

The Covenant in the Church Fathers

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It has sometimes been said that the introduction of the covenant idea as a theological category is a phenomenon of modern times. One writer of the dispensational school went so far as to state: "Theologically the theory is of comparatively recent development. It was, of course, unknown to the apostolic and early church fathers, never taught by the church leaders of the middle ages, and not mentioned even by any of the great teachers of the reformation period itself. No reference is made to it in any of the great confessions of faith, either Lutheran or Reformed, until the time of the *Westminster Confession*."¹

So before examining the works of the Reformers themselves, in order to test this assumption, it would be helpful to see if there are any guidelines or precursors among the church fathers or in medieval theology which might have influenced or informed Reformed theological thought at this point. The

¹ F. C. Lincoln, "The Development of Covenant Theory", *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 100 (1943), 136.

acquaintance of the Reformed theologians with both the Greek and Latin fathers of the church needs no underlining. They ranged widely through their works. Calvin's writings are saturated with quotations from the patristic authors. They are his second major source after the Scriptures. No other Reformer has such a wealth of patristic references. Calvin's acquaintance with some patristic writings depended on Eusebius and Cassiodorus and his knowledge of church councils and canon law, but many of them he knew first hand.²

One of the emphases in the Reformed use of the covenant was to demonstrate the unity and continuity or harmony between the Old Testament and the New. This was especially so in relation to the early Anabaptist controversy, and was a continuing concern for Calvin.³ But this was an old issue. With the church under attack, first from Judaism itself, and later from Gnostic and pagan writers who sought to isolate Christianity from its Judaistic roots, the early Fathers were pressed to explain the relationship between the Old and New Testaments.⁴ The covenant was

² J.T. McNeill and F.L. Battles, ed. and trs. Calvin *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols. LCC. XX (Philadelphia, 1960). "Author and Source Index", 2.1592–1634; see *Institutes*, 1.13.27, where Calvin gives a penetrating exposition of Irenaeus' *Adversus Haereses*, 111.61ff and 111.9.1; also W.N. Todd, "The Function of the Patristic Writings in the Thought of John Calvin" (unpublished Th.D. thesis, Union Theological Seminary, 1964), 156–157, 174, 203–204, 220ff.

³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 11. 10–11.

⁴ Marcion and Celsus were the main contributors here. On Marcion see: E.C.Blackman, *Marcion and His Influence* (London, 1948); R. M. Grant, *Gnosticism and Early Christianity* (Oxford 1959), ch.5; "Notes on Gnosis" *Vigiliae Christianae*, 11 (1957), 145–151; W. H. C. Frend, "Marcion" *Expository Times*, 80 (1969), 328–332; J. Knox, *Marcion and the New Testament* (Chicago, 1942). On pagan writers see: Origen, *Contra Celsum*, ed. and trs. H. Chadwick (Cambridge 1953); 1). Winslow, "Religion and the Early Roman Empire", *Early Church History*, eds. S. Benko and J.J. O'Rourke (London, 1979), 237–254; S. Benko, "Pagan Criticism of Christianity During the First Two Centuries AD", *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt*, eds. H. Temporini and W. Haase 23.2 (Berlin, 1979), 1055–1116.

naturally seen as a unifying factor in the dealings of God with men throughout both periods.⁵

Epistle of Barnabas

Before considering one or two of the fathers in more detail, there are two writings worth mentioning briefly in this respect. The basic argument of the first part of *The Epistle of Barnabas* concerned the Jews' violation of the covenant of the Lord received by Moses on Mount Sinai. Because they despised the promises in this covenant they lost it, and it became the possession of the Christian church. "The covenant is ours" now, said the author, since the new covenant founded on the sufferings of Christ was the fulfilment of these promises.⁶ This was precisely the covenant announced again and again by the prophets.⁷ The Old Testament sacrifices and ordinances, including circumcision, were types of this new covenant and were designed to teach its spiritual realities, but since the coming of Christ they have now been abolished.⁸ New Testament baptism and the Cross of Christ were constantly prefigured in the old, and as the covenant belonged to those who, like Abraham, believed, the Christians and not the unbelieving Jews, are now the heirs of

⁵ W.H.C. Frend, "The Old Testament in the Age of the Greek Apologists AD 130–180", *SJT*, 26. (1973), 129–150; R.M. Grant, "The Decalogue in Early Christianity", *HTR*, 40 (1947), 1–17; R.P.C. Hanson, *Allegory and Event*, (London, 1959); A. Harnack, *History of Dogma*, 7 vols. trs. N. Buchanan, (London, 1894–1899), 11.230–280; R.V. Moss, "The Covenant Conception in Early Christian Thought" (unpublished Ph.D. thesis University of Chicago, 1954), 155ff; W.C. van Unnik, "Ἡ καινὴ διαθήκη – a Problem in the early History of the Canon", *Studia Patristica* 4 (Berlin, 1961), 223ff; Z.P. Thundyil, *Covenant in Anglo-Saxon Thought* (Madras, 1972); "The Covenant Idea in the Second Century", E. Ferguson, *Texts and Testaments*, ed. W.E. March (San Antonio, 1980), 135–162.

⁶ *The Epistle of Barnabas*, 107–108, *ANCL*, vol.1, eds. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (Edinburgh, 1867).

⁷ *Barnabas*, 109–112.

⁸ *Barnabas*, 102–105, 112–115.

the covenant.⁹ The Lord has given to them the covenant which he once gave to Moses. Christ suffered on their behalf in order that they might inherit the promises and be “constituted heirs through him”. Christ was manifested so that he might redeem his people, and that “He might by His word enter into a covenant with us”.¹⁰ In this way the church became the spiritual temple of the Lord.¹¹

Justin Martyr

Again, in Justin Martyr’s *Dialogue with Trypho* the covenant played a similar major role in the discussion. Trypho, the Jew, admired the moral integrity of the Christians, but because they refused to observe the Old Testament festivals, Sabbaths, and the rite of circumcision he accused them of “despising this covenant rashly”, (i.e. the covenant of the law).¹² Justin replied with an exposition of “the final law” or “the new covenant” in contrast to all the temporal ceremonial observances and sacrifices of the Old Testament. He showed that the Christians were the true sons of Abraham, who had obtained righteousness and salvation through Christ.¹³ Enoch and the other Old Testament saints also received the spiritual circumcision of “the everlasting law and the everlasting covenant”, which was proclaimed by the prophets.¹⁴

Irenaeus of Lyons

Irenaeus was one of the clearest expositors of the covenant amongst the fathers. He held that out of longsuffering to

⁹ *Barnabas*, 120–125.

¹⁰ *Barnabas*, 125–126.

¹¹ *Barnabas*, 128–130.

