A COMPARISON OF BAPTIST AND REFORMED VIEWS OF THE COVENANTS

Review of Pascal Denault, *The Distinctiveness of Baptist Covenant Theology: A Comparison Between Seventeenth-Century Particular Baptist and Paedobaptist Federalism* (Birmingham, Alabama: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2013). Translated from the French by Mac and Elizabeth Wigfield.

These days the nature of covenant theology seems to be up for grabs. The situation has long been developing. Neo-Calvinism introduced tricovenantalism to replace the Reformed bicovenantal consensus. With the Dutch invasion of Presbyterianism this new system took hold at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia, perhaps as long as eighty or ninety years ago. At the same seminary a movement toward monocovenantalism began with John Murray. While the alterations to covenant theology were radical enough, they were not advertised as such. It was not until the 1990s that radical developments in monocovenantalism became a public controversy when they gave rise to the Federal Vision movement. One stream of tricovenantalism, based on the theology of Meredith Kline, also emerged as the Radical Two-Kingdom theology.

Pascal Denault's study of primarily seventeenth century debates in covenant theology might seem by comparison to be a quiet retreat from such controversies to a debate of interest only to students of the history of theology. On the contrary, it is relevant to the debates going on today, and provides an entry point into seeing these issues in a way that is helpful to evaluate today's controversies. More than that, it should help to illuminate other important matters that are coming into the foreground. Denault primarily had in mind the English context, whereas I will usually use the term Reformed/Presbyterian as I think the theology is incomprehensible without considering its original continental context, and taking into account its evolution from there. Sometimes, however, these must be distinguished.

Denault's Project

Denault set out to explain the difference between Baptist covenant theology on the one hand and that of Presbyterians and Congregationalists on the other. In doing so, he hopes to get at the root difference between the two theological movements. It is sometimes said that these agree on covenant theology, and only differ on secondary points, this similarity being made clear by how close the language of the Westminster and London confessions are to each other. Not so. These are two different types of

covenant theology in that the identification of the basic covenants is different, though concealed by the use of the same names.

Of course in many important matters these theologies are the same. Not only do they share the ecumenical creeds, but on such major doctrines as justification they hold the same positions. Even their ideas of church offices have more in common than with those groups that rely on bishops and hierarchy.

Denault's thesis is as follows:

> The most obvious distinction between Baptists and Presbyterians is, of course, baptism. However, baptism is not the fundamental distinctive between these two groups. We propose that covenant theology is that distinctive between Baptists and paedobaptists and that all divergences that exist between them, both theological and practical, including baptism, stem from their different way of understanding biblical covenants. Baptism is, therefore, not the point of origin but the outcome of the differences between paedobaptists and credobaptists.[1]

Compare, however, this passage from his Conclusion.

> At the end of this work, we are faced with a marked impression, to be specific, that Presbyterian federalism was an artificial construction developed to justify an end: paedobaptism. We do not think that this laborious theology was the result of a rigorous and disinterested application of hermeneutical principles. We rather believe that it was the consequence of an age-old practice, which became the ultimate instrument of social conformity in Christendom and which was inherited by the Reformed Church, namely, paedobaptism. Paedobaptism was the arrival point of Presbyterian federalism because it was the starting point.[2]

While Denault's opening statement describes the nature of the difference between the two theologies from a systematic point of view, in his conclusion he turns to motivation. But baptism was not the starting point of Reformed theology. Paedobaptism was one of the things that formed part of a broad view of the place of Christianity in the world, and it was this system of lived religion that was explained in the system of Reformed covenant theology. Denault misses the importance of this, and therefore misses the motivation for developing the system. This is what I had in mind in saying that the issues in this book illuminate other important matters that are coming into the foreground of debate. By the end of this review I hope to make clear how this is the case.

[1] Pascal Denault, *The Distinctiveness of Baptist Covenant Theology: A Comparison Between Seventeenth-Century Particular Baptist and Paedobaptist Federalism,* (Birmingham, Alabama: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2013) p. 5.

[2] Denault, p. 155.

