

CHAPTER TWO

THE STARTING POINT OF THE DOCTRINE OF COMMON GRACE

This is like the days of Noah to me: as I swore that the waters of Noah should no more go over the earth, so I have sworn that I will not be angry with you, and will not rebuke you.

ISAIAH 54:9

§ 1 The fixed historical starting point for the doctrine of *common grace* lies in *God's establishment of a covenant with Noah after the flood*. In the past, inadequate attention has been paid to this significant and decisive event. People move too quickly to Abraham and the patriarchs, with the result that the weighty significance of the Noahic covenant initially slipped into the background and then was almost forgotten.¹

1. The Noahic covenant is highlighted by the reformer Wolfgang Musculus (1497–1563), an older contemporary of John Calvin, as a manifestation of the general covenant (*foedus generale*), made unconditionally with all of creation, including especially animals. This is distinguished from the special covenant (*foedus speciale*), manifested in the covenant with Abraham, which as an expression of special grace has its

Many people, including pious children of God, behold and admire the rainbow without being aware of the underlying covenant that is so powerfully addressing them. For that reason, we must begin with placing the lofty significance of that Noahic covenant in more radiant light once again. It must come alive for us once again, address us once again, become for us once again an essential component of the grace of God that sustains us.

What must then stand out in the foreground is that this covenant established by God with Noah appears in Holy Scripture not at all as a subordinate matter, and by no means does it appear incidentally as a matter of secondary importance. Rather, the establishment of the Noahic covenant is narrated to us more solemnly, more comprehensively, with greater detail than the establishment of either the covenant in paradise or the covenant with Abraham. The establishing of a covenant is not mentioned indirectly, but the establishment itself and the making of the covenant are included in the narrative as a historical event. What God the Lord spoke and testified about is communicated with meticulous details. The entire event is concluded with reference to a sign in the clouds that as a sacred covenant sign would remind people century after century of the steadfastness and truth of the Noahic covenant.

Thus it is obvious that when the Lord our God gave the Holy Scriptures to his church, he clearly wanted to confirm for the church of all ages the remembrance of this covenant agreement. He necessarily approved the detailed knowledge of this event for his church. And he desired that his church throughout the ages would take into account the significant and rich meaning of this covenant agreement. Our Heidelberg Catechism understood this as well, and its description of the providence of God, that “herbs and grass, rain and drought,” and so much more, “comes to us not by chance, but by his fatherly hand,” was apparently taken from Genesis 8:22: “While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.”²

focus on the elect. Attention to the general covenant remained present but of secondary importance in the development of covenant theology among the Reformed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. See Vos, “Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology,” 234–67. See also Heinrich Heppe, *Geschichte des Pietismus und der Mystik in der reformirten Kirche, namentlich der Niederlande* (Leiden: Brill, 1879), 205–40, esp. 208–9; and Jordan J. Ballor, *Covenant, Causality, and Law: A Study in the Theology of Wolfgang Musculus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012), 46–57.

2. *Heidelberg Catechism*, Lord’s Day 10, Q&A 27. Compare Kuyper, *E Voto Dordraceno*, Zondags-afdeeling 10, 211–13.

§ 2 Noah became in fact the second progenitor of the human race; not that he replaced Adam, since Noah himself was the fruit of human procreation, as God had not directly formed Noah by his own hand. Noah inherited his nature and character from his parents and grandparents, which had not been the case with Adam. Adam was purely the product of God's creative imagination. Nor was Noah's wife taken from Noah's side, as Eve was taken from Adam's, but in Noah's wife we also find the outworking of the ancestral nature of her parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents. And what applies to Noah and his wife applies as well for the wives of his sons. They too were the descendants and spiritual heirs of previous generations, bringing the corruption of these previous generations into Noah's family.

