confession of faith. Chap. VII., is called God's Covenant; by which is meant the transactions of God with and towards man, respecting his duty and happiness; more especially the exertions of infinite wisdom and mercy, in the contrivance and establishment of the scheme of redemption, for the recovery and salvation of lost man, through a precious and blessed Mediator.

Passing over the prohibition to Adam, respecting the forbidden fruit, which is commonly called the covenant of works, his being the public head and representative of his posterity, as he certainly was, Rom. V. 12, we come to the intimation made to him

immediately after the fall, respecting the seed of the woman, that it should bruise the serpent's head ; upon which is founded the notion of the covenant of grace made with Adam, which was nothing else than a bare discovery, revelation, and manifestation of the eternal counsel of God, respecting man's recovery, carrying in it a promise of eternal life. No stipulations and re-stipulations, no conditions whatever ; nothing more nor less to be performed on Adam's part; nothing but a glorious manifestation, as was said before, of the rich grace and mercy of God in Christ. And the farther discovery of this rich grace, that was made to the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, was exactly of the same tenor ; a promise, that in their seed all the nations of the earth should be blessed. Gen. xii. 3 ; xxvi. 4 ; xxviii. 1-1. Not a word of a covenant, or any conditions. Hence, in the New Testament, where reference is had thereunto, the same language is constantly used ; as for instance : " For the promise is unto you and your children," Acts ii. 39. " Of this man's seed has God, according to his promise," Acts xiii. 23. " For the hope of the promise made of God unto our fathers," Acts xxvi. 6. " Heirs according to the promise," Gal. iii. 21, 22, 29. " The promise of eternal inheritance," Heb. ix. 19. " To perform the mercy promised," Luke i. 72. " And this is the promise that he has promised us, even eternal life," 1 John ii. 29. For all the promises of God in him, are not yea and nay, if you will, and if not, in the strain of a covenant, but yea and amen, 2 Cor. i. 20. In like manner, we read of gifts : "If thou knewest the gift of God," John. iv. 10. " Free

gift," Rom. v. 15-18. "Unspeakable gift," 2 Cor. ix. 15. " Gave gifts unto men," Eph. iv. 8. Hence, also, the administrations of grace are called the Old and New Testament, because a testament contains free gifts and legacies made over, and insured to the heirs. It is true we read in Isa. lix. 21, "As for me, this is my covenant with them." And in Jer. xxxi. 31-34, " I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, after those days, saith the Lord," speaking of the gospel day. With respect to which we observe, First. That in these places you see nothing that looks like a covenant. Secondly. That the word , covenant, in the Old Testament, sometimes means a statute, ordinance, establishment, appointment and decree, as in Jer. xxxiii. 2 ; Gen. ix. 9-11 ; Numb, xviii. 19. Thirdly. That the use of the word covenant might be more consonant with that legal dispensation, than that of a testament. Fourthly and lastly. That it might seem odd to speak of a testament, while the testator was yet living, as the Apostle hints, Heb. ix. 15, 16. But when our Saviour was about to lay down his life, and considered himself as already dead, he lays aside the use of the word covenant, and takes up the more proper word testament, saying, " This is the new testament in my blood," Matt, xxvi. 28. And ever afterward, the word testament was constantly used, when reference is had to the dispensations of grace, as you may see in the margin of your Bibles. And besides, when we consider the nature of a covenant, we clearly see there could be no possible room for such a thing ever to exist between God and man, respecting spiritual things; for the idea of

a covenant necessarily includes these things following : 1, Mutual wants in the parties covenanting. 2, ^Mutual benefits enjoyed by them. 3, Power in each party to perform the conditions of the covenant. 4, Each party is brought under obligations to the other, by the performance of those conditions. 5, Merit on both sides. 6, and lastly. Neither party ought to be under prior obligations to the other, respecting the conditions of the covenant ; of which particulars not one can be admitted in the present case.

As for the Abrahamic covenant, as some call it, it only respected temporal things, and the externals of religion, though it had the promise of the Messiah tacked to it, and was therefore called the covenant of promise, Eph. ii. 12. It was with regard to selecting Abraham and his descendants from the other nations of the earth to a national church state, and the enjoyment of the land of Canaan, the peaceable and quiet possession of which they were to enjoy, upon condition of their observing the external rituals of that dispensation, and being obedient, which they promised, and had in their power to do. And this was the covenant of which they received circumcision, an external mark or token, as a seal to confirm it, Gen. xii. 18 ; xvii. 7, 8 ; xxvi. 4 ; xxviii. 14 ; Exod. xix. 3-9 ; xxiv. 3-8 ; Lev. xxvi. 3, 40 ; Deut. v. 29. The word covenant seems to have been introduced into the Christian system of religion, because it favored of a legal strain, so acceptable to those who are fond of terms and conditions to be performed by man ; while others that do not favor legalism,

yet too incautiously make use of the word covenant, in bare compliance with custom ; though these are generally careful to inform us, that it means a testamentary covenant, a free, absolute, unconditional covenant, which is much the same thing as to say that it is no covenant at all.

