

**COMMENTARY ON  
R. SCOTT CLARK'S COVENANTALISM 3)**

*2:4. Orthodox Lutheranism appears to have rejected Reformed covenant theology because they saw in it a confusion of Law and Gospel.*

This is partly true. And the Lutherans were right to fear such a confusion, which became an important feature of Covenantalism in its highest development, because State Churches seek the sanctification of the entire community once they get into power. By drawing Aaronic legislation into the laws of both church and state, they developed *a theonomic approach* to public morality, and sought social compliance of everyone, not just believers. Modern Theonomists *still* want to do this. They agree with the covenantal Theonomists of the past that the way to sanctify societies is to impose at least parts of the Mosaic system on the whole culture by state legislation. In England the Puritans (both Anglican and Presbyterian and Independents) sought to enforce Sabbatarian rules and church attendance on everyone. They mostly failed in England, but tried to do the same thing after the emigration to Massachusetts by developing a Puritan colony there in Boston. Selections must be made, but *which laws to apply* (out of the over 600 in the Torah !!) is the arbitrary decision of whatever church authorities are in power. Today the Theonomists claim the whole civil and moral legislation of the Torah is potential material for state legislation (Rushdoony *etc.*).

The theological defense of NC legalism was very simple: if the covenant is one and eternal, and the “moral law” extracted from the Aaronic system (mostly the Ten Commandments) is also eternal (and not abolished on the Cross), then the Sabbath (for example) must apply under the NC. All sorts of OT laws could be pulled into the NC and applied to a church-controlled community, and this was indeed the basis of the “sanctification” of Boston society.

The Lutherans were right to think that a unified covenant meant that Law would be merged with Gospel, and they watched it happen in Reformed cities. They were also right to find no motivation in a unified covenant to defend infant baptism, since they believed in baptismal regeneration, and still do. The motivation issue is important. The Reformed *badly needed* a unified covenant, while the Lutherans did not. Dr. Clark tellingly omits this detail.

*5. Reformed theology turned to covenant theology however, not to revise or reject Luther's breakthrough, but in order to preserve the Protestant soteriology and to relate coherently justification to sanctification.*

Again, this is *partly* true. No orthodox Calvinist wants to deny the fundamental Gospel principle of justification by faith alone (Luther's *allein* in Rom 3:28), although “federal vision” and other erroneous recent developments of Covenantalism *do* in effect, while still claiming not to. The question really is *How exactly*, are you going to “relate” justification to sanctification “coherently”? Modern Covenantalists (*e.g.* Bishop of Durham N. T. Wright) do it by making justification just the first stage of the *process* of sanctification, so that instead of being *how you enter* the New Covenant, it is really *how you stay in* the covenant. This is a return to the Romanist heresy offered by Trent in 1545-63 that justification is a process that can be increased by good works, against the original Reformed (and Lutheran) position, that *justification is a forensic event*, not a process, while sanctification is *a lifelong process* of increasing conformity to God's will.

The developing Covenantalism of the 15-1600s was not just a way of “preserving” Protestant salvation theory, but a radical rearrangement of how it worked through bringing the OT Laws to the

task of NC sanctification. Justification was admittedly by Faith, but sanctification was by Law. It was no longer possible on the covenantal basis, to distinguish between OC *Law*, and NC *Ethics*, and the Puritans did not so distinguish them. It was all “the Law of God” to them. Puritanism was mostly theonomic.

6. *Classical Reformed theology taught three covenants : the covenant of redemption (pactum salutis), the covenant of works (foedus operum), and the covenant of grace (foedus gratiae).*

This is partly correct. The question needs to be asked however, about *Who, exactly*, taught this? Many Reformed thinkers said that the Trinitarian “covenant of redemption” was unnecessary. Others repudiated the covenant of works, some said it existed in Eden but is no longer operable, others said it still operates the same as ever, others claimed it had been absorbed into the Mosaic system, and others that it was therefore fulfilled by Christ for the believer, but still applies to the unbeliever.

Considering the enormous variations appearing in this theory as it developed, there was no such thing as “classical” covenant theology. Which “classic” are you going to quote? There are literally dozens of covenant theologians to choose from, most still not even in English. It is not obvious why Clark uses *pactum* for the first, but *foedus* for the other two.

For the NC theologian, the problem with this scheme is that there is no adequate exegesis to support the Trinitarian covenant, and none to support the covenant of works, either. These imaginary constructs are produced by a process of Aristotelian abstraction; that is, by selecting similarities that the historical covenants have, and building up a Platonic “covenant in heaven” (or in Eden if it’s of “works”). There are no references to them in the Bible, and we shall see below that the exegetical arguments for them are all invalid. Their purpose is to provide a “unified covenant principle” that will later be used to smooth over *the differences* between the OC and the NC, in the interest of legitimizing legalisms of various kinds plus of course, explaining infant baptism. Generalizations replace exegesis throughout this scheme. For example, Van Til often described unbelievers as “covenant-breakers,” as if unbelievers somehow had broken a covenant with God, but the expression in Rom 1:31 just means that they break agreements they make *with each other*. As a Van Tillian myself, I have to recall that Dr. Van Til was a Presbyterian covenantalist, so I should forgive him for sounding like one. There is no covenant of God with the heathen that they could “break,” as the Noachic Covenant (made with mankind as a whole) was not conditional on anything man had to do.

It cannot be shown that there was any ancient covenant between God and man in or after Eden, and the evidences in Genesis 2-5 only show that ancient people had a revelation that they disobeyed. Primeval revelation does not require or imply a covenant, which is a specific form of agreement, which must be *identified* in order to exist; every agreement is not a “covenant.” The fact that Gen 3:15 is a prediction of Christ doesn’t mean that they knew anything about Jesus of Nazareth, or needed to. The idea of an incipient or “implied” covenant is preposterous.

The Noachic covenant was a *common grace* affair and had nothing to do with (say) the calling of Abraham or Moses or David. It applied to the whole world and everyone in it, and was never altered or added to by later covenants, which were all particular *gracious* covenants having the progress of *redemption* as their subject. The only covenant in the Bible that has been abrogated is the Mosaic covenant.