¹² *The Writings of Justin Martyr and Athenagoras*, 99, *ANCL*, vol. 2, eds. A. Roberts and T. Donaldson (Edinburgh, 1867).

¹³ *Writings of Justin Martyr and Athenagoras*, 100ff.; see also, 248–253.

¹⁴ *Writings of Justin Martyr and Athenagoras*, 140; see also, 150f, 254f.

fallen man, God condescended to give “more covenants than one” to mankind, accommodating them to “the general scheme of the faith”.¹⁵ There were “four principal [Greek catholical] covenants given to the human race” – one from Adam to Noah, a second to Noah after the flood, the third to Moses, and the fourth was the one which summed up all the others in the gospel, bringing renovation to men and translation to the heavenly kingdom.¹⁶ However, he referred more frequently to the two covenants, meaning that which was under Moses and the new covenant in Christ. While there were differences in these covenants “fitted for the times”, they nevertheless manifested unity and harmony, because God was their author and their mutual purpose was the benefit and salvation of men.¹⁷ It was the same gracious God “who was announced by the law and the prophets, whom Christ confessed as His Father”. Therefore, there could only be one end to both covenants.¹⁸ The new covenant was both “known and preached by the prophets”. There was no contradiction;¹⁹ no instead, it was the spurious interpretation of the law by the Pharisees that Christ and the apostles opposed, since the law taught “the necessity of following Christ”.²⁰

True keeping of the law was an inward matter and only possible through the love of God in the heart.²¹ Irenaeus clearly distinguished between the letter of the law and the Word which liberates the soul from bondage to the mere letter. The Word corresponds to the natural precepts or righteousness of the law and the love of God in the heart.

¹⁵ Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, ANCL vol. 5, eds. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (Edinburgh 1868), 1.10.3.

¹⁶ Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, 111.11.8.

¹⁷ Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, 111.12.11–12.

¹⁸ Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, IV.5.1ff.

¹⁹ Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, IV.9.3ff.

²⁰ Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, IV.12.1–5.

²¹ Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, IV.12.2.

This same grace was available to those of old as well as to later Christians, though it was more obscurely revealed then.²² It was not by any observance of signs or sabbaths that they were justified but by believing God independently of the law of Moses.²³ The decalogue was given in covenant as an addition to the natural law inscribed upon men's hearts, because of their hardness and rebellion. Because the decalogue also reflected the righteousness of God, it has never been cancelled, not even by Christ, but remains in force. Christ has cancelled the bondage of the laws promulgated by Moses, but he has "increased and widened those laws which are natural and noble, and common to all". Christ's interpretation of the law remains as a reminder to those who have truly received the power of liberty of their continuing accountability to God, and as "the means of testing and evidencing faith", whether they will reverence, fear and love the Lord.²⁴ The temporal, Levitical ceremonial laws had a similar function. The true offering of sacrifices and oblations was not something that God needed *per se*, but was intended to discourage idolatry, and to be an expression of the love of the offerer and of his trust in what the sacrifices signified. Men were not sanctified by the sacrifices, but the sacrifices were sanctified, as it were, by the consciences of the offerers, and therefore were accepted by God as from a friend.²⁵

The faith of Abraham and the other Old Testament saints was identical with that of Christian believers. Christ came for one as much as for the other.²⁶ Both were justified by faith through Christ, who gathered "into the one faith of Abraham those who, from either covenant, are eligible for God's building". Abraham "did in himself prefigure the two covenants, in which some have sown, while others have reaped".²⁷

²² Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, IV.13–14.

²³ Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, IV.16.2; see also, IV.25.

²⁴ Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, IV. 15–16.

²⁵ Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, IV.17–18.

²⁶ Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, IV.21–23.

²⁷ Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, IV.25.1,3.

Here, then, in outline is the “covenant theology” of one of the early church fathers. Several points are worth noting. Irenaeus regarded the covenantal relationship between God and man as a divine arrangement, involving a condescension by God to man’s capacity and condition. He saw the covenant as the central factor in the unfolding of salvation history. While there were different expressions of covenant, the covenant in Christ was requisite for the saints of all ages, with one way of salvation for the church going back to the time of Adam. Irenaeus distinguished between the mere letter of the law and its spirit. He identified both the natural law, the moral law and the love of God with the righteousness of God. Ceremonial laws were abrogated with the coming of Christ, but the moral law continued in force and has a continuing function in the lives of those who have been liberated by the gospel as a means of testing the reality and strength of their faith. The covenant of grace, therefore, while unilateral in its initiation and accomplishment, had for Irenaeus a strong bilateral and ethical emphasis in its outworking in Christian experience.

Clement of Alexandria

Clement of Alexandria was another of the fathers to whom the Reformers referred, and who also used the idea of the covenant.²⁸ Clement, in one place, spoke of four covenants in the Old Testament. These were made with Adam, Noah, Abraham

²⁸ McNeill and Battles, *Institutes*, 2.1.608. It is hardly likely, however that Calvin knew Clement's works first hand. See Todd, “The Function of the Patristic Writings in the Thought of John Calvin”, 37. On Clement see: E. Molland, “The Concept of the Gospel in the Alexandrian Theology”, *Skrifter utgitt av Det Norske Videnskaps – Akademi* (Oslo 1938), 5–84, 16–30, 69–75; R.B. Tollinton, *Clement of Alexandria: A Study in Christian Liberalism*, 2 vols. (London, 1914); J. Wytzes, “Paideia and Pronoia in the Works of Clemens Alexandrinus” *VC*, 9 (1955), 148–158. [Editor’s note: Readers are directed to the recent work by A.N.S. Lane, *John Calvin Student of the Church Fathers* (Edinburgh and Grand Rapids, 1999). This work provides an excellent study of Calvin’s writings and his patristic sources. It is perhaps the best book on the subject at present.]

and Moses.²⁹ But Clement, like Irenaeus, more frequently designated two – the covenant made with the Jews of old, and the new spiritual covenant made with believers since Christ’s coming.³⁰ He suggested that the two tables of the decalogue “may be a prophecy of the two covenants”, but that it was “the same God who furnished both covenants”; therefore, the difference was more dispensational.³¹ “There is but one, true, ancient, universal Church, one in substance, and idea, in origin, in pre-eminence, and it collects into the unity of one faith those from both covenants, so that in fact there is rather one covenant manifest in different periods by the will of God”. Into this covenant all were gathered who were ordained or predestinated by God before the foundation of the world.³²

Not surprisingly, Clement devoted a lot of time to showing the relationship of law to gospel.³³ “Both the law of nature and that of instruction [i.e. Mosaic] are one,” he said, and these reflected the divine character in teaching righteousness. Obedience to the law, then, was an imitation of “the divine character, namely righteousness”. Both covenants could be viewed as manifestations of one righteousness. In this way, Clement, in one place, interpreted the covenant as God himself, arguing that the word [Greek *theos*] (God) comes from [Greek

²⁹ Clement, *Eclogae Propheticae*, 111, 151. Text used is in *Clemens Alexandrinus*, 3 vols. and index, ed. O. Stählin, *Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller der Ersten Drei Tahrhunderte*, vols. 12, 15, 17, 39, (Leipzig, 1905–1909, 1936).

