

# **Covenant Theology: A Historical Survey**

by

Colin D. Smith

## **Introduction**

Many of the great biblical doctrines cherished by the church have come down through history by means of a period of development and refinement. That is not to say these doctrines are not clearly and expressly taught in the pages of Scripture, but that they are scattered throughout the text such that one can only grasp clearly what the Bible teaches on that subject by gathering these passages together and deriving a theology from them. Such a process usually involves numerous people over hundreds of years, and is normally precipitated by a crisis in the church that requires an ordered and structured Scriptural response.

Perhaps the best example of this is the doctrine of the Trinity. The Bible does not contain a succinct statement of this vital doctrine as one finds in the creeds of Nicaea and Chalcedon. However, it is clear that all the elements of this doctrine are presented in the pages of Scripture,<sup>1</sup> and were believed from the earliest days of the church. Evidently a complete, systematic statement of the doctrine was not deemed necessary until the rise of Arius and his followers who disrupted the peace of Constantine's empire by challenging the orthodox teaching of the church. It was in response to Arius that Athanasius and those gathered at Nicaea in 325 A.D., after debate and discussion of the biblical teaching, presented to the world a clear statement of Christian belief. Again, as a result of further controversy, this statement was refined at the Council of Chalcedon in 451, and these together have formed the basis for Christian creedal statements on the Trinity ever since. One can see from this that while the Trinity was part of the belief of the church from the beginning, it did not need to be spelled out until challenged, and when it was spelled out it was done so on the basis of Scriptural teaching through the wisdom of theologians and exegetes past and present.

A similar story can be told for Covenant Theology. The fact that God has dealt covenantally with His people is without question the teaching of Scripture. The Hebrew and Greek words for "covenant" appear numerous times throughout the Old and New Testaments, and ancient near-eastern documents show that the practice of making covenants goes back very early in history. The New Testament clearly states that the

---

<sup>1</sup> For a biblical and historical defense of the Trinity, see James R. White, *The Forgotten Trinity* (Bethany House Publishers: Minneapolis, Mi, 1998).

covenants God made with His people prior to the coming of Christ had relevance for the church. However, until the Reformation, no-one had felt a pressing need to try to piece together how these covenants precisely related both to one another, and then finally to the new covenant in Christ. Various aspects of what would later become Covenant Theology can be traced from the Early Church Fathers through the medieval period, but it was in the upheaval of the Reformation that the pieces came together.

The crisis that precipitated the formulation of Covenant Theology seems to have been, at least initially, the Anabaptist controversy and the need to formulate a response to the denial of infant baptism. Between the time of Luther and the formulation of the Westminster Confession of Faith, some of the greatest minds of the Reformation gathered the biblical witnesses to the covenant, and found therein what the Scriptures had been proclaiming all along: that God is a covenanting God who does not forget His promises to His people, and who has, indeed, fulfilled all that the Old Testament covenants declared that He would in the new covenant sealed in the blood of Christ.

The purpose of this paper is to trace the development of Covenant Theology from the early church through to the Reformation. It is this writer's hope that he will convince the reader that Covenant Theology was not simply a creation of the Reformation theologians, but that it has always been in the background of Christian theology. This paper will not present a biblical defense of Covenant Theology, and the reader is encouraged to seek out one of the many good works that make such a presentation.<sup>2</sup>

### **The Early Church**

The question to be answered when examining the origins of Covenant Theology is not whether covenantal concepts were taught before the Reformation: it goes without saying that since the language of the Bible is covenantal, the language of theologians from the earliest days of the church was covenantal. Nor, as noted above, should one be looking for a fully fleshed-out system of doctrine resembling Covenant Theology as taught in the Westminster Confession of Faith in the Early Church Fathers. Theological

---

<sup>2</sup> This writer commends to the reader's attention O. Palmer Robertson's classic book [The Christ of the Covenants](#) (Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing: Phillipsburg, Nj, 1980) for an excellent presentation of the Biblical evidence for Covenant Theology.

systems were constructed to suit the teaching needs of the time, and covenant issues were not of primary importance to the church in the first fourteen hundred years of her existence. Rather, one should take interest in the nature of covenant discussion to appreciate the soil from whence Covenant Theology grew. How did the early Christians understand the distinction between the Old and New Covenants? Did they see separation, continuity, or both? How did they view Israel and her relationship to the church?

The Epistle of Barnabas, written between 70 and 135 AD, is primarily concerned with the relationship between Judaism and Christianity, and how Christians should interpret the Old Testament. It is not surprising, therefore, that the author is concerned to demonstrate a connection and continuity between the old and the new covenants. He speaks of Moses breaking the tablets of the law “in order that the covenant of the beloved Jesus might be sealed in our heart.”<sup>3</sup> He goes on to speak of how Moses received the covenant of the Lord as a servant, “but the Lord himself gave it to us, that we might become the people of inheritance, by suffering for us.”<sup>4</sup> The writer even uses an allegorical interpretation of the three hundred and eighteen of Abraham’s household that Abraham circumcised to say that Abraham was looking forward to Jesus when he circumcised.<sup>5</sup>

Justin Martyr (c. 100-165) spoke of the true spiritual Israel who are “we who have been led to God through the crucified Christ.”<sup>6</sup> Irenaeus (late second and early third centuries) spoke of two covenants (old and new) produced by “one and the same householder, the Word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>7</sup> He also recognized that those who were righteous in the Old Testament were so because of the Decalogue written on their hearts; they did not need the law written on stone. From this it is clear he believed

---

<sup>3</sup> Epistle of Barnabas, 4.7. All quotations from the Epistle of Barnabas are from Michael W. Holmes (ed), The Apostolic Fathers, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Updated (Grand Rapids, Mi: Baker Books, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> Epistle of Barnabas, 14.4.

<sup>5</sup> Epistle of Barnabas, 9.7. The writer uses the Septuagint representation of the number 318, IHT, where IH stands for Jesus (Ἰησοῦς), and the T is the cross.

<sup>6</sup> Dialog with Trypho, 11. Quotations from the Early Church Fathers are from The Christian Classics Ethereal Library (<http://www.ccel.org>).

<sup>7</sup> Against Heresies, Book 4, 9.1.

that the Ten Commandments are applicable for believers in every age.<sup>8</sup> Cyprian (died c. 258 AD) taught that the coming of the new covenant meant that the old was passing away: the old circumcision gave way to a new, spiritual circumcision; the law of Moses is ceasing and new law is given; there is now a new covenant, and a new baptism.<sup>9</sup> Christ is the new temple and the inaugurator of an eternal priesthood. All the blessings formerly for the Jews are now for Christians, and Jews must join the Church in order to receive forgiveness of sin.<sup>10</sup>

Of particular interest for this study is the mention by Augustine of a pre-lapsarian covenant—that is, a covenant between God and Adam in the Garden of Eden prior to the Fall:

Now it is true that many covenants are called God's covenants, apart from the two principal ones, the Old and New, which anyone may get to know by reading them. But the first covenant, made with the first man, is certainly this: "On the day you eat, you will surely die."<sup>11</sup>

In context, Augustine is attempting to explain how an infant can be guilty of breaking the covenant by being uncircumcised, as it states in Genesis 17:4, since it was not the fault of the infant that he was not circumcised. In his answer, Augustine points to the fact that in Adam, as a result of his sin in the Garden, all mankind, including newborn infants, became covenant-breakers.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Against Heresies, Book 4, 16.4.

