THE ETERNAL COVENANT

Ralph A. Smith, *The Eternal Covenant: How the Trinity Reshapes Covenant Theology*

Published by Canon Press, P.O. Box 8729, Moscow, ID 83843
800-488-2034 | www.canonpress.org

Printed in the United States of America.
Cover design by Paige Atwood.

03 04 05 06 07 08 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Smith, Ralph Allan.
The eternal covenant : how the Trinity reshapes covenant theology /
Ralph Allan Smith.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 1-59128-012-5 (pbk.)
1. Covenant theology. 2. Trinity. I. Title.
BT155.S615 2003
231.7'6—dc21

2003002349

THE ETERNAL COVENANT

HOW THE TRINITY RESHAPES COVENANT THEOLOGY

Ralph A. Smith

CANON PRESS *MOSCOW, IDAHO*

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED to my firstborn son, Ben Zedek, with prayer that God will bless him and enable him to fulfill the meaning of his name that he may be faithful to his Lord (Deut. 10:12–13).

Contents

Acknowledgments

This essay was originally provoked by a comment made by James Jordan in a lecture or perhaps an essay—I no longer remember the source. He said something to the effect that Reformed theologians had often seen the covenant as a trinitarian pact. The comment struck me because in my own reading of Reformed theology, I had not noticed the "trinitarian" aspect of the covenant. The substance of what Jim said remained with me for years, but it was only recently that I took time to look into it. Even more than that single comment, I am indebted to Jim's various publications and his emphasis on the Trinity for my own orientation to the subject. What I have written here is in some respects simply my reflection on his views. I am also indebted to him for interaction and encouragement through email.

Jeffrey J. Meyers, a Reformed minister and a specialist in the theology of the Trinity, has been generous in recommending books and discussing the Trinity in email correspondence. Jeff is perhaps the most well-read trinitarian theologian in the conservative Reformed world today, and his four lectures on the Trinity delivered at the Twelfth Annual Biblical Horizons Bible Conference were extremely helpful.

Finally, I also owe special thanks to Peter Leithart, who read an earlier version of this essay and offered helpful criticism. I am sure the final product is much better thanks to Peter's help, but the faults that remain are not his responsibility.

Doug Jones from Canon Press encouraged me to change the title into something more manageable and supplied the subtitle. My wife suggested the present title. She has also taught me more about God than all my other teachers.

Introduction

The most illustrious names in the history of Reformed theology have affirmed a covenant relationship between the Father and the Son, and not a few have specifically affirmed a relationship among all three persons of the Trinity. While there are differences of opinion among these theologians, it has been common to assume some sort of covenant between the Father and the Son for the redemption of God's elect. For a few, the covenant is almost a *theological* notion; for the vast majority, it is more properly considered "anthropological" since it is oriented to redemption and commonly linked with the idea of a covenant of works granted to Adam in the garden. The covenant with Adam is considered to be a covenant in which Adam merits blessing on the basis of his works, though most writers acknowledge the goodness of God in the covenant arrangement. What is remarkable is that the covenant with Adam, though in conception lower and in time later than the covenant between the Father and the Son, tends to be the paradigmatic covenant. The covenant between the Father and the Son is modeled after the covenant with Adam, and even though both the covenant of redemption and the covenant of grace are conceived of as taking place in the eternal counsel of God, the covenant of grace is often referred to as a "second covenant," the Adamic covenant being first.

The notion of a covenant among the persons of the Trinity is relevant not only to Reformed theology but, as the discussion of the covenant in Karl Barth makes clear,[1] relevant to the whole modern

