

The Unwanted Truth: Why Evangelicals are Rejecting Covenant theology.

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At the moment, the evangelical winds are all blowing in the direction of Biblical Theology not Systematic theology. Most of the men coming out of the evangelical colleges are interested in preaching redemptive historical sermons that focus on Christ (which is great) however, many are either ignorant of or ambivalent towards reformed orthodoxy, especially when it comes to Covenant theology.

Indeed, the evangelical climate is such that men trained at good evangelical colleges like PTC, Moore and SMBC often argue that Covenant theology is not biblical, by that they mean - where in Scripture do you find a reference to a covenant of Redemption, of Works or of Grace. Having digested Goldsworthy's 'According to Plan' (a fine book) they are all too familiar with the Abrahamic covenant of promise or the Mosaic covenant of law or the Davidic covenant of kingship, but they don't see the covenants that Covenant theology speaks of. Covenant theology is often viewed as a hermeneutic foisted upon the text of Scripture and those who advocate it as insensitive to salvation history and prisoners to a scholastic theology of yesteryear.

In part this is the result of the renaissance of Biblical Theology in Australia. Although it has been helpful to re-introduce the biblical covenants into evangelical thinking, for various reasons it has in some quarters led to an ambivalence towards Systematic theology and as a consequence, a neglect of the theological covenants of Covenant theology. Now don't get me wrong, biblical theology is very helpful, it's also very Reformed (its founder was G.Vos) but it must bend its knee to Systematic theology if it is to produce the harvest it ought.

The False Dichotomy Between Biblical and Theological Truths

Influenced by pulpit ministry, many people complain that Covenant theology is a theological construction but not a biblical one. And at the popular level, it sounds godlier to say 'give me the Bible, give me the text' as opposed to 'give me theology'. It sounds godlier to say 'show me the verse that proves there was a covenant with Adam or with Christ before the foundation of the world' then I will believe it's true, but proof texting (and that is what it is) is really silly and dangerous, as if biblical truth as opposed to theological truth was the only truth to be derived from Scripture.

Let me illustrate the problem with this approach, if I ask you to show me the text that speaks of and proves the Trinity, you couldn't do it, and the JW

knows it. But does that mean that the Trinity is not a biblical truth, well in one sense it's not biblical, but it is a theological truth, inferred and deduced from Scripture. Hence, we read of God saying "Let us make man in our image..." Gen 1:26; and concerning the tree of knowledge "the man has become like us.."Gen 3:22 and other similar references (Gen 11:7; Isa 6:8) and none teach a trinity, but none the less we ask, who are the "us" in these passages and we infer that there must be more than one person in these texts, though we haven't as yet deduced the theological truth of the Trinity. But as we add these inferences together, the "us" passages, the 'Angel of the Lord' passages (Gen 16:13, Ex 3:2ff; 23:20ff, Num 22:35 etc), as well as the references to the 'Holy Spirit' (Isa 46:16, 63:10 etc) and many others (Ps 110:1; Hos 1:7; Mal 3:1 etc) we begin to understand that truth. Moreover, with the greater clarity of N.T revelation of Godhead, Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Matt 28:19; John 1:1-2; Eph 4:4-6, Jud 20-21etc) we then confirm previous inferences and ultimately deduce the theological truth of the Trinity

This can be seen again with the theological truth concerning the person of Christ, in particular our doctrine of the incarnation (the hypostatic union -the truth of two natures existing in one person). Again the Doctrines of the Incarnation is not a biblical but a theological truth, it is doctrine derived from inference and deduction. So we can now see that theological truth is just as important as so called biblical truth, it is both necessary and godly to infer and deduce from the biblical testimony.

Biblical Theology Needs Systematic Theology

So getting back to Covenant theology, the argument often used against it, is that it promotes theological covenants not biblical ones. While at first that seems a convincing reason to reject Covenant theology, we can now see the simplicity and inadequacy of that approach, frankly, it asks too much. If we were to reject Covenant theology on that basis, we must also reject our doctrine of God, and I'm not sure that too many people would be happy with that (JW's apart). Now, let's demonstrate how this might actually work.

We Can Deduce That There was a Plan Made to Save People in Eternity Past.

