

Westminster Larger Catechism

Question 34

Halifax, 23 March 2008

Q. 34 How was the covenant of grace administered under the Old Testament?

A. The covenant of grace was administered under the Old Testament, by promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the Passover, and other types and ordinances; which did all fore-signify Christ then to come, and were for that time sufficient to build up the elect in faith in the promised Messiah, by whom they then had full remission of sin and eternal salvation.

READ> Hebrews 11:1-40

Introduction:

Last week, we did a general comparison between the Old Testament and the New Testament administrations of the Covenant of Grace.

- I explained to you that when we speak of the Old Testament and the New Testament, we are talking about the two basic ways that the Covenant of Grace has been administered.
 - The Covenant of Grace is God's gracious covenant of salvation that he establishes with His elect after the fall in which He gives Christ to them through faith in order that they might be pardoned and sanctified.
 - Before Christ came, He presented Christ to them for salvation in the ways described in the answer to question 34...
 - and now that Christ has come and died on the cross for them, He presents Him to them as described in question 35.

Last week, I showed you that the essential difference between the old way (the Old Covenant) and the new is that now all those who believe know the Lord—from the least of them to the greatest of them.

- It is not that elect of the Old Testament did not know Him, but rather that they did not know Him nearly as well—not *Him* as crucified, but *Him* through shadows.
 - He had not revealed Himself so fully as He did when the Son of God was actually given to die for us...
 - It was then that we saw the love of God in a way that Moses and David and all the OT prophets had never imagined!
 - By comparison, the people in the OT did not even know Him.
 - What's more,
 - the revelation of Christ that was given to the Old Testament people was given to prophets like Moses who then spoke to the people.

- Now Christ Himself is mediator who speaks to us in His Word by the Spirit.
- The result is that we all know Him, from the least to the greatest, for we have all heard His voice when we receive the gospel...
 - the good news that He came and died for us and rose again.

But this week we are going to go back and look at how Christ was set forth to the people in the Old Testament—before He had actually come to this world and died on the cross.

- They had faith in Christ promised, even as we now have faith in Christ given.
 - And God presented Christ to them, as it says in question 34, in a whole variety of ways:
 - by promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the Passover, and other types and ordinances which did all fore-signify Christ then to come.
 - We will see that though inferior to what we have, this revelation of Christ to them was sufficient for them at that time in order that they might believe and be saved.

But perhaps some of you may wonder what profit it is to look at this topic?

- Why should we bother with looking at what the OT people had when it is so inferior to what we have now?
 - There are a lot of Christians today who get very little out of the Old Testament.
 - They find it puzzling when you explain to them that the early church sang the Psalms—for that is the Old Testament.
 - And when the Bereans checked Paul's teaching by searching the scriptures, they are amazed when they stop and think about the fact that the only scriptures they had was the Old Testament.
 - Obviously since most of the Bible consists in the Old Testament, this is an important thing to understand...
 - Of course we all want to benefit as much as we can from God's revelation, but if you do not see how it is relevant to you, you will not obtain much benefit.

So I want to start off tonight with a look at:

I. How New Testament believers may benefit from studying the Old Testament.

- A. First, see that New Testament informs us that the OT was written for us even more than it was the people who lived in those OT days!
 1. In Romans 15:4, Paul is talking about the problem of those who still felt bound to keep the Old Testament Jewish ceremonies...they were weak...

- and in speaking about this, he mentions that the purpose of the Old Testament is not to bind us to all those old ceremonies, but to give us hope...
 - He says that they were written for our learning!
 - **Romans 15:4: For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.**
 - The Old Testament scriptures paint the picture for us of how God dwells among us, of how he forgives our sins, and so on.
 - Of course they were written for the people who lived in those days,
 - but they were written especially for us.
2. In fact, now that Christ has come we are in a position to understand the OT better than the ones who lived in Old Testament times did...
- a. In 2 Cor 3, Paul tells us that the veil is taken away now that Jesus has come—when we have embraced Jesus as Saviour...
- **2 Cor 3:14-18: But their minds were blinded. For until this day the same veil remains unlifted in the reading of the Old Testament, because the veil is taken away in Christ. But even to this day, when Moses is read, a veil lies on their heart. Nevertheless when one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.**
 - Notice that he speaks here of the *reading* of the Old Testament...
 - Those outside of Christ have a veil so that they cannot see the true meaning.
 - They do not see the Lord Jesus reflected in the scriptures.
 - The Old Testament is for us, almost like an analysis of Christ whom we now know.
 - We can understand it better because now we have seen His glory
- b. Consider, for example, the command to love your neighbour...
- That has always been there...
 - But it was one thing to be told that in the OT;
 - but how much more meaningful it is now that we have Christ as our example!
 - In 1 John 2, John speaks of the command to love our neighbour as an old commandment that is also a new commandment...

