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Covenant Theology - A Re-evaluation*

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AMONG the forces that have shaped the pattern of historical theology and have brought us to this ecumenical hour is one that is both strong and persistent, one that is aptly summed up in the term "covenant-theology." By this we mean not only the classic Federal Theology of orthodox Calvinism but also that type of biblical theology which sees in the doctrine of the covenant its unifying principle of interpretation. This Covenant Theology demands re-examination today partly because of its historical place in Reformed theology, and partly because it poses the deepest questions for "practical theology." To speak of the doctrine of the covenant, for instance, is to speak of the extent of the atonement, the effectual use of the means of grace, and the nature of evangelism. Perhaps such re-examination is especially demanded by the very fact that our modern theology sees little or no tension at these points. Let us present a brief study of the idea of covenant in historical theology, and then offer a possible solution to the problems raised by our historical investigation.

Biblical research confirms the insight of the Early Church in naming the two parts of its Scriptures "covenants" (*testamenta*). For the fundamental motif of the Scriptures is best summed up in the concept of *berith* (*diathēkē* in LXX and N.T.). The covenant of Horeb-Sinai is the foundation of Judaism, whose knowledge of God and service of God derive from and are judged by that historical act of grace. Thus the Ten Words of covenant were housed in "the ark of berith-Yahweh" (Deut. 10:8) as the foundation underlying the mercy-place. The other covenants, in the Book of Genesis, probably are best regarded in relation to the Mosaic pact—Adam's is its absolutizing (Gen. 2:16f), Noah's is its universalizing (Gen. 9:16), while Abraham's is essentially of the same kind, its evangelical precursor (Gen. 17).

The Hebrews were a covenant-people because theirs was a covenant-making God. This is evident from a study of the "distinctive ideas" of the Old Testament such as Snaith has given us. Consider the two primary words *chesed* and *'ahabah*: "'*Ahabah* is the cause of the covenant: *chesed* is the means of its continuance. Thus *'ahabah* is God's Election-Love, whilst *chesed* is His Covenant-Love."¹

The term *chesed* becomes the distinctive Divine attribute of Hebrew theology, God's faithfulness or "leal-love" (G. A. Smith), although we may feel that the complementary term *chen* (the condescending love of a superior

*The substance of this article was given in the form of a Paper read to the Trinitarian Theological Society, Toronto, on April 3, 1956.

1. N. Snaith, *The Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament* (Epworth, 1944), p. 95.

for an inferior) is necessary to express the true nature of the Divine grace. Yet the clue to the Old Testament history is the covenant, and therefore "the whole secret of God's continued mercy towards Israel was that they were the people of His choice. Israel ultimately depended upon the Covenant, and her hope of salvation was in God's persistent covenant-love."² The temptation to legalism is strong here, and the prophets struggled against it, reaching at last the doctrine of a New Covenant which is truly "the New Testament latent in the Old."

It would seem that Eichrodt's stress on the idea of the Covenant in his *Theologie des alten Testaments* is a valid one: Yahweh is a God who initiates covenants, a *Bundesgott*, and His people are the *Bundesvolk*. But if this is a true and fruitful interpretation of the Old Testament, it is a sad commentary on the Church (on its "hellenization"?) that it virtually lost the doctrine of the covenant, except in terms of an Augustinian predestination. This twist in the association of the covenant-idea shaped the pattern of historical theology so that the doctrine of grace became a question of ecclesiastical authority and ordinance rather than of the Divine activity of seeking and saving. The Schoolmen could write at length about the Divine attributes, but the relationship to the quality of *chesed* is difficult to ascertain. Even the Angelic Doctor's treatment of predestination, for all its merit, fails to notice the evangelical tension in the whole matter (*S. Theol.* Ia, Q. 23). This pattern obtains until the Reformers break through the scholastic method with a renewed understanding of the mighty acts of God in Jesus Christ. Thus Calvin's *Institutes* accepts the approach of the Apostles' Creed rather than the traditional *summae* or *loci*.