³⁰ Clement, *Stromata*, IV.5.327. Text of *Stromata*, *Protrepticus* and *Paedagogus* used comes from *The Writings of Clement of Alexandria*, 2 vols. trs. W. Wilson, ANCL, vols. 4 and 12, eds. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, (Edinburgh, 1867–1869).

³¹ *Stromata*, IV. 16. 383; IV.5.327.

³² *Stromata*, IV.17.487. On predestination see also, 1.12.388.

³³ This has been noted by Molland, “The Concept of the Gospel in the Alexandrian Theology”, 16–30, and also by Wytzes, “Paideia and Pronoia in the Works of Clemens Alexandrinus”, 154–155, although the latter has failed to note the covenantal link between law and gospel. He refers to them as separate ways to God.

thesis] (“placing”, “order” or “arrangement”).³⁴ A covenant, therefore, was an arrangement God made with man, and by dealing with man in this way, and thus expressing anger and love towards him, God was “condescending to emotion on man’s account”.³⁵

While the law was given through Moses, it was given and governed by the “benign Word”, that is, Christ, who was the “first expounder of the laws”, and whose name and office Moses predicted (Deut.18:15).³⁶ This meant that the law was more than a letter, it was a “living law”.

The law had a spiritual or “beneficent” purpose or action, and only those who sought and loved the Lord could truly understand it or benefit from it. This was where the Jews failed in the time of Jesus and Paul. They used the law wrongly, not recognizing that “both the law and the gospel are the energy of one Lord, who is ‘the power and wisdom of God’,” and that both beget salvation. Therefore, “faith in Christ and the knowledge of the gospel are the explanation and fulfilment of the law”.³⁷

For Clement, there was a single end to all God’s dealings with men, whether by law or by gospel. This he described often as “assimilation to God” or restoration to the image and likeness of God, of which the Word (Christ) was the model.³⁸ Christ “taught and exhibited... Himself as the Herald of the Covenant, the Reconciler, our Saviour, the Word, the fount of life, the giver of peace”.³⁹ Even Adam, Noah and Abraham who lived before the law, also lived according to the law, because they too sought

³⁴ *Stromata*,1.29.470; 11.18.48,51. See also V.6.244, where both covenants are seen as manifestations of one righteousness, and *Protrepticus*, 1.20, where Clement uses the words “order” and “arrangement” in relation to creation.

³⁵ *Paedagogus*, 1.8. 163.

³⁶ *Stromata*,1.26.461–462, and *Paedagogus*, 1.7.153.

³⁷ *Stromata*,1.27.464–466; IV.21.201; see also, 11.18.53ff,191ff and *Protrepticus*, 11.10iff.

³⁸ *Stromata*,11. 22. 78; *Paedagogus*, 1. 12. 18 1.

³⁹ *Protrepticus*, 10.99.

this conformity to God's image and likeness.⁴⁰ This was the true aim of faith in Christ or "that restitution of the promise which is effected by faith".⁴¹ Like New Testament believers, those "old Hebrew wanderers...learned by experience that they could not be saved otherwise than believing on Jesus".⁴²

Since the coming of Christ, the Lord has invited all men to the knowledge of the truth and has sent his Spirit to bring men to that knowledge by working faith and love in their hearts. But this was an ancient message. Clement said, "You have God's promise; you have his love, become a partaker of his grace. But do not suppose the song of salvation to be new... Error seems old, but truth seems a new thing." The "new song" was but a manifestation of the Word, and he was from the beginning. It was he who spoke through Moses.⁴³ The newness, Clement emphasized, was that of "new minds, which have become newly wise, which have sprung into being according to the new covenant". These new or "young" minds needed instruction in "the Word, the milk of Christ", as to how they should conduct themselves in the world.⁴⁴ This consequent ethical obligation was the main thrust of the *Paedagogus*, and is to be compared with Calvin's emphasis on instruction, teachableness, and being in the school of Christ.⁴⁵ In one place, Clement seemed to make a more rigid dichotomy between the law given by Moses, and the grace and truth which came by Christ. The law, here, he said, was "only temporary".⁴⁶ But clearly this passage can only refer to the

⁴⁰ *Stromata*, 11.19.58f.

⁴¹ *Stromata*, 11.22.78; see also, IV.22.204ff.

⁴² *Protrepticus*, 9.82–83.

⁴³ *Protrepticus*, 1.22.

⁴⁴ *Paedagogus*, 1.5,127; 1.6.138.

⁴⁵ see W.H. Neuser, "Calvin's Conversion to Teachableness" *Nederduitse Gereformeerde Teologiese Tydskrif*, 26 (1985), 14–27. Neuser's lecture is useful in that it gathers together Calvin's use of "docilitas", but it still requires much work in relation to the contexts in which it occurs.

⁴⁶ *Paedagogus*, 1. 7. 153.

manifestation of the law in the Mosaic dispensation, since repeatedly Clement stressed the continuity of the law through Christ who is its fullest manifestation. The law was never abolished or invalidated. The law produced wisdom through the fear [Greek *eulabeia*] of the Lord. By working the knowledge of sin and repentance, it trained or instructed men to Christ, and then had a function of discipline, leading to the way of perfection in Christ.⁴⁷

There is a strong bilateral character to Clement's teaching at this point. He said that the command, "The man that doeth them shall live in them"⁴⁸ had a two-fold function. For both the Hebrews and New Testament Christians, it "declares at once their life and ours" which was "by one covenant in Christ"; and secondly, it declared their correction and training.⁴⁹ Christian progress, therefore, was a healthy fear of the Lord producing faith, obedience and love. Hence, "the works of the Lord, that is, his commandments, are to be loved and done". For Clement, the paths of wisdom constituted the "conduct of life, and variety that exists in the covenants".⁵⁰ Clement's entire exposition of the true Christian gnosis was bilateral in character. Faith issued in the duty of fulfilling that "perfect righteousness" in "both practice and contemplation."⁵¹ And that obedience was the evidence of true faith: "The perfect propitiation, I take it, is that propitious faith in the gospel which is by the law and the prophets, and the purity that shows itself in universal obedience, with the abandonment of the things of the world, in order to that grateful surrender of the tabernacle, which results from the enjoyment of the soul."⁵²

⁴⁷ *Stromata*, 11.7.20.

⁴⁸ Leviticus 18:5 and Romans 10:5.

⁴⁹ *Stromata*, 11.10.29–30; 11.11.30–31.