There are hints along the way that Denault is going to miss this point, and I will try to touch on them as they come up. To begin with, Denault observes, "It was not baptism in itself that which was the point of dissent; but baptism as approached through the doctrine of the Church (which has no frame other than covenant theology). Before asking the question, 'Who can be baptized?' there was a more fundamental question, namely; 'Who is in the covenant?'"[3]

But this question is inseparable from the question of "What is it to be in the covenant?" The Reformed/Presbyterian side has been notorious in its inability to deal with this question in a convincing way. Denominations have split over it. They now range from groups such as the Liberated Churches of the Netherlands with the objective covenant, to perhaps the Vanguard Presbyterian Church near the other extreme, which split from the Presbyterian Church in America to found a denomination explicitly on the revivalist and conversionist theology that has long been a stream within Southern Presbyterianism. It is not that the Reformed/Presbyterians have not offered solutions, but that the solutions vary in nature and extent and fail to be sufficiently convincing to produce agreement. Denault does not go into the long troubled history; perhaps it was simply out of scope for his book project.

Also lost from sight, but highly pertinent to his discussion, is the fact that Baptists cannot deal with the question either. While from time to time Presbyterians point this out to them, the Baptists are loath to mention it, as it undercuts their fundamental conceit that their superiority is in having solved this very problem. Later I will argue that Denault is wrong in seeing the question of "Who is in the covenant" as the point of division between Baptists and the Reformed/Presbyterians. Forced to face facts, Baptists have to give the same answer as do the Presbyterians. The real difference is what the two groups say about what the covenant does for the various groups (once their existence is admitted) that are in it, and according to the way they are in it.

So far this says nothing about which covenant theology is correct. Nor will I attempt to answer that question. I will confine myself to pointing out what I think the real issue is and it's wider implications.

Denault begins by listing the sources he will rely on to extract the positions put forward by each side. He first gives that of the paedobaptists beginning with William Ames. This is interesting for reasons that Denault

[3] Denault, p. 6.

does not mention. Ames was a voluntarist, and it was he who introduced voluntarist theology to the Netherlands.[4] Also, Ames was the premier theologian of the New England Congregationalists, contributing to the voluntarist and conversionist cast of their theology. I will return to this later but, for now, I will raise the point that voluntarism was in the air among English Puritans. Did this have an impact on Baptist thinking? Was it a factor in the direction that their theology took?

I will not pay attention to the rest of the list, except for one item, as I do not intend to dispute Denault's interpretation of their views. The one other source I will mention is John Owen, because he is such an interesting case. Denault sees Owen's covenant theology as being basically of the same type as that of the Baptists, even though Owen was not a Baptist, but at first a Presbyterian, and then a Congregationalist.

Also, in discussing Owen, Denault brings up another significant point.

> During Owen's era, there was an antinomian tendency—represented particularly by the Socinians—who considered the Old Covenant as being the Covenant of Works. Opposing this tendency was that of the Presbyterians who considered the Old Covenant as being a covenant of grace. Owen thought of the Old Covenant as being neither the Covenant of Works nor the Covenant of Grace…. From what we can tell, this mediating position was also endorsed by the Baptists….[5]

Denault will be at some pains to distinguish the Baptist and Socinian views of the covenants, and dissociate these theologies, but when in our conclusion we consider the wider implications of the Baptist covenant theology, this issue will have to be re-examined.

Denault sees the origin of Reformed covenant theology in Zwingli's controversy with certain Anabaptists who wanted to base theology only on the New Testament. To defend the unity of the testaments, Zwingli

[4] Voluntarism in Puritan theology was a doctrine about the nature of man which gave the will the lead role among the faculties. Prior to Ames, Reformed theology gave the lead role to reason. Practically speaking this meant that faith, believing, gave the direction that the whole person followed. For voluntarism, the decision became primary, hence the whole revivalist tradition that evolved from it in the long run. This sort of voluntarism must be distinguished from the principal controversy in medieval voluntarism, which was a doctrine about the nature of God, rather than about the nature of man. When it came to human nature, the medievals agreed about human choice, but their views were complicated by a fundamental dualism. To them the intellect belonged to the soul, not the body, and they were inclined to ascribed to faculties of the soul much that today is ascribed to the body.

[5] Denault, p. 19.

defended the unity of the covenants. There was one Covenant of Grace, but with a development of its administration.

