

The Benefit of Having a Worthy Opponent

How the Theology of Seventeenth-Century Puritans Can Be Complemented by the Nineteenth-Century German Thought Known as the Mercersburg Theology

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CHAPTER FOUR (Cont.)

Where Is Covenant in the Heidelberg Catechism?

While the covenants named in this study may not be specifically named in the Heidelberg Catechism, the Heidelberg Catechism was referred to by Witsius on more than one occasion as a suitable basis for doctrine and for explaining the covenants. He referred to questions 31, 67, 70, 75 and 80 regarding the satisfaction rendered by Christ's sufferings¹ and to question 42 regarding why believers still have to die if Christ has already died in their place.²

The Catechism was produced by Caspar Olevianus and Zacharias Ursinus in 1563. There have been at least two works published elaborating on the covenant theology of Olevianus.³ Ursinus wrote *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism* which references the word covenant under the discussion of approximately twenty-nine of the one hundred and twenty-nine questions. While the systematic formulation of covenants was not included in the text of the catechism itself, Ursinus devoted space to explaining it in his commentary, and he did include it in the text of another catechism he produced, the *Catechesis Maior*. The overall content of the Heidelberg Catechism is covenant theology, revealing the total depravity resulting from Adam's fall, the designation of Christ by the Father to fulfill the offices of prophet, priest and king, and to be the Mediator who would accomplish salvation for the elect as a Substitute offering His life as a ransom. Believers are justified by faith and by the ministry of the Holy Spirit have their hearts refurbished with new affections which are nourished by the preaching of the Word and the Sacraments. There is much material in the catechism which is beautifully arranged in such a way as to make available Biblical theology to a common person.

¹ Witsius, vol. 1, p. 226.

² Ibid., p. 231.

³ See R. Scott Clark, *Caspar Olevian and the Substance of the Covenant* and Lyle D. Bierma, *The Covenant Theology of Caspar Olevianus*.

Nathan Decker observed that while the Heidelberg Catechism does not include a Lord's Day devoted to the covenants, Ursinus in another catechism wrote, "What firm comfort do you have in life and death? That I was created by God in His image for eternal life; and after I willfully lost this in Adam, God, out of infinite and free mercy, took me into his covenant of grace that he might give me faith, righteousness and eternal life because of the obedience and death of his Son who was sent in the flesh."⁴ The whole of the catechism presents the believer's living relationship with Jesus, the essence of the covenant of grace.

In response to the idea raised at the beginning of this chapter that covenant theology did not exist before the Puritans, R. Scott Clark explains that there are references in early church writings which reveal themes such as the unity of the covenant of grace, the superiority of the new covenant over the era characterized by Moses' Law, union of the Jews and Gentiles in Christ and both being identified as Abraham's children, and a stress on moral obligations of participants in the covenant of grace. It was through the confusion of Medieval theology and then the challenges directed at the Reformers that a more detailed covenant theology came to be articulated.⁵

One aspect of covenant theology that is included in Witsius' writings was not yet developed when the Heidelberg Catechism was written. That is the covenant of works. Richard Muller understands the covenant of works to be a doctrinal construct. As noted earlier, it is not particularly named in Scripture. It was formed by "a comparison of a series of biblical loci."⁶ One arrives at the concept of the covenant of works almost by reasoning backward from the covenant of grace. Wilhelmus à Brakel said that if one did not understand the covenant of works he would not truly grasp the covenant of grace and the true mediatorial role Christ played. Nor would one understand properly Christ's active obedience that merited eternal life for the elect.⁷ Not everyone shares this favorable view of covenant theology. There are those who consider it to be a departure from the Reformers' theology and accuse it of wrongly creating a priority of law over grace. But Calvin had emphasized the legal relationship between God and man, the tree of life as sacramental, the idea that sacraments are covenantal signs, the law of Moses as a legal pact, and a relationship between Adam and Christ which explains Christ's redemptive fulfilment of the law. He did not however summarize these things with the terminology "covenant of works."⁸

⁴ Nathan Decker, "The Covenant and the Confessions," *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal* 48, no. 1 (November 2014): p. 8.

⁵ R. Scott Clark, "The History of Covenant Theology," Retrieved from www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/history-covenant-theology/.

⁶ Richard Muller, "The Covenant of Works and the Stability of Divine Law in Seventeenth-Century Reformed Orthodoxy: A Study in the Theology of Herman Witsius and Wilhelmus à Brakel," *Calvin Theological Journal* 29, no. 1 (April 1994): p. 75.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 88-89.

F. W. Dillistone has noted that covenant terms were seldom used in sixteenth century confessions. Showing antagonism toward the concept he alleges that the covenant of works as expressed in the Westminster Confession is “a fictitious invention which has no Scriptural foundation.”⁹ Nico Bakker who is critical of Witsius claims that the covenant of grace is Witsius’ covenant of works repackaged to simply present Christ as Surety instead of us. He accuses covenant theology of relegating the covenant of grace to the shadow of the covenant of nature.¹⁰ Still others see it as a departure from the Three Forms of Unity.

