

COMMENTARY ON  
R. SCOTT CLARK'S COVENANTALISM (1)

**The Occasion**

Dr. R. Scott Clark is a teacher of Systematic Theology at Westminster (West) Seminary. On their website he has published an outline in a series of 140 “theses” (propositions for debate), of the traditional Covenantalism which is universal among conservative Presbyterians, and even among those Reformed Baptists who adhere to such a *Confession* as that of 1689. This outline is the very best summary statement of Covenantalism I have seen, and deserves to be read carefully by those of us who have escaped from Dispensationalism, only to be attracted (as Calvinists) to the traditional covenantal framework of theology that has dominated Reformed thought since Zwingli and Calvin. These studies will therefore consider it “verse by verse” in order to show that its presentation of the structure of biblical thought is by no means the only one possible, or even the best we have.

The New Covenant Theology (NCT) advocated by those associated with (for example) the *Sound Of Grace* website is very much a work in progress. At present it should be thought of as a movement rather than as a worked-out system, but much has been done and published which points to the correct procedure for replacing both the dispensationalist and covenantalist constructs with one more exegetically rooted in the Text and yet avoiding the many pitfalls of both Covenantal and Dispensational traditions.

**“System” Unavoidable**

Systematic Theology cannot avoid proceeding according to some program or construct, because some unifying scheme must be assumed before the diverse biblical material on the many topics of the discipline can be brought together in an organized way. Catholics, Arminians, Calvinists, and Lutherans all use traditionally-conditioned constructs to do their distinctive theologies. Those of us who have abandoned Dispensationalism have seen traditional Covenantalism as enticing, but not fully convincing. Most Baptists are pretty wary of it, and for good reason. At the same time, those who have swallowed the 1689 *Confession* whole have accepted Covenantalism as part of that package-deal, and believe that covenantal thinking can be used without accepting its supposed implications about infant baptism. The 1689 *Confession* is, if anything, more clearly covenantal in its expressions than is its parent from Westminster Abbey.

This series of studies will comment on almost all of Clark’s 140 propositions, contrasting his perspective with the views I hold as a supporter of the New Covenant Theology project. My hope is that these ideas will contribute to resolving the great impasse that NCT faces at present in the area of hermeneutics, since NC theologians are still divided on the topic of eschatology, some being a-millennial and others (like me) being still pre-millennial. The impasse is about methods of interpretation, some favoring a more “literal” method, others attracted to the allegorism common among *a-*, *post*, and other *anti*-millennialists, including the Preterists. The *Sound Of Grace* website, where much of the current discussion originates, has decided rightly to forbid discussion of Preterism as a distraction from their central purpose. My hope is that this commentary on Dr. Clark’s presentation of current Covenantalism will contribute to the exploration of a fresh start on the systematization of NCT, and clarify the issues separating literalism from allegorism.

The central thrust of the NCT project is, since we have given up both Dispensational and Covenantal schemes as no longer meeting our hermeneutical needs, an attempt to take seriously the *particular historical covenants* actually described in the Bible, and to develop on a sounder exegetical basis, the Bible’s structural idea of “covenant” as it unfolds in the “drama of redemption.” It is my conviction that large ideas like *covenant*, *kingdom*, *church*, *redemption*, and others, can only be brought fruitfully together by limiting our speculative propensities to what the text actually *says*. This may seem obvious as stated, but in fact, traditional Covenantalism has its “covenant of works,” its “covenant of grace,” its “covenant of redemption,” and much else for which the exegesis is hardly sufficient. Then, Dispensationalism is based on a set of rigid “dispensational principles” originating mostly in the mind of J. N. Darby in the 1830s, as he wrestled with the very personal problem of his Anglican ordination, eschatology, and the nature of the body of Christ. *His*

speculations resulted in Dispensationalism of several kinds, plus the idiosyncrasies of the Exclusive Brethren. While some speculation *per se* may be harmless, the creation *ex Nihilo* of “principles” that then become a straight-jacket of rules limiting what can be said thereafter will only hinder progress.

The NCT program must spend more time on careful exegesis. *Context!* (as Gary Long has pointed out in his book of that title), is one important thing, and presuppositions are another. Our presuppositions must be exegeted from the text like everything else contributing to the structure. It must be our concern to set forth under even more light than before, what Calvinists of all stripes like to call “the system of Truth contained in the Scriptures.” There is no question that the popularity of Covenantalism is fed by the desire to systematize.

## Commentary

Clark’s “Prolegomena” consists of his first three propositions. The italics indicate that the theses are being quoted strictly as Dr. Clark gives them. We will comment on each (at least most of them) in turn:

*“1:1. Covenant theology structures all of Biblical revelation.”*

Indeed it does, and that’s the problem, not the answer. From being used by the Catholics to justify calling Christian pastors “priests,” through Zwingli’s appeal to baptism as a replacement for circumcision under the New Covenant, all the way through the long scholastic evolution of the covenantal principle for ordering absolutely everything in theology (during no less than 300 years), Covenantalism became the assumed standard for “structuring” the drama of redemption throughout the Reformed tradition. Today, Reformed scholars speak of *everything* as “covenantal,” including creation, the fall, redemption, the kingdom, our daily work, liturgy, apologetics, and anything else that might be included in the implications of theology.