> The Reformed Church, therefore, saw the Old Covenant as a covenant of grace. This conception has a significant and definitive impact on reformed ecclesiology because, by considering that the Church was under the same covenant as Abraham's descendants, the Old Testament Scriptures became normative in defining the doctrine of the Church and its link to the Covenant of Grace.[6]

The Covenants

From here Denault goes into a discussion of the covenants, beginning with a chapter on the Covenant of Works, that is, of the covenant that God made with Adam prior to the Fall. He notes that the Baptist Confession of 1689 removes almost all the language about this covenant that is found in the Westminster and Savoy confessions. "There is no doubt that the Baptist Confession of faith endorses the doctrine of the Covenant of Works, but it is presented differently."[7] To Presbyterians the Old Covenant (of the Old Testament) was an administration of the Covenant of Grace, so it was not put in fundamental contrast to the New Covenant, but was contrasted to the Covenant of Works.[8] "The Baptists, however, refused to deny the continuity between the Covenant of Works and Old Covenant." "Contrarily to the Presbyterians, the Baptists understood the New Testament, the law/grace contrast as a contrast between the Old and New Covenants."[9]

The Covenant of Grace

In his next chapter, on the Covenant of Grace, he tells us that the "Covenant of Grace was the basis of federalism" and that "this same basis became the breaking point between Presbyterian and Baptist theology."[10]

[6] Denault, p. 24.

[7] Denault, p. 29.

[8] In a dissertation on the theology of Klass Schilder, Sybrand Strauss says that "within Reformed theology for a long time it was customary to speak of the covenant of works as the 'old covenant' and the covenant of grace as the 'new covenant'. Thus consistency of usage cannot be counted on." Sybrand Albertus Strauss, *"Everything or Nothing": The Covenant Theology of Klaas Schilder*, dissertation, University of Pretoria, p. 92. https://www.christianstudylibrary.org/files/pub/articles/Strauss-S_Everything-or-Nothing_Klaas-Schilder%27s-View-of-the-Covenant.pdf

[9] Denault, p. 32.

[10] Denault, p. 35. The idea that the Covenant of Grace is the basis of federalism is not as uncontroversial as Denault seems to suppose. For the argument that the

Not only was this covenant the basis of federalism, but Denault says that in "the seventeenth century, federal theology was the frame within which all doctrines were understood and the doctrine of salvation by grace did not escape this frame." "The Covenant of Grace, in reformed perspective, is the covenant that regroups all of the saved of all time from the creation of the world until the last judgment."[11] The contrast which Denault offers to this reformed perspective is that of the Socinians, who "defended a strict discontinuity between the two testaments."[12] He explains:

> In response to the Socinian dichotomy, the reformed put a predominant emphasis on the unity and continuity of the Covenant of Grace from the proto-gospel to its full accomplishment in the death and resurrection of Christ. This is how the main biblical covenants were unified and how the notion of discontinuity in the divine plan was discarded.[13]

What was in common in these covenants was grace, and the differences were "external and administrative factors."[14]

Notice the multiplication in Denault's explanations for why the Reformed made the Covenant of Grace the unifying Covenant for both Old and New Testaments. It was because Zwingli had to confront the Anabaptists, it was because of the inertia of preserving the initial infant baptist position, it was inherited from Luther (pp. 35, 36), it was to oppose Socinianism, which he expands to Socinians, Anabaptists and Arminians. "The first were antitrinitarian heretics, the second were reminiscent of Münster's fanaticism and the third were the adversaries of the theology of grace. These three groups also had in common the rejection of the inter-testamentary unity of the Covenant of Grace."[15] Denault argues that this led to unjust suspicion and treatment of the Baptists. I will argue below that Denault leaves out another important similarity of these groups which gave them a more sinister aspect in the eyes of the Reformed than Denault wishes to consider.

Covenant of Works is the basis and that the Covenant of Grace is the means of satisfying the Covenant of Works and therefore not logically distinct, see, Klass Schilder, *Heaven, What Is It?* Translated and condensed by Marian M. Schooland (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1950), pp. 90, 91.

[11] Denault, p. 35.

[12] Denault, p. 35. He called the Socinians the "hyper-dispensationalists of their time", evidently not realizing that the distinctive of hyper-dispensationalism is the denial that the New Testament outside of some or all Pauline epistles applies to the church.

[13] Denault, p. 37.

[14] Denault, p. 38.

[15] Denault, p. 37.

As the Presbyterians placed both Old and New Covenants under a single Covenant of Grace, some other language than 'covenant' had to be employed to describe their essential identity yet also the difference between them. For this unity they employed 'substance' which gave the same identity to every part of the Covenant of Grace, while distinguishing the 'circumstance' or the 'administration'. This also accomplished something that Denault calls "even more fundamental to paedobaptism", "the mixed nature of the people of God (made up of both regenerate and the non-regenerate)." Denault quotes Lyle Bierma on this point: "the non-elect in the visible Church … are included in the external administration of the covenant through the Word and sacraments but not in the internal administration of the substance of benefits of the covenant through the Holy Spirit."[16] This creates inevitable linguistic confusion. As the 'substance' of the covenant is synonymous with the 'essence', the meaning is to be really in the covenant, whereas the external administration only amounts to not really being in the covenant. Yet Denault speaks of this as "the paedobaptists could consider a place for the non-chosen within in the Covenant of Grace".[17]

Something begs to be said about this idea of covenant adminstration as an important part is the idea of sacraments, and this is a point of difference between and within various Reformed denominations, ranging between views close to as well as far from what Baptists say. We will not, however, go into it here.