<sup>9</sup> It is interesting to note in passing that Cyprian does not appear to equate circumcision with baptism.

<sup>10</sup> Treatise 12, Book 1.

<sup>11</sup> Augustine, *City of God* (London, England: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 688 (book 16, chapter 27).

<sup>12</sup> A further point of interest is the fact that Augustine goes on to quote from the book of Ecclesiasticus: "All flesh becomes old like a garment, for the covenant from the beginning is you shall surely die" (Ecclesiasticus 14:17). The passage does not explicitly mention Adam or the Garden of Eden, but Augustine understood that to be the covenant referenced. Also, the expression "you shall surely die" (θανάτῳ ἀποθανῆ) mirrors the Septuagint rendering of Genesis 2:17 (θανάτῳ ἀποθανεῖσθε). If Ecclesiasticus considers God's command to Adam to constitute a covenant, then this would undoubtedly be the earliest such reference, since Ecclesiasticus is commonly dated to around the second century B.C.

Genesis 2 does not refer to God's commandments to Adam explicitly as a covenant, but covenant theologians have long held it to be a covenantal arrangement.<sup>13</sup> While Augustine does not express the concept as fully as the seventeenth century Reformed theologians would, he certainly demonstrates that they were not the first to consider an Adamic covenant.

### **The Medieval Church**

Most studies on the medieval background to the Reformation look primarily to the late medieval period, since the environment of early medieval Europe was not one in which theological speculation and the development of ideas flourished—such was the legacy of the barbarian invasions. There were, however, certain political and societal structures in place that, if not directly influential to later concepts of covenant, certainly helped people grasp particular covenantal ideas. For example, the feudal covenants that existed between a vassal and his landowning lord that would bind the lord to protect his vassal, and require obedience of the vassal to the lord with punishments for breaking the contract. A feudal contract of this kind was referred to by the term “*sacramentum*,” as was also the soldier's pledge of allegiance, which had a similar binding nature.<sup>14</sup> The king's relationship to his people could also be seen in covenantal terms, although there was question with regard to the propriety of deposing a tyrant who is clearly in breach of his covenantal promise.<sup>15</sup>

Among the first, and arguably the most influential, of the medieval theologians to emerge in the thirteenth century was Thomas Aquinas. His importance is evident by the fact that many of the concepts generating discussion and debate leading up to and during the Reformation find their source in his writings. Not least of these were concepts that

---

<sup>13</sup> The Westminster Confession of Faith provides a succinct statement of the covenant theologians' position: “The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam, and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience.” (7.2)

<sup>14</sup> Peter A. Lillback, *The Binding of God: Calvin's Role in the Development of Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mi: Baker Academic, 2001), pp. 30-31.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32. Lillback also discusses the implications of this for papal authority, and the fact that a similar covenant existed between the pope and his people. The Conciliar Movement arising out of the controversy between the Avignon and Roman papacies demonstrated that some believed a rogue pope could be regarded as in violation of his covenant and legitimately deposed.

lay the foundation for the later discussions on the meaning of justification and the role of the covenant in God's redemptive work.

Aquinas held that while there is unity between God's essence and His will, specifically in the area of creation, God's will has liberty to act even contrary to His essence, although that which is created must conform to God's essence and work toward God's prescribed end. Hence, there are a range of creative possibilities open to God, and He is free to choose whichever, as long as that choice is working toward His final goal.<sup>16</sup> Also, Aquinas taught that the Christian is not able to merit eternal life from his own nature, and is in need of grace which takes human effort and makes it meritorious.<sup>17</sup>

Bonaventura echoed man's incapability of meeting God's righteous demands, and the need for prevenient grace to make man into a new creature that meets God's approval. In this, he sees God as accepting what was formerly unacceptable, not on the basis of anything that man has done, or on the basis of what has been done to him through infused grace, but simply because God has, through promises, decrees, and covenants, freely condescended to reconcile man to Himself by these means. God does this, not because He has dealt with sin and has in that way made the unrighteous worthy, but simply because God has the free will to do so.<sup>18</sup>

In the teaching of John Dun Scotus, there is an insistence that whatever God wills must have reference to His essence. However, he did distinguish between all the things that God could possibly do (*potentia absoluta*), and the things that God actually decrees to do (*potentia ordinata*), such that God could potentially (*absoluta*) do something that, by his decree (*ordinata*), is impossible. The application of this principle that is of particular interest to covenantal thought is with regard to salvation. God could, if He so desired, accept anyone regardless of the state of their soul, with or without appropriate

---

<sup>16</sup> Stephen Strehle, Calvinism, Federalism, and Scholasticism: A Study of the Reformed Doctrine of the Covenant (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 1988), pp. 7-11.

<sup>17</sup> Denis R. Janz, "Late Medieval Theology," in David Bagchi and David C. Steinmetz (eds.), The Cambridge Companion to Reformation Theology (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 7.

<sup>18</sup> Strehle, pp. 20-24.

merit, infused grace, and so forth. However, by means of His *potentia ordinata*, God has decreed that grace is necessary to make men acceptable to Him.<sup>19</sup>

Two major schools of Realism developed from the writings of Aquinas and Scotus (Thomism and Scotism), and while McGrath<sup>20</sup> insists that these schools had no major influence upon Reformation thought, it cannot be denied that the idea of God bestowing grace based on a binding decree—which appears to be the view put forth by Aquinas and Scotus—is foundational to the idea of covenant. While the views set forth by these theologians do not resemble Covenant Theology in the least, the fact that such ideas were in circulation demonstrates that the concept of covenant, and God accepting sinful men on the basis of covenant, was not lost in the Middle Ages.

Indeed, the Nominalists, or the *via moderna*, developed the concept of God's covenant with His people to describe the way in they are mutually obligated. Despite the fact that by His *potentia absoluta* God could save people in whatever way He so desired, He has, by decree of His *potentia ordinata*, determined to do so by means of a covenant with His church. According to Nominalist views—particularly those of Gabriel Biel—God demands of man that he does what is within him (*facere quod in est*): in essence, that man does his best. For His part, God binds Himself in this covenant to accept such a person that fulfills this requirement.<sup>21</sup> The Nominalists spoke of two stages of merit: *meritum de congruo*, congruous merit by which man does his part and fulfills his side of the covenant; and *meritum de condigno*, condign merit, or that merit which God accepts according to His justice. As a recipient of grace by virtue of His fulfillment of his covenant promise, however, man is given grace such that his effort is made pleasing and acceptable to God, so by virtue of congruous merit, man receives condign merit. The main point here is that for the Nominalists, what secured man's grace is the fact that God is covenantally obligated to bestow merit upon men who fulfill the stipulated demands of the covenant promise.