So it is absurd to want to put Noah on a par with Adam. As far as the source and the originality of their existence are concerned, they are simply not comparable. In Adam we find the source, the original fountain of all the generations of our human race. In Noah's family we find the flowing together and intersection of the various streams that by now had become tributaries. From our human race the only person who can be compared to Adam is the second Adam, the Man from heaven, by whom and in whom we once again find an entirely renewed source. Noah is our second *progenitor*; he is not a second *head* of our race.

Although Noah occupies a more modest position, this much is certain, that the current of the different streams of humanity came to a standstill in him for one brief moment, and then came to divide from him again into diverse streams. You see such a phenomenon in higher elevations where the plateaus differentiate the higher mountain ranges from the lower bluffs, with all the little streams of those mountains flowing together into an azure lake that deepens into a basin, and from the other side of the lake water flowing out into two or three streams that seek their way to the plateau below.

With Noah there was just such an incision, one that was extremely severe, one that cut into the life of our human race. Nothing survived from what preceded it, except what was present in Noah and his wife and his daughters-in-law, and from this fivefold fruit of earlier human life there sprouted the entire subsequent development of our human life. Noah and those eight souls did not form a *new* humanity. Rather, they are merely the continuation of the original human race. But now, after this ancient race was radically pruned by the Lord and was cut down to the root, such that in fact nothing but these five shoots survived, represented by those eight

souls, who would soon cause the life of our race to spread out in three main branches, through Shem, Ham, and Japheth.³

So the ancient church of God was not cut off with the flood, in order to have begun as a newly formed entity with Noah's family. But the church came forth out of paradise to Noah, borne by him in the ark, proceeding from the ark to dwell upon the earth once again, and in this way continued its original existence in Noah's generation. The only difference is that after the flood the church appeared *in a new condition*. Shem would expand its tents; Japheth would be the first to depart from the church and later return; and Ham would forego its blessing.

The establishment of the Noachic covenant is also properly related to the future of God's church, but this relationship is in terms of the alteration that our general human life underwent. In this Noachic covenant there is after all nothing that intentionally or primarily pertains to *saving* grace. It involves neither forgiveness of guilt and sin, nor promise of adoption and eternal life. Salvation is not being bestowed on some, but in this covenant God's promise extends to *all* the children of men. The covenant does indeed benefit the church, and does have as its goal, if you will, the future flourishing of the church. This covenant seeks to make the church possible and to secure a place of rest for the church, but it does not involve the church as such. This covenant involves man *as man*, man in his society on earth with other *men*, man in his relationship to the *animals*, and man in his relationship to the destructive elements of *nature*.

§ 3

After Noah the situation of our entire earth was different than before; and on that earth the situation of our human race and of our human life is in many respects different than in the days before the flood came. We know very little of the situation that existed before the flood. We read of people with a life span of almost ten centuries. We read of the outbreak of violence, of a devout generation that maintained the fear of the Lord; and of the earliest development of human artistic capacity. But we also read of a frightening crisis that gave godless people supremacy and made unrighteousness and violence increase rapidly.

Finally all of human life appears to have degenerated into wantonness, sensuality, and bloodshed until, after Enoch's removal, only in Noah's

3. Kuyper is apparently referring here to the entire family unit of Noah, his wife, and three daughters-in-law as the "fivefold fruit of earlier human life," totaling "eight souls" with the addition of Noah's three sons.

family did the sacred service of the Lord continue. But only those general features are mentioned. We are not given many details. There is no material at hand to fuel our imagination. What the opening chapters of Genesis offer you is not an interesting story for stimulating your curiosity, but a completely sober portrait sketched in outline, with broad strokes, in order to humble you as a member of the human race in your human understanding.

So gloriously had paradise been opened, so abundantly blessed by God, and look, that is what our human race brought forth from its own wicked root, until at last the judgment of the Almighty is issued, that “*every* intention of the thoughts of his heart was *only* evil *continually*” (Gen 6:5b).

