

**COMMENTARY ON
R. SCOTT CLARK'S COVENANTALISM 18)**

Dr. Clark's next category is labeled "Ecclesiastical," and contains another 32 theses. We are now getting to the real issues resulting from covenantalist thinking. The central issue is the nature of the Church in its visible and invisible aspects.

8:1. The church is both the universal and local Christ[-]confessing covenant community.

This is formally correct, but does not explain the relation between the visible ("universal") and invisible ("local") aspects of the Church, as the word "community" remains to be defined. The universal or invisible Church consists of all existing believers only. Some of them are found in local churches, many are with the Lord. The concept of "Christendom" as a historical phenomenon is not a biblical category, and includes Catholics, Protestants, Orthodox, heretical, and nominal professing "Christians." It is not a "covenant community" at all, but a broadly religious societal movement resulting from the growth of the invisible Church. It should not be confused with "the universal Church."

2. God has ordained three special offices in the Christ confessing covenant community: minister, elder, and deacon.

This is an inadequate statement about the NT terms used for Christian leadership, as "minister" is one translation of *diakonos*, a servant. "Elder" translates *presbuteros*. By "minister" Clark probably means a Pastor, or the "teaching elder" in a Presbyterian assembly. The Catholic tradition developed a hierarchy of bishop, elder, and deacon in descending order, then added archbishops, cardinals, and popes at the top end, and monks, nuns, and laity at the bottom. There is no hierarchical principle taught in the NT, where Jesus speaks against the principle as heathen (Mk 10:41-45, Lk 22:25-26). The NT has many terms describing Christian leaders (including "leaders" ! in Heb 13:7), all describing *gifts* and *functions*, not positions of control and authority on a scale or hierarchy of superiors and inferiors. God gives gifts to individuals who then exercise them, and are recognized by a congregation as having the gift from Christ for the Body (Eph 4:4-13). The "three-fold ministry" theory of Catholicism is based on the arbitrary selection of NT terms for hierarchical convenience. Usually, a plurality of elders and deacons managed a NT assembly.

3. Christians are obligated to join themselves to a true Christ confessing covenant community.

More accurately, Christians should be part of a Bible-believing local Church wherever possible (Heb 10:25).

4. The marks of a true, Christ confessing, covenant community are the pure preaching of the Gospel (the covenant of grace), the pure administration of the covenant signs and seals (sacraments), and the administration of discipline.

Here we have an explanation of what the term "signs and seals" meant in 7:29 above. These three "marks" of a true church are the classical ones of Reformation thought. They replace the traditional "Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic" marks of mediaeval Catholicism. The equation of "the Gospel" with "the covenant of grace" in this thesis is a covenantalist gloss needing no comment.

5. *A genuinely Christian life cannot ordinarily be lived outside a true Christ confessing covenant community.*

Changing this to “outside a true New Covenant Church” makes it more accurate.

6. *Members of the Christ confessing covenant community who have received the sign and seal of the covenant are morally obligated to live in fidelity to that community, and to make regular and consistent use of the means of grace (Word and sacrament).*

This thesis is harmless except that there are many more “means of grace” than just hearing sermons and obeying Christ’s commands to participate in the two sacraments. Unfortunately, in some denominations “confessing” can mean formal assent to a large historically and culturally-conditioned *Confession of Faith* such as Westminster or 1689, which contains erroneous doctrines often not even believed fully by the leadership. Baptists would argue that those paedobaptists who have never been baptized as believers are in fact disobedient Christians whose leadership has inhibited from obeying the Lord because they imagine they have been “done as babies.” In the Bible, baptism is *always an act of obedience* to Christ, not a passive rite. The believer obeys by seeking to join a local church, and that church obeys by baptizing him/her upon hearing a credible confession of faith in Christ. The paedobaptist obeys nobody, neither as a baby nor at “confirmation.” He simply ignores the command.

7. *Attendance to the means of grace may be said to be stipulations or moral obligations or even second-order conditions of the covenant of grace so long as they are distinguished from the proper condition or instrument of the covenant of grace.*

By this standard, every command in the NT is a “second order condition” of the New Covenant. The repetition of the phrase “the covenant of grace” is a propaganda technique for impressing the covenantalist idea on the reader. Most of the time it just refers to the New Covenant, when that term should replace it. The “proper condition” was earlier correctly defined as saving faith (7:14), but “second order” is not defined. Does it mean “less important” or “secondary” ?? If a second order condition is a necessary condition, what would a third order condition be? A non-necessary condition?? A Baptist would simply say that baptism of a believer is not necessary at all for salvation, (neither are “proper instruments”) but that it is necessary for a biblical church order, as is the orderly celebration of the Lord’s Supper. As acts of obedience, both are necessary for a fully biblical Christian life.

8. *The Word of the covenant is in two parts: Law and Gospel.*

Tell that to the writer of Galatians (Gal 3:30). Here we see at its baldest what the “one and eternal covenant” of Heinrich Bullinger really amounts to; the blending of law and grace in a State-Church. The New Covenant theologian (after reading through Galatians), just looks at Hebrews and sees that the Mosaic system is characterized by such expressions as “*elementary, dead works, changeable (temporary), weak, useless, making nothing perfect, not better, obsolete, growing old, ready to disappear, and can never take away sins, or sanctify*” (chapters 6-10). This doesn’t sound like a working covenant to me. This type of language (and much more of a negative kind) indicates that God has abolished the “first” to establish the “second” (Heb 10:9). The whole argument of Hebrews is designed to prove (among other things) that the *New Covenant* in Christ completely replaces the *Old Covenant* in Moses. These are two covenants, not one, and we are no longer “under Law” but “under Grace,” and they are *not* miscible; they are *not* two sides of the one eternal covenantal coin. Bullinger’s “one covenant” is an illusion. There is no hint of it in Hebrews.