---

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., pp. 25-42. See also Denis R. Janz, "Late Medieval Theology," pp. 9-10.

<sup>20</sup> Alister McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Malden, Ma: Blackwell Publishing, 1999), p.71.

<sup>21</sup> *facienti quod in se est Deus non denegat gratiam*: God will not deny grace to the one doing what is in him.



Augustinian theologians condemned the Nominalist view as Pelagian in that it seemed to enable men to attain salvation by means of their good works. While God's grace is still needed for men to be acceptable, that grace comes to men as a result of their doing "what is in them." The Nominalist response to this criticism was to compare the value of a man's work with the coinage of the day. Although medieval coinage was usually made from gold or silver, in times of financial emergency, the king might order that coins be made from a metal of lesser value, such as lead. These lead coins would resemble their gold and silver counterparts but their intrinsic value would be considerably less. In order for the substitute coins to be acceptable as currency, the king declared them to be as valuable as their gold and silver counterparts, and guaranteed their acceptance as valid currency. When the financial crisis was over, the king promised to replace the lead coins with silver and gold coins. For the Nominalists, man's works are of little value, like the lead coins. However, given man's crisis, God promises by means of covenant to declare man's works to be of infinite value and treat them as such. The difference with Pelagianism is that the Pelagians treated man's works if they were gold coins, that is, of themselves intrinsically worthy of God's grace.<sup>22</sup>

The Augustinian theologian Thomas Bradwardine did not reject the concept of covenant, but rather the fact that in the Nominalist scheme, God deals with men covenantally on the basis of their works, and not, as he insisted, on the basis of election. As Lillback puts it, the issue "is not the covenant idea itself, but the essence of the covenant."<sup>23</sup> For the Nominalists, God's covenant was with all men on the basis of their works. Bradwardine insisted that God's covenant was with His people only: those who call upon Him for mercy as a result of prevenient grace.<sup>24</sup>

William Tyndale's views of the covenant might be, as Strehle points out, "terse and often nontheological,"<sup>25</sup> they are, nonetheless, indicative of pre-Reformation ideas.

---

<sup>22</sup> McGrath, pp. 75-76; Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation: A History* (New York, Ny: Penguin Books, 2005), pp, 110-111.

<sup>23</sup> Lillback, p. 52.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Strehle, p. 326.

Tyndale wrote that the covenant is bilateral, involving conditions for both God and man. Man is required to desist from sin, and covenantal rewards are only bestowed on man by God out of His grace through the covenant. It is also interesting to observe that Tyndale connected circumcision and baptism to substantiate paedobaptism.<sup>26</sup>

### **Luther, Melancthon, and the Swiss Reformers**

The development of Covenant Theology in the Reformation period is not necessarily one of direct inheritance; hence it is difficult to set forth a precise time-line tracing covenantal thinking from one thinker to another. That is not to say there are not dependencies, but it is better to consider strands of tradition in the plural, rather than the singular. For example, while Luther and Zwingli were familiar with each other, they probably arrived at their own ideas of covenant independently, with Zwingli developing his doctrine much more fully than Luther. Calvin, however, would have been familiar with Zwingli and Luther, as well as other theologians of that generation, and might well have been influenced by their covenantal views while still drawing his own conclusions.

Prior to his “tower experience,” Martin Luther taught and believed the Nominalist view of the covenant: God is bound to give grace to the one who does his best (*quod in se est*).<sup>27</sup> He rejected the idea of condign merit, however, since God is obligated by His covenant with man to bestow grace upon the one who puts forth his best effort. It is the covenant that obligates God, not man’s work, hence only congruent merit is necessary, since this is itself that grace.<sup>28</sup>

With regard to the Old and New Testaments, Luther saw both contrast and continuity, or at least overlap. The Old Testament requires works of law that man is unable to keep; however the New Testament is based on the promises of God, not on the works of men, and God’s promises are eternal. Yet the promise of grace in the New Testament does not nullify the need for effort on man’s part: there is grace, but still a need for merit as believers prepare themselves for Christ’s return. Similarly, in the Old

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., pp. 323-328.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. p. 60.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p.62.

Testament, there is merit, but still a need for grace: the saints of old had to receive grace on account of their belief in and preparations for the coming of the Messiah.<sup>29</sup>

In 1517, when Luther confronted the sale of Indulgences with his 95 Theses, these Nominalist convictions<sup>30</sup> gave way to the familiar themes of election and saving grace through faith alone that are associated with his name. However, Luther's misgivings over the place of works and merit in the believer's life clearly influenced his view of covenant. While recognizing that there is mutual responsibility in God's covenant with man, he downplayed man's covenantal obligation (though man is obliged to fight against sin) in favor of God's covenantal promise to save.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, Lillback observes that Luther probably shied away from the term "covenant" in favor of terms such as "testament" or "promise" since these latter terms convey more of a unilateral understanding of God's dealings with man.<sup>32</sup>

It is important to remember that Luther was not a systematic theologian as was Calvin or even Bullinger, for example. In viewing the covenant in terms of the old and the new, while recognizing a certain amount of continuity he seemed more concerned to emphasize the discontinuity. It is interesting to note, however, that in correspondence with Melanchthon addressing the problems Melanchthon was having with the Zwickau Prophets in 1522, it was Luther who pointed his colleague to the practice of circumcision, relating the symbol of entry into old Israel to the symbol of entry to the new Israel

---

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 61

<sup>30</sup> "Convictions" should probably be understood loosely, since, as Lillback points out (p. 63), there is a struggle evident in Luther's writing as he wrestles with the concepts of merit and grace in God's covenant: isn't the covenant itself an act of grace apart from man's striving to do his best?

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 66.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. This emphasis upon God's grace is perhaps most clearly presented in Luther's teaching regarding Law and Gospel. For Luther, the Law represented the old covenant of works and merit, whereas the Gospel presents God's grace. In his lectures on Galatians, he takes Paul's words that the Law leads us to Christ (3:24) to mean that the Law is not for the believer, but the unbeliever:

The true function of the law is to bring me to the knowledge of my sin and to humble me, so that I may come to Christ and be justified by faith... This is the real function of the law. The point of this is that sinners may know that the law does not reveal their sin to them and humble them so that they should despair, but so that by accusing and bruising them it may drive them to Christ, the Saviour and comforter. When this is done, they are no longer under the law... If, therefore, you look to Christ and what he has done, there is no law. He has come and taken it away. (Martin Luther, Galatians (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998), p. 187.)

(baptism). As the former had been applied to infants, Luther argued, thus the latter should also be applied to infants.<sup>33</sup> Luther did not develop this thought, but it was capitalized upon by those for whom the Old Testament and the Law had much more significance for the believer, particularly Zwingli.

