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An Overview of Reformed Covenant Theology

A Presbyterian Perspective

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BRACKETED NUMBERS [BOLD TYPE] DENOTE CORRESPONDING INDIVIDUAL SLIDE NUMBER

I. GENERAL INTRODUCTION [2-3]

A. What is Reformed Covenant Theology? [4]

B. Why Study Covenant Theology?

1. Covenant Theology is rooted in Sola Scriptura
2. Covenant Theology unifies the foundational theme of Scripture:

“You Shall Be My People and I Will Be Your God” (Jeremiah 30:22; Genesis 17:7)

The “Big Picture” of God’s Eternal Decree

3. Covenant Theology structures the Covenants of Works and Grace and translates them from their origins in eternity (and emanating from the Covenant of Redemption) to their expressions in history. The Covenant of Grace is composed of the “Old Covenant” (which is comprised of several, progressively built upon and administered “sub-covenants”) and the Better/Greater “New Covenant” (all-encompassing fulfillment of the Old Covenant in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ) [5]
4. Covenant Theology engenders optimism and hope amongst the Israel of God (**Isaiah 55:8-11 [6]**; **Hebrews 10: 12-18 [7]**; Jeremiah 29:11; Titus 1:1-3; 1 Peter 1:3-5)
5. Covenant Theology is foundational to the dominion (creation) mandate of Genesis 2 by which God, through His people in the preaching of the Gospel and by the power of the Holy Spirit, extends his Kingdom civilization through all the earth

6. Covenant Theology motivates the people of God to be a “workman approved” (2 Timothy 2:15) [8]
7. Covenant Theology enables the Christian to properly (biblically) understand and use the sacraments (Baptism and the Lord’s Supper)
8. Covenant Theology provides a framework for biblical systematic theology
9. Covenant Theology is necessary for a biblical understanding of personal and general eschatology
10. Covenant Theology contradicts all forms of racism (secular and soteriological)
11. Covenant Theology is the basis for consistent world evangelism
12. Covenant Theology distinguishes biblical, orthodox Christianity from all other religions (which, being humanly (autonomously) derived, are man centered). God, by covenant, benevolently condescends and is seeking and saving those lost sinners chosen by Him in eternity. In man centered religion, lost sinners are in quest of and trying to “get right” with God
13. Covenant Theology is absolutely necessary for a proper understanding of the God’s comprehensive Plan of Redemption (Christian worldview)
14. Biblical Covenant Theology is uniquely Reformed

C. What Are the Tools of Our Study?

1. First, a defining of terms
 - a. Orthodoxy (Correct “Straight” Doctrine)
 - b. Heterodoxy (“Crooked” Doctrine)
 - c. Heresy (Damnable Doctrine)
 - d. Orthopraxy (Correct “Straight” Practice or Conduct)
 - e. Primary (Foundational) Christian Doctrine (Those beliefs absolutely necessary for salvation and admission into the visible church)
 - f. Secondary Christian Doctrine (Those beliefs [while not required for salvation or admission to the visible church] necessary for Godly sanctification in all areas of life and for protection against apostasy)
 - g. Tertiary Christian Doctrine (Those beliefs, sincerely held by orthodox Christians, that are matters of conscious [is a thing a sin versus not a sin] that are derived from differing understandings (exegetically derived) of the implied meaning of a text(s))
 - h. Adiaphora (Objects of Indifference; Objects of circumstance)
 - i. Pre/Post lapsarianism: Pre – Before the fall of Adam; Post – After the fall of Adam
 - j. Declarative Scripture Texts (Describes what is and/or what happened)
 - k. Prescriptive (Normative) Scripture Texts (What should be, not necessarily what is. Describes the normative ethical standard)
 - l. Type (biblical typology: a divinely authored state of affairs [e.g., a person, place or institution] that images a heavenly reality and foreshadows its consummate

realization through the work of an obedient federal head (i.e., the tree of life and Adam, or the paschal lamb and Christ)

- m. Anti-Type (biblical typology: The heavenly (vertical) and consummate (horizontal) reality toward which earthly types point within the unfolding of covenant history. For instance, the earthly tabernacle in the Mosaic covenant was a “copy and shadow” of the heavenly reality (cf. Hebrews 8:5; 9:23–24)
- n. Natural Law [NL] is biblically defined as the moral Law of God (as summarized in the Ten Commandments) written by the Creator on the heart of Adam and evident through the light of nature from Creation (Pre lapsarian). NL and the Ten Commandments are essentially identical. Since the fall of Adam in the Garden, NL is held unrighteously in the hearts and minds of men [Romans 1:18-32]. As such, idolatry follows.

