

Feature Article

The Covenant in the Westminster Standards: Some Thoughts

One of the persistent questions in our continuing discussions with the OPC has been the matter of the covenant. In particular, the matter has centered on the question: with whom is the covenant made, with Christ and the elect, or with believers and their seed? The “Evaluation of the Divergencies” submitted by the CCOPC to General Synod Burlington (1986) (a report which has, over time, received canonical status at our major assemblies as the final and complete answer on the matter of the divergencies) concluded that, with regard to this question, the “weaknesses and imperfections in the Westminster Standards could benefit from a careful emendation,” although they are not an “impediment to recognize the Orthodox Presbyterian Church as a true Church of the Lord Jesus Christ.”¹ To the ordinary reader untrained in the Talmudic reasoning of synodical committees, this may appear opaque, at best, but reading this report in search of contradictions is like following a burning fuse in search of an explosion; one never has to wait very long. Before, however, we take up the issue of with whom the covenant is made; I would like to look more broadly at the issue of the covenant within the Westminster Standards.

Let us begin with the beginning: it is helpful to remember that there is no such thing as a covenant. ‘Covenant’ is a word that describes the relationship between God and man. This means that there is a great difference between a covenant and a contract. In Scripture, contracts simply involved the exchange of property, whereas covenants involved the exchange of persons, so as to form sacred family bonds. Kinship was thus formed by covenant. Scripturally, the covenant relationship is stronger than bio-logical kinship. One should note Jesus’ extremely strong language pitting the New Family of God against the old natural Adamic family (“hate father and mother”; Matt. 10:21; 34-37, Lk. 14:26). The meaning of the covenants in the Old Testament was God’s fathering Israel as His Son.

When Christ established the New Covenant with us, then, it was much more than a simple contract, or legal exchange, where He took our sin and gave us His righteousness. Although this is true, there is more to it. The New Covenant establishes the church in which Christ is not ashamed to call us His brethren. He makes us children of God. As a covenant act, being justified means sharing in the grace of Christ as God’s children; being sanctified means sharing in the life and power of the Holy Spirit. God’s grace is His undeserved favour to sinners, but it is also the actual gift of God’s life in son-ship.

Frequently, we describe this exclusively in terms of court-room language, which is true as far as it goes. Far more than simply being a Judge, however. God is our Father. We are more than just criminals; we are runaways. The New Covenant was made, not so much in the courtroom, as it was established by God in the family room. In the covenant, we are made God’s children in Christ, by grace alone.

Now, I told you all of that in order to highlight the differences between the Presbyterian and the Reformed understandings of the covenant. After the sixteenth century, the covenant was defined

more and more as an agreement between God and man. Covenant becomes a pact instead of God's administration of favour and promise. This has resulted in an inversion of law over grace. As a result, there is a legalism attached to these standards as well as a bifurcation of nature and grace. This is an abstraction of the covenant idea. In the Westminster Standard, 'covenant' functions as an overarching principle by which to explain election and predestination (e.g., covenant only with the elect). The pattern followed is a legal pattern, not a trinitarian one. As a result, election stands as distinct from temporally administered covenants and can only result in weakening the Reformed doctrine of God. Some people, including ministers and theological professors who should know better, get positively dreamy-eyed when contemplating the fact that the Westminster Confession has a separate chapter on the covenant whereas the Three Forms do not treat it as a separate topic.

This separate chapter, however, results from the reduction of the covenant to a contract and from displacing the covenant God, Who is our Father, with the contract-making God, Who is our employer. This doctrine of the covenant becomes even less acceptable when you look at what is taught concerning the 'covenant of works': 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 (WCF, VII.II).

God gave to Adam a law, as a covenant of works, by which he bound him and all his posterity to personal, entire, exact, and perpetual obedience, promised life upon the fulfilling, and threatened death upon the breach of it, and endued him with power and ability to keep it (WCF, XIX.I).

The structure of covenant of works/covenant of grace pervades all the aspects of the Westminster Standards. These two covenants under gird the Confession's theological structure. The first covenant was made with Adam before the fall and promised everlasting life upon condition of meritorious works of perfect obedience to God's law. The covenant of grace is a postlapsarian arrangement made necessary by Adam's breach of the covenant of works, founded on relationship under girds the Three Forms; further, as the history of the church has gone forward, our understanding of the covenant has been increased and sharpened. Certainly, the Liberation of 1944 shows us this.

But what about the third point? After all, this position is found among our own people. Prof. Dr. J. Faber, for example, would allow for the Kuyperian doctrine of the covenant with the elect within our churches - so long as there was no binding.⁹ While I greatly respect Prof. Dr. Faber, I strongly disagree with him at this point. The Liberation was not simply about binding to a certain doctrine. It was also about the truth of scripture about the covenant, about baptism, etc.