That Zwingli had an appreciation for covenantal continuity between the Old and New Testaments prior to his conflict with the Anabaptists is clear from references in his early writings.<sup>34</sup> Certainly, the debate over baptism gave shape and impetus to his ideas, but in 1522 it was not yet a central theme in his thinking; indeed, to begin with, Zwingli himself had doubts about the validity of infant baptism and was not yet ready to refer to it in covenantal terms.<sup>35</sup> By the end of 1524, however, Zwingli was ready to take on the Anabaptist movement and to utilize the concept of covenant in the defense of paedobaptism. Whether Zwingli arrived at this conclusion himself, or to what extent he was dependent upon the influence of others is difficult to determine. It is noteworthy that in 1523, Johannes Oecolampadius of Basel, Switzerland, seemed to equate circumcision and baptism in covenantal language:

Behold, these have forsaken the Lord... They are the cause of their own evil since they have forsaken life and chosen death, and have parted from their friend and are clinging to their enemy. This, this is apostasy, even a most serious abandonment, to violate the covenant with God which is entered in circumcision, or baptism.<sup>36</sup>

Oecolampadius was with Zwingli for the Colloquy of Marburg in 1529, and they both shared similar views on the sacraments. Also, Zwingli had left Oecolampadius to represent Swiss Protestantism at the Catholic-convened conference at Baden in 1526.<sup>37</sup> It

---

<sup>33</sup> Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation: A History* (New York, Ny: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 149.

<sup>34</sup> Lillback, pp. 82-3.

<sup>35</sup> Strehle, p. 118.

<sup>36</sup> Johannes Oecolampadius, *In Iesaiam Prophetam Hypommematon, Hoc Est, Commentariorum* (Basel: Andeas Cratander, 1525), 8a-8b, quoted in Lillback, p. 84.

<sup>37</sup> Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform* (New Haven, Ct: Yale University Press, 1980), pp. 332-3.

is not unreasonable therefore to assume a close association between the two Swiss Reformers, and hence possible that they may have exchanged views on baptism and the covenants.

The schism in Zurich that led to the Anabaptist uprising did not happen over the question of baptism. Zwingli and those that were to lead the Anabaptists were initially collaborators for reform in Zurich opposing the Mass, the use of images, and “coercion in religion.”<sup>38</sup> During the Second Zurich Disputation of 1523, the Anabaptists became increasingly uncomfortable with Zwingli’s reluctance to push reform on the magistrates. By moving slowly, Zwingli hoped to bring the entire canton into a full appreciation and acceptance of Reformed teaching, and avoid the canton being split along religious lines. This was unacceptable to the radicals, who began to seek ways to separate themselves from the Zwinglian magisterial vision.<sup>39</sup>

In June 1524, Louis Haetzer published (with notes) a German translation of John Burgenhagen’s exposition of Paul’s epistles. The work criticized the Magisterial Reformers for not applying Scripture as strictly as they should.<sup>40</sup> One of the ways the radicals believed Zwingli was not applying Scripture strictly was in his sacramental theology: not just that he would tolerate the Roman Catholic Mass for the sake of unity in the canton, but that the practice of infant baptism, both a sign of church membership and of citizenship, was to continue. As McGrath points out, the Anabaptists wanted to sever the link between church and state, whereas Zwingli wished to maintain the link as it was currently in Zurich. Zwingli was thus able to make the issue one of revolution and heresy: refusing to baptize one’s child was not simply a theological preference—it was an act of treason.<sup>41</sup>

On January 10 and January 17, 1525, Zwingli and his colleague (and future successor) Heinrich Bullinger held a disputation with some of the leading spokesmen of

---

<sup>38</sup> George Huntston Williams, The Radical Reformation 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Kirksville, Mo: Truman State University Press, 2000) p. 180.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 187-8.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 189.

<sup>41</sup> McGrath, p. 187.

the Anabaptist movement (Grebel, Manz, and Blaurock). It was a debate that Zwingli would win, but at the cost of giving birth to a fully-fledged counter movement. In May, 1525, Zwingli published his work On Baptism, in which for the first time he lays out a paedobaptistic apologetic based upon the covenant, identifying baptism as a continuation of the covenant sign of circumcision:

Christian children are no less God's children than their parents, just as well as in the Old Testament. Now if they are God's who will forbid them water-baptism? Circumcision was to the ancients a sign of that which for us baptism is the sign. Now since the former was given to the children, thus also should baptism be given to the children.<sup>42</sup>

Zwingli developed and matured his covenantal idea, responding to Balthazar Hubmaier's rebuttal of Zwingli's book, and moving beyond the baptism debate to relate the covenant to the doctrine of election. Once again, this was not a connection Zwingli made without provocation from his credobaptist opponents. Zwingli had written in his book that the Hebrew infants were part of God's people. In his response to Zwingli, Hubmaier wondered how this could be since God had said "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated" (Romans 9:13)? Is Zwingli not contradicting the doctrine of election by making those that were clearly not of God's people a part of God's people?<sup>43</sup>

Zwingli's response, in essence, was that the covenant God made with Israel included their children, and since there is only one covenant, and only one people of God, that same covenant is the one enjoined by Christians to this day. However, receipt of the covenant sign is not a guarantee of election; this must be proved in the life of the child. If the child grows up without faith, then it is evident that he was not of the elect, like Esau. Zwingli believed that had Esau died in infancy, this would have demonstrated his election. Since he did not, by the testimony of his faith (or lack thereof), it is clear he was of the reprobate.<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup> *Zwingli's sämtliche Werke*, IV, 637, quoted in Lillback, p. 94.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.100-105. Lillback notes that Zwingli believed all covenant children who die in infancy are of the elect.

From this point on, the concept of covenant continuity between the Old and New Testaments would be used by Reformed theologians to support arguments for infant baptism,<sup>45</sup> most notable among these theologians was Zwingli's successor in Zurich, Heinrich Bullinger.

Bullinger's significance is not that he advanced or developed covenantal thinking in a new and different way, but rather that he did not develop his views on the back of a controversy (e.g., baptism), but considered Covenant Theology as a doctrinal system in its own right. For this, he is thought of as being the first true covenant theologian.<sup>46</sup> In his 1534 work *De Testamento Seu Foedere Dei Unico et Aeterno*, Bullinger notes that covenants between warring factions include ceremonies, conditions, and some form of documentation so that future generations would know the covenant exists. In this way, God has condescended to man by making such a covenant with him.<sup>47</sup> This covenant is eternal, uniting both Old and New Testaments, and has as its covenanting parties God and the seed of Abraham (including infants).<sup>48</sup> The covenant has mutual terms: God promises to be the God of Abraham's descendents, while Abraham's seed must live in faithful obedience to the Lord.<sup>49</sup> For documentation of the covenant, one only has to look, of course, to Scripture. The fact that the covenant is a bilateral agreement implies that it is dependent to some extent on man's work, which would seem to run contrary to the Reformational doctrine of justification by grace alone, to which Bullinger subscribed.<sup>50</sup> Bullinger insists that God does not depend upon the actions of man to bestow His gift of grace, which alone saves.<sup>51</sup> The main point for Bullinger, however, is that there is

---

<sup>45</sup> Lillback, p. 97-98.

<sup>46</sup> Strehle, p. 134.

<sup>47</sup> Lillback, p. 110-111.

<sup>48</sup> Strehle, p. 135; Lillback, p. 111.