- It is new because now we have a clear example of what it really means to love our neighbour...
 - We see how Jesus loved us and even went to the cross for us, and that simple commandment takes on a whole new fullness.
 - The veil is taken away when we behold the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ!
3. Consider how freely the apostles and prophets in the NT apply the teachings of the OT to us—they show that it is all for us.
- Let me give you some examples...
 - a. Take the moral commandments—
 - The apostles refer to them again and again.
 - They quote them as assumed—for example in Ephesians 4:25 that we looked at last week,
 - there was a quote from Zechariah to let each of you speak truth to his neighbour...
 - The apostle freely applies that to the New Covenant people at Ephesus.
 - And again this morning in Eph 4:26, there was the quote from Psalm 4 to “be angry and sin not.”
 - Again, it applies to us now as it applied to them.
 - The moral law of God does not change.
 - There are some who foolishly say that the moral commandments of the OT do not apply to us unless they are repeated in the NT,
 - but the apostles’ attitude is far different—they freely apply all the moral commandments of the Old Testament.
 - b. And they even take the case laws and apply them in principle to those who live in an entirely different situation...
 - For example, the OT says “you shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain”
 - Paul is writing to city people!
 - He is writing to city people who probably didn’t have oxen treading out grain any more than we do...
 - Yet, he takes this OT case law and applies it to the Corinthians that they might learn to support their pastors who teach them the word.
 - He shows that this principle is what God is concerned about—not oxen.

- c. And where does Paul go when he wants to speak about the nature of faith?
 - He goes to the foundation that is laid in the Old Testament...
 - He goes to the example of Abraham and David, and informs us that if we would be saved, we must have faith like them...
 - And he goes to Moses in Deuteronomy 30 and quotes that passage from him that says,
 - “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart.”

B. Secondly, see that Jesus Himself tells His disciples that the OT is about Him.

1. Hear what Jesus said to His disciples after He was risen from the dead:
 - **Luke 24:44-45: Then He said to them, “These *are* the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and *the* Prophets and *the* Psalms concerning Me.” And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures.”**
 - Do you see what this says?
 - After He was crucified and raised, it was then that He opened their understanding of the scriptures.
 - It was then that they saw that it was all about Christ!
 - This is the same thing that Paul was talking about when he said that the veil is now taken away.
2. Consider how important this is in our knowledge of Christ...
 - How do we speak of Jesus today?
 - He is called “our Passover”—how much more meaning that has to us today than it had to Israel!
 - He is called “the Lamb of God”
 - He is called our shepherd
 - He is called the redeemer
 - He is called our High Priest
 - He is said to tabernacle among us and calls Himself the temple—how much more meaning that has now that He has come in the flesh to dwell among us!
 - He is called the king
 - He is called the prophet like Moses
 - He is called the lion of the tribe of Judah
 - He is called the Saviour

- He is called the Judge of the earth
- Where did we get this language?
 - It is all introduced to us in the Old Testament.
 - Now that He has come, He fills out the meaning of all these terms for us with a fullness that was unknown to the people in the Old Testament...
 - but if we do not understand the meaning of these terms, then there is nothing for Him to fill out...
 - For example,
 - if we don't know what the lamb was used for in the Old Testament sacrifices,
 - It means little to us to be told that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.
 - Or, if we do not know what the Lord's anointed king was supposed to do in the OT,
 - we will not be able to so fully comprehend what Jesus does as our King.

II. With all this in mind, let's look at how the Covenant of Grace was administered under the Old Covenant dispensation.

- I will simply take a few examples to show how Christ was set forth by each of the various means mentioned in the catechism...
 - A. First, there are promises...
 1. The foundational promise in the whole of the Bible is "I will be your God and you will be my people"
 - a. Last week, I mentioned to you how this promise is coordinate with the two other promises:
 - "I will forgive their sins and remember their iniquities no more..."
 - and "I will write my law in their heart" or "I will give them a new heart so that they will delight in my ways."
 - b. The people of the OT had these promises, and almost everything that God did concerning them was related to these promises.
 - They experienced His forgiveness when He took them to be His people and dwelt among them in the erection of His tabernacle (tent) in the midst of their tents.

- He spoke to them and led them and defended them as His own people, and they were His people through forgiveness.
- He also taught them his ways and chastened them and gave them strength to live in obedience to Him.

2. In other words, they experienced the outworking of these promises—

- that God was a God to them, that He was reconciled, that He forgave them and made them to be His people, distinct from the nations of the world...

a. But they did not get to see the promise fulfilled.