Post lapsarian NL is used by God to declare men guilty of and without excuse for their unbelief. Furthermore, NL is not the Gospel and is unable to save (WLC A. 60) and is, in its post fall expression, an unreliable guide as to how God may be glorified in any area life.

Positively, NL is a means by which the Holy Spirit suppresses sin in the world by way of the human conscious (albeit a conscious that is deeply corrupted).

Remarkably, it is this same tarnished conscious that at times suppresses sin that will also allow men (most especially the unregenerate) to defy or over-ride their conscious or to use it to justify sin! – Romans 2:14-18)

- 2. The Bible / Holy Scripture: The Word of God (**Westminster Confession of Faith [WCF] Chapter 1.2 [9]**)
 - a. Both the Old and New Testaments of Scripture are of ongoing benefit to the people of God: (**2 Timothy 3:14-17 [10]**; **2 Peter 1:19-21 [11]**; **2 Peter 3:14-16 [12]**; **WCF Chapter 1.8 [13]**)
 - b. Biblical hermeneutics:
 - i. Grammatical - historical method of interpretation [**14-18**]
 - ii. Clarity (“Perspicuity”) of Scripture (**WCF Chapter 1.6 [19] - 1.7 [20]**)
 - iii. Analogy of Faith – (*Sacra Scriptura sui interpres*) – Scripture is to interpret Scripture (**WCF Chapter 1:9 [21]**)
 - iv. Infallibility versus Inerrancy
 - v. Other important components of Biblical hermeneutics include consideration of genre (history, poetry, prophetic / eschatological), presence of metaphor / allegory, authorship and dating
- 3. The Westminster Standards (Confession of Faith, Larger and Shorter Catechisms) primarily and the “Three Forms of Unity” (Confessional Standards of the Continental Reformed), secondarily

4. Writings and sermons of Reformed theologians (past and present) including: Berkhof, Brakel, Henry, Edwards, C. and A.A. Hodge, Calvin, Shaw, Ursinus, Vos, Dabney, Warfield, Boettner, Reymond, O. P. Robertson, Villi, Bahnsen, Ball, Gentry, Mathison, **Morecraft**
 - a. The “noble” Bereans (**Acts 17:11 [22]; WCF Chapter 1.10 [23]**)
 - b. Synods and Councils (**WCF Chapter 31.3 [24]**)

D. The Nature and Construct of Divine Covenants (Works and Grace)

1. Definition: a bond in blood; a bond of life and death solemnly (Stevenson) and sovereignly (Robertson) administered
2. Definition (Villi): a binding agreement between God and man consisting of the terms in which their relationship is initiated, maintained, and/or broken. It includes divine promises and commands, as well as rewards/punishments for obedience/disobedience
3. Scripturally, the presence of a covenant is determined by the presence of covenantal components not necessarily the word (*berith / diatheke*) itself
4. “A bond”: that which binds people together
 - a. *Berith* (Hebrew)
 - b. *Diatheke* (Greek): a bond between a superior and inferior (God/Man)
 - c. *Suntheke* (Greek): a bond between equals (Godhead)
5. “In blood”:
 - a. **Genesis 15:7-11, 17 [25]. Jeremiah 34:18-20 [26]**
 - b. The “cutting” of a divine covenant is a commitment of life and death. At its making, there is the symbolic death of the covenant maker. When the animals were cut (Abrahamic Covenant), it was representative of the covenant-maker Himself being “cut” and put to death
 - c. **Hebrews 9:22 [27]**
 The descendants of Adam are party unto either a covenant of Grace (Kingdom of God) or a covenant of Works (Kingdom of Satan). The latter demands that all covenant-breakers (those with the imputed sin of Adam AND who, by necessary consequence, fail to keep the whole moral law – PERFECTLY) die spiritually and physically. Stated another way, all descendants of Adam break the Covenant of Works by their possession of a sin nature (original sin) and by their inevitable commission of actual sins. There can be no remission of these sins without the shedding of blood – hence the absolute necessity of Christ and His work (active / passive obedience) as the Great Mediator and High Priest in the Covenant of Grace.