<sup>49</sup> Lillback, p. 111.

<sup>50</sup> Strehle, pp. 136-7.

<sup>51</sup> Bruce Gordon, "Heinrich Bullinger" in Carter Lindberg (ed.), *The Reformation Theologians: An Introduction to Theology in the Early Modern Period* (Malden, Ma: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), p. 174.

continuity from Adam to Abraham to the prophets down to Paul and the Apostles in the need for man to obey God and fulfill his covenant duties.<sup>52</sup>

Genesis 17 provides for Bullinger the epitome of the covenant. It is in the covenant between God and Abraham that the covenant receives its clearest presentation. Bullinger would go as far as to say that the very gospel itself is evident in the Abrahamic covenant; even the Ten Commandments may be considered a summation of this covenant.<sup>53</sup> It also summarizes for the Christian his covenant responsibility before God: walk before the Lord with steadfastness, purity of faith and life, and adhere to the Lord with one's whole heart.<sup>54</sup> The penalty for breaking the covenant is disinheritance:

For the one who has neglected these things, and which things become to him strange gods, and impiously and foully commits evil, and has worshiped God more with ceremonies and externals than true sacredness, this one will be excluded, disinherited and rejected from the covenant.<sup>55</sup>

While not strictly speaking a Swiss Reformer, Calvin's theological heritage was without doubt from that line. He was born in France, and studied at the University of Paris, but moved to Basel for a year in 1535 where he came in contact with Zwingli and Oecolampadius.<sup>56</sup> It was from there that he received the call from Farel to assist with the work of reform going on in Geneva. Despite his great respect for Luther and the likelihood that Calvin came to the Protestant faith through Luther's works,<sup>57</sup> the influence of the Swiss Reformers upon him—granting notable disagreements—was clear and strong.

---

<sup>52</sup> Lillback, pp. 111-112.

<sup>53</sup> Strehle, pp. 138-140.

<sup>54</sup> Lillback, p. 121-122.

<sup>55</sup> Bullinger, *De Testamento Seu Foedere Dei Unico et Aeterno* quoted from Peter Lillback in "The Binding of God" (Ph.D. diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1985), appendix, paragraph 7, pp. 506-507, quoted in Lillback, p. 122, n. 42.

<sup>56</sup> Randall C. Zachman, "John Calvin" in Lindberg, *The Reformation Theologians*, p. 186.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 185.



It is a matter of scholarly debate the extent to which Calvin can be considered a covenant theologian. There are differing opinions on what constitutes Covenant Theology, and whether Calvin's teaching incorporates sufficient of those elements to be considered covenantal. David Weir differentiates between "the covenant idea," which is the basic notion of covenant that runs throughout the Bible; "Covenant Theology," which comes out of the covenant idea and forms the basic framework and controlling idea of the whole system; and "federal theology," which is a specific type of Covenant Theology in which the covenant defines every detail of the system, and includes an Adamic covenant (or the "pre-lapsarian covenant"—i.e., the pre-Fall covenant) as well as a post-Fall ("post-lapsarian") covenant, or covenant of grace.<sup>58</sup> Lillback, on the other hand, accepts the definition provided by Moltmann who says it is "that use of the covenant which expresses the soteriological relationship preferentially in terms of the covenant or its synonyms, and uses the idea to express and defend the continuity of the Old and New Testaments."<sup>59</sup> According to Weir's definition it is doubtful Calvin truly was a covenant theologian, whereas by Lillback's standard Calvin could be considered one of the first.<sup>60</sup> The question of whether Calvin was a covenant theologian is beyond the scope of this paper. However, an examination of Calvin's use of covenant ideas will serve the purpose of tracing the development of covenantal thinking to his time.

As Lillback demonstrates, Calvin made much use of covenantal terms, using them to describe in various ways the redemptive dealings of God with His people.<sup>61</sup> Further, he believes that while Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion is not structured according to a covenantal system, the concept of covenant is "an integral feature of Calvin's theology."<sup>62</sup> Strehle is less optimistic, stating that Calvin's use of covenant in his Institutes, "can hardly be considered a constitutive factor," reckoning his use of the

<sup>58</sup> David A. Weir, The Origins of the Federal Theology in Sixteenth-Century Reformation Thought (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 3.

<sup>59</sup> Lillback, p. 28.

<sup>60</sup> It is, perhaps, not surprising that Lillback favors Moltmann's definition since the thesis of Lillback's work is that Calvin was indeed one of the earliest covenant theologians.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 134-5, 137.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.

covenant to be restricted simply to “sacramental and testamental discussions.”<sup>63</sup> It seems to this writer that at the very least for Calvin the covenant, while not a fully developed theological system, was an element within his theology that was understood, and could be employed both for explanatory and apologetic purposes.

Fundamentally, the covenant bound the Old and New Testaments together: the people of God in all ages have always been party to the same covenant, even though the administration of that covenant has changed:

From what has been said above, it must now be clear, that all whom, from the beginning of the world, God adopted as his peculiar people, were taken into covenant with him on the same conditions, and under the same bond of doctrine, as ourselves... The covenant made with all the fathers in so far from differing from ours in reality and substance, that it is altogether one and the same: still the administration differs.<sup>64</sup>

Further, being a recipient of God’s grace through the covenant has always meant being a recipient of eternal life:

The covenant which God always made with his servants was this, “I will walk among you, and will be your God, and ye shall be my people” (Lev. xxvi.12). These words, even as the prophets are wont to expound them, comprehend life and salvation, and the whole sum of blessedness... Souls... if not united to God by righteousness, remain estranged from him in death. On the other hand, that union, wherever it exists, will bring perpetual salvation with it.<sup>65</sup>

At the moment when he rose again, [the Lord] deigned to make many of the saints partakers of his resurrection, and allowed them to be seen in the city; thus giving a sure earnest, that everything which he did and suffered in the purchase of eternal salvation, belonged to believers under the Old Testament just as much to us. Indeed, as Peter testifies, they were endued with the same spirit of faith by which we are regenerated to life (Acts xv.8).<sup>66</sup>

---

<sup>63</sup> Strehle, p. 149.

<sup>64</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book II, Chapter X, 1. This and all quotations from Calvin’s *Institutes* are from the Henry Beveridge translation (Grand Rapids, Mi: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989).

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, Book II, Chapter X, 8.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, Book II, Chapter X, 23.