Covenant theology through inference and deduction teaches that there is an Eternal covenant, a covenant made between the members of the Trinity where the parties agreed to save the elect. For example, we infer from Eph 1:4 that this covenant or plan of redemption included God (Father) choosing of a people to be saved (elect). It seems a reasonable inference based on Eph 1:4 "For he chose us in him before the creation of the world...to be redeemed by his blood." We can also deduce that this covenant included not only the choosing of a people for redemption, but also through whom their redemption would be accomplished. In Eph 3:11 we read redemption is "... according to his eternal

purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.” In addition to this, we note that the Holy Spirit also had work to do as the one through whom this redemption would be applied. In 2 Thess 2:13 we read that “..from the beginning God chose you to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit..”

Our deductions seem to be confirmed by way of inference in Heb 13:20 where the writer says “may the God of peace... equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ...” But how does he expect that God will do this? “Through the blood of the Eternal covenant...”

Next we ask what then is the relationship between Jesus' blood and this Eternal covenant?

Well let's look at what Jesus says about why he came, to see if that helps us. In John's Gospel 4:24 when the disciples asked Jesus if anyone remembered to bring a picnic Jesus responds... “My food,” said Jesus, “is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work..” So Jesus is a man who has work to do, the work of the one who sent him.

So when Jesus is arguing with Pharisees concerning his divine mission he says in John 5:36 “For the very work that the Father has given me to finish, and which I am doing, testifies that the Father has sent me.” Apparently, Jesus wasn't on a holiday, he was here fulfilling the work of the Eternal covenant that the Father has commanded him to do. So Jesus says in John 14:31 “The world must learn that I love the Father and that I do exactly what my Father has commanded me.” And although Jesus doesn't say my work is that of fulfilling the Eternal covenant, he does say his goal on earth was obedience to the Father through the completion of His redemptive work. That's why we read in Jn 17:4 he prayed “ I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do.”

Jesus Had a Purpose

So far we have deduced that there was an Eternal covenant in Jesus' blood and that Jesus was given work to do on earth that led him to obey the Father and go to the cross. Therefore we can infer that the Eternal covenant had an express purpose, that is, the redemption, or salvation of God's chosen people (the Elect). Concerning the purpose of Jesus' work we read in John 17:2 “For you granted him authority over all people (WHY?) that he might give eternal life to all those you have given him.”

God's eternal purpose through his Son was that they may have life eternal vicariously through his life and work. That's why Paul says the Church must declare God's eternal purpose of redemption to the whole world. In Eph 3:10-11 we read “His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of

God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord." Moreover, the reason the Son is to receive glory is that the eternal purpose of God to redeem a people to Himself was accomplished through Jesus. Not might be accomplished, not hopefully accomplished. But actually accomplished though the work of Jesus.

Jesus Had a Reward.

One other important aspect to the Eternal covenant is that Jesus was promised a reward for his covenant obedience. In Luke 22:29-30 when the disciples were arguing over who might be greatest in the Kingdom to come, Jesus said this to them "And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel."

You see Jesus' reward was that all those he represented (ie. lived and died for) would be welcome in the Kingdom to come. That's why Jesus can say, "I confer a Kingdom on you... just as my Father conferred one on me..." It literally says.. "just as my Father covenanted to me.." Consequently, "the Messiah is predestined to become the 'heir of all things" (Heb 1:2), as the Last Adam who defeated sin and death (1 Cor 15:21-28), and as the true Seed of Abraham (cf. Rom 4:13; Gal. 3:16), and as the Son of David who inherits the throne of the kingdom (Is. 49:8; Dan 7:13-14; Heb 1:2-14).

So we have established that there was an Eternal covenant by good and necessary deductions. We could of course chase down further lines of inquiry to deduce an Eternal covenant, like Charles Hodge who argued where we have the elements of a covenant we have a covenant (parties, conditions and blessings) and arrive at the conclusion of an eternal covenant. However, we feel this simple demonstration is sufficient to establish the veracity of an Eternal covenant. Yes it's a theological covenant, a theological truth, but as we have seen, one based on biblical inferences and deductions.

Furthermore, it is not only a deduction, but a necessary one if we are to explain the choosing of the elect to be saved. Or the Messiah's statement that he was sent to do his father's will and work, or the Spirit's role of bringing glory to Jesus, or to explain the promise of a reward of a kingdom for Christ when all things are brought to fulfillment. Now if we have established (albeit briefly) the Eternal covenant, then it only follows that what was planned in the Covenant of Redemption (Eternal covenant) outside of history comes to pass in history through the Covenant of Works and Grace. But they are theological truths for another day.