You can see clearly that if the One who created us had not intervened and had not called into being a new order of things, that is, a new living situation, the church would have ceased to exist, and our entire race would have perished in its own pitiful ungodliness. Only in one family was the fear of the Lord still flourishing. How long would it have been until this particular family would also have been swallowed up by the universal stream?

Exactly *what* took place cannot be determined with precision. What Holy Scripture tells us about it is expressed with majesty and written down with ornate, impressive language, but it refrains from recording all the details.

The traditions of the ancient peoples tell us little more than the recollection of an awesome event. And what the investigation of this earth, of its surface, of its mountains and its core have taught us thus far indicates that colossal changes have taken place, but it still lacks the graphic detail and exactitude of history. Meanwhile, this much is certain, that even if Holy Scripture had been silent about the flood, and even if the traditions of the peoples had contained no recollection of an event like this, simply observing the earth in its mountainous regions, and exploring the earth's surface in almost every country, would provide us the certainty that a massive cataclysm had taken place on this earth, one that altered the entire form of the earth and completely altered even its climatic patterns.

§ 4 When God had completed his work in paradise, and had crowned humanity as lord of creation, God saw “that everything was *good*” and our entire earth, as it had come forth from God's hand, must originally have displayed the image of complete harmony and purity.

But that earth no longer exists; *that* world you will not find. Especially those who hike through the rugged and rough mountain regions become deeply aware of this fact. The devastation to which the mountains testify, particularly in their upper reaches, is startling and enormous. Of course, we can still admire the natural beauty and the majestic and delightful scenes of these high mountains, but then mostly from afar, and only in those elevated regions where the snow and ice fields conceal the destruction below the surface by the brilliance of its virgin snow and ice. Where there is no cover, and the naked rocks protrude, the mighty mountain monster displays its savagery. There we observe nothing but destruction, and sense an eerie wilderness, the ruin of what once existed, proclaimed in a most powerful language. Consider how terrible the ruptures and seismic activity involving the entire surface of the earth that must have occurred before this chaos emerged from the harmony of its original creation.

We leave the researchers of nature's phenomena to their own speculations and calculations, although we admire their perseverance and the ingenuity wherewith they pursue their investigations, extending as far as the earth's core. The only thing of interest for our subject is that the factual condition of our earth corresponds to what Holy Scripture tells us, namely, that *our earth is no longer* what it was originally, but that *colossal cataclysms* took place on the earth's surface.

Scripture records two such upheavals. In the first place, the original condition of the earth was changed immediately after *the fall*. Second, that condition underwent a colossal change through *the flood*. Scripture gives us no detailed account of the first change. Genesis 3 does not chronicle all the details of the fury of the elements that showed themselves so clearly in the flood. We are told only that (1) a curse had come upon the earth; (2) the plant world began to bring forth thorns and thistles; (3) the wild animals came to have a different nature; and (4) the beauty of paradise languished and then vanished.

Despite the brevity of this explanation, it supplies enough for us to surmise that an entire reversal of the condition of this earth must have occurred at that time. If the nature of the plant world had changed, if the nature of the animals had undergone such important alterations, if the original beauty of paradise had departed, and the curse was placed on the earth, then these brief indicators say enough for us to realize that entirely

different relationships had entered life, and an entirely different, severely altered situation had come into being.

We simply cannot make a comparison with the earth *before* and *after* the curse. The world as God had originally created it at one time had perished under the curse, and an entirely different, sorrowful, and somber form of this same earth had now appeared. Only powerful processes within the elements could have brought this about, and the presumption is obvious that in the desolate scenes that nature still offers in many geographical regions to this day, we have before us the results of what occurred at that time.

§ 5 In that world thus ruptured and disheveled lived the race that had reproduced from Adam until Noah. But then followed a *second* powerful upheaval, one that in a violent manner again tore and fractured the earth that existed. This catastrophe wholly changed the earth's appearance, and it was upon that earth's surface, crushed and rearranged for a second time, that the current development of our race began after the flood.