Now when Presbyterians take to speaking this way without clarifying that they mean membership of the non-elect in the externality only and not really in the substance, they are accused (by other Presbyterians) of compromising the doctrine of justification. This came up repeatedly in the controversy over the Federal Vision, for example.[18] The Reformed/Presbyterians typically make clear, however, that they also mean to say that those under the external administration only of the covenant get something more than the application of these elements of external administration – a something more that is not of the essence but nevertheless covenantal. The problem is that when this something more is explained there is an end to unity, and often clarity as well. The Reformed/Presbyterians cannot agree on an account of the nature and extent of this something more.

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[16] Denault, p. 41, cited from Lyle Bierma, *The Covenant Theology of Caspar Olevianus* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2005) pp. 104-5.

[17] Denault, p. 41.

[18] I have in mind the use that the Federal Visionists made of the sources used to justify their views, while themselves confusing these things.

Denault himself does not hesitate to give his interpretation, referring to the distinction as being "between an external (natural) efficacy and an internal (spiritual) efficacy of the Covenant of Grace" that accounts for the mixed nature of the membership of the biblical covenants. The members of this external administration he says are the visible church and the Kingdom of Christ.[19] He cites the Westminster Confession, Chapter 25, II, which, however, applies this to all those who profess the true religion and their children, and goes on to call these "the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation."[20] What group these professors are is not so clear, an especially important consideration when we consider all the halfway covenant people, across the whole gamut of denominations who are baptized but not enrolled in the membership of any congregation. Certain ecclesiasticists appeal to this passage to say that one must be a formal church member, that is enrolled in a congregation, to be saved except in special cases such as residing in a country where no Christian congregations exist. Others say that only the profession of Christianity, which they equate to acknowledged faith, is required, in short, not the external administration of the covenant, understood as the ordinances, ministry of the word, and discipline. Furthermore, here in this passage is the definition of one of the two kingdoms of the Two-Kingdom theology. Denault takes this external covenant to mean that "all of those who profess, regenerated or not, including their posterity, form the Kingdom of Christ under the external administration of the Covenant of Grace."[21]

Proceeding to the theology, Denault equates the "one covenant under two administrations" idea to this duality of the covenant between substance/circumstance or internal/external or spiritual/natural.[22] He cites Ames as holding that the newness of the New Covenant applies to its external form, "its substance being new in nothing."[23]

We can question whether all of this language, whether used by Presbyterians or used by Baptists to describe Presbyterian view, properly expresses the distinction. That of spiritual/natural seems particularly suspect. But the larger point is whether this really is the distinction between

[19] This equation of the Kingdom with the church, in this case the visible church, is of momentous consequence to today's controversies, and is relevant to the reasons for which people choose a view of the covenants. For if Christ's Kingdom, and the Christian's responsibilites are society-wide, it matters if the external administration of the covenant impacts this area.

[20] Denault, p. 42.

[21] Denault, p. 42.

[22] Denault, p. 43.

[23] Denault, p. 43.

the Presbyterian and Baptist views. The duality of substance/circumstance is applied to the covenants, explaining their unity but with a difference in administration. But internal/external describes the different aspects of a particular covenant as it applies to its members. This is just as descriptive of Baptists as of Presbyterians, but the Baptist theology drives them to evade this fact. Thus Denault's list of dualisms includes those that clarify and explain the distinction between Baptists and Presbyterians and those that obfuscate and confuse it.

Reformed/Presbyterian Views of Covenant Membership

The situation is made worse by the lack of clarity typical of the Reformed/Presbyterians. I once was a member of a church where the pastor took to "explaining" the covenant in terms of monocovenantalism and New Perspectives on Paul. This was greeted with relief by many in the congregation who for the first time heard an explanation that to their minds "made sense of the covenant." Only by thus simplifying into heresy was clarity obtained. Other members were puzzled, not so much because they saw the error of the new explanation, but because they could not understand why there was a difference from what they had always heard previously.[24] A very useful book on the Presbyterian view is Lewis Bevens Schenck's *The Presbyterian Doctrine of Children in the Covenant.*[25] He points out the division between Presbyterians on this matter, as large sections of Presbyterian denominations have lost sight of the Reformed concept. This becomes evident in the reasons put forward for the baptism of children, and also in the way that these baptized children are subsequently regarded, often as little heathens who need to be evangelized and converted when they grow up.