While many, even K. Schilder himself, may have thought and wished that the two views could live together. God said that the two could not. To reduce the Liberation to a plea for doctrinal freedom is just wrong. The two doctrines of the covenant cannot co-exist; the Kuyperian view, the view that the covenant is made with Christ and the elect, is unbiblical and unconfessional, and it must be rejected.

Finally, is it true that the OPC and the Westminster Standards reject presumptive regeneration? Of course, there are statements in the Standards, in the Directory for Worship, and elsewhere that would support this conclusion. As we have seen, however, one can find in the Standards support for any number of contradictory positions. Now, on the question of presumptive regeneration: Lewis Bevan Schenck wrote an entire book. *The Presbyterian Doctrine of Children in the Covenant*¹⁰, to show that the Westminster Standards and the bulk of American Presbyterian history agreed with Abraham Kuyper. Perhaps Schenck is wrong; perhaps the OPC has broken radically with the history of Presbyterianism at this point; perhaps the OPC simply ignore those portions of the Standards which support presumptive regeneration; but, then again, perhaps not. At any rate, I do know OPC ministers who hold to presumptive regeneration.

Further, there is another side to this question. Schenck himself notes that there are Presbyterians who believe in what we could call presumptive non-regeneration. On this view, the children of believers must be presumed to be unregenerate until they show signs of conversion. The children of believers have many benefits that the children of unbelievers do not have, but, essentially, there is no difference between the two. In the words of James Henly Thomwell, a nineteenth century Presbyterian theologian, the children of believers are not in the church, but are in the vestibule of the church. More pithily, an OPC minister once described the children of believers to me as ‘little vipers in covenant diapers.’ Prof. John Frame (who has since left the OPC for the more latitudinarian fields of the PCA) once suggested that the OPC have a Presbytery made up of Reformed Baptist congregations. After all, he argued, although they do not baptize their children, they have the same view of their children that we do. This was defeated, but it was not laughed off the floor. More practically, there is in the Philadelphia area a summer camp called French Creek. The OPC runs a series of summer Bible camps there and part of the goal, on the part of some people, is to send their children to French Creek “to get converted.” Granted, I cannot ‘prove’ this motive for the French Creek camps, but I have seen it.

At any rate, the CCOPC in 1986 and our General Synods thereafter have been far too dewy-eyed about the OPC and the covenant, and the OPC and baptism. We are dealing with more than weaknesses and imperfections. The Westminster Standards are a confusing mess on the covenant. Where they are clear, they are clearly wrong. And we, as churches, need to take a long, clear-eyed second look.

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1. Report of the Committee for Contact with the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Acts of General Synod Burlington, ON 1986, p.146.
2. Willem Van Gemeren, *Systems of Continuity and Discontinuity* (Westchester: crossway Books' 1988)'ed. J. S. Feinberg, p.43
3. The history of the development of Federal Theology and its theological biases is found in Charles S. McCoy and J. Wayne Baker, *Fountainhead of Federalism: Heinrich Bullinger and the Covenantal Tradition*, Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991.
4. This is J. B. Torrance's point in "The Covenant Concept in Scottish Theology and Politics and Its Legacy," *The Scottish Journal of Theology* 34 (1981), p. 239.
5. John Murray, "The Adamic Administration," *Collected Writings of John Murray*, Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth, 1977, Volume 2, pp. 47-59.

6. This is the conclusion of Dr. J. Faber, "The Covenant of Works", *Clarion*, Vol. 31, No. 5, March 12, 1983, p. 91. The entire article is an excellent analysis of the idea of the covenant of works.
7. S. G. de Graaf, *Promise and Deliverance*, Vol. 1 (St. Catharines: Paideia Press, 1977, trans. H. E. Runner), p. 37
8. CCOPC, op. cit., p. 146.
9. Dr. J. Faber, "The Liberation: The Doctrinal Aspect," "The Liberation: Causes and Consequences", C. Van Dam, ed., Winnipeg, MB: Premier Printing, 1995, pp. 21-23.
10. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940.

Reader Response:

In "A Reader Speaks Out: Beware of the Scribes" (March 1, 1996), Br. Verhelst charges that the NIV has hampered with the words of John 17:17. He suggests that the NIV translation team has taken away from the Word of God by mistranslating "Thy truth" to "the truth" and asks, "Whose truth is the Bible speaking of...?" But it is not only the NIV that has translated this verse this way. The RSV, used for decades in the Churches, does the same. This is not a matter of mistranslating, as Br. Verhelst charges, but it is a matter of which text type the translators followed: the Majority Text or the Alexandrian (Egyptian) Text. To suggest that the NIV translators have altered God's Word in some way is a gross misunderstanding of the facts. The same goes for Br. Verhelst's complaint about Christ's satisfaction of the justice of God as well as His perfect legal obedience, the elect being sovereignly and freely made parties to the covenant of grace through God's mercy.