Calvin's understanding of the significance of Covenant may be summed up in three references. First, Calvin accepts the concept of covenant as expressing the way God deals with men: "All those persons, from the beginning of the world, whom God has adopted into the society of his people, have been federally connected with him (*fuisse ei foederatos*) by the same law and the same doctrine which are in force among us" (*Inst.* 2.10.1). Second, as this same passage makes clear, his chief concern is to illustrate the *substantial identity* of the old and new covenants: "The covenant of all the fathers is so far from differing substantially from ours, that it is the very same; it only varies in the administration" (*Inst.* 2.10.1). In terms of its substance and reality (*substantia et re ipsa*) the Old Testament is one with the New, for the substance and reality of both Covenants is Jesus Christ. Hence the identity in content of the sacraments of both Testaments, inasmuch as the sacrament is both sign and seal (effective as well as cognitive) of the covenanted grace: "By the figure metonymy, the name of covenant is transferred to circumcision, which is so conjoined with the word, that it could not be separated from it" (*Comm. on Gen.* 17:9).

The third reference unfortunately became central in subsequent Calvin-

2. *Ibid.*, p. 129.

ism. This is Calvin's relating the "principle of the gracious covenant" to a supralapsarian scheme of double predestination (*Inst.* 3.21.5). That is, he understands the Divine activity of covenant-making only as derivative from the Divine activity of decree-making. The latter has priority, and atonement is subordinately related to its secret mystery. Yet even here we catch a glimpse of that other strain which informs all his thought, and which itself gives the tension and the dynamic to his theology. I mean his doctrine of faith as *union with Christ*:

In order to maintain the efficacy and stability of election, it is necessary to ascend to the head, in whom their heavenly Father has bound his elect to each other, and united them to himself by an indissoluble bond. Thus the adoption of the family of Abraham displayed the favour of God, which he denied to others; but in the members of Christ there is a conspicuous exhibition of the superior efficacy of grace; because, being united to their head, they never fail of salvation [*Inst.* 3.21.7].

To this doctrine we shall return later.

The subsequent Calvinism concentrated on the third reference to the detriment of the first two (e.g. Beza's supralapsarian system) so that a reaction was almost inevitable, and James Arminius bowed to the will of history. The resulting Calvinist-Arminian debate, as underlined by the Synod of Dort, indicates the inner connection between election and atonement in these terms: conditional election means universal atonement, while double predestination implies limited atonement. Thus simplified and hardened, it is little wonder that Protestant Church history becomes the story of a new scholasticism. One interesting attempt to break the deadlock was made by the French school of Saumur, whose impetus came (of course!) from a Scot, John Cameron, but whose pupil and successor, Amyraut, is the chief representative. He taught a doctrine of "hypothetic universal grace," in which the decree of atonement precedes the decree of election, and the reason why the inward light of grace is given to some and not to others remains a mystery, without having to declare the latter to be predestinated to unbelief (a theory much like the later New England theology). Amyraut won his case, proving that he was not speaking contrary to the canons of Dort. Against the Saumur school such men as Turretin and Wetstein sounded the old refrain of the *decretum horribile* (which Turretin varied by asserting the inspiration of the Hebrew O.T. vowel points!). Thus did Calvinism march on from strength to strength, secure in the knowledge that predestination was the first principle of Reformed theology, and that the question of the relation of the Cross of Jesus Christ to sinful men was strictly derivative from the prior question of the details of the covenant made between the Father and the Son before the dawn of creation.

In the light of this development, the Federal Theology appears as a more hopeful sign, although it is basically the child of this debate. The classic utterance of the new system is the *Summa Doctrinae de Foedere et Testamento Dei* (1648) of Johannes Cocceius of Leyden. The basic desire is to

interpret history in terms of the nature of the covenant operative at particular times: "Man who comes upon the stage of the world with the image of God, exists under a law and a covenant, and that a covenant of works."³ The second covenant, of Grace, which succeeded after the Fall, is divided by Cocceius according to "a twofold economy," the first "in expectation of Christ," and the second "in faith in Christ revealed." Some theologians made a different analysis, distinguishing a threefold administration of one covenant of grace, from the Protevangelium in Paradise to Moses, the Mosaic law, and the N.T. Gospel. But in general this was rejected, and even those who further subdivided the economy of grace (e.g., Wolleb) make clear that the one ordinance of Christ Jesus operates throughout.