The narrative of the flood makes clear that in this second cataclysm the element of *water* played the major role. That same account also tells us that the earth's surface itself ruptured again, for it says that "all the fountains of the great deep burst forth" [Gen 7:11]. Apparently this intends to tell us that enormous masses of water, hidden under the surface of the earth, forced through the fissures of earth's surface with great power and flooded the surface of the earth. To what degree this coincides with a sudden massive thaw of the ice fields covering the highlands, and whether this thaw caused the terrible and destructive downpour, can no longer be determined.

Enough is said for us simply to know that during the flood over this our earth, for the second time a comprehensively disruptive and comprehensively altering agitation of the elements occurred, and that from this point forward, this earth as we know it received this form and shape that we now encounter.

Whereas this earth became what it now is through those two upheavals, Holy Scripture testifies to us both times concerning something about which the natural scientists know nothing, namely *this*, that both the first and the second upheaval were effected by *the wrath of God* against the *sin of our human race*. Once more for a third time, so this same Holy Scripture testifies, such a tremendous upheaval is awaiting us, one that will surpass both of those previous ones in terror, when "the heavens will pass

away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved” (2 Pet 3:10).

However, that third global catastrophe will not come until the hour has arrived when the *Maranatha* is ushered in and the sign of the Son of Man appears in the clouds. This third catastrophe will differ from the previous ones inasmuch as the former two disasters caused nothing but destruction, whereas the last catastrophe will actually serve to restore the harmony of creation and with it, the glory of paradise, indeed, causing a glory of a *still higher order* to radiate upon this earth (that is, the new earth under a new heaven).

Until then the current situation of this earth continues. Prior to that last hour no new catastrophe will occur. There will be some regional disasters and even local destructions, especially in the countries and regions with active volcanoes; but what has *not* occurred since the days of Noah, and will not occur before the Lord’s return, is such a universal catastrophe like the entrance of the curse, and during the flood, when the entire face of the earth was changed.

The extent to which the other heavenly bodies affected the earth during those two powerful upheavals is not reported to us. But it is prophesied to us that this will occur with the final catastrophe that will come one day. Then sun, moon, and stars will also cooperate in this global destruction, as repeatedly attested in the prophecy of the old covenant, and again in the Revelation of the apostle John. But until that day, the relation of this earth to the sky will in general remain what it is now, which is clearly expressed in the promise that while the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease (Gen 8:22).

Since the days of the flood, a *new condition of the earth* has come into being that pertains to the surface of this earth, as well as its atmospheric conditions. That new condition will not be disturbed, as it was twice before. Instead, it will remain unaltered until the final consummation and until the entrance of the new order of all things, when the glory of the Lord will fill his creation in undisturbed harmony.

And this fact, this permanence of the existing order, affecting our entire earth and human life on that earth, is now sealed for us in the *Noahic covenant*.

§ 6

Until the time of Noah, everything surged back and forth in continual unrest and was subjected to change. The curse continued its wrathful operation. But with Noah that turbulence was changed into rest through an

omnipotent act of the Lord's mercy. After the flood God provided his covenant: his covenant given to this earth, to all who were called human beings, his covenant even to the animal world and to all of nature. It extends from Noah to the *Maranatha* for the external order of things, in undisturbed stability, rest, and order. It is the Lord's design. It is his sovereign good pleasure.

Moreover, so that we, the children of men, would taste and enjoy this rest, this peace and tranquility that had been prepared for us in this stability, the Lord God not only took counsel with himself to do this, but he also revealed his decision to Noah, and through Noah to us. And so that it would have a sure certainty for us, he anchored and sealed this decision in a covenant promise for us.

It is for that reason that we need to go back to Noah for the condition of our human life in all its aspects. There, at Noah's altar, erected after the flood and sanctified by the sacrificial blood, lies the mighty, majestic, predominant starting point for the entire developmental history of our human life. By means of that starting point with Noah, *common grace*, which began in paradise, acquired its more definite form.