The Nature of Covenant Theology

by Dr. Ernest Pickering

Covenant theology is a theological system of thought which affirms that God's redemptive dealings with men are governed by certain covenants between (1) the persons of the Godhead, and (2) the Godhead and men. The chief exponents of this system of theology have been found in the Reformed tradition. Names like Shedd, Hodge, Kuyper, and Vos are connected with covenant theology. With such noble and able exponents its impact has been tremendous. A survey of its historical roots will serve as a background to its tenets.

A Brief Review of the Historical Rise of Covenant Theology

One of the earliest theologians to espouse some covenant principles was Hyperius of Marburg who about 1561 published his work called Topica Theologica. In 1570 Olivianus, a professor at Heidelberg published The Covenant of Grace, and was perhaps the first to make the idea of the covenant the determinative principle in the whole theological system. Eglinus, professor at Marburg, produced a treatise on the covenant (1600). These all laid a groundwork on which others raised a structure.

Many regard the major definitive work in this area to be that of Cocceius, a Dutch theologian and professor at Leyden who produced his tremendous work on Summa Doctrina de Foedere et Testamenti Dei in 1648. Building upon the idea of a determinitive covenant, he also added the idea of a covenant of works between Adam and God. Francis Turretin, a contemporary of Cocceius, elaborated upon the entire covenant theory and gave it increasing favor.

The momentous Westminster Assembly (1646) included the concept of the covenant principle in The Westminster Confession of Faith (Chapter VII, sections II and III) which reads as follows: "II. 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. III. 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 offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ, requiring of them faith in Him, that they might 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."

Witsius (1685) emphasized the fact that the covenant began in eternity past and was made between the Father and the Son. Later Reformed theologians have accepted covenant theology, enlarging, developing, and clarifying it.

A Summary of the Basic Tenets of Covenant Theology

In order to set the stage for further discussion it is necessary to clarify the general outline of covenant theology. While there are shades of difference among covenant theologians concerning the details, the broad outline is generally the same. In eternity past God made a covenant (widely known as the covenant of redemption) which bound Him to redeem the elect. Included in this covenant was the obligation on the part of God to provide for the incarnation of Christ, His vicarious death by which He would procure salvation for the elect, and His victorious resurrection. Also included in the covenant was the obligation of God to efficaciously draw the elect to Christ so that they would appropriate the salvation which God has provided. All the Biblical covenants (Abrahamic, etc.) are simply facets of this one eternal covenant of grace.

Covenant theology also holds to the concept of a covenant of works. This is a covenant made by God with Adam in which He promised Adam eternal life if He obeyed and eternal death if He disobeyed. God dealt with Adam in this covenant as the representative head of the human race, tested him in behalf of all the race, and passed judgment upon all the race because of his failure in the covenant relationship.

Summarily, covenant theology views God's purpose with the human race as essentially soteriological. God is saving the elect. All of his dealings with men are to be viewed in the light of this pervading purpose.

The Covenant of Works

The basic concept of the covenant of works is the belief that God entered into a covenant with Adam. After indicating this Charles Hodge declares, "This statement does not rest upon any express declaration of Scripture" (Systematic Theology, II, 117). In other words, the idea of this covenant as presented in covenant theology is a deduction based upon certain factors which are thought to be present in the Genesis account rather than upon a clear teaching of Scripture.

At this point covenant theology is closely tied to the doctrine of the "federal headship" of Adam. The designation is derived from the Latin, foedus, which means "a compact, league, or treaty." According to this view Adam did not act merely as an individual before God while being tested in the garden of Eden, but rather he was the "federal head" of the entire human race, acting as their official representative in the covenant between himself and God. The whole human race was therefore involved in the covenant of works. Adam was tested for the whole human race. His success or failure, therefore, would be the success or failure of all mankind.

Advocates of the federal theology maintain that in this covenant God promised Adam eternal life for obedience and death and

judgment for disobedience. While Scripture gives no hint of the promise of eternal life upon obedience, Berkhof observes that this is "clearly implied" (Systematic Theology, p. 213). Most theologians seem to feel that God imposed this covenant upon Adam. Some hold that Adam voluntarily assumed it.

If questioned as to where the Scriptures point to any promise of eternal life for Adam, adherents of the scheme reply with Louis Berkhof, "The great promise of the covenant of works was the promise of eternal life. They who deny the covenant of works generally base their denial in part on the fact that there is no record of such a promise in the Bible. And it is perfectly true that Scripture contains no explicit promise of eternal life to Adam. But the threatened penalty clearly implies such a promise" (Systematic Theology, p. 216). However, it is the feeling of many that an implication is a rather shaky plank upon which to rest so large a structure.

There is some disagreement as to whether the covenant of works is still in force. Some say it is still partially in force since man always owes God perfect obedience. Others deny this on the ground that, if this were true, the whole human race would still be on probation thereby denying the fall of the race through Adam's transgression.

