

COMMENTARY ON  
R. SCOTT CLARK'S COVENANTALISM 11)

Dr. Clark's section 5 [*The Covenant of Redemption* (pactum salutis; consilium pacis)] contains seven theses to explain and justify an original covenant between the Persons of the Trinity. That God's eternal plan for the creation can be described as a "decree" or decision to have this universe rather than some other is one thing, but what that secures is one Will of Jehovah, which makes it meaningless for the Persons to then have to make a "covenant" between each other. The Trinity is not a committee that parcels out jobs for its members. The omniscience of the Persons through interpenetration of the divine *substantia* makes the image or analogy of a covenant impossible, and unnecessary. No doubt the Plan of God for the world is "one and eternal," but it is not treated as a "covenant" in the Bible.

5:1. *The pre-temporal covenant of redemption (pactum salutis) stands behind the covenant of works and covenant of grace and orders the history of redemption.*

This states the *theory* that the historic covenants are merely "administrations" of an eternal unified covenant. We shall see under 5:3 below, that this is not provable from the verses quoted to make it plausible. The expression "stands behind" actually means "has been postulated by many Covenantalists as the basis of." The ambiguity of these covenant ideas is signaled by the fact that the so-called covenant of "works" was often observed to have functioned within a cocoon of *created grace* *i.e.*, before the Fall), and the covenant of redemption was clearly conditioned by aspects of God's Law. Historically, the inventor of a clearly defined "covenant of works" (*foedus operum*) was Zacharius Ursinus who wrote it into his theological curriculum and in his formulation of the simpler Heidelberg *Catechism*. He was systematizing elements inspired by both Bullinger (1534) and then Calvin's *Institutes* (finalized in 1559), and the lesson was quickly learned by the developing covenantal tradition, as many young Reformed scholars studied with him. Ursinus' name, like those of Bullinger and Beza, is not much known to modern Protestants, but his personal influence was enormous.

2. *In the history of redemption, the pactum salutis means works for the Son and grace for us.*

It was certainly the eternal Plan or Will of God as expressed in the decree to create and redeem, *etc.*, that the Incarnate Son should do certain "works" in history, but every detail of the life of Jesus was also fully predestined by his Father and every act of obedience revealed in time to the human nature ("I can do nothing of myself"), was a manifestation of "created grace" so that Jesus could succeed as Man where Adam failed, by living every moment on the basis of revelation (Mat 4:4, quoting Deut 8:3). When Adam and Eve presupposed themselves as their origin of meaning for deciding whether God or Satan was correct about whether they would die upon eating the forbidden fruit, God withdrew the upholding power of created grace, and their idolatrous choice was confirmed. God's Word (as in Gen 2:16) was no longer their standard for interpreting the world. Disobeying a command is not the same thing as breaking a covenant.

Incidentally, we have no idea how a being created good from God's hand could ever make the initial turn from God to the Serpent, as the actual origin of sin and evil is not revealed. One popular explanation is to postulate an autonomous freewill, which Calvinists reject as a pagan (Stoic) theory. It's better to just admit we don't know, as it has not been revealed.

3. *The pactum salutis is biblically grounded in Psalm 110, John 5:30, 6:38-40, [chapter] 17, [and] Gal 3:20 among other places.* (My additions for clarity).

These verses have been referred to presumably because they make the case best for an original “covenant” between the Father and the Son in eternity. There are in fact, few better verses to quote for this purpose. Unfortunately, they prove no such thing, and have a very different reference.

Ps 110 is first, a prediction by David of the Father inviting the *resurrected* Son to sit in divine authority until the earth is subdued. The verse is quoted by Jesus to show that David’s “Lord” must be divine. The time reference is both the present age and the coming Kingdom. The process by which Christ (“my Lord”) becomes King over all the earth is now in progress, but it will not be manifested publicly until the second coming (Zech 14:9), and the psalm clearly looks forward to the last days, “the day of Thy power, . . . the day of His wrath.” When the incarnate Jesus heard or read these words, he knew in his human nature what the Logos had known from eternity, that he would finally be the victorious King of the Jews. Although the omniscient Logos dwelled within him subconsciously, he only knew as man, what the Father wanted him to know. The Father spoke to him both directly *and* through the inscripturated Word, of which this is an example, *for Jesus lived his human life by this Word*. He had to learn Aramaic and then Hebrew and then Greek and some Latin, in order to function as a child, as a businessman of Galilee, and then as a teacher of the People, as a prisoner before Pilate, and finally as the dying Savior of the elect Remnant in all ages. There were things he did not know, because he did not need them then. He could tell who would believe in him or betray him, but he did not know the date of the second coming, or what a printed Greek New Testament looks like, although he presumably knows these things now.

John 5:30 and 6:38-40 certainly show that Jesus was aware of his own obedience in contrast with the disobedience of so many of his hearers, and that his whole life was devoted to the Father’s will, but it says nothing of a covenant. “Covenantal” language is not present, unless one reads these verses back from the economic Trinity acting *in time* onto the eternal relations between the Persons of the ontological Trinity *in eternity*. These passages refer to the Incarnation, not to any eternal covenant.

Chapter 17 of John speaks of the “glory” the Second Person had in eternity before the Incarnation (the pre-existence of the Logos, *etc.*), but they say nothing of a pre-temporal “covenant.” The references to those the Father had “given” the Son is to the promises Jesus found in the Hebrew Text, and which he saw fulfilled in his earthly ministry when the Apostles and other believers came to him in faith. The fact that these things flow out of an eternal purpose of God doesn’t require a covenant to organize them.

Gal 3:20 states that a Mediator mediates between two parties, not one, but this Mediator acts between God and sinners (“the Seed, which is Christ”), not between the Father and the Son. Again, no Trinitarian covenant is referred to, or even alluded to, unless it is first presupposed. This verse in the context of Paul’s argument might have been quoted to show that the Promise (verse 22) was unconditional, and that therefore its fulfillment in the New Covenant must be unconditional, depending solely on the sovereignty of him who promised, but of a covenant between the Persons of the Trinity it says nothing. Since we are told that there are well over 200 interpretations of this difficult verse in the literature (F. F. Bruce *in loc.*) the wonder is why it was appealed to at all.

Dabney refers us to Tit 1:2, Eph 1:4, 1 Cor 15:22-45-47, Rom 5:17-18, and Heb 7:22 in the NT, and to predictions of the *Offices* of Prophet, Priest, and King in Isa 42:6, 49:8, Mal 3:1, Ps 40:7-8, Isa 61:1-2, 53:10-11, Ps 110:4, John 10:17-18, Ps 2:7-8, 110:6, Lk 22:29, Zech 6:13. None of these verses require any intra-trinitarian covenant. All are predictions of what the Messiah would do in history, or are references to the divine decree of which all three Persons were eternally and exhaustively aware.

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