⁵⁰ *Stromata*, 11.12.33–35; VI.15.374.

⁵¹ *Stromata*, IV.16.184; see also, V.11.261ff.

⁵² *Stromata*, IV.25.213.

Clearly, there was a dual emphasis in Clement's view of the covenant. On the one hand, he saw it entirely as the gift of God's grace, but at the same time, there was a strong ethical obligation enjoined. But the fulfilling of this obligation was also contained in the gift of grace, as demonstrated in this passage on the covenant from *Protrepticus*: "It is that treasure of salvation to which we must hasten, by becoming lovers of the Word. Thence, praiseworthy works descend to us, and fly to us on the wings of truth. This is the inheritance with which the eternal covenant of God invests us, conveying the everlasting gift of grace – and thus our loving Father the true Father – ceases not to exhort, admonish, train and love us."⁵³ So while Clement emphasized that the salvation of man was entirely the work of the Lord himself, he could at the same time, in the context of the covenant, employ the language of commerce and speculate on how much this salvation was worth if one wanted to buy it. He concluded that it was beyond price, inestimable, yet "you may, if, you choose, purchase salvation, though of inestimable value, with your own resources, love and living faith, which will be reckoned a suitable price. This recompense God cheerfully accepts", for the sake of Christ.⁵⁴

Here, in the second century, the very same issues were raised as came to the fore in seventeenth-century covenantal theology. Faith, love, obedience and good works are depicted as gifts of the grace of God, yet they are described as our "own resources", underlining the duty of exercising them in Christian experience. Tollinton is quite right when he says, "Clement adheres to the Biblical conception of the Covenant as an agreement or compact between God and man...God enters into the relationship of His grace and goodness, man in the spirit of duty and obedience." He could have added "gratitude".⁵⁵ It is quite obviously wrong to infer that there is no discussion of

⁵³ *Protrepticus*, 10.88.

⁵⁴ *Protrepticus*, 9,82–83.

⁵⁵ Tollinton, *Clement of Alexandria: A Study in Christian Liberalism*, 2.204.

mutual obligations in the fathers' view of the covenant.⁵⁶ One other comment: The last quotation from Clement shows that it was not necessary to await the development of sixteenth and seventeenth century social contract theory in order to introduce mercantile language and illustrations into the exposition of covenant theology, simply because the idea of mutuality in the covenant was much older.

Augustine of Hippo

Of all the fathers, the favourite of the Reformers was Augustine. John T. McNeill says that "Calvin's self-confessed debt to Augustine is constantly apparent" throughout the *Institutes*, and he proves his point in the "Author and Source Index" by listing 730 references to the Bishop of Hippo's works.⁵⁷ It can be said that the entire Reformation developed within the Augustinian framework of the relation of human nature and divine grace. Luther emerged from the Augustinian tradition, but Calvin was Augustine's most ardent, though not uncritical, followers.⁵⁸

The covenant was important for Augustine, and for anyone to say that he "makes only peripheral use of the covenant doctrine"⁵⁹ or that he "makes no use of the idea in his *City of*

⁵⁶ Stoute, "The Origins and Early Development of the Reformed Idea of the Covenant", 23.

⁵⁷ McNeill, *Institutes*, "Intro." 1.lix; "Author and Source Index", 2.1593–1601; L. Smits, *Saint Augustin dans l'oeuvre de Jean Calvin*, 2 vols. (Assen, 1957–1958). Volume 2 contains every reference and allusion to Augustine; F. Wendel, *Calvin: The Origin and Development of His Religious Thought*, trs. P. Mairet, (London 1963), 124–125.

⁵⁸ McNeill, *Institutes*, "Intro.", 1.lvii see especially n.59 where studies of Calvin and Augustine are listed, to which must be added B. B. Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine* (Philadelphia, 1956), a series of scholarly articles edited by M. Kik.

⁵⁹ C.S. McCoy, "The Covenant Theology of Johannes Cocceius" (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Yale University, 1957), 56.

God”, is difficult to understand.⁶⁰ Augustine built upon the patristic position, with his main emphasis upon two covenants, the “old” as manifested supremely in the Sinaitic arrangement, and the “new” in Christ.⁶¹ But this distinction between the old and the new in terms of law and gospel was not so narrow and absolute as is often thought. Preus supported this view: “Augustine,” he said, “does not transpose the two-level situation of the biblical letter into an absolute Old Testament/New Testament division, even though much of what he argues points in that direction.”⁶² For example, Augustine did not confine the giving of the law covenant to Sinai. Discussing his favourite proof text on the subject of original sin (Gen. 17:14), he claimed “that even infants, riot in consequence of the character of their own life, but because of the common origin of the human race, have all broken God’s covenant by that one act in which all men sinned”.⁶³ He proceeded then to indicate that he considered the Sinaitic covenant to be “a more explicit” form of a *pre lassos* Edenic covenant made with Adam:

Many covenants, to be sure, are called God’s covenants in addition to the two chief ones, the old and the new, which all may learn by reading them. Now the first

⁶⁰ W. A. Brown, “Covenant Theology”, *ERE*, 13 vols. (Edinburgh, 1908–1926), 4.219.

⁶¹ A. Augustine, *Ennarationes in Psalmos*, 104.7. Translations used are *The Works of Aurelius Augustine, Bishop of Hippo*, 14 vols. ed. M. Dods (Edinburgh, 1872–1886); *De Civitate Dei Contra Paganos*, trs. P. Levine et al, *LCL*, IV–V (London, 1966); *De Catechizandis Rudibus liher unus*, trs. J.P. Christopher (Washington, 1926); *Expositions on the Book of Psalms*, 6 vols. Library of the fathers (Oxford, 1847–1857). Other texts consulted: *Sancti Aurelii Augustini Hipponensis Episcopi Opera Omnia*, 11 vols. in 15 (Paris, 1836–1838); *Aurelii Augustini Opera, in Corpus Christianorum*, series Latina, vols. 27–57 (Turnholt, 1954–1984); *Augustine: Earlier Writings*, ed. J.H.C. Burleigh, *LCC* VI (London, 1953); *Augustine: Confession and Enchiridion*, ed. A.C. Outler, *LCC* VII (London, 1955); *Augustine: Later Works*, ed. J. Burnaby *LCC* VIII (London 1955).

⁶² J.S. Preus, *From Shadow to Promise* (Cambridge, Mass. 1969), 16 n.19.

⁶³ Augustino, *De civitate Dei*, XVI.133.

covenant given to the first man is really this ‘on the day that you eat, you shall die the death’ (Gen.2:17). Now since a more explicit law (*lex evidentior*) has been vouchsafed later, and the Apostle says. ‘But where there is no law, there is no transgression’ (Rom.4:15), how can the words we read in Psalms be true, namely: ‘I have reckoned all sinner’s on earth as transgressors’? (Ps.119:119). Only on the ground that all who are held in bondage by any sin are guilty of transgressing some law.