However, this salvation was given apart from knowing Christ. The covenant in every age sets forth Christ in some way, and hence salvation only comes through faith in Christ, even in the Old Testament period:

In the same way we infer that the Old Testament was both established by the free mercy of God and confirmed by the intercession of Christ. For the preaching of the Gospel declares nothing more than that sinners, without any merit of their own, are justified by the paternal indulgence of God. It is wholly summed up in Christ. Who, then, will presume to represent the Jews as destitute of Christ, when we know that they were parties to the Gospel covenant, which has its only foundation in Christ? Who will presume to make them aliens to the benefit of gratuitous salvation, when we know that they were instructed in the doctrine of justification by faith? And not to dwell on a point which is clear, we have the remarkable saying of our Lord, “Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day, and he saw it and was glad” (John viii.56). What Christ here declares of Abraham, an apostle shows to be applicable to all believers, when he says that Jesus Christ is the “same yesterday, to-day, and for ever” (Heb. xiii.8).<sup>67</sup>

The main difference, therefore, between the two covenants with regard to the presentation of the gospel is one of clarity: the things presented clearly in the New Testament are veiled and given in the form of types and shadows in the Old. God operated this way on account of the maturity of the recipients; He dealt with people according to their ability to comprehend:

It is now clear in what sense the Apostle said (Gal. iii. 24; iv. 1), that by the tutelage of the Law the Jews were conducted to Christ, before he was exhibited in the flesh. He confesses that they were sons and heirs of God, though, on account of nonage, they were placed under the guardianship of a tutor. It was fit, the Sun of Righteousness not yet having risen, that there should neither be so much light of revelation nor such clear understanding. The Lord dispensed the light of his word, so that they could behold it at a distance, and obscurely. Accordingly, this slender measure of intelligence is designated by Paul by the term *childhood*, which the Lord was pleased to train by the elements of this world, and external observances, until Christ should appear. Through him the knowledge of believers was to be matured.<sup>68</sup>

---

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., Book II, Chapter X, 4.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., Book II, Chapter XI, 5.

Calvin presented the covenant as a bilateral agreement between God and man. The covenant was binding not only upon man with regard to his duties toward God, but also upon God:

The creatures do see that the living God abases himself as far as to be willing to enter into treaty with them, as if he should say, Come, let us see at what point we are: indeed, there is an infinite distance between you and me. I might command you what seems good to me without having anything further to do with you, and neither are you worthy to come to me.. yet despite all that I give up my own right: I offer myself to you to be your leader and Savior: I am willing to govern you, and you shall be as my little family... I am here ready to enter into covenant with you, and to bind myself to you.<sup>69</sup>

Given God's nature, from His perspective, the covenant is unconditional since it is impossible that God would not keep His side of the agreement—to be the God of His people.<sup>70</sup> From man's perspective, however, there is the condition of obedience to God's commands, and given man's nature, this renders the covenant conditional. This conditionality, though, is only apparent, since man's disobedience does not render the covenant void, but results in the withdrawal of covenant blessings.<sup>71</sup> For the believer, however, his inability to keep the requirements of the covenant is compensated by the Holy Spirit through whom he receives the fullness of the Law's promises as if he had fulfilled their condition.<sup>72</sup> In this it is evident that Calvin wanted to both emphasize the fact that the believer's justification is based on faith alone and is solely the work of God, but nevertheless works are important. As Lillback points out:

This doctrine gives Calvin a two-edged sword to wield against his theological opponents. The Romanist, who thought his works merited salvation, was confronted with the fact that good works without Christ's righteousness were still impure. The Libertine, who thought that Christ's death made him spiritually pure

---

<sup>69</sup> *Calvini Opera* XXVI, 242, quoted in Lillback, p. 166 n. 20.

<sup>70</sup> Lillback, p. 169.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 170.

<sup>72</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes*, Book II, Chapter VII, 4. Also, Lillback, p. 172.

regardless of his personal life, was confronted with the inseparability of the Holy Spirit's work of regeneration and Christ's righteousness.<sup>73</sup>

Of interest at this point is the relationship between Calvin's view of covenantal obligations, and the Nominalist views examined above. Calvin appears to be in agreement that God is covenantally obligated to bestow grace upon men, and while man is required to obey God's commands, the work that man does is only acceptable to God by virtue of the covenant. However, God was never obliged to covenant with man in the first place, and hence man can make no demands of God. Man always has been in God's debt, and despite this God condescended to enter into covenant with man; and God's "accepting grace" is always dependent upon justification by faith alone and the forgiveness of sin, never simply because God chooses to accept them. On these points, Calvin and the Nominalists parted ways.<sup>74</sup>

Along with the Swiss Reformers, Calvin used the continuity between the Old and New Testaments to argue in favor of paedobaptism. Indeed, the continuity of the covenants led naturally to a continuity between circumcision and baptism, having already established that the difference between the covenants was one of administration: circumcision and baptism may look different, but they mean the same thing.<sup>75</sup>

It is clear, therefore, that Calvin's covenantal views were a continuation and further development of those set forth by the Swiss Reformers. Again, he did not develop his theology around the covenant as Bullinger did, but neither was it a passing curiosity in his work. The covenant was that which bound the Old and New Testaments together, providing a common thread between the promises made to the Patriarchs, Christ's work of redemption, and the benefits received by the faithful Christian. It also emphasized the gratuitous nature of saving faith, gave confidence and assurance to the believer, and also provided a strong incentive for good works.

### **The Heidelberg Theologians**

---

<sup>73</sup> Lillback, p. 183.

<sup>74</sup> See Lillback pp. 200-206 for a discussion of this topic from which these comments derive.

<sup>75</sup> See Calvin, Institutes, Book IV, Chapter XVI, 10ff.

In the second half of the sixteenth century, Heidelberg was, for the most part, a Reformed haven in largely Lutheran Germany. Apart from the brief rule of Johann Ludwig VI, the electors were theologically Reformed and encouraged the teaching of Reformed theology at Heidelberg University, which was fast rivaling Geneva as the center of Reformed education in Europe.<sup>76</sup>

The impetus behind the development of Covenant Theology within the Swiss Reformers through to Calvin was, clearly, the issue of baptism. Given the situation in Zurich with the Anabaptists, this is only to be understood. It has been observed, however, that covenantal ideas pre-dated the baptism debate and there is a notable line of covenantal teaching that came through the Reformed stronghold of Heidelberg in the German Palatinate in the latter part of the sixteenth century that was less concerned with the issue of baptism, and more concerned with the issue of God's sovereignty as it relates to the Fall. This in turn led to discussions around the idea of a pre-lapsarian covenant.

Philipp Melanchthon, Luther's co-laborer and future successor, produced what is probably his most famous work, the *Loci Communes* ("Commonplaces") in 1521, and he continued to revise this work over the succeeding years. From the 1535 revision, he began to reconsider the doctrine of predestination, having become concerned that an over-emphasis on God's sovereignty could end up making God the author of evil.<sup>77</sup> As a result, both in the *Loci*, and in other works, he posited an intermediary position that granted a certain amount of free will to man, while still allowing God overall control of nature:

Man has in his own power a freedom of the will to do or not to do external works, regulated by law and punishment. There are good works he can do and there is a secular goodness he can achieve through a power of his own which he has and receives from God for this purpose... He must have a certain freedom of choice to refuse evil and to do good. God also requires such external or secular righteousness... But this freedom is hindered by the devil.<sup>78</sup>

---

<sup>76</sup> Weir, pp. 117-118; MacCulloch, pp. 354-355.

<sup>77</sup> MacCulloch, p. 242.

<sup>78</sup> From Melanchthon's *Visitation Instructions*, quoted in Heinz Scheible, "Philip Melanchthon" in Carter Lindberg, *The Reformed Theologians*, p.71.