[1] On the one hand, Barth recognizes the importance of the covenant for the doctrine of creation and redemption: "The decisive anchorage of the recognition that creation and covenant belong to

discussion of the Trinity. As we shall show here, already the Puritans addressed important issues that have to do with the interpersonal relations among Father, Son, and Spirit, and for at least some of the Dutch Reformed theologians, the covenant functioned as more than a mere means of salvation. As we shall also show, however, in Reformed theology, discussion of the covenant among the persons of the Godhead is fragmented, and its importance for the doctrine of the Trinity has been largely neglected. In part, that is because of differences among Reformed theologians about the nature of the covenant relationship in God, some in the Dutch Reformed tradition offering a significantly differing view from that of the Scottish Presbyterian tradition. While it would be wrong to characterize this as a question of whether or not a particular view is true to Reformed theology, it would be naïve to ignore the fact that these are issues with far-reaching consequences. For if there is a covenant relationship among the persons of the Trinity, it—not the covenant of works—ought to constitute the paradigmatic

each other is the recognition that God the Creator is the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. . . . The recognition of the unity of the divine being and its particularity as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit will prove effective in all these directions for the recognition not only of the interconnexions but also of the variations in the relation between creation and covenant" (*Church Dogmatics* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958], 3:48–49). On the other hand, although he sees that the purpose of creation and redemption is found in man being brought into covenantal union with God, Barth denies as clearly as he ever denies or affirms anything that there is or can be a covenant among the persons of the Trinity: "The thought of a purely inter-trinitarian decision as the eternal basis of the covenant of grace may be found both sublime and uplifting. But it is definitely much too uplifting and sublime to be a Christian thought." The reason for this unusually dogmatic denial seems to be found a few sentences later in the words: "How can even the most perfect decision in the bosom of the Godhead, if the Godhead remains alone, be the origin of the covenant, if it is made in the absence of the one who must be present as the second partner at the institution of the covenant to make it a real covenant, that is, man? To unite God in His attitude to man—whether in respect of His properties, or as Father, Son and Holy Spirit—there is no need of any particular pact or decree. God would not be God if He were not God in this unity" (*Church Dogmatics* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956], 4:66). Barth's solution to the basic questions posed by covenant theology is a failure worse than that of Cocceius, whose views he criticizes, but he is correct to point out that the traditional Reformed view is dualistic and that it errs in making the covenant of grace secondary to the covenant of works (ibid., 66). But since the anthropological orientation of the trinitarian covenant in Barth is even more radical than in orthodox Reformed theology, he has undermined his attempt to make the Trinity the true center of theology, though his doctrine of the Trinity is itself suspect along with many other aspects of his theology.

covenant and therefore supply not only the key notion of systematic as well as biblical theology, but also the essential link between these two disciplines. Indeed, it should be the very center of the whole Christian worldview.

There are three basic questions that must be answered. Is there a covenantal relationship among the persons of the Trinity? What is the nature of that relationship? What are the implications of such a covenant? The first question determines our view of the ultimate source of the covenant. The second question determines the direction of our covenantal thought. The answer that we give to it will decide how the doctrine of the trinitarian covenant will affect our theology in general and its application to life. The third question is too broad to deal with adequately here, but we can suggest some of the implications that should be drawn as an introduction to the further development of the doctrine.

1
Is There a Covenant in the Trinity?

The history of the Reformed doctrine of a covenant among the persons of the Trinity is complicated by numerous issues, not the least of which is the fact that the covenant has often been thought of as a covenant between the Father and the Son, with little or no mention of the Holy Spirit, a discrepancy so great that Herman Hoeksema can refer to it as an implicit, albeit unintentional, denial of the Trinity.[1] In addition to the place that the Holy Spirit is thought to occupy in the covenant, there are questions about the relationship between this covenant and the covenant of works, about whether Christ enters this covenant as representative for His people or whether there is a second covenant between God and the elect in addition to the covenant with Christ, and about the relationship of this covenant to the doctrine of the decree. Not discussed by Reformed theologians, but nevertheless relevant, is the question of *perichoresis* as it relates to the notion of the covenant. We will discuss only a few of these issues, but in preparation for that discussion, we will begin with a brief survey of Reformed opinion on the covenant among the persons of the Trinity. What is most interesting from the perspective of this essay is the fact that so many Reformed theologians do recognize that the persons of the Trinity from eternity relate to one another in covenant. Given this fact, we need to investigate why it should be that the doctrine of the covenant is seldom seen to be grounded in this trinitarian relationship.

[1] Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1966), 293.

