

COMMENTARY ON
R. SCOTT CLARK'S COVENANTALISM 12)

5:4. *Christ fulfilled the legal obligations of the pactum salutis in his active and passive obedience as the representative of the elect.*

There is no need for the postulation of an intra-trinitarian “covenant” to understand that Christ fulfilled the *Mosaic Covenant*, thus securing on our behalf, justification through his active and passive obedience, a righteousness to be imputed to us. The fact that Jesus would “do always those things that please [his] Father” requires no eternal covenant. That it would happen was simply the Decree as it unfolds in history. God’s eternal purpose for the world that he will save the Elect is “promised” in history as a result of the Decree. The expression “before times eternal” (*pro chronōn 'aiōniōn*) may just as well refer to earlier revelation in past ages as to “eternity past.” The term “promised” can be taken as the Father promising the Son eternal life (unlikely) or to the Decree being revealed in history. Either way, no “covenant” is required. Traditional Covenantalism is *an acquired habit* of speech and thought, not a required conclusion from clear exegesis. Titus 1:2 is a good example of this.

The eternal Decree (or Plan or Purpose or Will) of the Trinity (“Yahweh thy Elohim, Yahweh is One”) includes electrons being negatively charged and protons being positively charged and insects having six legs and elephants four. No doubt the Trinity of Persons were unanimous in all these details from eternity. But no “covenant” was needed for this. Neither was any covenant needed to secure the results of the Incarnation on the cross, only predestination, as Calvin saw. Covenants are made between God and Man in history, not between God and God.

5. *The allegation that the pactum salutis tends to tritheism seems to ignore the distinction between the economic and ontological Trinity.*

The notion of an intra-Trinitarian covenant certainly makes the Trinity look like a committee (tritheism?), but it is even clearer that reading back the covenants of the economic Trinity *from history* onto the eternal relations of the ontological Trinity *in eternity past* blends them together and endangers (if it does not deny) the Creator-creature distinction. And there is an even worse problem suggested by an intra-Trinitarian “covenant”: it invites the serious heresy of subordinationism in the ontological Trinity, just as the Origenists (and the Arians after them) did when they read the temporal subordination of the human nature to the Father in time, back onto the eternal relation between the Father and the Logos before creation. If there is anything I learned from Van Til it was that any hint of subordinationism inside the ontological Trinity is bad, really bad....

6. *The work of the Holy Spirit has not always been discussed under the pactum salutis only because it focuses on the accomplishment of redemption rather than the application of redemption.*

What, exactly, is this thesis supposed to explain?? Question for the Covenantalist: Does your idea of the *pactum salutis* also require another covenant between the Father and the Spirit and another between the Son and the Spirit? If not, why not? Again: Why isn't the “application” of redemption the same as its “accomplishment?” If “accomplishment” refers to the Cross (as *per* John Murray’s book on the Atonement), are both not included under the *pactum*? What does “focuses” mean?? With fluffiness like this, no wonder Murray wanted the whole program “recast.” New Covenant Theology attempts this recasting, although Murray would not be happy with it. The thing to “focus” on is the content of the historic covenants actually found in the Text, *without* the speculative meta-covenants of traditional Covenantalism controlling exegesis from the wings.

As the work of each Person unfolds in history as the economic Trinity, the Holy Spirit is seen “applying” the fruits of the Atonement to the Elect. But the Spirit is also at work in the physical creation as well (from Gen 1:2 on), as is the Logos in the ordering of natural law, as also in the order and maintenance of common grace. These things are all accounted for under the Decree without postulating an intra-Trinitarian covenant. Analyzing the Decree is entertaining, and has produced the dilemmas suggested by supra- and infra-lapsarianism, but it is always pretty speculative, and the temptation to read temporalities back into eternity must be resisted.

7. *Since the Spirit certainly consented to apply Christ’s work to the elect (John 15:26), there is no reason why the Holy Spirit’s work cannot be integrated into the pactum salutis.*

The language of “consent” suggests an independent will agreeing to a committee decision. It would be more accurate to simply *see the Will of God as one with the Decree*, and the act of creation as implementing the purposes of that Decree. A covenant construct is superfluous.

And since the work of the Spirit in history is a result of the Decree, there is no reason why His work cannot be derived from and integrated with the Decree itself, without introducing the notion of an intra-Trinitarian *pactum*. The reason why the Holy Spirit may be said to have “consented” to the Decree is because *God’s Will is one*, the Holy Spirit is Personal, and the *circumincession* (or mutual interpenetration) of the Persons within the one divine Substance (or *ousia*) of Jahweh guarantees the unity of the one Will of God. These considerations make the *pactum* irrelevant. All is accounted for without it.

The descriptive problems addressed in these last seven theses illustrate the internal structural problems in Covenantalism that have exercised covenant theologians for centuries, and they show how arbitrary some of its arrangements can be. Of course, *once we just assume* the framework with its constituent elements, all sorts of verses can be used to illustrate the presupposition. So does “The Father is greater than I” illustrate Arianism if that is first assumed. The Trinitarian sees this verse as just a reference to Christ’s humility in the Incarnation, and so proves that there are distinct Persons in the Trinity against Oneness Pentecostalism. Arianism is unnecessary, and the subordination of the *incarnate* Christ is purely temporal, and not a property of the ontological Trinity.

Part 6 of Dr. Clark’s theses contains six propositions under the heading “The Covenant of Works (*foedus operum*).”

6:1. *The pre-lapsarian covenant may be called a covenant of works in respect to its terms, a covenant of life in respect to its goals and a covenant of nature in respect to its setting. All three names describe the same covenant.*

The obvious problem with this kind of false classification of highly generalized relations is that it equally applies to other covenants, such as the Mosaic. The “setting” only shows that other topics such as general revelation (“nature”) are being taxed to supply elements of this artificial construct. All the covenants in the Bible have life as a “goal,” and the Mosaic system is certainly a covenant of works in part. Besides, if it is true that “by the Law shall no flesh be justified,” the function of “law” before the Fall must have been very different from what it was after the Fall. Problems like these have been solved by some Reformed thinkers simply by denying that any covenant of works existed before the Fall, and relegating the theory to the realm of superfluous speculation.

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