O. Palmer Robertson, noting the absence of much of covenant theology from the classic creeds of the Reformers is specifically hesitant about the covenant of redemption, or the covenant referred to earlier as the covenant Witsius described between the Father and Son which underlies the covenant of grace. Robertson calls this covenant an artificial construct as well. He hesitates to use terminology “covenant of works” and “covenant of grace” for fear it gives the impression that grace was not in play in Paradise or that works play no part in present-day salvation.¹¹

John Murray does not use covenant language to define the pre-Fall relations in Paradise, but his references to the Adamic administration seem to be an equivalent, including the same elements.¹²

Many will continue to wrestle with the terminology used to express the plain Biblical concepts contained in the catechism of misery, salvation and gratitude. In his commentary on Question eighteen of the Heidelberg Catechism, Ursinus states that there is only one covenant which is “two-fold in circumstances,” referring to the Old and New Testaments.¹³ However, in his Major Catechism he does use *foedus naturale* but not *foedus operum*.¹⁴ Berkhof cites Bullinger and Olevianus as the first to present federal theology as a “constitutive principle of the entire system.”¹⁵ Dirk Visser argues that God’s rest on the seventh day of creation and the appearance of the fourth commandment in the law of Moses lays the foundation for understanding that the law of nature was a moral law, preferred to be known by some as the covenant of works.¹⁶ Ursinus does refer in other writings to a natural covenant which required perfect obedience, the reward

⁹ Quoted in J. Mark Beach, “The Doctrine of the Pactum Salutis in the Covenant Theology of Herman Witsius,” *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 13 (2002): pp. 106-107.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 108-109.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 114-115.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 113.

¹³ Zacharias Ursinus, *The Commentary of Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. G. W. Williard (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, rpt. 1852), p. 98.

¹⁴ Derk Visser, “The Covenant in Zacharias Ursinus,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal* XVIII, no. 4 (Winter 1987): p. 533.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 534, footnote.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 536.

for which was eternal life and the punishment being eternal in nature.¹⁷ This would indicate that the seventeenth-century Puritans were not as disconnected from the sixteenth as some would suggest.

While the covenant of works was not mentioned in the 1530-1560 time period, by 1600 it was well developed.¹⁸ While there was little mention of such a concept in Zwingli, Tyndale, Bullinger or Calvin who all focused on the single covenant of grace, as time went on theologians began to work backwards from Moses to Adam.¹⁹ Thomas Cartwright began to see how the covenant of works prepared for and explained and magnified the covenant of grace. William Perkins openly acknowledged two covenants that were different in “nature, substance and kind.” The one was summarized by “do this and live,” and the other was plainly all of grace.²⁰ It is helpful to know that Perkins was responding to a Roman Catholic idea of a covenant which mingled law and grace together. His goal was to develop a scheme which would separate the two and elevate the Gospel.²¹ By 1595 Polanus wrote of the covenant of life and death in Eden which was later repeated at Sinai.²²

Regardless of what terminology is used in describing the relationship between law and Gospel, the content of the Heidelberg Catechism cannot be classified as lacking because there is no Lord’s Day devoted to covenants. The truth of covenant theology is plainly presented. Indeed, the teachings of Edwards and Witsius are most useful for making plain the truths of Holy Scripture and magnifying the perfect obedience and sacrifice of Jesus as well as guarding the church from error amid many notions of how the testaments fit together or what the role of the law should be in the present or how corrupt man truly is by nature.

What the covenants are to Puritanism, providing a unifying framework for understanding Scripture and teaching the essence of the faith, participation in the life of Christ is to Nevin and Mercersburg. The two are not mutually exclusive. Edwards spoke of the pollution transmitted from Adam in terms that indicate it is more than a legal imputation. That fits with Nevin’s organic philosophy. Where Edwards said that from the beginning God counted all of humanity as represented in Adam, Nevin would express the relationship in terms of a shared general life of humanity. Witsius’ explanation of Adam as the root and humanity the plant that grew from it likewise fits with Nevin’s organic model. Edwards also presented humanity as sharing an organic relationship with Adam, for if the root is corrupted, he said, so the entire plant will be.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 539.

¹⁸ Michael McGiffert, “From Moses to Adam: The Making of the Covenant of Works,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal* XIX, no. 2 (Summer 1988): p. 132.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 133, 142.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 143-145.

²¹ Ibid., p. 146.

²² Ibid., p. 151.

Reiterating themes already introduced, the Puritan approach is thoroughly Biblical, and as such, it is difficult to see how it could be improved upon. But in Nevin's day heirs of the Puritans had broken covenant theology into mechanical parts in their process of pursuing a subjective style of faith. Nevin would then seek a corrective by presenting a summation of Christianity as participation in the objective life of Christ, brought forward by the incarnation and continuing in the life of the church and its sacraments. He would elevate that objective nature of church and sacraments higher than the Puritan movement did. One danger that could result from his model is that if one pursues participation in the life of Christ without the same strict and careful attention to Scripture which the Puritans employed, then subjectivity once again may well rise to a corrupting level as personal ideas of who or what Christ is begin to create a self-styled Christianity as has occurred in some mystic writings. Again, perhaps the perfection of both systems is the union of both.

Next attention will be directed to examine more directly Nevin's ideas on the objective presence of Christ in the church and its sacraments.

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