In the areas of anthropology and hamartiology the idea of the federal headship of Adam has important overtones. As federal head Adam sinned in a representative relationship. All men were "in Adam" in the sense that he was their legal representative before God. When he sinned God counted all of Adam's seed as sinners even though none of them were actually involved in Adam's wrong-doing. Being thus sinners in His sight, God imparts to each of Adam's seed a sinful nature and they become objects of the judgment and wrath of God.

George P. Fisher in a few sentences has summarized the theory. "Adam is conceived to have been constituted in virtue of a sovereign constitution of the Creator a representative of mankind, the kinship of Adam and his descendants being the reason why he and not another is appointed to stand in their place. They have no guilt, in the sense of culpableness, on account of this sin. Their guilt is exclusively a legal liability to the penalty of that offence, by reason of the representative relation established through God's ordinance. It is a legal responsibility. The penalty of this vicarious breach of the Covenant is our inborn natural depravity, and eternal death is the penalty of this depravity" (History of Christian Doctrine, p. 350).

Some federal theologians have recognized in some way both the natural and the federal headship of Adam, holding a combination of the Augustinian view and the federal concept (cf. Charles Hodge, Systematic Theology, II, 196f) though not thereby freeing themselves from the weaknesses of the federal idea.

The federal headship theory has generally been combined with the creation view of the origin of the soul. Adam's seed did not receive a sinful nature by natural birth but by divine creation. This divine impartation of a sinful nature was God's judgment upon the descendants of Adam as a result of Adam's failure and disobedience.

With this brief outline of the covenant of works set forth, an examination of the covenant of redemption is in order.

The Covenant of Redemption

The covenant of redemption is said to be an eternal covenant. It is generally seen as a covenant between God the Father and God the Son with each having certain responsibilities under the covenant. It is based upon the idea that God the Father sent the Son into the world to accomplish certain things whereupon He would receive a reward.

God the Son was to assume a human nature, live a sinless life, bear the sins of men vicariously. God the Father was to prepare a body for Him, sustain Him in His earthly ministry, deliver Him from the grave, exalt Him to His own right hand, make Him the Head of the church, and give Him all of the elect, glorifying them for eternity. These were the general stipulations of the covenant.

In the outworking of its provisions Christ became both the Head and Surety (Heb. 7:22) of the covenant. He guarantees it and is the people's representative in it. As such He, as the last Adam, was under the original covenant of works just as the first Adam was. Thus He had to obtain eternal life by meeting the demands of the law on behalf of the people whom He represented in His covenant. Adam appeared as the representative of the human race in the original covenant of works, failed the test, and lost eternal life. Christ appeared as the representative of the elect in the original covenant of works, passed the test, and gained eternal life for the elect. Note that He had to do this by meeting the demands of the law on behalf of the elect.

It is at this point that the Reformed distinction between the active and passive obedience of Christ is important. The distinction is two-fold. (1) Christ entered the federal relation in which Adam stood in order that He might gain eternal life for the sinner. This is denoted His active obedience. (2) Christ also entered the penal relation to the law, dying to pay the penalty in our stead. This is called His passive obedience. Whether or not Christ actively obeyed the law on behalf of the elect has been called into question by many, but this remains the common belief of covenant theologians.

The covenant of redemption, as viewed by its advocates, is the foundation for the covenant of grace. A covenant of grace would be impossible apart from a covenant of redemption. The persons of the Godhead must first covenant to save before they could covenant with men to apply that salvation.

The Covenant of Grace

The covenant of grace is the third covenant to be considered in the general scheme of covenant theology. It has to do with the application of salvation to the elect.

The parties to the covenant. All are generally agreed that God is the initiator of, and the first party in, the covenant of grace. Difference of opinion exists over the second party, however. Some say it is with the sinner. Some say it is with Abraham and his seed. Most take it to be with the elect or the elect sinner in Christ.

The unchanging nature of the covenant. In his discussion Charles Hodge uses as a heading the following: "The Identity of the Covenant of Grace Under All Dispensations" (Systematic Theology, II, 366). This concept is crucial in the study of covenant the-

ology. Covenant theology holds that all the Biblical covenants are simply varying expressions of the one eternal covenant of grace. Since the eternal covenant of grace is soteriological in essence, the Biblical covenants are soteriological as well. For example, the Abrahamic Covenant was not made with a national entity as such, but with the "continuing covenanted community" which was Israel in the Old Testament and is the church in the New. The Old Testament covenants, therefore, were not made with physical seed, but with spiritual seed. Out from this notion stems the natural antipathy of covenantists to the premillennial scheme of theology. There is no room in the covenant of grace for covenants with a literal, physical Israel, such as demanded by premillennialism. Since premillennialism does not fit the covenant scheme, it is by and large rejected by covenant theologians.