The covenant of works is also called the covenant of life in The Westminster Larger Catechism. At any rate, the phrase 'covenant of works' is an unhappy one, for it implies that Adam was supposed to do good works and merit life from God apart from faith. For example, the Larger Catechism (Q/A. 20) states that God entered into "a covenant of life with him [Adam], upon condition of personal, perfect, and perpetual obedience, of which the tree of life was pledge." Later the Catechism (Q/A. 32) contrasts this arrangement with the covenant of grace, wherein God "freely provides and offers to sinners a Mediator, and life and salvation by Him, and requiring faith as the condition to interest them in him..."

Crudely, but accurately put, the covenant of works is like this: God created Adam in some kind of neutral position and told him that if he kept the law he would earn life. Adam sinned and came under death. Jesus Christ, the Second Adam, did the good deeds necessary to earn life, and His 'merits' are given to us when we receive Him by faith. What are these merits which Adam could have earned and which Jesus Christ did earn? In the structure of the Westminster Standards they are brownie points that we present to God as a bribe. Seriously - this is what the Confession and Larger Catechism teach.

Now, what does this mean? Are we to believe that Adam was supposed to earn 'merits' before God apart from faith? Even very few Presbyterian theologians want to maintain this (although I have known a few who do). The traditional explainers of the covenant of works always try to explain away this evil implication. One famous theologian, John Murray, simply despaired of the effort and threw the covenant of works overboard. He concluded that there was no covenant before the fall. ^ These sorts of problems ought to suggest to us that the bipolar covenant theology is fatally flawed.

Genesis 1 says that God 'blessed' Adam and Eve. They did not start in any kind of 'neutrality.' They started out in the Kingdom. They already had life. They were supposed to mature to glory.

God freely invited Adam and Eve to the Tree of Life in Genesis 2. Only the Tree of Knowledge was forbidden. Even in the Garden, 'life was a free gift, received by faith alone'. Adam was commanded to persevere in faith, not to earn anything. The Westminster structure is unbiblical.

This doctrine of the covenant of works is not contained within the Three Forms of Unity. Within the Westminster Standards, this covenant of works stands over against the covenant of grace and this must lead to confusion. The Westminster Standards teach that Adam's obedience in Eden would have been meritorious; it would have earned for him everlasting life. Yet, man the creature can never make the Almighty Creator to be indebted to him. As S. G. de Graaf notes, "We are accustomed to speaking of this covenant as the covenant of works. However, we should not take this name to mean that man was expected to earn eternal life as a reward for doing good works, as though eternal life was man's payment for services rendered. Because man owes everything he is and has to God, we may never speak of man earning wages paid out by God. Therefore it might be wiser to speak of the covenant of God's favor. Grace generally means favor, but in the Scripture grace always has the special meaning of favor that forgives guilt."⁷

The Westminster Standards, however, posit an antithesis between grace and merit as two phases in God's dealings with man. Now we are in a position to look at the question: with Whom is the covenant made. The Westminster Confession and Catechisms are, to say the least, confusing on this question. On the one hand, the Larger Catechism in question 31 asks, "With whom was the covenant of grace made?" and the answer is "The covenant of grace was made with Christ as the Second Adam, and in him with all the elect as his seed." Clearly the Catechism teaches that Christ is the Head of the covenant and that the covenant is made only with the elect. And just as clearly this cannot be made compatible with either the Belgic Confession, article 34 or the Heidelberg Catechism, question and answer 74. The promise of baptism is not to every child, but only with elect children. Indeed, the same thing is found in the Shorter Catechism, question and answer 20: "God, having out of his mere good pleasure, from all eternity, elected some to everlasting life, did enter into a covenant of grace to deliver them out of the estate of sin and misery, and to bring them into an estate of salvation by a Redeemer" (emphasis added). On the other hand, however, the Confession does say that the visible church "consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children" (XXV.II). At best, we must conclude that we do not know what the OPC believes in this regard; it is all over the map.

Just here the CCOPC's "Evaluation of Divergencies" seeks to come to the rescue. First, it is admitted that there is a dual emphasis in the Westminster Standards. Second, it is maintained that there is no doctrine of the covenant in the Three Forms of Unity except "by implication." Third, although the binding to the Kuyperian doctrine was rejected in 1944, yet the Liberation leaves freedom for different approaches "with respect to the relation between God's election and His covenant." "Finally, we are assured that the OPC rejects the error of presumptive regeneration.