Wherefore if even infants, as the true faith maintains, are born sinners, so they are also seen to be transgressors of the law that was issued in the garden of Eden... this since circumcision was a sign of regeneration and the act of birth brings perdition upon the infant through the original sin by which God’s covenant was first broken, unless regeneration sets him free, these divine words must be interpreted as if they said: ‘He who has not been regenerated, his soul shall perish from among the people’ for he broke God’s covenant when in Adam, together with all mankind, he himself also sinned... since he [God] did not expressly state what sort of covenant the infant has broken, we are free to understand it as referring to that covenant whose infringement could be attributed to the child’.⁶⁴

Adam, according to Augustine, was made upright with “no need for a Mediator”.⁶⁵ He could have continued in that uprightness, “though not without divine aid,” or become corrupted, by his own choice. Either way, God’s will would be done, “either by man, or at least concerning him.”⁶⁶ Augustine distinguished clearly between grace before and after the fall: “Did Adam have the grace of God? Yes, truly, he had it largely, but of a different kind. He was placed in the midst of benefits which he had received from the goodness of his Creator; for he

⁶⁴ Augustino, *De civitate Dei*, XVI. 133–135; see also, *Enchiridion On Faith, Hope and Love*, VIII.27, the reference to man breaking away “from the wholesome discipline of God’s law” .

⁶⁵ *Enchiridion*, XXVIII. 108.

⁶⁶ *Enchiridion*, VIII. 107.

had not procured those benefits by his own deserving.”⁶⁷ Adam did not need grace for deliverance then, but grace for perseverance, the exercise of which was left to his free choice. And Augustine did not object to the idea of meritorious obedience in this context: “That he willed not to continue was absolutely the fault of him whose merit it would have been if he had willed to continue.”⁶⁸ Adam was created neither wise nor foolish, but a rational creature, who could “at least receive a commandment, which he ought to obey”.⁶⁹ Such obedience to the covenant, Augustine speculated, would have caused Adam to pass into the company of the angels with no intervening death, to “a blissful immortality that has no limit”.⁷⁰

Augustine also stressed the unity of the race in Adam – in him “appeared the entire plenitude of the human race”, so that when Adam sinned, the entire race broke the covenant in him, and was “to be held liable to the same penalty” – punishment by death.⁷¹ Speculation on the cause of sin beyond the human will was discouraged by Augustine. Sin was to be attributed to the will of man, for “God is not the author of the evil a man does, though he is the author of the evil a man suffers”.⁷²

The term “covenant of works” was not used by Augustine, but this picture he presented of the divine arrangement with Adam in Eden before the fall, contained all the ingredients of such a covenant as later portrayed by the “covenant theologians”. It was a bilateral arrangement whereby the promise of a “rise to better things” would result from exercising the

⁶⁷ *De corruptione et gratia*, 29.

⁶⁸ *De corruptione et gratia*, 30–32.

⁶⁹ *De libero arbitrio*, 3.xxiv.71–72.

⁷⁰ *Civitate*, XII. 111; see also, *Enchiridion*, VIII.25 and *De peccatorum meritis*, 1. 2. 2.

⁷¹ *Civitate*, XII.129, XIII.141; see also, XIV.259, *Enchiridion*, VIII.26 and *De peccatorum*, 111.

⁷² *De libero arbitrio*, 1.i.1, 3.xxi.63; see also, *Civitate* XII.27, *De vera religione* XIII.27 and *De dono perseverantiae*, 46.

“stewardship of righteousness”,⁷³ and death would be the consequence of disobedience. Furthermore, this law or covenant was not only given verbally, but was an expression of the absolute and unchangeable eternal law which was “stamped upon our minds”.⁷⁴ There was, therefore, continuity between the law given in Eden and that given on Sinai. Both were expressions of the eternal law. The “more explicit” giving of the Edenic covenant at Sinai was necessary due to the corruption of sin.⁷⁵

Augustine argued that if human nature could fulfil the law of perfect righteousness, then it could be “sure of its reward, that is, to secure everlasting life”.⁷⁶ But since the fall the condition of man has been such that this is utterly impossible. Everyone now arises from “a condemned state” (*ex damnata propagine*).⁷⁷ Christ was the only example of anyone achieving moral perfection in this life.⁷⁸ Consequently, any good man can receive must be through grace: “So he [God] manifest[ed] a new covenant of the everlasting inheritance, when man, renewed by the grace of God, might lead a new life, that is, a spiritual life.”⁷⁹ This grace, however, was not intended for all. It was a distinguishing grace rooted in divine predestination. Since the fall, no man could attain to eternal life, but God has chosen to elect some men to salvation from this lost and perishing mass.⁸⁰ And “to those he has predestinated unto eternal death, he is also the most righteous awarder of punishment, not only on account of the sins which they add with indulgence of their own will, but

⁷³ *Enchiridion*, VIII.25.

⁷⁴ *De libero arbitrio*, 1. vi. 15.

⁷⁵ *De libero arbitrio*, 1.xv.31–xvi.35.

⁷⁶ *De natura et gratia*, 2. ii.

⁷⁷ *Civitate*, XV.412,413; *De natura et gratia*, 7.vii–14. xiii; *De spiritu et littera passim*; *De peccatorum* 11. 7. vi.

⁷⁸ *De spiritu et littera*, 1.1; see also, 61.xxxv–66.xxxvi.

⁷⁹ *De catechizandis*, 96; *Enchiridion*, IX.30–32.

⁸⁰ *Enchiridion*, IX.28–30; see also, xxv and *De Praedestinatione*, 10–11.

also because of their original sin”.⁸¹ Augustine distinguished between a general and a particular election.

Israel was chosen as God’s people, just as many Gentiles were later called to the marriage through the Word, but not all of these obtained the election of grace, that is, the special calling by which the elect are taught of God and receive the gift of faith in order to believe. This distinction is important, since, for Augustine, it corresponds to the covenant of the law at Sinai and the covenant of grace in Christ.⁸²

The covenant of grace was first made with Adam himself after the fall, for “even Adam was delivered by the mercy of the Lord Jesus Christ”,⁸³ who is the second Adam and the One who answers to all that the first Adam lost.⁸⁴ Augustine said that there were four temporal, historical epochs or “ages” in the history of salvation – before the law, under the law given by Moses, under the grace revealed by the coming of the Mediator, and after the resurrection. But he emphasized that the grace revealed through the Mediator “was not previously absent from those to whom it was to be imparted, although in conformity to the temporal dispensation it was veiled and hidden”. It was through this grace that righteous men of old believed (e.g. Job, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Joshua, Samuel, David), “for none of the righteous men of antiquity could find salvation apart from the faith of Christ”.⁸⁵

Those who were righteous under the time of the law were also under grace. Christ was their Mediator too. Though his incarnation had not yet happened, the fruits of it still availed for the fathers. Christ was their head. They believed in his resurrection yet to take place, just as Christians *Anno Domini* believe in his Judgments yet to come.⁸⁶ So the men of God in the

⁸¹ *De Praedestinatione*, 10–11; see also, *De dona perseverantiae*, 35.

