

Theology

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Seminar: **COMMENTARY ON R. SCOTT CLARK'S COVENANTALISM (4)**

Clark's third category of theses contains thirty propositions dealing with "Biblical/exegetical" issues. These theses cover the most important arguments for Covenantalism supposedly based on Scripture. We will examine each in turn. To provide a reasonable alternative interpretation of a verse that is in harmony with both context and grammar is to *remove it from the opponent's arsenal*. A verse that can have more than one possible meaning that could express the author's intention, cannot be used as "proof" for either positions. And the mere fact that a verse has long been used to *illustrate* something doesn't mean it proves it. Assumptions, illustrations, similarities, and analogies, never by themselves, rise to the level of proof. The best exegetical proofs are demonstrations of logically necessary results.

3:1. The God of the Bible relates to his creatures covenantally from eternity (pactum salutis), in creation (covenant of works), in providence (covenant of preservation), and in redemption (covenant of grace).

This is just a short summary statement of the covenantal construct. The fourth covenant (of "preservation") might refer to the Noachic Covenant of Gen 8:21-9:17 (Thesis 3:9 below), or to providence in general. The force of the statement is largely created by the vagueness of the term *relates*. God "relates" in dozens of ways to his creation, and making a covenant with someone is just one way. NCT considers the specific historic covenants actually described in the Bible, to be the real backbone of the drama of redemption, rather than various imaginary "inferred" covenants. It is the sheer generality of many covenantalist claims that makes them so useful. There *is* such a thing as invalid inference.

2. Hosea 6:7 ("like Adam") confirms the consciousness of the Biblical authors of a prelapsarian covenant of works.

Actually, it does no such thing. If there had been a covenant of works in Eden, this verse *might* have been a reference to it, but as it stands, there are at least four other possible understandings of the verse that have no bearing on the covenantal assumption: 1) The Hebrew word for Adam might actually be a variant spelling of *Edom* (no *vav*, plus different vowel-points). Or 2), the Hebrew word might be rendered "like man," *i.e.*, like men in general, or the Gentiles; like men, my people are disobedient, and have transgressed their covenant. Or 3), "Adam" might be a *place* where ("there") the people disobeyed God. Or 4), the Hebrew grammar only requires that *disobedience* be the error of Adam, a disobedience like the Israelite's disobedience to God now under the Mosaic covenant. In that case, the commonality ("like") is Adam's disobedience, not covenantal conditions being broken. Any one of these alternatives could reflect the "consciousness" of the author. This verse does *not* say, "As Adam disobeyed the covenant of works, so have my people transgressed the Mosaic covenant." Just as "Whosoever will" proves Arminianism only if you presuppose that it refers to libertarian freewill, so Hosea 6:7 only proves a covenant of works if this original covenant is first assumed. Covenantalists quote this verse because it's the only one they've got.

3. The Apostle Paul presupposes the existence of a prelapsarian covenant of works in passages such as Romans 2:13 and 4:4.

This is easily stated, but impossible to prove. In Rom 2:13, we are told that merely hearing the Law is not enough to justify unless it is followed by faithful obedience, and in 4:4, the just payment of a worker is not a gift, but what is *owed* him who has earned it. Aside from the fact that no reference to a covenant of works before the Fall is found here, neither can any exegesis of these texts show that Paul

“presupposed” it. These verses are perfectly logical steps in Paul’s argument in Romans, nothing more. They show that obedience would warrant a just reward, but say nothing about a covenant with Adam.

4. *The excommunication from the tree of life (Genesis 3:22-24) confirms the probationary nature of the covenant of works.*

This would only be true if there has been a “covenant of works” in the first place. Clearly the Eden experience was “probationary” in the sense that they failed the test when confronted by Satan, but the existence of a probationary test does not require a covenant. All commands are not covenants, and a command does not require a “covenant” to give it validity. The assumption is in the Covenantalist’s head only.

5. *There were multiple signs and seals of the covenant of works including the creational Sabbath, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and the tree of life.*

This is an example of the method of abstraction. It creates a Platonic concept or ideal reality out of attributes selected from particular cases, the way the abstract class of “the mammal” is made up of the common attributes of a particular cat, a dog, and a zebra, as they all suckle their young. Then, the idea of a “seal” of a covenant is just read back from later covenants. A sufficient refutation is that abstracted similarities does not establish identity. For example, there is no evidence that God imposed a weekly Sabbath on his people before Sinai, or after the Cross (see Paul’s attitude in Gal 3:10, 4:10, 5:3, and Col 2:16-17). Besides, how many “seals” does one covenant need? The whole idea of a “seal of *the* covenant” is very unclear. Why would the tree of life (or the other tree) be such a seal if the Sabbath were? It’s lack of clarity like this that caused John Murray to suggest that covenantalism needed to be “recast.” Even that was a polite understatement.

6. *The first Gospel promise in Genesis 3:15 announces the covenant of grace, i.e., redemption of the elect by a Mediator.*

The “protevangelium” only announces “the covenant of grace” if one first proves that all the elements of the redemptive covenants in the Bible are “really” only one covenant, of which the historical covenants are just a “faint copy” (Berkhof’s revealingly Platonist expression). Generalizing all the particular covenants onto one universal is a scholastic move, and quite unnecessary biblically. Promises by themselves do not a covenant make.

7. *The covenant of grace is the progressive historical account of the administration of the Gospel in the history of redemption.*

This is very misleading as it stands. It’s really only a description of how the construct *works* for the Covenantalist. Actually, “the covenant of grace” as a theological construct is never mentioned in Scripture, by which features of *several* particular covenants are selected to create the generality of *one* covenant, which is then said to be “administered” as separate covenants. The word “gospel” just means “good news,” and its content at any point must be defined in the context. Jonah didn’t think the realization that the Ninevites had repented with their king was “good news,” although it certainly was for them, as it averted a divine judgement. The covenants of Scripture are not “administrations,” but just distinct covenants by which God advances redemptive revelation. Each stands on its own two feet.



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