Also consider the divisions that have occurred within the Reformed church in the Netherlands. Abraham Kuyper explained the basis for baptism as being presumed regeneration (though the idea goes back to Voetius and Witsius). He thought that the children of believers normally

[24] This occurred despite the church being a self-described "strict subcriptionist" congregation, requiring subscription to the full Westminster Confession. The pastor explained to me that while the Westminster Confession was "logical and true" it was not what the Bible taught, and therefore not what he would preach. That this might be a contradiction only reinforced its truth in his mind, as he had learned at Westminster Seminary the teaching of Cornelius Van Til that contradiction was the mark of divine truth.

[25] Lewis Bevens Schenck, *The Presbyterian Doctrine of Children in the Covenant: An Historical Study of the Significance of Infant Baptism in the Presbyterian Church* (Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1940, 2003).

were or became regenerate, perhaps even before birth, and the reality of this status should be presumed as the reason for baptism. Against this Klaas Schilder stood for the objective and bilateral covenant. Baptism was an objective act and should be performed on the basis of an objective reality. Thus the children of believers were actual members of the covenant.[26] His reasoning was that the covenant was forensic, and therefore not a matter of internal "inclination." Also, as noted above, Schilder saw the unity of the covenant in its grounding in the Covenant of Works. As this was the foundational covenant, other covenants had to function in a way that addressed this reality of covenant and Fall. Also important for Schilder was the idea of dating. That is, at particular historical points God added to the covenant, to which Schilder related its progressive fulfillment. (Note the contrast between this and the Baptist idea of progressive *promise*.) Schilder could not accommodate Kuyper's tricovenantalism (see below) within this scheme, which implied also the rejection of Kuyper's common grace theology. The result was a denominational split. As Schilder's reasoning is a line of thought seldom heard or contemplated it is worth quoting him as some length.

> "Covenant of Works" is the name given to the initial relationship between God and man. This relationship was a covenant simply because service of God is possible only in the form of a covenant. The term "Covenant of Works" was applied in retrospect, in contrast with "Covenant of Grace," and the very Covenant of Grace adds depth and meaning to the concept of Covenant of Works. It is evident, then, that the Covenant of Works must not be looked upon as merely temporary; it is rather the original, fundamental, and therefore irrevocable covenant.

[26] Strauss writes: "The doctrinal conflict that (together with other things) occasioned the church split of 1944 was focused chiefly on this point. This conflict involved the interpretation of the expression found in the first question of the liturgical formulary for infant baptism, namely, whether the believing parents confess that their children are "sanctified in Christ," and therefore ought to be baptized. In order to understand Schilder's position in this respect, it is necessary to provide a bit more background. In the Netherlands debate concerning the precise meaning of this phrase has continued literally for centuries."Schilder also attacked the internal/external distinction. Strauss explains "Regarding the idea of two covenant spheres, an external and an internal, he wrote at that time: 'Every attempt leading to this contrast result from a mistaken anthropology, namely, that a person's internal dimension is the most important. The fact that something is visible is no reason to call it non-spiritual. One can also be spiritually occupied while performing something physical. Spiritual means governed by the *pneuma tou theou*, that which conforms to God's Spirit in the visible and the invisible'" Notice the Schilder habitually links the question of the externality vs internality of the covenant with anthopological externality vs internality of the subjects, which seems a confusion.

> In the Covenant of Works God linked the promised blessedness with the work of obedience. Man was called to obedience; therein he would find his freedom and blessedness. Not that he could earn it; all of man's strength and ability was given of God, and man can never return to God the equivalent of all that God has given him. Man's obedience could never be the *reason* for his attaining blessedness; it is only the channel. For though the covenant, as we have noted, involves two parties, it is one-sided in that God originated it and has absolute control of it. He has related our works toward Him with His work toward us.…
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> God, however, carrying through His side of the covenant, provided One to fulfill the demand of obedience and to bear the punishment for the broken covenant. The way which God thus opened for Adam and his sons is fittingly called the Covenant of Grace; it is now only by grace that man can be restored to fellowship with God. But there is no *new* covenant. The second Adam took upon himself the Covenant of Works, and no man comes into God's fellowship except through the fulfilling of that original relationship, which we call the Covenant of Works, by the second Adam.[27]