⁸² *De praedestinatione*, 32–34, 14–16.

⁸³ *De natura et gratia*, 24.xxi.

⁸⁴ *De peccatorum*, 11ff.

⁸⁵ *Enchiridion*, XXXI. 118; *De perfectione*, XIX. 12; *De vera religione*, XXVII.50; see also, *De catechizandis*, 96–97.

⁸⁶ *De gratia christi*, 11.27–32.

Old Testament were shown to be heirs of the new. The new covenant was actually more ancient than the old, though it was subsequently revealed. It was “hidden in the prophetic ciphers” until the time of revelation in Christ. Abraham and those before and after him were therefore “all children of the promise and of grace”.⁸⁷ Also, it was through the operation of the same Holy Spirit that the men of old belonged to “the grace of the new covenant”.⁸⁸ So while there were different manifestations in the covenant corresponding to different ages, there was but one *testamentum aeternum* throughout all ages, entered by faith alone.⁸⁹ In every age, everyone, whether children or “decrepit” old men, said Augustine, must come into the new covenant by the regeneration of the Holy Spirit.⁹⁰ Only by receiving the Holy Spirit, and not by any power of the human will, could any delight in, or love for, God arise in the soul and begin a movement towards perfection.⁹¹

This stress on the operation of the Spirit is crucial to understanding Augustine’s doctrine of the law. He made a clear letter/spirit distinction. The mere teaching of the commandments without the presence of the life-giving Spirit was a letter that killed, and by this he meant teaching the actual precepts of the law and not just a figurative as opposed to a literal interpretation of Scripture. The commands of the law were good and praiseworthy, but when the Holy Spirit’s aid was not given causing men to “desire good” (*concupiscentia bona*), then evil desire would actually increase through the very prohibition, good as it was.⁹² This was the distinction Augustine made between law and grace. The law “makes sin to be known rather than shunned”,

⁸⁷ *Contra duas epistolas Pelagianorum*, 111.6–8.

⁸⁸ *Contra duas epistolas Pelagianorum*, 111.12.

⁸⁹ *Ennarationes in Psalmos*, 104. 7; 73. 2.

⁹⁰ *Enchiridion*, XIII. 43–46.

⁹¹ *De spiritu et littera*, 4.ii; 5.iii; see also, *De Peccatorum*, 11.7.vif.; 11.34.xx.

⁹² *De spiritu et littera*, 6.iv–7.v; see also, 23.xiv–32.xix; *De gratia Christi*, 1.9; *De gratia et libero arbitrio*, 22–23; *Contra duas epistolas*, 111.2.

but grace shows forth “the destruction of sin and the renewal of righteousness”, which could not come to man by the letter of the law.⁹³ Only the righteousness of God, “not the righteousness of man or the righteousness of our own will,” could justify a man before God, and this righteousness was the “gift of God through the help of the Holy Spirit”, bringing faith in Christ just as foretold by the prophets.⁹⁴

It was just at this point that the Jews failed. They received a law that was holy and just and good, and which was a continuing testimony and witness to the unchanging righteousness of God as it had been to Adam. But they refused to appreciate that it could no longer justify and that the righteousness of the law (i.e. their own efforts to keep the law) was totally inadequate. They thought that the letter could suffice them for life, and so they became doers of the law only and not seekers of divine mercy. They had an eye for the earthly promises alone and were ignorant of what the promises signified. They were moved by cupidity and carnal fear rather than faith working by love. These were the children in bondage, opposed by Paul in the fourth chapter of Galatians.⁹⁵

Augustine’s references to the temporality of the law or the old covenant must be understood in this context. He distinguished between those in the Old Testament, who, discerning the true spiritual nature and function of the law, used the law lawfully,⁹⁶ and those who desired to worship God for material benefits only – “a carnal people living after the old man, and leading a carnal life, eagerly desired of the Lord God carnal rewards and received them as a symbol of spiritual blessings”.⁹⁷ For the former, the old

⁹³ *De spiritu et littera*, 8. v–9. vi; see also, *Da perfectione*, V.11; *Contra Faustum* XV.8.

⁹⁴ *De spiritu et littera*, 15. 1x; see also, *De natura et gratia*, 1.1. The righteousness of God as shown in Rom. 1, is not the commands of the law only but “the aid afforded by the grace of Christ”. See also, *De gratia et libero arbitrio*, 24.

⁹⁵ *Contra duas epistolas*, 111.13,18–23,9.

⁹⁶ *De spiritu et littera*, 16.x.

⁹⁷ *De catechizandis*, 72—73,96–97.

covenant brought a knowledge of their sin and led them to Christ. They had, therefore, “no further use for it” in relation to their salvation.⁹⁸ The latter failed to recognize that all those visible blessings which were bestowed upon them in the old covenant, and bestowed through the ministry of the patriarchs and prophets, “signified spiritual mysteries closely associated with Christ and the church of which even those saints were members, although they lived before Christ our Lord was born according to the flesh”.⁹⁹ The manifestation of the new covenant in Christ, which was only new in a revelatory sense, made “the first covenant to be antiquated”, in the sense that the spiritual blessings it pointed to were fully manifested, and the carnal or material use of it was abolished, although there is still “a carnal multitude” in the church today who stand in a similar relationship to the new covenant.¹⁰⁰ They may even have the signs of Christ, but they cannot enter the kingdom of God, because they continue in iniquity.¹⁰¹

The distinction, therefore, between the old covenant and the new, between law and grace, was not so radical in Augustine as is often assumed. The old covenant at Sinai also contained the heavenly promises, indeed it was established in order to present them to the people in veiled form. The law and the sacraments were “to be spiritually understood”.¹⁰² The new covenant was contained in the old. This is what lay at the heart of Augustine’s famous dictum: “*In veteri testamento est occultatio novi, in novo testamento est manifestatio veteris*,”¹⁰³ or as he said again, “the new covenant is foreshadowed in the old. For what is that which is called the old covenant but the veiled form of the new, and

⁹⁸ *De spiritu et littera*, 16.x.

⁹⁹ *De catechizandis*, 84–85; see also, *Ennarationes in Psalmos*, 34–7; 88.i.3–5.

¹⁰⁰ *De catechizandis*, 72–73.