One of the issues raised by the doctrine of predestination that gave discomfort to some was the idea that God foreordained the Fall. For one who believes in God's exhaustive sovereignty, it stands to reason that if God is in control of all things, then even that initial sin event must be, somehow, according to His plan and purpose. In the second edition of his *Institutes* published in 1539, Calvin clearly taught that God planned the Fall to show His mercy and love, but He is not, as a result, the author of evil.<sup>79</sup>

Jérôme Bolsec, an ex-Carmelite friar, challenged Calvin's doctrine of double predestination in 1551 saying that it made God into a tyrant, and robbed man of any incentive to act morally.<sup>80</sup> With regard to the Fall, Bolsec wanted to know what induced Adam to sin resulting in his being abandoned by God, given he was not yet subject to Original Sin and hence there was no reason for God to abandon him.<sup>81</sup>

Bolsec was not alone in critiquing Calvin's views, and this caused Calvin to further define his position. In responding to the objections, Calvin argued that there is a difference between the proximate cause of sin and the remote cause of sin. Adam was the one directly committing the act, so his is the proximate cause; God however is the remote cause, since the sin happens by His decree. God is not, therefore, the author of sin: the sin is Adam's alone.<sup>82</sup> This did not end the controversy, since both Trollet and Castellio addressed the topic, Trollet taking up Bolsec's cause after Bolsec was expelled from Geneva, and Castellio insisting that God's will was permissive, not ordaining, otherwise God would be the author of evil.<sup>83</sup>

While Calvin was responding to Castellio, Beza was working on his *Summa Totius Christianissimi*, in which he defended Calvin's position, though applying a more rigorous logic to the system. For Beza, predestination and providence serve the purpose of showing the glory of God in His saving of the elect and His condemnation of the

---

<sup>79</sup> MacCulloch, p. 243; Weir, p. 64.

<sup>80</sup> MacCulloch, p. 242; Weir, p. 65.

<sup>81</sup> Weir, p. 65.

<sup>82</sup> Weir, pp. 66-67, where he quotes from Calvin's *De aeterna Dei praedestinatione*.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

reprobate. He distinguished between the decrees themselves and the execution of those decrees, teaching that the decree to elect some and condemn others was made before all other decrees. In this, Beza showed himself to be the first supralapsarian theologian.<sup>84</sup>

Calvin was not willing to be so bold, however. He certainly did not deny that God's hand was behind the Fall, however He was reluctant to speculate on the reason why God would ordain the Fall, preferring to leave this within the realms of God's secret will.<sup>85</sup> For his part, Bullinger in 1560 would simply refer to the issue of God's sovereignty and the Fall as a "curious question."<sup>86</sup>

The controversy over God's sovereignty and the Fall was an issue under discussion in Heidelberg during the mid-sixteenth century, and one that was to impact the development of Covenant Theology both there, and later within the Reformed movement as a whole.

The first person recognized to have adopted the idea of a pre-lapsarian covenant into his theology to any great extent is Zacharias Ursinus. The work that Ursinus is possibly best known for is as a major contributor to the Heidelberg Catechism of 1563 while serving as professor of Dogmatics at Heidelberg University.<sup>87</sup> Ursinus started out a Lutheran and a disciple of Melanchthon, who possibly influenced his later covenantal thinking—at least with regard to the pre-lapsarian covenant.<sup>88</sup> Sometime between 1557 and 1561, Ursinus adopted Reformed theology, and he ended up teaching at the University of Heidelberg. He later went to the Casimirianum of Neustadt an Hardt when Ludwig VI purged the University of Reformed theologians in favor of Lutherans<sup>89</sup>.

Ursinus' views concerning a pre-lapsarian covenant appear in his Major Catechism of 1561-2, while elsewhere he taught regarding the covenant of grace. He taught that the covenant made in the Garden of Eden was with mankind, not just with Adam. Pre-Fall

---

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., pp. 72-73.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 75.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 101.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.; Strehle, p. 163.

<sup>89</sup> Weir, p. 101.



Adam knew God and His will, and it is possible he believed God held out the promise of a future eternal life for Adam.<sup>90</sup> The Fall was, for Ursinus, foreordained of God since God is absolutely sovereign, and yet He is not responsible for evil. Adam and Eve are fully culpable for their sin in the Garden since they had a perfect covenant relationship with God but broke that covenant. Since the covenant bound not only Adam and Eve but their descendents too, no-one is blameless.<sup>91</sup>

Casper Olevianus, one of Ursinus' colleagues at Heidelberg, did not have nearly as developed a covenantal view as Ursinus, but he does speak of a pre-lapsarian covenant. He mentions a "covenant of creation" from which Satan led Adam and Eve, breaking the covenant relationship between God and man. The Incarnation was, therefore, necessary to atone for the broken covenant, and to provide a restoration that is eternal.<sup>92</sup> While Olevianus makes use of the covenantal concepts, and particularly the pre-lapsarian covenant, he does not develop the idea any further: he simply utilizes it in his work.<sup>93</sup>

Between 1573 and 1574, Ursinus and Olevianus would have come into contact with Thomas Cartwright at Heidelberg. Cartwright was one of the early English Puritans who had come to Heidelberg by way of Geneva—where he met and befriended Beza—by way of Cambridge, where he had graduated and where he had taught. After his time in Heidelberg, he went on to Antwerp to pastor an English-speaking congregation. However, the significance of Cartwright is not just that he had contact with Ursinus and Olevianus, but that he was also a covenant theologian.<sup>94</sup> Perhaps even more significant is the fact that following Cartwright to Antwerp was Dudley Fenner, a fellow Cambridge graduate and disciple of Cartwright.<sup>95</sup>

Given the connection between Ursinus, Olevianus, Cartwright, and Fenner, it is hard to imagine that Fenner did not come under the influence of covenantal—and even pre-lapsarian covenantal—ideas, if he had not already been developing such thoughts

---

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.107-108, 119.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 135-136.

<sup>93</sup> Strehle, p. 168; Weir, p. 137.

himself by that time. Fenner's *magnum opus* was his *Sacra Theologica*, in which he systematically developed the covenant idea. He recognized two distinct forms of covenant in Scripture: the conditional *foedus operum*, or "covenant of works" (he was the first to call it this), and the unconditional "covenant of grace." Since the covenant of works is part of creation, it is binding on all people, requiring obedience to God's law. The covenant of grace, however, is only made with believers, saving them and giving them the desire to do good works in gratitude and love for God. By contrasting the two covenants—something characteristic of the Ramistic system of dichotomies he had embraced—Fenner could highlight the gracious nature of God's saving work.<sup>96</sup> Fenner was the first to combine High Calvinism with a developed Covenant Theology in which the purpose of the covenant of works is to render all men guilty before God, and to drive sinners to God by making them more aware of their sin.<sup>97</sup> Christ then came as the second Adam, fulfilling the obedience that had been required of the first Adam.<sup>98</sup>

At Fenner's untimely death when he was about 29, William Perkins picked up the mantle. Perkins was another Cambridge theologian and English Puritan who continued Fenner's work and became a bestselling author in the process.<sup>99</sup> He particularly picked up on a teaching of Calvin's whereby some of the reprobate may be given a "temporary faith," which is not saving faith, but nevertheless makes them appear to be of the elect. This concept helped to drive home the necessity of self-examination and discernment to be sure one's faith was of the saving kind.<sup>100</sup>

---

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p. 118.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p. 119, 144.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., p. 137; MacCulloch, pp. 389-390.