Just how do we evaluate this? Well, we can readily concede the dual emphasis; I would suggest that we go further: the Westminster Standards are internally contradictory and are hopelessly muddled on the doctrine of the covenant. Yet, second, is there no doctrine of the covenant in the Three Forms? There is no separate discussion of the covenant - that is true. Still, we may rightly conclude that the covenant as 4:4. This is not a matter of the NIV translators removing words from Scripture.

If it were, the same charge should be laid against the RSV. The difference in the versions is a matter differences in the textual basis used by the translators, not translation policy.

When Br. Verhelst concludes, "Dynamic Equivalence, which reeks of change, simply will not do!" he misrepresents the problem. Even the NASB, the most literal - equivalent translation commonly available in the English world, is virtually identical to the NIV at John 17:17 and Luke 4:4. The problem is not between dynamic or literal equivalence, but rather which text type to follow.

Br. Verhelst also points to Rev. 22: 19b and accuses the NTV of belittling the curse by dropping the word "and." This is a serious accusation. The problem, however, is not with the NIV but with the textual basis of the KJV commonly known as the Textus Receptus. The word "and" has no basis in either the Egyptian or Majority text. Because it appears in the Textus Receptus the translators of the KJV had to add the word "from" to the English (dynamic equivalent?). This then is a matter of evaluating the Textus Receptus.

In the time of the Reformation, the Bible scholars of the day began discovering the thousands of ancient manuscripts and began to publish them. The Textus Receptus is but one of those printings. Erasmus was attempting to assemble the best collection of Greek texts. In his lifetime he put out five constantly revised editions. Theodore Beza put out nine different editions. In 1633 Elzevir, a printer, wrote in the foreword to a new edition (essentially one of Beza), "What you have here, then, is the 'text' which is now universally 'recognized': we offer it free of alterations and corruptions." In Latin, "Textum ergo habes, nunc ab omnibus receptum: in quo nihil immutatum aut corruptum damus." From this "advertisement" we get the term 'Textus Receptus.' But we should note that the editions since Erasmus' first edition simply were not standard and universally recognized. There were all sorts of editions being published. Elzevir was engaging in a good marketing job. Elzevir's publishing house by its skillful marketing and competent printing of this edition, did in fact standardize the text of the NT. Supporters of the Textus Receptus, however, need to explain why this one printing is the finest example of the Greek text and that Beza and Elzevir should have the final and last say on the matter.

The readers of Reformed Polemics should also be informed that the question of which text to follow, is a matter of debate among even very conservative Reformed scholars. The Report to Synod 1995, by the Committee on Bible Translations states concerning which text type is the best: "...that we should accept the Byzantine text-type as anyway as old as the other and certainly not inferior to the others. Therefore, the Byzantine or Majority Text (rather than the Textus Receptus which is based on very few manuscripts) should not be rejected. Herewith we reject the bias of the majority of critical scholars who favour the Egyptian manuscripts. The bias for the Egyptian manuscripts ... appears to have no valid foundation in the picture of the history of the text. The bias in favour of the Majority text is not worse.

The committee wrote a section "2.2 Original Text" in the main body of their report (pages 4 ff.). Quoting the report of the Committee on Bible Translations to the Australian Free Reformed Churches they write, "Scholars from all camps agree that 95%-97% of the text is established without doubt or debate." The Australian committee goes on to write, "Regardless of which position is adopted, we still do have the true text of the NT before us."

When they say that 95%-97% of the text is established they are speaking of all variants. Many variants are not significant to meaning but are simply spelling variants (much like the English, honor / honour). It is estimated that there are only 375 significant variants that need serious discussion. According to Morgenthaler there are 137,490 words in the NT. Other than the larger disputed passages in Mark 16 and John 8, and if, on average each variant consists of 2 or 3 words, what we really are talking about is approximately 0.75 % of the text of the NT. 99.25% of the text of the NT is established! Louis Berkhof, the conservative Reformed theologian, wrote of the variants in the New Testament “Some change the sense of the particular passages or expressions, or omit particular words or phrases; but no one doctrine of religion is changed, not one precept is taken away, not one important fact altered, by the whole of the various readings taken collectively (Introduction to Systematic Theology, pg. 159).” In a sense, however, the whole debate “Majority Text vs. Alexandrian” is academic. There is no Bible translation based on the Majority Text available.

The fundamental debate about which translation we should adopt must then be based on translation policy not on text type. The detractors of the NIV, therefore, need to show clearly how the committee erred in its assessments in Appendix 1, 2, 3 & 9 (its discussion on translation technique); how the committee failed in Appendix 11-17 (its textual studies); and how its recommendations are wrong. One of the striking things in the debate on the adoption of the NIV in the Churches is an almost consistent failure to interact with the Report to Synod in any significant way. Those who oppose the adoption of the NIV should show how the Report failed in fulfilling its mandate, where and why it is wrong in its evaluations and conclusions, and why its recommendations should have been rejected by Synod.

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