¹⁰¹ *Ennarationes in Psalmos*, 88. ii.4.

¹⁰² *Contra duas epistolas*, 111.10.

¹⁰³ *De catechizandis*, 26–27.

what else is that which is called the new but the unveiling of the old".¹⁰⁴ What applied literally to the old covenant, also applied figuratively to the new.¹⁰⁵ The new covenant was actually revealed first, but veiled until Christ's coming within the old, which was later revealed at Sinai.¹⁰⁶

What has been considered so far would encourage the expectation of some idea of continuity of law under the full manifestation of the covenant of grace since both testify to the one righteousness of God. Augustine could speak of a sense in which the justified man had no further use for the law, and that the old covenant was antiquated, but he went on to explain that this did not mean that "the law of works belongs to Judaism and the law of faith to Christianity". The moral law belonged to both, just as faith belonged to both, because both magnified the righteousness of God.¹⁰⁷ Christ fulfilled and did away with the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament, and fulfilled and established the moral teaching or precepts of the law as a duty in the lives of his people. Moral precepts were distinct from typical observances which prefigured Christ. The latter came to a close when fulfilled in Christ, but the former "are fulfilled... by the accomplishment of what they promise", both in Christ and in his people.¹⁰⁸

The law of faith also brought the knowledge of sin since it contained the moral law, but the difference was that what one could only enjoin, the other granted to belief. No none could be righteous without the operation of God's grace writing the law within the heart by the Holy Spirit. This Augustine saw as the essence of the new covenant prophesied in Jeremiah 31:31ff, as distinct from the old covenant not kept by the fathers, who looked for the earthly and material goods promised rather than "the

¹⁰⁴ *Civitate*, XVI.129.

¹⁰⁵ *Civitate*, XVII. 253.

¹⁰⁶ *Contra duas epistolas*, 111.7.

¹⁰⁷ *De spiritua et littera*, 21.xiii.

¹⁰⁸ *Contra Faustum*, XIX; quote XIX.18.

eternal and heavenly goods belonging to the new covenant”.¹⁰⁹ The new covenant fulfilled the same law which was in the old. The failure to keep it was through no fault of the law, but due entirely to the fleshly desires of the “old man”.¹¹⁰ No man, whether the Jew who had the letter of the law written or Gentile who were never confronted with the letter of the law from the old covenant, “can claim credit for his own fulfilment of the law”. This was only brought about by the Holy Spirit writing the law in the hearts of the elect who were the seed of faith through Abraham.¹¹¹

Augustine said that it was only the man who was first justified who could begin to do the works of the law referred to in Leviticus 18:5, which “If a man do, he shall live in them”. But the justified man did not do these works in order to win the favour of the Justifier. That was won through faith. But the faith that saved raised men up to live sober, righteous and godly lives. In this way, faith did not make void the law, it produced a love of righteousness and “by the love of righteousness comes the working of the law” which men, saved by grace, freely wanted to keep and live by.¹¹² The commandments could only be kept by the grace of God, which was “indispensable for the observance of the precepts”.¹¹³

When Paul said that faith was the gift of God, Augustine insisted that he did not mean “to deny good works or empty them of their value, because he also said that God rendered to every man according to his works; but he would have works proceed from faith and not faith from works”.¹¹⁴ True faith would produce good works, and a faith which did not was insufficient for salvation, so in this sense, Augustine argued that eternal life

¹⁰⁹ *Contra Faustum*, 32.xix–33; 34.xix; 36.xxi.

¹¹⁰ *Contra Faustum*, 35.xx.

¹¹¹ *Contra Faustum*, 40.xiv–50.xxix.

¹¹² *Contra Faustum*, 51.xxix–52xxx.

¹¹³ *De gratia et libero arbitrio*, 8.

¹¹⁴ *De gratia et libero arbitrio*, 17.

could be spoken of as a reward for service, although that service itself was the result of saving grace.¹¹⁵ These good works were guided by, and reflected, the righteousness which was in the law.

The law, said Augustine, was not only necessary for the people under the old covenant, “but also is now necessary for us for the right ordering of life...Who is so impious as to say that he does not keep these precepts of the law because he is a Christian and is established not under the law, but under grace?”¹¹⁶ The difference was that under the letter of the old covenant men sought to do these things in the hope of gaining happiness thereby; to believers under the new, through faith in the Mediator, “a spirit of grace is ministered, so that they may do these things well”, though never perfectly in this life.¹¹⁷ In this way the law that could not be fulfilled through law was fulfilled through grace, since “the grace whereby God works within us to will what is good, he means nothing else than the law and the doctrine. For in the law and the doctrine of the holy scriptures are promised future glory and its great rewards”.¹¹⁸ The secret of this fulfilment of the law by the Christian was the love of God shed abroad in the heart by the Holy Spirit. Thus, the commandments of the law were not burdensome or grievous, as they were to the Jews, because they never are to God’s beloved.¹¹⁹

The question now is: What was man’s responsibility, if any, respecting faith and obedience in this covenant relationship? Augustine certainly emphasized the priority of grace to all else in God’s dealings with man. Salvation was a divine gift of mercy so that men could not arrogate to themselves anything concerning it as their own work. It was God “who both prepareth the will to receive divine aid and aideth the will which has been prepared...Why are we admonished to ask in order to receive, unless it be that he who grants us what we will is he through

¹¹⁵ *De gratia et libero arbitrio*, 18–21, 28.

¹¹⁶ *Contra duas epistolas*, 111.10.

¹¹⁷ *De perfectione*, V111. 18–19.

¹¹⁸ *De gratia Christi*, 1.10–11.

¹¹⁹ *De perfectione*, X.21.

whom it comes to pass that we will". God's mercy always "predisposes a man before he will, to prompt his willing".¹²⁰ Again and again, Augustine returned to this question of the priority of grace and the reality of human freedom, always affirming that the grace which was primary was also the ground and source of human willingness.¹²¹

Does this mean that men in spite of Augustine's disclaimer are "insensate stones", without will and reason of their own?¹²² Augustine asked whether if the gift of grace followed only upon faith: "Is this faith itself in our own power?" In reply, he made a distinction between man's "will" and his "ability": "We sometimes will what we are not able to do", and *vice versa*. He then defined "power" or "ability" as "the union of the will with the capacity to act".¹²³ Augustine argued that it was absurd to say that a man can believe if he will not, since belief is consenting to the truth spoken. If consent is an act "faith must be in our power". But this of will, then power itself was from God and granted by him. Man "believes when he will, and when he believes, believes willingly", but that belief is given by God himself and is not implanted in us by nature.¹²⁴

Augustine explained that God worked this power to will and believe in the elect by both external and internal means – externally by the preaching of the law and the gospel; internally by the Holy Spirit. In this way God sought to renew man's will without violating his nature.

