

**COMMENTARY ON
R. SCOTT CLARK'S COVENANTALISM 10)**

Dr. Clark next has three theses under the heading "4. Systematic/Dogmatic." Thus,

4:1 Covenant theology is so of the essence of Reformed theology that to revise its covenant theology is to revise the substance of Reformed theology.

If "Covenant theology" in this sentence means the way Reformed thought evolved *scholastically* under the influence of covenantalist presuppositions after the Reformation, it is correct. Those of us out of popular Evangelicalism who have discovered Reformed thought, have read it mostly in either the reprinted Puritans or in the "doctrines of grace" as defended by modern Presbyterian and Baptist Calvinists. This is why Kenneth Good had to note in his dissertation *Are Baptists Calvinists?*, that the answer must be Yes *and* No, depending on whether "Calvinist" includes covenantalism, infant baptism, a state church, *etc.*, or just refers to the soteriological Five Points of the Tulip. Unless they accept the whole of the 1689 Confession, Baptists have tended to be wary of much covenantal thinking even when approving of it generally. Historically, because of its important initial role as the basis for infant baptism, and its conditioning of a theonomic relation between church and state, Covenantalism has indeed been "of the essence of Reformed theology," and almost all the classical Reformed theologians were saturated in it. Of the great American Presbyterian theology teachers such as Dabney, Thornwell and the Hodges, *all* studied Turretini in the original Latin. Dabney's *Systematic Theology* is not much more than a commentary on Turretini.

NC theologians insist that this historical scene has been fundamentally misleading for the calvinistic Baptist down the years, that the 300 years of covenantalist evolution since 1534 has been the source of many errors and absurdities, and still is (think: Federal Vision). We wish to avoid these pitfalls, while also strengthening our calvinistic understanding of how a hermeneutic should be structured. We think there is actually no logical or necessary connection between calvinistic ideas of salvation and traditional Covenantalism. Covenantalism is simply superfluous.

The same can be said of our attitude toward Dispensationalism. While retaining what truth its teachers represent, we consider it to be an imposition on theology, and often misleading. I myself have extricated myself from my original dispensational thinking, but retain much of its premillennialism, while rejecting pretribulationism and the artificial distinction between Israel and the Church as (say) J. N. Darby conceived it. I discovered that Covenantalism has nothing to do with millennialism, and many of the main promoters of the great prophecy conferences of the late 1800s were Presbyterian premillennialists, of which Nathaniel West was prominent. There were plenty of others down to J. Oliver Buswell and J. Barton Payne more recently. Covenantalism doesn't *require* A-millennialism.

Historically, it is useless to argue about what the "essence" of a theological movement might be, because generalizations can be so misleading. One can only observe what particular thinkers in a movement said about particular issues. The wide divergence among Covenantalists on the topic of the "covenant of works" is an example of this, as were the debates about infra- and supra-lapsarianism that divided the scholastic Calvinists. Often it is the extended implications of a position that make it more important than it deserves to be.

2. *The covenantal arrangement of the history of redemption and the covenantal progressive revelation of Scripture is not a mere convention, but rather a reflection of the intra-Trinitarian relations.*

This would only be true if one already agreed that there was in fact a “covenant of redemption” within the Trinity. NCT counters this statement of the construct with “The history of redemption unfolds according to the relevant elements of the eternal Plan of God, who applied it to individuals in the form of a series of historic covenants.” The Plan or Decrees of God can only be known by revelation, not by speculation. The starting-point must always be the concrete facts of the unfolding creation as stated in Scripture, not abstractions from them. Traditional Covenantalism is indeed a “mere convention.” The history of redemption, however, is the unfolding of the divine Decree and reveals the coherent attributes of God.

This is not to demean “constructs,” for everyone must seek unifying factors in Scripture in order to develop its internal relations systematically. The historical covenants are among those factors, as are the attributes of God. But the face-value of the Text must always trump speculation.

3. *All the covenants revealed in Scripture contain both promised blessing and threatened jeopardy.*

This is an example of the process of abstraction that generates the “one and eternal covenant of grace.” Is it really true that the New Covenant threatens “jeopardy”? If it does, then Paul’s statement in Romans 5:1-2 is not true. Neither are Rom 8:28-30, or Eph 1:3-14 a fair statement of the situation. On the other hand, if the New Covenant, like the Mosaic, is made with a mixed multitude of believers and unbelievers and their descendants, perhaps it does contain curses to fall on its subjects under certain conditions. After all, some further explanation must be given of how “covenant children” (people born into Presbyterian families and included in “the covenant” by baptism) ever come to apostatize. But if the New Covenant is made only with the regenerate Remnant, none of them can apostatize, and therefore it can contain no “threatened jeopardy” aimed at the Elect. No imaginable jeopardy (“nor any other created thing”) can affect the security of the Elect (Rom 8:31-39). In the New Testament documents, sinners avoid the curse of “threatened jeopardy” by regeneration and trusting Jesus for salvation, and enter the covenant community by believers’ baptism. Nobody enters the New Covenant by natural birth. Only those who have the faith of Abraham are children of God, and therefore “covenant children.” Under the Mosaic system it was not so, for that covenant was with a Nation comprised of the Remnant plus unbelievers, and circumcision was continued from the Abrahamic Covenant as a sign of the need for regeneration, and as a pointer to the need for faith. Eventually the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD showed what the rejection of the Messenger of the New Covenant really meant for the Nation, as had the destruction of 586 BC by the Babylonians.

Protestants do not believe that the true Church, the Body of Christ, is identical to the visible church. Romanism equates them, so that communion with the Pope is the only guarantee of union with Christ, and rejection of his Vicar is rejection of Christ. Likewise, Protestants believe that every regenerate believer is “in Christ,” and a living member of his (invisible) Body, sharing his resurrection life, which being eternal, guarantees security from apostasy. In fact (*contra* Arminianism), apostasy is the clearest proof imaginable of unregeneracy in the first place. Under the New Covenant there is the blessing, but no threatened curse. In all the National Churches, “covenant children” apostatize on a regular basis, while nobody apostatizes from “the Church which is His body” (Eph 1:22-23).

It is by no means clear what “jeopardy” was threatened by the Noachic or Davidic covenants either. Genesis 9:8-16 seems to contain no threats to follow unbelief, and 2 Samuel 7 appears to contain only promised blessings for David’s line. Although the term *berith* does not appear in 2 Sam 7 or in the parallel account in 1 Chron 17, David calls it a “covenant” in 2 Sam 23:5.

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