Perhaps the most significant historical aspect of the Federal Theology is its acceptance by the Westminster Assembly. The basic idea of covenant had become part of the life of Scotland as early as 1556, when members of the struggling Reformed Church entered into a "Band" at Dun, vowing to "refuse all society with idolatry." The following year at Edinburgh "ane Godlie Band" was established.⁴ Yet the Federal Theology as such seems to have been fully developed in Britain, at least by 1645 when John Ball wrote *A Treatise of the Covenant of Grace*, a book recommended by such Westminster divines as Calamy and Reynolds.⁵ But apart from such external evidence, the Westminster Confession adopts the concept of two covenants, one of works and one of grace, with the latter differing in its parts only administratively (VII.5).

The Westminster Confession thus adopts as its frame of reference, its principle of Biblical interpretation, the full-orbed Federal Theology involving as its chief points the doctrines of double predestination, limited atonement, covenants of works and of grace, and imputed justification. Its teaching on those points of doctrine which have relevance to evangelism, such as Effectual Calling, is necessarily shaped by this frame of reference. The problem evident at these points received attention historically in the development of American Calvinism. The New England Theology sought to retain the distinctive principle of the sovereignty of God, while also working out homiletic methods of approaching sinners according to the theory that "God has opened a door for all to be saved conditionally" (Bellamy). This school discussed at great length such moot questions as whether one should urge the unregenerate to pray for conversion, and whether the imputation of sin by virtue of the representative nature of Adam is mediate or immediate. In general, the New England Theology moved away from the extreme (supralapsarian) position of Jonathan Edwards himself. And in reaction to its development the Hodges of Princeton declared exhaustively the old Calvinism. Charles Hodge accepts the

3. Quoted in Heppie, *Reformed Dogmatics* (English translation by G. T. Thomson, Edinburgh, 1950), p. 281.

4. J. Kerr, *The Covenants and the Covenanters* (Glasgow, 1895), p. 12.

5. Cf. Fisher, *History of Christian Doctrine* (Scribners, 1896), p. 348 footnote, for this question.

Federal Theology at its basic point: "The Nature of the covenant, therefore, determines the object of his death,"⁶ yet in the growing doctrine of "common grace" he indicates one way of solving the evangelical tension of scholastic Calvinism: "It will of course be admitted that, if efficacious grace is the exercise of almighty power it is irresistible. That common grace, or that influence of the Spirit which is granted more or less to all men is often effectually resisted, is of course admitted."⁷

Finally, what of the contemporary attitude towards the Federal Theology? There would seem to be three main attitudes, the teaching of the Westminster Seminary approaching most closely to the traditional system.⁸ In the impressive theology of Dutch theologians, however, we see a more critical attitude. Bavinck, for instance, resolves the tension between supra- and infra-lapsarianism inasmuch as the Divine decree is "a system the several elements of which are coordinately related to one another."⁹ Karl Barth, finally, seeks a re-orientation of the problem of predestination, and a more personal and dynamic approach to the problem of atonement.¹⁰ It is also significant to consider his appraisal of the Federal Theology, as given incidentally in a comment on the historical theology of Heinrich Heppé:

On Heppé's historical outlook we should note that according to him, wonderful to relate, not Calvin but the later Melancthon must have been the Father of Reformed theology. And he has paid his tribute to the spirit of the nineteenth century, in that for him the incursion of the covenant-theology of Cocceius and his pupils, proclaimed alongside of Cartesianism, into the line of the older expositors of Reformed dogma seems not to involve any deeper problem; so that we ask in vain how it came about, that, in this particular, Reformed orthodoxy in the eighteenth century can be so marvellously and painlessly "intellectual", i.e., pietistically rationalist.¹¹

Here Barth indicates the confusion in our historical attitude: we have approached the Reformers through the orthodoxy of their successors, and have failed to notice the basic disagreement between the two, from dynamic to static and from Biblical to philosophical theology. Why should it be taken for granted that Calvin's theology begins with the doctrine of predestination? Because of the caricature so systematically and skilfully drawn for us by the orthodox Calvinism. Yet this orthodoxy failed to assess Calvin aright, failed to balance his Augustinian concept of grace (which emphasis is not necessarily supralapsarian, we should add) with that which informed his doctrines of justification, sacrament and predestination too—that faith means union with Christ. The final sign of the caricature is the fact that Charles Hodge interprets our relation to Christ as "a federal union,"¹² and

6. *Systematic Theology* (Nelson, 1873), Vol. II, p. 546.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 687.