Those who, like David Engelsma, blame Schilder for the Federal Vision's monocovenantal conditional theology, have not made the (considerable) effort needed to understand him.[28] Notice, however, the contrast to Meredith Kline's idea of the Covenant of Works, where he introduces the idea of merit. For Schilder "Man's obedience could never be the *reason* for his attaining blessedness; it is only the channel." Thus there is a certain parallel to how faith functions, in the place of works, in the New Covenant. Those who follow Kline's theology will see this as a basic flaw, which leads in the end to a confusion of faith and works. Such differences underline the difficulty in explaining the distinction between Reformed and baptist views.

Returning to the Presbyterians, the Vanguard Presbyterian Church has separated from the Presbyterian Church in America and published this declaration:

> This continuing reformed, presbyterian denomination will follow in the train of Eighteenth-century New Side Presbyterians like William and Gilbert Tennent, Samuel Blair, and Samuel Davies. These men, while hold-

[27] Klaas Schilder, Heaven, What Is It? trans. and condensed by Marian M. Schoolland, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1950) pp, 90, 91.

[28] David Englesma belongs to the Protestant Reformed Church, which has yet another permutation of covenant theology, denying the Covenant of Works, yet insisting on a strict unconditionality of the Covenant of Grace. According to the Protestant Reformed theologian Herman Hoeksema, Christ earned merit by coming to earth and humbling himself in the incarnation, and that is the merit imputed to the believer in justification. Only such a merit is proportional to the believer being allowed to go to heaven. The merit of fulfilling a Covenant of Works would be inadequate for the end.

> ing firmly to the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, wholeheartedly embraced the outpouring of the Holy Spirit during the Great Awakening of 1735. The Old Side Presbyterians were skeptical of the work of the revival and were concerned about open air preaching and itinerant preachers who called people everywhere, even those in Presbyterian churches who were baptized as infants, to be born again, repent, and believe on Christ. The new side preachers' clarion call was, "You must be born again." We seek to do the same. The gospel must be preached anywhere, and everywhere, one-on-one, from the pulpit, and on the streets of our cities, stressing the necessity of the new birth through regeneration, which yields justification, and which proves its reality through sanctification, a growing ability to put off indwelling sin and to walk in a greater measure of gospel holiness.[29]

A useful contrast to this is the thought of John Nevin, of the German Reformed Church.

> Conversion is the turning around of man. He exercises a power granted to him by baptismal grace, i.e. in the act of regeneration. Any system that makes salvation come from the subject is dangerous. Man is able to convert himself only in proportion as he apprehends by faith that salvation and righteousness are presented to him in Christ. Conversion is a process, not accomplished in a moment.[30]

This amounts to the claim that in the normal case conversion takes place under the external administration of the covenant and, in that sense, within it.

Baptist View of Covenant Membership

The Baptists sought to preserve the unity of the Covenant of Grace in their own way. That is, they denied that there was more than one way of salvation, but that it was always only through the Covenant of Grace, with the same justification under the Old Testament as under the New. Nevertheless, they rejected the model of one covenant under two administrations. They did this by distinguishing between covenant and promise. The Old and New Covenants were two distinct covenants. The Covenant of Grace was revealed progressively as promise until it was not only fully revealed but also established in reality as a covenant in the New Covenant.[31] "The

[29] https://vanguardpresbyterianchurch.com/commitments/

[30] William H. Erb, ed. *Dr. Devin's Theology – Based on Manuscript Class-Room Lectures* (Reading, Pa.: I. M. Beaver, Publisher, 1913) p 289, quoted in Karl Dahlfred, *Theology Drives Methodology: Conversion in the Theology of Charles Finney and John Nevin*, p. 62.

[31] Denault, pp. 61, 62.

Baptists believed that no covenant preceding the New Covenant was the Covenant of Grace."[32] In fact, the very idea of promise implied that the reality was not yet. Still, Old Testament believers were justified under the Covenant of Grace in anticipation.

