

COMMENTARY ON
R. SCOTT CLARK'S COVENANTALISM 14)

Dr. Clark's seventh division contains 32 theses under the heading "7. The Covenant of Grace (*foedus gratiae*).” This is the heart of his structural account of the real essence of Covenantalism. It is really an exposition of Bullinger's theory of God's "one and eternal covenant," from which the historical covenants are supposedly derived as "administrations."

7:1. When we speak in covenantal terms we should always specify to which covenant we refer.

This would be really good advice if Covenantalists kept to it. Unfortunately, they tend to subsume the Abrahamic into the Mosaic, as if the Abrahamic Covenant were abolished (especially the Land promises if they are A-millennialists) along with the ceremonial Law. The OT prophecies that depend on its literal provisions are then allegorized to apply to the NT Church, and Israel is stripped of their prerogatives as stated in their covenants. In the NT documents, the term "old covenant" always refers to the Mosaic system. The whole argument of Hebrews was designed to demonstrate what that means. There are no exegetical grounds for assuming that the Abrahamic Land promises were ever rescinded, only "hermeneutical" preferences. It is still true that the meek will inherit *the earth*. The word "earth" never means heaven or the Christian life, in Scripture. NC theologians cannot escape the implications of OT prophecies by appealing to a hermeneutic developed by Covenantalists in order to avoid the OT evidence for a coming messianic Kingdom on earth.

2. The pactum salutis is distinct from and the basis of the covenant of grace.

No, both the intra-Trinitarian "covenant" and the "one and eternal covenant" of Bullinger's 1534 tract are man-made delusions. The "basis" of the covenants of Scripture, whether they speak of grace as in the New Covenant, or the conditional blessings and curses of Deut 28-30, is the Decree as it unfolds the revelation of the Attributes of Jehovah. "Decree" does not imply "covenant."

3. It is a grievous theological error to confuse the covenant of works with the covenant of grace.

It is an even greater error to blend the Mosaic Law with the sanctification provisions of the New Testament text. In the NT, "righteousness" includes both *justification* (a forensic event) and *sanctification* (a life-time process of progressive growth in grace or holiness). Both result from *sola Fide*, faith alone. The same verses Clark would use to prove this *Thesis 3.*, a NCT thinker would use to show that the basis of sanctification is New Covenant Ethics, not Old Covenant Law (Gal 2:19, 3:3, 3:25, 4:31, 5:1-6) and its dynamic motivation is the resurrection life of Christ within, not the Letter without (Gal 5:16-25, Rom 6). Everyone in the New Covenant without exception is regenerate and is "being sanctified" (Heb 10:8-17).

4. The term covenant of grace can be used broadly and narrowly. When used broadly, it refers to everyone who is baptized into the Christ[-]confessing covenant community. When used narrowly, it refers to those who have received the double benefit of Christ: justification and sanctification.

This is the first time we have a hinted admission from Dr. Clark that the *real* meaning of traditional Covenantalism is the justification of infant baptism. To prepare a stage for this play, he distinguishes (in good Dutch fashion !) between the *broad* and *narrow* applications of the term. This distinction is just a reflection of the idea that (as "broad"), the New Covenant includes non-believers,

an opinion expressly excluded from it by Jeremiah, and for which there is not a single supporting verse in the NT. There is no hint in the NT text that there are *any persons* in the New Covenant who are not professing *disciples* of Christ. The wheat and tares illustration in Mat 13 refers to the visible Church, not the Elect Remnant or Body of Christ. Throughout the NT record, baptism is never given to anyone who is not deemed regenerate by the baptizer, having a credible profession of faith and repentance, this conforming to the essential nature of the New Covenant as defined by Jeremiah, as being only with those who “know the Lord,” *unlike* the Mosaic Covenant which was made with an entire Nation, a mixed multitude entering the Land. By “used narrowly,” Clark intends that, in another sense, the NC is made with only believers (Well, which is it?). Of course, he smuggles in the generalized “one and eternal” “covenant of grace,” but the fact that the NC is wholly a covenant of grace, being unconditional and made with the elect only, does not justify the meta-covenant that he refers to. It’s just Heinrich Bullinger still controlling Presbyterian thinking from the grave....

5. *Used in the broader sense, the covenant of grace is not synonymous with election so that all the elect are in the covenant of grace, but not all in the covenant of grace are elect.*

This is the same argument Augustine used to exclude the Donatists from the true (Catholic) Church, and he used Mat 13 on the tares and the wheat to prove it. The Donatists were true believers, despite some theological blunders, and Augustine’s arguments are as worthless exegetically now as they were then. Today it is used to prove that the “covenant community” (historically equated with all members of a State Church in, say, Zürich), including baptized unbelievers starting with babies. After its role in explaining why we should baptize babies, Covenantalism was next used to justify the “magistrate” in sanctifying a whole community by using Mosaic laws. Modern evangelical Americans need to ponder carefully what Zwingli was actually doing when he approved of drowning Baptists off the city bridge; *they were enemies of the State*. In the NT, even local visible churches are intended to be pure of unbelievers, and the instrument of excommunication is designed to assist this deal. Nobody sees the hearts of men, or pretends that Baptist churches are always pure, but the ideal of church purity is taught in the passages explaining Baptism throughout the NT. It is no accident that the “Anabaptists” were accused by the Reformers of “Donatism” simply because they sought to have a church of gathered believers only. This epithet was a preparation for their persecution by the Reformed state-churches, just as the Donatists were persecuted by the Catholics.

I remember a former Baptist minister who, like me at the time, was a member of a Presbyterian Church in Michigan, asking the Pastor, “How, exactly, do your kids differ from mine?” Silence fell, for there was no honest answer, for both raised their fallen offspring to believe the Gospel. There are no verses at all in the NT to support the notion that the New Covenant is made with families (including unbelieving slaves and uncles), “communities,” or nations, as the Mosaic was. It is made with the Elect only, and all of them without exception become regenerated to faith in God’s good time.

6. *Used in the narrow sense, the covenant of grace refers only to the elect.*

Used in the New Testament’s sense, *the New Covenant* is made with (“refers only to”) the Elect, and no one else. The posited meta-covenant “of grace” is a purely human construct, and none of the verses quoted to illustrate it actually prove its existence. The convenient distinction of a wider sense and a narrower sense worked well enough when Abraham Kuyper was describing the features of the *imago Dei*, but it is nothing but a convenient scholastic framework for Dr. Clark, as we shall see below. Of the scholastic method it was said, “When you can’t prove something, make a distinction !!”