Reformed Opinion

While the majority of Reformed theologians and thinkers believe in some sort of covenant among the persons of the Trinity, there are exceptions, the most prominent of which is John Murray. Murray denies that there is a covenant with Adam in the garden of Eden, preferring instead to see the notion of a divine covenant as *essentially redemptive*, assuming that the word should be defined by its common use in Scripture (Gen. 6, 9, 12, etc.). If the word *covenant* is not used in Scripture for a particular arrangement, Murray does not call it a covenant, even if it seems otherwise to have the qualities of a covenant. But both Murray's denial of a covenant of works and the implicit denial of a pretemporal covenant are more a matter of language than substance. For just as Murray speaks of the Adamic "administration," in terms which will appear to many readers to be, for all intents and purposes, a "covenantal administration," so also he speaks of an "inter-trinitarian economy of salvation,"[2] which could be designated an "inter-trinitarian covenant" without being unjust to the content.

Another well-known Reformed theologian, O. Palmer Robertson, explicitly denies the covenant of redemption.[3] But considering the proportion of Reformed thinkers in favor of a covenant among the persons of the Trinity, one would have thought that Robertson would feel bound to explain and defend his position more than he does, especially since he is not simply following Murray. His approach seems to be that of Old Testament biblical theology, and it is not clear that he has given adequate thought to the issue from the perspective of systematic or even New Testament biblical theology. His definition of the covenant—a bond in blood sovereignly administered[4]—excludes the possibility of a trinitarian covenant.

[2] *Systematic Theology,* vol. 2 of *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977). On the Adamic administration, see 49–50. On the covenant of redemption, see 130–31.

[3] O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 53–54. In his lectures on the doctrine of the Trinity in twentieth century history, Jeff Meyers suggests—I believe correctly—that at least part of the reason for Robertson's rejection of the traditional notion of a covenant among the persons of the Trinity is to be found in the fact that he is interacting with the Scottish tradition and its notion of a pact or contract. Jeff J. Meyers, "The Trinity in Recent Theology, Lecture 4" in *2002 Biblical Horizons Bible Conference* (Niceville, Fla.: Biblical Horizons).

[4] Ibid., 4.

But these two exceptions, both from twentieth-century America, are far from typical of Reformed theology.[5]

Returning to the older Reformed thinkers from the generation after the Reformation onward, theologians are virtually unanimously in favor of affirming a covenant between the Father and the Son for the redemption of the world. Early Reformed theologians such as Olevianus, Cocceius, Witsius, and Voetius all affirmed a covenant between the Father and the Son.[6] A short survey of Reformed opinion on the subject shows clearly that it has long been the common view that God entered into a covenant with Christ for the salvation of the elect. Some Reformed theologians have preferred to see two covenants, one between the Father and the Son, usually called the *covenant of redemption*, and another called the *covenant of grace*, agreed upon by the Father and Christ—considered not as the Son, but as the Messiah and representative of the elect. Other Reformed writers prefer to see two aspects to a single covenant. The following survey is certainly not exhaustive, but it offers a glimpse of a few of the best Reformed thinkers.

Caspar Olevianus (1536–1587) may have been the first Reformed theologian to formulate the idea of a pretemporal redemptive covenant between the Father and the Son and the first to use the covenant idea as the organizing principle for systematic theology, which shows how far back historically the notion goes.[7] More importantly, Olevianus apparently was quite conscious of the trinitarian and covenantal link, according to Westminster Seminary Church historian, R. Scott Clark.

> Whether by Heppe or Barth, Olevian has been interpreted primarily as a covenant theologian, but this view needs to be questioned. In fact, Olevian was as much a theologian of the Trinity as he was a federal or covenant theologian. Indeed, he was a federal theologian

[5] I am not trying to suggest that these are the only two. There are no doubt others, but these two are well-known.

[6] Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics: Set Out and Illustrated from the Sources*, ed. Ernst Bizer, trans. G. T. Thomson (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978 [1950]), 376–79.

[7] Lyle D. Bierma, *German Calvinism in the Confessional Age: The Covenant Theology of Caspar Olevianus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996).