- God promised to provide the sacrifice—to pay the penalty of their sins—but they did not get to see Him do it or how He would do it.
- This is what Hebrews 11 is speaking about when it talks about those who believed, but did not obtain the promise...
 - They had the benefit of reconciliation with God,
 - but they did not have the benefit we have of seeing how God is reconciled to us.

b. At the end of Hebrews 11, Paul says,

- **Heb 11:39-40: And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise, God having provided something better for us, that they should not be made perfect apart from us.**
- In other words, if Christ had not come, all of God's promises would have failed...
 - They had the promise of Him, but now we have Him.

c. But clearly, their faith in the promise of Christ was sufficient for them to have the forgiveness of sins...

- Many of them did not believe, and of course, they were not saved...
 - But those who did “obtained a good testimony through faith.”
 - God showed that He accepted them.

B. Secondly, there were prophecies...

1. This brought them closer to Christ,

- for they were told by prophetic word that Christ would come...
- That in mount of the Lord, God Himself would provide the sacrifice that would take away their sins.

- That in time, the Lord would bring the nations to the Son of David who would take David's throne and reign forever and ever—and that of the increase of His government there would be no end.
- That He would crush the serpent's head—that he would bring all his enemies under His feet.

TRANS> We could go on and on,

2. But can you see how all these Old Testament prophecies kept the hope of the Old Testament people alive?
 - It kept them looking for Christ, though they did not know His name...
 - It caused them to yearn for His coming.
 - And these same prophecies serve to give us great confidence today!
 - Our Lord actually foretold—hundreds of years before Christ came—that the nations would turn to Him...
 - and that He would come from David's line, and yet, be born of a virgin.
 - There is actually a detailed account of the crucifixion, before crucifixion was even practiced, in Psalm 22.
 - There is an account in Isa 53 of how he would suffer as a substitute for us and so take away all our sins.

C. Thirdly, there were the sacrifices...

1. These were begun right after the fall, for we find Cain and Abel offering sacrifices as a matter of course—
 - This would have never come to their minds if the LORD had not instituted the practice.
 - Neither would it have been proper for them to take it upon themselves to offer such things as this to the Lord.
 - Before the fall, there would have been no such sacrifices.
2. But why were these appointed for them?
 - a. We are not given an account of the original institution, but when we get to the time of Moses,
 - the reason is clearly stated...
 - The blood of these sacrifices is poured out to make atonement for the people's sins.
 - They are offered in place of the sinner.

- For example, in Lev 17:11, it says:
 - **Lev 17:11: ‘For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul.’**
- b. Each time these sacrifices were made, the people were reminded of their sins, but they were also reminded of God’s promise to forgive their sins.
 - Hebrews explains that because they were offered again and again, it made it clear to them that they were still waiting for the sacrifice that would take away their sins.
 - **Heb 9:6-10: Now when these things had been thus prepared, the priests always went into the first part of the tabernacle, performing the services. But into the second part the high priest went alone once a year, not without blood, which he offered for himself and for the people’s sins committed in ignorance; the Holy Spirit indicating this, that the way into the Holiest of All was not yet made manifest while the first tabernacle was still standing. It was symbolic for the present time in which both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make him who performed the service perfect in regard to the conscience—concerned only with foods and drinks, various washings, and fleshly ordinances imposed until the time of reformation.**
 - They were never meant to trust in these sacrifices,
 - They were clearly only temporary until the coming of Christ.
 - They only accomplished symbolic purification...
 - Christ would offer the real atonement.
 - But these symbols laid a foundation for what Christ would actually do when He came so His work would make sense to us.

D. Fourthly, there was circumcision...

1. Circumcision was given to Abraham as recorded in Genesis 17.
 - a. It was given by God to be a sign of the covenant that God had made with Abraham to identify those who belonged to God...
 - It was a sign that God was his God and that he was one of God’s people.
 - Now this could only be so through the forgiveness of sin, and as we have seen, that promise was already in place, and sacrifices representing Christ then to come were already offered.
 - But from the days of Adam—and again from the days of Noah,
 - many had drifted away from true reliance upon God to provide the sacrifice that would save them,
 - for they offered sacrifices,

