

COMMENTARY ON
R. SCOTT CLARK'S COVENANTALISM 15)

7:7. *There is a just and necessary distinction to be made between those who are in the covenant broadly (externally) and those who are in the covenant both broadly and narrowly (internally).*

This thesis expands the distinction made in 7:6 above. It is intended to make more explicit the claim that there are unregenerate people comprehended under the New Covenant. NCT notes that in the predictive announcement of the coming New Covenant, Jeremiah states that *the main difference* between the Mosaic and the New covenants was that the Mosaic was made with *a nation* and was *conditional* “which covenant they broke,” while the New Covenant will be “not like” the Old in that everyone in the New will be regenerate and will “know the Lord.” In other words, the New Covenant will be made with the Elect Remnant only in “the house of Israel and the house of Judah.” Later it is shown that into that root or stock, Gentiles will also be “grafted in” (11:17-24), having the same faith as Abraham (Rom 4, and Gal 3:23-29). As a Gentile, I do not support the root; the root supports me.

8. *The internal/external distinction is a corollary of the distinction between the church considered visibly and invisibly.*

This is what Covenantalism claims, but it would only be true if the New Covenant were made with unbelievers as well as believers, and that is what Jeremiah 31:33-34 flatly denies. As negative evidence, no verses can be found in the NT that show that the New Covenant was ever made with an unbeliever. Nobody denies that all visible churches include hypocrites and non-believers, but no verse suggests the NC is made with them, which is the essential claim that the Covenantalist needs to prove.

9. *Denial of the “internal/external” distinction leads necessarily to confusing election and the decree or to positing two types of election, decretal and “covenantal” (i.e., a temporary, historical, conditional election) as is evident in the so-called “Federal Vision” theology.*

But the Decree *includes* election. In the meantime, no New Covenant thinker denies the distinction between the visible and invisible Church, but we don't have a dog in this Federal Vision fight; it is simply irrelevant to New Covenant Theology. The real solution to the Federal Vision heresy is to start by abandoning the traditional Covenantalism and the “new perspective on Paul” from which it is derived, and of which it is a fruit.

10. *The Gospel is not a promise of election, but of a gracious and sovereign salvation from sin which salvation is received through faith alone.*

We agree. This thesis is presumably intended to exclude the notion that election is somehow dependent on foreseen faith, or on whether a person “stays in the covenant” or not. Election is the basic *condition* of the Gospel, *not a fruit* of it. NCT preaches faith in Christ, not a “promise” of election. Nobody can know they are elected until they believe, and nobody can ever know for certain that they are reprobate until the final judgement. All sorts of nasty unbelievers might turn out to be elect and be born again of God, as the cases of St. Paul or John Newton attest well enough.

11. *There are two chief benefits of the covenant of grace: justification and sanctification, of which justification has logical priority.*

Change the phrase “covenant of grace” to “the New Covenant,” and this thesis is correct. In fact, the *process* of sanctification *begins* the same instant as the *event* of justification.

12. *The sole ground of justification is the fulfillment of the condition of the covenant of works by Christ in his active and passive obedience.*

Even better, “The sole ground of justification is the fulfillment of the condition of the Mosaic Covenant in its entirety by Jesus in his life and death (‘born under the Law’), this active and passive obedience being imputed as a gracious gift of righteousness to every believer, the moment he/she believes.” For NCT, the notion of a previous “covenant of works” is superfluous. The relations of promise and inheritance, blessing and curse, type and fulfillment, are all fully explained in the NT text without ever referring to a primeval covenant of works. Such an idea does not even appear in the text when the relation of Adam and Christ is in view, nor elsewhere where it would help the argument.

13. *The sole object of justifying faith is Christ the Surety of the covenant of redemption for us, and the fulfillment of the covenant of works for us, and the Mediator of the covenant of grace to us.*

Strictly speaking, this proposition means a NCT believer cannot be saved, since I (for example) do not believe that Christ was the Surety of the Trinitarian covenant of redemption, or that he fulfilled a “covenant of works” that never existed. Better stated, this thesis should read, “The sole object of justifying faith is Christ as the Surety and Mediator of the New Covenant, who by his obedience ‘under the Law,’ satisfied fully the Mosaic Covenant on the believers’ behalf.” Titles like *surety* (Ps 119:122, Isa 38:40 and Heb 7:22), *messenger* (Mal 3:1), and *mediator* (Heb 9:14-16) of the New Covenant label different aspects of Christ’s atoning work.

14. *The sole instrument of justification and condition of the covenant of grace is a receptive, resting, extra-spective, faith which trusts in Christ’s keeping of the covenant of works.*

Better still, “The sole instrument of justification, providing entry into the New Covenant, is assent to the knowledge of the Gospel, and trust in the Person of Christ the Savior who has fully satisfied the just wrath of God against sinners (Isa 53:11), as expressed in the Mosaic Law.” This would satisfy the classical definition of *saving faith* as including *knowledge* of the true Gospel, *assent* to that truth, and *trust* in the Person who presents himself for our faith in that Gospel. This condition of the New Covenant is supplied as a supernatural gift by God himself in our initial regeneration, and is not asserted as an autonomous natural ability (libertarian freewill). More briefly, “The sole instrument of justification is faith in Christ as he offers himself in the Gospel.”

15. *Only believers receive the chief benefits of the covenant.*

Better, “Only believers are the subjects of justification and sanctification because only believers are in the New Covenant.” Clark meant to indicate that the unbelievers comprehended in the “covenant of grace” will not receive these “chief benefits” although they may experience other benefits, presumably common-grace advantages. No doubt there are common grace fruits flowing from the Cross experienced by some unbelievers influenced by the Gospel, but we cannot see their hearts, so only God knows that as non-elect, they are not members of the invisible “church which is his Body” of Ephesians 1:22-23. In 1 Cor 7:14, “sanctified” refers to the validity in God’s eyes of a mixed marriage, and “holy” to the legitimacy of the offspring of mixed marriages. There is no such thing (in the NC) as the “covenant holiness” of an *unbeliever*, which is a self-contradictory idea.

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