> because he was a trinitarian theologian. In his mind, to exposit the Trinity, or the ancient trinitarian creeds, was to teach the doctrine of the covenant, since the covenant is nothing more than a way of describing the relations which obtain between the triune God and his elect.[8]

It is perhaps significant that Richard Sibbes (1577–1635), who lectured at Holy Trinity, Cambridge, from 1610–1615 and served as master of Catherine Hall, Cambridge, from 1626 until his death, speaks only of the covenant of grace and includes within it what might be included in the covenant of redemption,[9] whereas his younger contemporary David Dickson (1583–1662), in his famous work *The Sum of Saving Knowledge,* tells us that the Father, Son, and Spirit decree all that comes to pass in time, and then proceeds to expound that decree by the covenants. Man broke the covenant of works, but God in his grace had ordained a way of salvation, the covenant of redemption, "made and agreed upon, between God the Father and God the Son, in the counsel of the Trinity, before the world began."[10] Thus, from very early on, we find both those who refer to two eternal covenants for our salvation (the covenants of grace and redemption) or to only one covenant (the covenant of grace). In either case, the fact that the persons of the Trinity enter into a covenant before the foundation of the world does not change.

Samuel Rutherford (1600–1661), famous for his political treatise *Lex Rex* and for his participation in the Westminster Assembly as one of the prominent representatives from Scotland, wrote a work on the covenant entitled *The Covenant of Life Opened*, in which he distinguishes—upon the basis of the parties of the covenant—between the covenant of grace and the covenant of redemption,

[8] R. Scott Clark, "The Catholic-Calvinist Trinitarianism of Caspar Olevian," *Westminster Theological Journal* 61, no. 1 (spring 1999): 16. Note that Clark stops short of what we might expect. He does *not* say, "the covenant is nothing more than a way of describing the relations which obtain among the persons of the Trinity." Assuming that this is a correct exposition of Olevian, we would have to say that his view is typical of Reformed theology in general in that the covenant never quite becomes truly trinitarian.

[9] Richard Sibbes, *The Works of Richard Sibbes* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1983 [1864]), 6:19 ff. and 464 ff.

[10] David Dickson, *The Sum of Saving Knowledge* <http://www.newblehome.co.uk/dickson/sumss-heads.html>.

which he calls the "covenant of suretyship." The covenant of redemption, according to Rutherford, was a trinitarian covenant.

> It is not the same covenant that is made with Christ and that which is made with sinners. They differ in the subject or the parties contracting. In this covenant of suretyship, the parties are Jehovah God as common to all the three on the one part, and on the other the only Son of God the second person undertaking the work of redemption. In the covenant of reconciliation, the parties are God the Father, Son and Spirit, out of free love pitying us, and lost sinners who had broken the covenant of works. Hence the covenant of suretyship is the cause of the stability and firmness of the covenant of grace.[11]

Thomas Brooks[12] (1608–1680) includes an extended exposition of the covenant of redemption in his treatise "Paradise Opened" (1675).[13] His purpose is pastoral so he does not enter into whatever theological disputes may surround the doctrine in his own day, but he clearly and without much apology differentiates the covenant of grace from the covenant of redemption, offering the usual reasons. One of the distinguishing marks of Brooks's discussion is that he is one of those who explicitly include the Holy Spirit in the covenant. Though in the extended exposition of the covenant and the many Scriptures that he sees as its foundation, he very seldom mentions the Spirit, yet, near the end of the exposition, he mentions that the Spirit of God is involved in the covenant as a "legal witness" and then a little later he writes,

> Consent of all parties, the allowance of the judge, and public record, is as much as can be desired to make all public contracts authentic in courts of justice; and what can we desire more, to settle, satisfy, and assure our own souls that all the articles of the covenant of redemption shall, on all hands, be certainly made good, than

[11] Samuel Rutherford, *The Covenant of Life Opened* (Edinburgh: Robert Brown, 1655), 308–309.

[12] Brooks served as preacher before the House of Commons at least on one occasion, December 26, 1648.

[13] In *The Works of Thomas Brooks* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1980 [1867]) 5:329–403. The subtitle at the top of the page reads appropriately, "The Covenant of Redemption very clearly and largely opened."