Denault enters into an extended discussion of the contrast between this Baptist perspective and the Presbyterian one. He eventually makes this significant statement:

> Baptist ecclesiology, because it rested on a different federalism, rejected the Presbyterian notion of a visible Church made up of believers and their posterity…. Put differently, the Baptists supported the notion of an invisible Church made up of all of the elect who had been called; it did not have an external administration in which the non-elect were to be found;[33]

This, of course, is not true because it cannot be true. The Baptists do have an external administration of the covenant, in that they baptize, admit to institutional church membership, instruct, and discipline. But because the Baptists do not have a means to detect who is really regenerate, they sometimes baptize and otherwise make part of the external administration those who are not regenerate and who sometimes later show this through apostasy. Denault is not unique in his claim, though. It is a common Baptist conceit. Denault goes on to immediately quote the following confessional statement.

> All persons throughout the world, professing the faith of the gospel, and obedience unto God by Christ according unto it, not destroying their own profession by any errors that undermine its foundation, or unholiness of conversation, are and may be called visible saints; and of such ought all particular congregations to be constituted.[34]

Note the external signs: profession, visible obedience consistent with the profession, and orthodoxy of the profession. This external evidence allows those persons be in the external covenant, called "visible" saints, and members of congregations. That is, the baptists have external signs which allow participation in an external covenant administration.

Denault, in his next sentence, glosses this as: "Only authentic faith, according to the Baptists, allowed one to enter into the Covenant of Grace. Therefore, only those who had a credible profession of faith could make up the visible Church."[35] This is a flagrant non-sequitur, as the quotation de-

[32] Denault, p. 63.

[33] Denault, p. 86.

[34] Denault. p. 87.

[35] Denault, p. 87.

tails externals, not "authentic faith". Here is also the Presbyterian contrast as much as the Baptist one: Authentic faith puts one in the Covenant of Grace; credible profession allows entry into the visible church. The difference between Presbyterians and Baptists is that in the case of underage children, it is the credible profession of the parents that is made the condition of membership. How are we to reconcile this with Denault's earlier claim that the Covenant of Grace did not have an external administration in which the non-elect were to be found? Only in case he is going to claim that the external administration is not what it is evidently and by definition, namely baptism, etc.

But was this present distinction between Presbyterian and Baptist ideas of the visible church always this small? We will have to return to this question.

In his next section, "The Range and Effectiveness of Grace in the Covenant of Grace" Denault muddies the waters further by neglecting the internal vs external aspects of the covenant in parts of his discussion. He notes "What remained fundamental was that it was conceived that all the blessings of the Covenant of Grace came directly from the mediation of Christ. It was therefore possible to benefit from the mediation of Christ without being saved, to partially benefit from the effects of his redemption."[36] He calls this a limited Arminianism.

The Context that Frames Covenant Theologies

We must now consider the wider scope of the covenantal model in Reformed thought. I will begin with the Geneva of Calvin's time. At Geneva and surrounding areas a discipline was established that was unique when it appeared. At the beginning when Reformed churches first appeared, everyone, of course, was already baptized and was considered a Christian and a church member. But the reformers believed that conduct befitting Christians was also required. Local ecclesiastical authorities, called consistories, were set up that had the power to discipline. "Local consistories had the power to impose fines, brief jail terms, and certain forms of public humiliation.… The best example was the consistory for Valangin, a seigniory within the principality of Neuchâtel, which could condemn miscreants to censures, excommunications, fines, brief prison sentences, the pillory, and even banishment."[37] In Geneva, in distinction from other jurisdictions, "the Consistory was an ecclesiastical institution that could not impose any

[36] Denault, p. 91.

[37] Jeffrey R. Watt, *The Consistory and Social Discipline in Calvin's Geneva* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2020) p. 6.

secular penalties; if it deemed miscreants worthy of a secular penalty, such as a fine or a jail sentence, it referred them to Geneva's Small Council, which did have that authority." Practically speaking, this meant that no legal counsel was allowed those appearing before the Consistory. "To be sure, residents of Geneva absolutely had to appear when convoked. Failing to respect a summons from the Consistory could result in being jailed."[38]

> By the later 1540s, Calvin's Consistory could also oblige people to do *réparation publique*, a confession of their sin before the entire congregation whereby they got on their knees and asked forgiveness from God and from the state.[39]

Oddly, it was excommunication that was among the more controversial punishments, and many consistories did not have the power to impose it. At Zurich, "Heinrich Bullinger … insisted that all disciplinary powers resided with magistrates alone, and both demonstrated a strong distaste for excommunication. As Bullinger noted, if Jesus allowed Judas to participate in the Last Supper, why should people who were guilty of much lesser sins be excluded from the sacrament?"[40]

Outside the Swiss confederation consistories were established in several places, but their powers varied considerably depending on the degree of church establishment and state backing.