- d. Covenants are sealed in blood. Losing one's blood means losing one's life.
Signifies a thing of extreme importance
- 6. Comparison of Last Will-Testament and a Covenant [28]
- 7. Summary of Divine Covenantal Components:
 - a. Parties to the covenant
 - b. Commands or terms of the covenant
 - c. Covenantal promises for obedience
 - d. Covenantal penalties for disobedience
 - e. Often sealed with an oath/sign
 - f. Universal / Promise / Fulfillment

II. INTRODUCTION TO THE COVENANTS (Preliminary Concepts)

A. Tabular Representation of the Covenants of God [29]

1. Covenant of Redemption (The triune God, from eternity and fulfilled in history, will save/redeem a people for Himself)
2. From the Covenant of Redemption flows the Covenants of Works and Grace

B. Graphical Representation of the People of God [30]

1. The Visible Body / Church is comprised of the elect (Invisible Body / Church: wheat) and non-elect (Reprobates: tares)
2. The Invisible Body / Church is comprised of the elect ONLY
3. The Elect are the sole beneficiaries of the Covenant of Grace. Reprobates (both those within and outside of the visible body) are irrevocably subject to eternal damnation as they fail to keep the Covenant of Works
4. Sidebar: The Parable of the Good Seeds (Wheat) and Weeds (Tares): Matthew 13:24-30; 36-43

C. Graphical Representations of Covenant Administrations [31]

1. The Covenant of Grace has two administrations: Old and New
2. The various "sub" covenants of the old administration represent a progressive unfolding and greater revealing of God's redemptive plan in history
3. As they are progressively / subsequently revealed by God, each (Adamic to Noahic, Noahic to Abrahamic, etc.) covenant does not, in any manner, replace or nullify the previous covenant(s).
4. The Old Covenant is comprehensively fulfilled in the New Covenant by Christ. While there are continuities and discontinuities between the Old and New covenantal administrations, continuities predominate

D. Graphical Representation of Covenant Membership [32]

1. Elect Gentiles grafted in
2. Reprobate Jews “broken off” (a remnant remained)
3. Reprobate Jews and Gentiles may be members of the visible church (body), BUT ...
4. Are not TRULY grafted in

III. **THE COVENANT OF REDEMPTION (God’s Eternal Decree of Salvation)**

A. **Definitions:**

1. That covenant made voluntarily amongst (suntheke) the members of the Trinity in eternity past. In it, the Son covenanted to purchase and secure the redemption of the elect by perfectly keeping the Covenant of Works on their behalf as their federal head (Villi)
2. An eternal covenant between the Father and the Son, according to which the Son became surety for his people, undertook to obey and suffer in their place and was promised everything that pertains to grace and salvation (MacLeod)
3. That covenant God made with Himself in eternity past whereby the members of the Trinity all agreed as to what they would do to save sinners from their sins (Morecraft)
4. **John 17:1-2 [33]; Psalm 89:2-4 [34]; Luke 22:29-30 [35]; John 12:49-50 [36];** Ephesians 1:4; 3:11; 2 Thessalonians 2:13; 2 Timothy 1:9; James 2:5; 1 Peter 1:1-2

- B. Trinitarian Nature of the Covenant:** As commonly noted by theologians, the Covenant of Redemption is made (in a technical and legal sense) between God the Father (presumptively as a representative of the Godhead) and God the Son. God the Holy Spirit, while not considered a direct party to the Covenant, plays an absolutely necessary and vital role in its execution/administration in history.