- but did so to satisfy idolatrous versions of God that were paid off by means of sacrifice...
 - The covenant God made with Abraham was different because it was based on faith in what God promised...
 - It established that God would accomplish salvation for His people, and that in Abraham's seed all the nations would be blessed.
 - It was not to be what man provided or what man offered to God,
 - but what God provided for His people.
- b. Circumcision was fitting symbol because it pointed to the cleansing of the male organ of procreation...
- God was not promising that Abraham would no longer bring forth children who were sinners,
 - but the Lord was promising that He would cleanse Abraham's children.
2. This circumcision was never meant to be a mere ritual—or just a badge of physical membership.
- a. Therefore, Moses commanded the people to see that they had an inward circumcision to correspond with what was outward in the flesh...
- In Deut 10:16, he said:
 - **Deut 10:16: Therefore circumcise the foreskin of your heart, and be stiff-necked no longer.**
- b. It was a ritual that was to have a spiritual meaning that corresponded to it—namely, the cleansing of the heart or the new birth...
- But as this is something that they could not do themselves, Moses makes the promise in Deut 30:6:
 - **Deut 30:6: And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.**
- c. And this cleansing is something that Jesus does for all His own—all who are born again—
- In Colossians 2:11-12, baptism and circumcision are used interchangeably, and the spiritual circumcision is said to be done by Christ.
 - **Col 2:11-12: In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.**

- By using these terms interchangeably like this,
 - It shows that Christ cleansed their hearts (as He does ours) by the baptism of the Holy Spirit.
 - They had the same salvation.
3. So you can see by this that circumcision is just like baptism...
- a. We look to God to give us the cleansing of our hearts that is symbolised by the covenant sign of baptism...
 - We are baptised with water, but Jesus baptises with the Spirit....
 - And when the Spirit comes upon us, we are cleansed,
 - for He writes God's law upon our hearts so that we delight in it and He gives us faith in Jesus.
 - b. But you see from Moses' command and promise to Israel regarding the circumcision of the heart that Israel also had true salvation,
 - not by the mere sign, but by the inward work of God upon their hearts.
 - Just as with baptism, there were many who had the sign without the thing signified,
 - but still, the promise did not fail because of this...
 - Not all Israel was Israel in the same way that not every Christian is a Christian.
- E. Israel also had the Passover to represent Christ...
1. Here was a clear picture of a substitution of Christ, the lamb in exchange for us...
 - of judgement passing us by because of the blood of the lamb.
 - How helpful is that saying (both to them and to us)...
 - **Ex 12:13** "Now the blood shall be a sign for you on the houses where you are. And when I see the blood, I will pass over you; and the plague shall not be on you to destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt."
 - By betaking themselves to the blood of the lamb,
 - they were given assurance that the Lord's judgement would not fall on them.
 - So it is, that by looking to Christ whose blood was shed, we are assured that there is no condemnation for us—
 - the Lord's judgement will fall on others, but not on those who are trusting in Christ.

2. As we saw this morning in 1 Cor 5,
 - The Apostle Paul refers to Christ as “Christ our Passover who was sacrificed for us.”

F. Other types and ordinances

1. Just think of all the types that are in the Old Testament...
 - a. There are prophets, priests and kings who are all types of Christ...
 - 1) They were all anointed to serve,
 - The prophets’ role was to give the people the word of God...
 - The priests’ role was to offer sacrifices for the people and intercede for them.
 - And the king’s role was to bring the people under God’s law and to defend them from their enemies.
 - 2) Christ is **the** anointed one who answers to all these types...
 - He brings the Word to us by Himself being the Word and by bringing it to our hearts by His Spirit so that we understand.
 - He is our priest in that He, of course, offers the sacrifice that takes away our sin
 - He is our king in that He brings us under God’s law and will destroy all our enemies.
 - b. Besides prophets, priests, and kings, there are other types...
 - 1) The ark of Noah is a type of Christ, for it represents how we must be in Christ if we are to be saved from judgement...
 - 2) The resurrection is typified almost everywhere in the Old Testament...
 - There is the deliverance of Isaac from the command to slay him.
 - There is the raising up of Moses
 - There is the descent of Israel in Egypt followed by their ascent to the promised land.
 - There is the deliverance of Jonah from the fish
 - 3) There is the tabernacle which is a type of Christ taking human flesh and dwelling among us...
 - 4) There is David the warrior and there is Solomon the prosperous...

- 5) There was the ark of the covenant with the law in it—which represents Christ with the law in His heart.
2. And the ordinances!
 - a. There was the cleansing of lepers...pointed to the cleansing we have in Christ.
 - b. There were the ceremonial laws that kept them distant from death and showed them that they were only clean because God cleansed them.
 - c. There was the Jubilee when debts were cancelled and servants were set free—pointing the Jubilee we have in Christ.

We could go on and on, but I trust that you get the main idea here...

- The Old Testament is full of Christ, but they never actually had Him...
- Now we do, so the Old Testament becomes all the more meaningful for us.