It naturally follows that, if the covenant of grace is the same in all dispensations, then the church, the recipient of this covenant, is likewise unchanging in its character throughout the various dispensations. "The covenant of grace, or plan of salvation, being the same in all its elements from the beginning, it follows, first, in opposition to the Anabaptists, that the people of God before Christ constituted a Church, and that the Church has been one and the same under all dispensations" (Charles Hodge, Systematic Theology, II, 373).

While it is interesting to note that Hodge recognizes such a thing as a "dispensation" it must also be remembered that he does not conceive of this in the same way as do premillennial dispensationalists. The dispensations, as viewed by covenantists, are simply different administrations of the same covenant of grace. Some distinguish as many as four dispensations while others find only two--law and grace. These different dispensations are merely periods of time during which God's chief aim is the salvation of the elect.

That even the Mosaic dispensation was a facet of the covenant of grace is an integral part of the covenant scheme. "In the old dispensation, comprising the Patriarchal and Jewish churches, it [covenant of grace] was administered through animal sacrifices and visible types and symbols..." (W. G. T. Shedd, Dogmatic Theology, II, 363).

In light of the sharp distinction in Scripture between law and grace such a contention seems entirely without foundation. However, in order to maintain their covenant principle consistently they are forced to view the law as a means of administering grace.

The conditions of the covenant. Reformed theologians do not care for the word "condition" as used in relation to the covenant of grace, and yet we have in mind by this term the means by which persons enter into covenant relationship.

A distinction is made between entrance requirements for adults and for infants. "The condition of the covenant of grace, so far as adults are concerned, is faith in Christ" (Charles Hodge, op. cit., II, 364). A voluntary confession of faith is thus made necessary.

The problem of children and the covenant is somewhat more complicated. Holding, as they do, that the covenant of grace is essentially the same in its Old and New Testament form, covenantists argue that, since infants were under the blessings of the covenant in the Old dispensation, they are similarly accorded that privilege in the New dispensation. Children of believers, there-

fore, are under the covenant of grace.

Children of believers are in the covenant as a legal relationship from the time they are born, but are not necessarily in the covenant as a communion of life. A faithful administration of the covenant by believing parents will result in their children being transformed by the Holy Spirit and being given saving faith. Such children, however, are assumed to be the possessors of spiritual life. "As long as the children of the covenant do not reveal to the contrary, we shall have to proceed on the assumption that they are in possession of the covenant of life" (Louis Berkhof, op. cit., p. 288).

W. Hendriksen, writing in The Banner, a Christian Reformed paper, states: "We have a perfect right to regard our children as regenerated, for remember, God perpetuates His covenant in the line of believers and their seed....You have no right to demand of them to turn from total darkness to glorious light, from stark unbelief to fervent faith in Christ. In their case there is no 'Before' and 'After' in that sense....They 'always' loved Jesus....They are not 'outsiders' who have to become 'converted' in the sense in which the heathen become converted. No, they are 'insiders' and have the right to be treated as such." The Reformed emphasis upon the Christian instruction of their children, while commendable in many ways, springs from this idea that the Christian life, already within the child, may be nurtured into full bloom.

Infant baptism and the covenant. Most covenant theologians are pedobaptists. This is a direct corollary of their entire system. Infant baptism is a logical deduction based upon the premises already discussed. The case for infant baptism, from the standpoint of covenant theology, can be summed up in five points.

(1) God's covenant with Abraham was primarily a spiritual covenant. (2) Circumcision was the outward sign and visible seal of this spiritual covenant. (3) The Abrahamic Covenant is still in force and is essentially identical with the present "new covenant" of this gospel age. (4) Infants shared in the covenant under the old dispensation and received circumcision as the visible sign and seal that they did thus partake of it. (5) Therefore, infants should share in the New Covenant, the salvation of Christ, receiving baptism as the sign and seal of their participation in it. Baptism, therefore, is the New Testament equivalent of the Old Testament rite of circumcision.

To covenant adherents the sacrament of baptism is both a sign and a seal. As a sign it signifies the washing away of sins and the removal of the pollution of sin in sanctification. As a seal it is "...a present and sensible conveyance and confirmation of grace to the believer who has the witness in himself, and to all the elect a seal of the covenant of grace, to be sooner or later conveyed in God's good time" (A. A. Hodge, Outlines of Theology, 501).

It is to be noted that Hodge's definition supports the sacramental concept of baptism and the Lord's supper which is held by covenant theologians. They are more than ordinances; they are conveyors of the grace of God. A sacrament is an ordinance instituted by Christ in which, by visible signs, the grace of God and the benefits of the covenant of grace are represented, sealed, and applied to believers, who by their participation, give a witness to their faith in Christ. While baptism is not absolutely necessary to salvation it is obligatory because Christ has commanded it.