Fallen man only willed evil, but God renewed that will while respecting its freedom. In fallen man, natural "freedom of choice could produce no act of belief", so God worked by inducement and invitation to initiate consent. "Assuredly then it is God who brings about in a man the very will to believe, and in

¹²⁰ *Enchiridion*, IX. 31–32; see also, XXIV.97.

¹²¹ *De gratia et libero arbitrio*, 29; *De predestinatione*, 19,39–43; *De dono perservantiae*, 4.

¹²² *De peccatorum*, 11. 5. vi.

¹²³ *De spiritu et littera*, 53.xxxi.

¹²⁴ *De spiritu et littera*, 54,xxxii; 55.xxxii.

all things does his mercy anticipate us, yet to consent to the calling of God or to refuse it, as I have said, belongs to our own will.” Beyond this Augustine would not go, but simply abandoned the somewhat roundabout argument by resorting, as he so often did, to the *o altitudo* of Paul (Rom. 11: 33).¹²⁵

It is clear from this and many other passages that Augustine did not regard the believer as totally passive in the process of experiencing salvation, both with respect to faith and obedience. In the progress to perfection those who were members of the *Civitas Dei* were frequently admonished to good works: “It is on this account that numerous precepts are enjoined upon us concerning mutual forgiveness and the great care requisite for maintaining peace, without which no one will be able to see God.”¹²⁶ Commenting on such texts as Isa. 1:19-20, Gal. 3:19, and Rom. 5:20, Augustine was able to affirm that the promises of God in both covenants were “full of conditions of this sort”, but always to the end that men may be driven to grace and faith.¹²⁷ The precepts of the moral law were still enjoined as a duty of life upon Christians, and were seen as an evidence of true faith.¹²⁸

Augustine frequently reminded his readers of their promises to this end in the covenant which they had made with God in baptism.¹²⁹ For him the idea of covenant not only had a unilateral element in which God sovereignly announced his intentions of grace concerning men, and what he had bound himself to perform in Christ the Mediator and Sealer of the covenant,¹³⁰ but it also had a bilateral element when God entered into an agreement with his people in which they bound

¹²⁵ *De spiritu et littera*, 60. xxxiv.

¹²⁶ eg. *Civitate*, XIV.305ff; XV.430–435; *Sermones Suppositicios*, CCX in *Opera Omnia*, V.2894.

¹²⁷ *De perfectione*, XIX. 12.

¹²⁸ *Contra Faustum*, XIX.18ff.

¹²⁹ *Sermones Suppositicios*, CCLXIV in *Opera Omnia*, V. 3042f, 3055; *De rectitudine catholicae conversationis*, in *Opera Omnia*, VI.1704,1762.

¹³⁰ *Ennarationes in Psalmos*, 88. 1. 3–5.

themselves to walk according to his precepts. In one place, Augustine offered a clear bilateral definition: “*Pactum est quod inter aliquos convenit*”.¹³¹

It is pointless to claim that the Reformers accepted “an Augustinian notion of unilateral testament, not a bilateral covenant”.¹³² Indeed, while Augustine usually used *testamentum* when referring to Christ and especially to his death, he made it clear that he did not think of the word only in unilateral terms. He said: “*Testamentum sane in Scripturis non illud solum dicitur, quod non valet nisi testatoribus mortuis; sed omne pactum et placitum testamentum vocabant*”.¹³³ For Augustine *pactum* and *testamentum* were used interchangeably, and *testamentum* carried the idea of mutual responsibility as well as the idea of unilateral promise.¹³⁴

Summary

Some conclusions can now be drawn from this brief outline of the use of the covenant in several of the church fathers.¹³⁵ First, they all used the idea of covenant to stress the

¹³¹ *Heptateuchum Locutionem*, 1 .Gen.21:27. I am indebted to Peter Lillback for this quotation. See also *Ennarationes in Psalmos*, 102.25.

¹³² J. W. Baker, *Heinrich Bullinger and the Covenant: The Other Reformed Tradition* (Ohio, 1980) 189.

¹³³ *Ennarationes in Psalmos*, 82.6. trs. “Indeed, testament in the scriptures not only speaks of what is not effective except by the death of testators, but every covenant and agreement they call a testament.”

¹³⁴ Even K. Hagen, whom Baker cites to support his exclusive unilateral argument, admits at this point, “Augustine described *testamentum* in rather bilateral terms”; see, K. G. Hagen, *A Theology of Testament in Young Luther: The Lectures on Hebrews* (Leiden, 1974) 35.

¹³⁵ Others could also be considered. For example, Chrysostom, who saw the covenant of grace proceeding from both the Father and the Son as well as the old covenant: “*Nam ut Vetus Testamentum non Patris tantum est, verum et Filii; ita gratia non Filii solum est, set et Patris, et communia omnia*”, *Sancti Joannis Chrysostomi Opera*, 13 vols. (Paris, 1839), 10.790. He also discussed the relationship of the old covenant to the new with respect to elements of continuity and discontinuity and regarded the Old Testament saints as having the same kind of faith as those in the new (12.204–205; 9.561 etc.). Tertullian also made use of the idea [see, E. Ferguson, “The Covenant Idea in the Second

unity, and explain the differences, between the Old and New Testaments. Secondly, they saw the covenant soteriologically as one eternal covenant in Christ manifest throughout all ages from the time of Adam. Thirdly, there was a dual emphasis in their presentation of the covenant. It was a unilateral promise of grace given sovereignly by God, but it also required a response of faith and obedience from man, though this response was only by divine enabling and not by any natural inherent power resident in fallen man. Fourthly, in the case of Augustine, there was a definite use of the idea of covenant in a legal sense, though still in a context of “grace”, with respect to Adam in his unfallen state. Finally, again in Augustine especially, there was a close association of the covenant with baptism, so that it is erroneous to locate the origin of the idea of the covenant in this connection in the Zurich reformation.¹³⁶ Baker was far off the mark when he declared that “Bullinger’s idea of the covenant was not Augustine’s. Augustine’s was a theology of testament, not a notion of bilateral covenant,” and equally so when he went on to say that “none of the church fathers, save perhaps Irenaeus, developed any sort of bilateral, conditional covenant notion. It was a theology of testament that Bullinger discovered in the fathers, not a theology of covenant”.¹³⁷ There was ample scope in the fathers, as in the Scriptures, for discovering both the idea of unilateral promise and bilateral covenant, and it would be more true to say that the Reformers, including Bullinger, followed them in both.

Century”, *Texts and Testaments: Critical Essays on the Bible and Early Church Fathers*, W. E. March (San Antonio, 1980) 148–150].

¹³⁶ Baker, *Bullinger and the Covenant*, 1–3.

¹³⁷ Baker, *Bullinger and the Covenant*, 20, 23.