To Summarize:

1. God the Father is the Originator of the Covenant
2. God the Son is the Mediator of the Covenant
3. God the Holy Spirit is the Executor of the Covenant

- C. WCF: Chapter 3.3-3.8 [37-40]**

- D. The Work Assigned (by God the Father) to the Redeemer (God the Son) [41]**

- E. The Promises Made (by God the Father) to the Redeemer (God the Son) [42-43]**

- F. The Work of the Holy Spirit [44] (WCF Chapter 8.3 [45]; Matthew 3:13-17)**

G. **Infralapsarianism and Supralapsarianism (The Logical Order of God's Eternal Decree): Comparison [46-48]**

IV. **THE COVENANT OF WORKS (First Universal Covenant): "Adam, Obey Me and I Will Give You Eternal Life"**

A. **Synonyms**

1. Covenant of Creation
2. Covenant of Commencement
3. Covenant of Life
4. Edenic Covenant
5. Federal Covenant

B. **Wilhelmus a Brakel's (1635-1711) Dire Warning [49]**

C. **Definition:** That Covenant made by God with Adam in the Garden of Eden while he (Adam) was in a state of innocence (without sin and in a time of testing/probation. In it, God promised Adam and his posterity eternal life for perfect obedience and threatened death (physical and spiritual) for disobedience (**Genesis 2:15-17 [50]**). Because Adam was the federal head of the human race, all mankind descending from him by ordinary generation (Psalm 51:5), sin in him (by imputation) and inherit his sin nature and thereby break the Covenant of Works (**Romans 5:12,17 [51]**; **Hosea 6:6-7 [52]**; **Leviticus 11:44-45 [53]**; Matthew 5:48; 1 Peter 1:14-16)

D. **In the Westminster Standards:**

1. Confession of Faith: **4.2 [54]** / **7.1-7.2 [55]** / **19.1 [56]**
2. Larger Catechism (LC): **Q.20 [57]**

E. **Creation Ordinances:** God commanded to Adam before the Fall and while still in his state of innocence: Work (Genesis 2:15), Marriage (2:24), Reproduction (1:28), Dominion (1:28), and Sabbath observance (2:3; cf. Exodus 20:8, 11)

F. **Symbol / Sign: Tree of Life** (Genesis 2:9)

G. **Does the Covenant of Works Remain in Effect for the Natural Descendants of Adam? YES!!! - But with Two Modifications [58-59]**

H. **The Covenant of Works in History and its Relationship to Human Governments and the Law of God (First Given to Adam [and written on his heart] at Creation) [60] (WCF 19.2 [61]; LC. Q.92-97 [62-64]; WCF 6; [65])**

I. Three Fold Use of the revealed Law of God (Post Lapsarian)

1. A tutor by which the regenerated sinner, realizing the enormity and insurmountable nature of his sins, flees to Christ for mercy and forgiveness
2. An authoritative guide to sanctified living
3. An authoritative guide to the civil magistrate as he restrains sin and promotes justice in society

V. THE COVENANT OF GRACE - Old Dispensation: "Adam, Obey Me Because I Have Given You Eternal Life"

A. Definition - Covenant of Grace (Villi): The historical counterpart to the Covenant of Redemption. It is the covenant through which God promises man eternal life through faith in the Messiah. It was informally revealed by God in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:15) and more formally established by Him through entering into a covenantal relationship with Abraham and his seed (Genesis 17:1-14). It was made progressively clear through the Old Covenant era and came to full expression in the New Covenant era

Definition - Covenant of Grace (Morecraft): That bond of eternal friendship that God has established with His people in Christ, in which bond, God is their sovereign friend and they are His servant friends. And in this Covenant God enters into a fellowship of life with them and gives them a sovereignly dictated order of life (the moral law) to show them how to live as His people.