The exact relationship of baptism to the regeneration of infants is a knotty problem for Reformed thinkers. In adults the sacrament of baptism strengthens the grace of God within them. In infants it does the same, but a problem remains: How can it strengthen the grace of God in the heart of an infant who is unconscious of the significance of baptism? Luther "solved" this problem by suggesting that God wrought faith in the heart of an infant by baptism, and then confidently challenged anyone to prove that God did not do this. A few Reformed scholars have held that baptism in some way regenerates. However, the bulk of them have relied on one or more of these arguments:

It may be assumed (though it is not certain), they say, that children offered for baptism are already regenerated and have the seed of faith. Thus baptism would strengthen that which they already possess.

It is also emphasized by many that the operation of baptism may not be limited to the time of its administration. It is possible that it may augment faith at a later time when the significance of the sacrament is understood more clearly.

A further explanation has been given by some who have declared that infant baptism is a means of grace to the parents of the child. One is immediately struck by the total lack of Scriptural support for such reasoning as has been presented here. For this reason Baptists and others have rejected the vagaries of covenant theology for the more solid foundation of the Word of God.

A Critique of Covenant Theology

The church remains indebted to many of the great covenant theologians for their outstanding contributions in various areas. Among them have been some of the greatest of conservative scholars. It is evident, however, that great and good men often build large systems of thought upon very meagre premises. Such is the case with regard to the system of covenant theology.

An extra-Biblical invention. While there are of course elements of truth within the covenant scheme, as a system, the major premises of it are largely derived from theological speculation rather than sound Biblical exegesis. Covenantists admit in their own writings that some of their key ideas are not clearly stated in Scripture. True theology should arise from a study of the Word of God, not bring a system to the Word of God which is imposed upon it. One has rightly said of one of the covenants. "The so-called covenant of works is really a fictitious invention which has no Scriptural foundation" (F. W. Dilliston, The Structure of the Divine Society, p. 134).

A narrowing of the purposes of God. In their presentation of the covenants of redemption and grace, the purpose of God with men is limited largely to a soteriological one. Thus in every age the primary purpose of God is that of bringing individual persons to saving faith. An examination of Scripture disproves this contention. God has several purposes. He has a purpose for the Gentile nations, a purpose for Israel as a nation, a purpose for the church. The Bible indicates that He has worked with men according to various revelations of His will, not just one. Personal salvation is only one of several purposes of God.

All Biblical covenants are actually reduced to one. The distinctive character of the various Biblical covenants is not rec-

ognized by covenant theologians. Without regard to their plain meaning or proper interpretation they are all lumped together as various expressions of one eternal covenant, the covenant of grace. In order to do this their language must be spiritualized and their application to a literal nation Israel denied. Great violence and dishonor is done to the text of Scripture by such a method.

The dispensational distinctions of Scripture are obliterated. In covenant theology the evident differences of God's dealings in various dispensations are denied. The dispensations (whatever number are recognized) are only various modes of administering the one covenant of grace. Even the dispensation of law is in reality a phase of God's gracious dealings. No more serious charge could be brought against the covenant system than to say that it confounds the principles of law and grace, which error is condemned strongly in the New Testament. The legalism prominent in many Reformed circles stems from a lack of clear teaching in this very area. Such notions as that of a "Christian Sabbath" would be absent if Scriptural distinctions were observed.

Covenant theology has an objectionable adjunct--the federal headship of Adam. At least two arguments can be brought against the federal theory. First of all, it calls into question the justice of God. If Adam was the representative of mankind, and if mankind did not actually sin when he sinned, then what right has God to account as sinners men who did not actually sin? God can only regard men as responsible for Adam's sin if they actually had some part in it.

A more serious objection can be raised. Federal theologians who maintain that God, in view of Adam's sin, immediately creates each soul in corruption, are wide open to the charge of making God the author of sin. If God by immediate creation brings into existence a sinful soul, how may we escape the conclusion that God has produced moral evil? Is it not better and more Scriptural (in light of Romans five) to state that corruption precedes the imputation of sin and is the basis of it?

A false and harmful view of the nature of the church. The church of Christ is declared to be both believers and their children. This is oblivious to the requirement of God that churches are assemblies of the saved. For this reason Reformed churches have always opposed the principle of a truly regenerated church membership. Their churches have not historically been centers of fervent evangelism. Under the influence of such churches millions of persons have considered themselves children of God who have had no new birth experience.

Theologically, of course, they do not see the church as a distinct purpose of God for this age. The church is found in every age. To undergird this contention extensive spiritualization of Old Testament Scripture is required in defiance of many of the common laws of Biblical interpretation.

In short, the covenant system is unsatisfactory in many ways. Its exegesis is faulty. Its premises are artificial. Its conclusions are seriously at odds with plain New Testament teaching. As such it cannot lay claim to being a Biblical system of thought.