The sum, then, is this, that the glorious dispensations and manifestations of the rich grace and mercy of God in Christ, contain free, absolute, and unconditional promises of the free, rich, and unmerited gifts of God, conveyed to the heirs as legacies, in a testamentary way.

Having thus shown you, dear brethren, that there can be no such thing as a covenant between God and man, respecting spiritual blessings and service, we come now to consider what foundation there is to style the glorious transactions between the persons of the ever blessed Trinity, respecting man's recovery, a covenant ; and here, undoubtedly, there is some appearance of that kind. If ever there was a covenant of grace, this is it. If ever there was a covenant of redemption, here you will find it. And, on the part of Christ, a covenant of works too: forasmuch as the great work of redemption, the fulfilling of the law of God, in behalf of his people, for whom he undertook as their surety, was performed by him. Psalm cxix. 122 ; Isa. xxxviii. 14.

The passages of Scripture that speak of this glorious transaction as a covenant, are these following : " And my covenant shall stand fast with him," Ps. lxxxix. 28: " And give thee for a covenant of the people," Isa. xlii. 6 ; xlix. 8 ; "Neither shall the

covenant of my peace be removed," Isa. Ivi. 4, G ; "As for thee also, by the blood of thy covenant," Zech. ix. 11 ; "Even the messenger of the covenant," Mai. iii. 1. But then it is spoken of under other views, in these that follow : " According to the eternal purpose, which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord," Eph. iii. 11 ; "And the counsel of peace shall be between them both," Zech. vi. 13; "For I have not shunned to declare unto you the whole counsel of God," Acts xx. 27 ; " The immutability of his counsel," Heb. vi. 17; "Being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God," Acts ii. 23. And besides, Christ is said to be foreordained to that work, 1 Pet. i. 20 ; sent, John x. 35 ; to have received a commandment, John x. 18 ; was therefore a servant, Isa. xlii. 1 ; cheerfully obeyed, Ps. xl. 7, 8 ; and was rewarded, Ps. ii. 8 ; Phil. ii. 9. From the whole, then, we see, that there was a counsel held in eternity, even from everlasting, respecting the recovery of man ; that the Triune God did then contrive, find out, adjust and settle, speaking after the manner of men, the whole plan and scheme of that great and glorious work, who should be saved, by what means, and after what manner ; that the Son of God. the second person in the Trinity, should be a Mediator, should undertake for his chosen ones as their surety, and should assume human nature, that he might make satisfaction to divine justice in their behalf; that all the gifts and graces necessary for the purpose should be treasured in him. Col. i. 19. That the blessed Spirit should co-operate in manifesting the whole to the world, and applying the same to the

chosen ones, namely, by enlightening their darkened understandings, -working in them faith and repentance, changing their vile affections, converting them from the service of sin and Satan, to the service of the living God, carrying on the -work of grace begun, and keeping them by the power of God, unto salvation ; by every means making them meet for the inheritance of the saints in light, and finally bringing them to the full possession of it.

Thus, dear brethren, we have briefly laid before you the plan of our redemption, as concerted in eternity, and brought into effect in time. You see the glorious covenant of grace, which was well ordered in all things, and sure. You see the Son of God appointed to the mediatorial work, and all grace treasured up in him for that purpose. You see him undertake, go through with it, and the Spirit co-operate to accomplish the whole. You see the dispensations of grace to man are free, absolute, and unconditional; the gifts of God dispersed in a testamentary way, free and firm. Nothing of works, but all of grace. Nothing of the will of man, but all of the will of God; that we might all, and at all times, cry grace, grace, and whosoever glorieth, might glory in the Lord.

O blessed and glorious scheme ! What a rich display have we here of the wisdom, justice, holiness, truth, mercy, pity, compassion, and condescension of God ! See the harmony of the divine attributes, in this stupendous plan, that is every way worthy of a God ! What shall we render unto him for such rich, unmerited grace ! Never to the endless ages of eternity, never

shall we be able to render adequate compensation. O that the love of God were abundantly shed abroad in each of our hearts, that we might for ever admire, with astonishment admire, his rich grace ; that we might for ever love, fear, honor, reverence, and serve him, with all our hearts unfeignedly.

" Now, the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is well pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen." By order of the Association,

Samuel Jones, Moderator,
Thomas Fleeson, Clerk.