B. Westminster Confession of Faith: 7.3-7.5 [66-67]; LC. Q.30-34 [68-70]

C. Adamic Covenant (First Covenant of Promise)

1. Synonym(s): Covenant of Commencement; Covenant of Life
2. Sign / Symbol / Seal: Tree of Life
3. Genesis 3:14-18
4. Features [71-72]

D. Noahic Covenant (Second Universal Covenant)

1. Synonym(s): Covenant of Preservation
2. Sign / Symbol / Seal: Rainbow
3. Genesis 8:20-9:17
4. Features [73]

E. Abrahamic Covenant (Second Covenant of Promise)

1. Synonym(s): Covenant of Promise
2. Sign / Symbol / Seal: Circumcision
3. Genesis 12:1-3; 15:5-6; 17:1-14

4. Features [74-77]

F. Mosaic Covenant (Third Covenant of Promise)

1. Synonym(s): Sinaitic Covenant
2. Sign / Symbol / Seal: Sabbath / Passover (Paschal Lamb)
3. Exodus 19:3-8
4. Features [78-79]

G. Davidic Covenant (Fourth Covenant of Promise)

1. Synonym(s): None
2. Sign / Symbol / Seal: None
3. 2 Samuel 7:8-17; Psalm 89:3-5
4. Features [80]

VI. THE COVENANT OF GRACE - New Dispensation: "Obey Me Because I Have Given You Eternal Life"

- A. Definition - Covenant of Grace (Villi):** The historical counterpart to the Covenant of Redemption. It is the covenant by which God promises man eternal life through faith in the Messiah. It was informally and subtly revealed by God in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:15) and more formally established by Him through entering into a covenantal relationship with Abraham and his seed (Genesis 17:1-14). It was made progressively clear (gradually unfolded) through the Old Covenant era and came to full expression in the New Covenant era (**WCF 7.6 [81]; LC. Q.35-36 [82]**)

Definition - Covenant of Grace (Morecraft): That bond of eternal friendship that God has established with His people in Christ, in which bond, God is their sovereign friend and they are His servant friends. And in this Covenant God enters into a fellowship of life with them and gives them a sovereignly dictated order of life (the moral law) to show them how to live as His people.

B. The New Covenant (Covenant of Fulfillment)

1. Synonyms: Covenant of Fulfillment
2. Sign / Symbols / Seal: Water baptism and Lord's Supper
3. Jeremiah 31:31-34 [83]; Acts 2:38-39 [84]; Luke 22:20 [85]
4. Features [86-87]

C. Old Covenant – New Covenant Continuities and Discontinuities: How is the Covenant of Promise the same and how is it different?

1. Matthew 5:17-19 [88]; 2 Cor. 3:1-18
2. Continuities [89]

3. Discontinuities [90-92]
4. The “Israel of God” [93]

D. The Great Commission

1. Matthew 28:16-20 [94]
2. Features [95]

E. The “Millennium”: How Great Will the Great Commission Be?

1. Historic Premillennialism (Pessimistic)
2. Dispensational Premillennialism (Pessimistic)
3. Militant Amillennialism (Pessimistic)
4. Optimistic Amillennialism (Truncated Optimism, Post Mill “Light”)
5. Classical (Historicist) Post Millennialism (Optimistic)
6. Partial Preterist Post Millennialism (Optimistic)
7. Humanistic “Post Millennialism” (Satanic)

F. Suggestions for Eschatological Optimism [96-97]

1. Promise, Authority, the Gates of Hell and Plunder
2. Supporting Texts

VII. ABBERANT COVENANTAL VIEWS

- A. Classical Dispensationalism: Severely Heterodox (Handout)
- B. New Covenant Theology [98] (NCT): Severely Heterodox
- C. The Federal Vision (FV) [99] (Auburn Avenue Theology / Shepherdism* / Piperism*): Neo-Catholicism: Heretical (Handout)
- D. Mosaic (Klinean) Republication [100-104] (the Mosaic Covenant represents, “in some sense”, a “republication” of the Covenant of Works): Heterodox
- E. Contemporary / Neo (“Radical”) Two Kingdoms Theology [105-116] (R2KT or R2K): Severely Heterodox

* Not identical to FV theology but close facsimiles

VIII. SUMMARY: THE “BIG PICTURE” (Last Page Supplemental Handout)

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