8. E.g. L. Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (Eerdmans, 1932).

9. H. Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God* (English translation by W. Hendriksen, Eerdmans, 1951), p. 383.

10. E.g. *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, II/2 and III/2.

11. Heppé, *op. cit.*, p. vii.

draws a close parallel between the representative role of Adam and of Christ. But it is highly questionable whether this is a fair reading of Paul's central concept of being *en Christo*; and the relation between Adam and Christ according to Paul (e.g. *Romans* 5:12ff, *I Cor.* 15:21ff) is not sufficiently homologous to bear the interpretation which the Federal Theology assumes.

The critical question for the Federal Theology was the effective use of the means of grace: how was the Minister of the Word and Sacraments to offer God's grace, and how was the repentant sinner to receive it? This is the question for which Protestant orthodoxy could find no adequate answer in its covenantal interpretation of Reformed theology. And this is precisely the question to which the doctrine of union with Christ provides the positive answer. Calvin, in company with Peter Martyr (and Martin Bucer), had stressed the dynamic communication of the new humanity of the Ascended Lord as the content of faith, given through the means of grace committed to the Church.¹³ This union with Christ was to be discerned on three levels. First was a general or absolute union by the Incarnation, which affords the theological basis for anthropology and ethics, since in this prior sense every man *as man* bears the image of God (cf. *Inst.* 3.7.6). The second kind of union is effected by the Holy Spirit, who unites us to Jesus Christ in justification and new life: "For no other way are we reconciled to God by the sacrifice of His death, except that He is ours and we are one with Him," writes Calvin to Martyr. The third union is the result of this justifying grace, by which the Spirit communicates the properties of Christ's new humanity, which is perfected in us by Resurrection alone.

The question of whether justification is imputed or imparted, it may be observed, does not arise for the Reformers, but only for a more scholastic generation. Barth puts the case thus:

In emphasizing this more than mystical and more than speculative statement, that faith means unity with the thing believed in, i.e. with Jesus Christ, Calvin did not in the least lag behind Luther, or either of them behind an Augustine, an Anselm, a Bernard of Clairvaux. Without this statement the Reformed doctrine of justification and faith is impossible to understand.¹⁴

When we grasp this basic orientation of justifying faith in the Reformed theology, we take a decisive step away from the bent of the Federal system and towards a more positive understanding of the means of grace and the task of evangelism.

Let us be quite clear that the Reformed theology is first and last a theology of the Holy Spirit. He is the answer to the problem of the effectiveness of Scripture, Sacrament and Church. He quickens men by His use of creaturely means, so that we "lift up the heart" to that communion with Jesus Christ which is our life. In the office of the Holy Spirit, therefore, we have the

12. *Op. cit.*, p. 551.

13. Cf. Peter Martyr Vermigli, *Epistolae (Loc. Comm., 1576, pp. 1094ff.)*; *Ioan. Calv. Epist. et Resp.*, Ep. 208.

14. *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Clark, 1936), p. 274.

context in which we are called to seek today's answer for today's problem of communicating the Gospel and evangelizing the world. No doubt a sign that the Spirit uses every theology is the fact that the Federal theologians did not argue from their doctrine of limited atonement to one of limited evangelism! Nevertheless our task today is to seek a more Scriptural norm for the doctrine of the covenant. Scripture is less concerned about questions of decrees and limits than about the question of the People of God and its responsibility as His Servant in and to the world. The Covenant means a covenanted people (*laos*), a Laity, the "ordinary" means of God's gracious activity towards His world. The doctrine of the Laity demands that we think again about our dichotomy of clergy/laity, and our restriction of the term "evangelist." Finally, in this People's history and destiny we have the true meaning of "covenant theology," namely the mystery of that Divine-human Body which ministers to its generation the grace of God, even Jesus Christ the Head of His Body, the King of His People.