<sup>97</sup> Weir, p. 142.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., p. 143.

<sup>99</sup> MacCulloch, pp. 389-390. MacCulloch notes that Perkins' work even outsold the English translations of his hero, John Calvin.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

From the beginning of the seventeenth century, it becomes harder to trace specifically the spread of covenant thinking since it had, by this time, become part-and-parcel of the Reformed and Puritan mindset.<sup>101</sup> Covenant Theology not only spread to England, but also Scotland, and the Netherlands, where Cloppenburg, Cocceius, and Witsius particularly promoted it in their writings and disputations.<sup>102</sup> In 1646, Covenant Theology, including reference to both the covenant of works and the covenant of grace, was given official sanction in the Westminster Confession,<sup>103</sup> where it has been a part of the Reformed tradition ever since.

## Conclusion

This brief survey has attempted to trace the origins of Covenant Theology from the first identification of the covenant concept as it applies to both Old Testament and New Testament believers, through to the development of a theological system that recognizes the continuity between the covenants, as well as the different administrations of the covenant. This paper has also noted the different approaches to covenantalism stemming from the different issues that acted as catalysts for development of the covenant idea, particularly baptism with the Swiss Reformers, and theodicy with the Heidelberg theologians. These two strands eventually came together and informed Reformed thinking from the seventeenth century onwards.

The author hopes that this study has demonstrated that Covenant Theology is neither a new concept, nor is it one without a solid heritage that goes back not only to the

---

<sup>101</sup> Mark W. Karlberg, "Moses and Christ—The Place of Law in Seventeenth-Century Puritanism" in *Trinity Journal*, 10, no. 1 (1989), p. 14: "Beginning with the two-covenant scheme of Tyndale (1484-1536), what Trinterud has correctly identified as 'the basis of his entire religious outlook,' the Puritan divines exploited fully the covenant idea, not only in their interpretation of the Scriptures, but also in their structuring of ecclesiastical and civil institutions."

<sup>102</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Carlisle, Pa: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1958; reprint 2000), p. 212.

<sup>103</sup> "The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam, and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience. Man by his fall having made himself incapable of life by that covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the covenant of grace: wherein he freely offered unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ, requiring of them faith in him, that they may be saved, and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto life his Holy Spirit, to make them willing and able to believe." (Westminster Confession of Faith, 7.2-3)

foundations of Protestantism, but further back to the Scriptural contemplations of the early church. The introduction made the point that doctrinal development is not the same as doctrinal innovation: just because the church took years, even decades or centuries, to produce mature doctrinal statements regarding central issues of Christian belief, that does not mean those doctrines were novel, or were not believed from the beginning. Often, it takes conflict to bring about clarification on issues for which the church has long held a belief. It took the Arian heresy to make the church consider carefully and set forth as accurately as possible what she believed the Scriptures taught with regard to Christ's deity—a belief that was part of the Christian *kerygma* from the beginning. The same can be said for Marcion and the canon of Scripture, or Pelagius and predestination. Likewise with Covenant Theology: the church has long held to the belief that God is a covenanting God, that there is continuity between the old and new covenants, and that these covenants find some kind of fulfillment in the work of Christ. It took controversy, however, over baptism, and God's sovereignty in the face of Adam's Fall, to force theologians to search the Scriptures and bring these issues into focus, as far as the Scriptures allow men to understand them.

May this work serve the church by deepening her appreciation for the many brave and intelligent men who have studied diligently to understand and help God's people understand these truths. But most of all, may this study cause us to praise the Lord of the covenant who freely calls His people into intimate, covenantal union with Him for His glory and their salvation.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

- Bagchi, David and Steinmetz, David. *The Cambridge Companion to Reformation Theology*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Berkof, Louis. *Systematic Theology*. Carlisle, Pa: Banner of Truth Trust, 2000.
- Calvin, John. (trans. Henry Beveridge) *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Grand Rapids, Mi: William B. Eerdmans, 1989.
- Lillback, Peter A. *The Binding of God: Calvin's Role in the Development of Covenant Theology*. Grand Rapids, Mi: Baker Academic, 2001.
- Lindberg, Carter (ed). *The Reformed Theologians: An Introduction to Theology in the Early Modern Period*. Malden, Ma: Blackwell Publishing, 2002.
- Luther, Martin. *Galatians*. Wheaton, Il: Crossway Books, 1998.
- MacCulloch, Diarmaid, *The Reformation: A History*. New York, Ny: Penguin Books, 2003.
- McGrath, Alister E. *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*. Malden, Ma: Blackwell Publishing, 1999.
- Strehle, Stephen. *Calvinism, Federalism, and Scholasticism: A Study of the Reformed Doctrine of Covenant*. Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang, 1988.
- Weir, David A. *The Origins of the Federal Theology in Sixteenth-Century Reformation Thought*. Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1990.
- Williams, George Hunston. *The Radical Reformation*. Kirksville, Mo: Truman State University Press, 2000.

Articles on doctrine, Covenant Theology, Practical Theology and Pastoral Theology. Covenant Theology Articles and Links. The Gospel of Jesus Christ. Theological Articles. Covenant Theology Section. Pastoral Theology Section. Following the Reformed Theology of the 1647 Westminster Confession, there is no real debate on how "covenants" work. If you are interested in Covenant Theology (which you should be if you love God's word) then take some time to peruse this excellent work: *The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man*. Francis Robert's *The Mystery and Marrow of the Bible*. Robert's work, "The Mystery and Marrow of the Bible" is one of the best works on Covenant Theology in the history of the Christian Church. Answer: Covenant Theology isn't so much a "theology" in the sense of a systematic set of doctrine as it is a framework for interpreting Scripture. It is usually contrasted with another interpretative framework for Scripture called "Dispensational Theology" or "Dispensationalism." From a redemptive historical perspective, the covenant of works is the first covenant we see in Scripture. When God created man, He placed him in the Garden of Eden and gave him one simple command: "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die" (Genesis 2:16-17). Covenant theology, type of Reformed (Calvinist) theology emphasizing the notion of a covenant, or alliance, instituted by God, which humans are obligated to keep. This concept was developed in the latter part of the 16th century into the notions of the two covenants: the biblical covenant of works. Encyclopaedia Britannica's editors oversee subject areas in which they have extensive knowledge, whether from years of experience gained by working on that content or via study for an advanced degree. See Article History. Alternative Title: federal theology. Covenant theology, also called federal theology, type of Reformed (Calvinist) theology emphasizing the notion of a covenant, or alliance, instituted by God, which humans are obligated to keep.