*“1:2 The form of the covenants revealed in Scripture was borrowed from, and is accommodated to, the ancient near eastern world, and must be understood in that context.”*

This is perfectly correct as it stands. The covenants in Scripture starting with the Abrahamic, copy the form of such institutions as the “suzerainty treaties” used to establish the relationship between dominant kings and their subject peoples. The Pentateuch definitely contains the same covenant features as the treaties of the Hittites and others, and was clearly borrowed by Moses from the examples of treaties with the Egyptians which he would have known well from the political archives accessible to him in Egypt. This means that God used this cultural phenomenon to explain his own relation to the People he was redeeming from their bondage in Egypt. It contains a religious prolegomena in Genesis, and appeals to the one true God as the reigning sovereign, then states the legal conditions under which they must live, and pronounces the blessings that will accrue if they obey, followed by the curses that will fall on them upon rebellion. The two “tables” (copies) of this covenant were placed in the Ark, below the mercy-seat on which the blood of sacrifice would be later sprinkled. Typically, two copies of a suzerainty covenant were made as witnesses, one passing into the archives of the ruler, and the other being set up in a prominent place (usually) in the temple of the subject people, so that all would know the conditions of submission. There were therefore always two testimonies or witnesses to the content of the covenant, and in the case of the Jews, both witnesses were placed in the Ark. This is why it was called “the ark of the covenant,” and why the people could be forgiven for one more year, when the blood of atonement came between the eye of the Judge, and the triple testimony against his People, who had once more failed to keep the Covenant, as the rod of Aaron and the bowl of manna showed.

The important thing to note here is that the historical covenants use as their model, not an eternal pact between the members of the Trinity (of which the text knows nothing), but a well-known framework operating in the Gentile culture surrounding the Jews. The Bible never suggests that the Persons of the Trinity are related by a “covenant.” In fact, nothing can be more inappropriate than the analogy of a conditional political pact between finite persons on earth, and the imaginary “covenant of redemption” between the Persons of the Trinity. How could the *perichoresis* (or *Circumincession*, or *interpenetration*) of the Persons with the omniscient being of the Deity result in (or even be compatible with) an agreement between three independent people as if the Trinity was a committee deciding how to farm out its jobs for the coming week? The idea of a

Platonic unified covenant in heaven is created exegetically by the Aristotelian trick of abstracting ideas and features from the several covenants *in history*, and then imposing this structure like a cookie-cutter on the Trinity *in eternity*. Things said in the Bible by the Father to the Incarnate Son *in time* are happily read back onto the Trinity *in eternity* as if the *ontological* Trinity and the *economic* Trinity were the same things. Even if it were conceded that the Father and the Son and the Spirit mutually understood the respective roles they would fulfill in time, it still doesn't follow that this is best (or even possibly) expressed as a covenant. Philosophically, it requires the Thomistic "analogy of Being" to make this thing work. Recall what Van Til said about that: it implies the denial of the Creator-creature distinction. The purpose of this abstractive thinking is the development of what Bullinger called "the one and eternal covenant of God," of which the Bible knows nothing, but which then becomes the structural principle for later Covenantalism.

*"1:3 Covenant is the most coherent explanation for Biblical revelation, and the nature and authority of the canon."*

The reference to "authority" and "the canon" is a reflection of the views of such contributors as Meredith Kline, and has no direct bearing on our present interests, except that the Canon may be thought of as the documents of a covenant. The "coherence" of the biblical doctrine about the covenants is not of course, the same thing as the speculative construct of Covenantalism. One would not expect the large body of references (with over seventy references in the Pentateuch alone, and over twenty in the NT) to "covenant" in the Bible to be *incoherent*, but that doesn't justify the speculative structure based on the overarching constructs on which traditional Covenant Theology depends. Ideas such as redemption, creation, fall, and kingdom are also "coherent" in Scripture, but *berith* and *diatheke* take their place among them without asking to be elevated to be the most unifying feature. It would be plausible to arrange all of Systematics according to the work of the three Persons of the Trinity, if a "unifying principle" were asked for. What could be more "unifying" to Christian thought than the Trinity itself? In fact, Bishop Martensen actually attempted such a thing, which produced the curiosity that the area of eschatology fell under the work of the Holy Spirit. Since he was Lutheran, he didn't make any use of the covenant idea, and the term is not even in his index. This signals an important point historically, for neither the Catholics (East or West), nor the Lutherans ever needed to create a Covenantalism, because their justification for infant baptism was "baptismal regeneration."

Linking the ideas of Revelation with those of Canon and Authority may be valuable in one sense, but it doesn't require "the one and eternal" covenant of Covenantalism to do it. It would be simpler to just recognize the Hebrew Bible as the fundamental text of the Old Covenant, and the Greek NT as the constituent text of the New Covenant, both being equally the Word of God revealed, but being primarily characterized by the *differences* between the Mosaic and the New Covenant, especially the status respectively of Law and Grace as their outstanding features. This would at least keep the discussion Pauline. That there is "continuity" between the Testaments is obvious, but the covenant idea is only one element that needs explanation.

Readers of modern covenantalist theologians (and they are mainly Presbyterians) need to remember two things 1), The history of Reformed Covenantalism is by no means a coherent and smooth evolution from acorn to leafy tree. The tradition has endless variations and divergencies, generates fresh heresies in every age of its progress, and contains very serious logical problems, which remain unaddressed by popular covenantal thought. Then, 2), the arguments on which it is based are not straightforwardly exegetical, but are laced with logical slides, arguments from analogies based on the false principle (never admitted openly) that similarity amounts to identity, and that make use of generalities that create an appearance of unity when the biblical evidence not only favors diversity, but expressly describes it. Jeremiah 31 is a good example of this.

We shall see in this commentary that generalizations and loosely-defined terms cover over important differences between the Old and the New Covenants which make a great deal of difference exegetically. The solution to this state of affairs can only be more careful exegesis of those Covenants that actually appear in the Text, not an appeal to generalities about abstractions like "the covenant principle" that do not appear there.

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