> Like Swiss consistories but unlike Geneva's, consistories in Scotland—known there as kirk sessions—were tribunals that could impose mundane penalties (even corporal punishments) on miscreants. Elders and deacons served on the sessions, which were dominated by lay members, who easily outnumbered the ministers. Like French consistories, kirk sessions had administrative in addition to disciplinary functions, and also had the power to exclude people from communion (though they did not appear to exercise that right as often as Geneva's Consistory did).[41]

In Geneva, attendance at church services was mandatory, as was catechetical instruction. Not only were the youth expected to attend, but ignorant adults could be required to go. The consistories also tried to root out Roman Catholic practices – such as prayers to Mary or for the dead, or celebrating Christmas – or for speaking in defense of Roman Catholic doctrines. The consistories were also concerned about cases of gross ignorance of Christian teaching, and might sentence someone to attendance at Catechism instruction for a period. Geneva was not especially strict about

[38] Watt, p. 7.

[39] Watt, p. 8.

[40] Watt, p. 8.

[41] Watt, p. 9.

Sunday observance as long as recreation did not conflict with attendance at services or, for the youth, at Catechism class. Religious instruction, however, ranked high among the consistory's priorities, including seeing to it that parents properly performed their duties in this regard. Naturally, the usually recognized sins were also punished. In addition to this were the things not regarded as sins by Roman Catholics, but now so categorized by Reformed, such as dancing, singing secular songs, and gambling. Other, economic sins that came to the attention of consistories were squandering of assets, laziness, wandering the streets, and idleness.[42]

This idea of a Christian society was not welcomed in most places. Richard Hooker was set up in 1591 to write a defense of the Anglican establishment in England, effectively creating a theology for it. "Set up" means that he was funded by prominent parties to give up his other work and spend years on this new effort. Called *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, it began to appear in 1593. Issued by the King's printer in fine editions, it was obviously a production by the establishment. A comparison of the first editions with other polemical printed works of the time makes clear the quality difference in the fine paper, careful printing, and quality editions, which all proclaim the official backing. The opening pages address the Puritans directly.

> The wonderful zeal and fervour wherewith ye have withstood the received orders of this Church was the first thing which caused me to enter into consideration, whether (as all your published books and writings peremptorily maintain) every christian man fearing God stand bound to join you for the furtherance of that which ye term *the Lord's Discipline*.[43]

England had a national church. It was the official compulsory religion. All the English living in a legal manner were baptized and were members. The question was whether the Reformed, in England calling themselves Puritans, were to be allowed to establish their discipline, a discipline that aimed to make England Christian in conduct, not just in profession and in outward administration of the covenant in the traditional manner. As Hooker's project makes manifest and as subsequent history makes obvious, powerful interests with power and money wanted to

[42] Discussion of these matters and others are in the several chapters of Watt's book. The book is based on a detailed study of the cases in consistory records. Watt does not seem to have much grasp of Reformed theology itself.

[43] Richard Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastistical Polity*, edited by Arthur Stephen McGrade (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) p. 1.

block this discipline. The reasonable explanation is that the elite wanted to go on with their sinful lives.[44]

Hooker's next section is titled "The first establishment of new discipline by Mr Calvin's industry in the Church of Geneva, and the beginning of strife about it amongst ourselves." There follows an extended history of the establishment of the Reformed church order and discipline in Geneva and in Switzerland generally. He makes it clear that this is the discipline that the Puritans wanted and which he is writing against.[45]

The story you may have heard, as it is the one we are are all told, was that the Puritans wanted to purify the rites and symbols of the English Church. Also, there is a stereotype of "Puritanism" as joy-hating moral strictness. What were are not told is the discipline project that was behind this image, to bring English life under the rule of the consistories.

Having gained this perspective about what the Reformed project was really about, another look at the Baptist position becomes more illuminating.

> All persons throughout the world, professing the faith of the gospel, and obedience unto God by Christ according unto it, not destroying their own profession by any errors that undermine its foundation, or unholiness of conversation, are and may be called visible saints; and of such ought all particular congregations to be constituted.[46]

The Reformed view was that persons in Christian societies should, through the discipline, be educated in Christian doctrine so as to be able to make a proper profession of faith in the gospel. Also, the discipline was to correct their conduct to bring it into alignment with their profession, in order to fulfill the standards for visible saints. Even excommunication,

[44] Another reason can be adduced. In a jurisdiction where there is an established church, and membership in the church is required to hold office or otherwise participate in public life, the power to excommunicate is the power to depose from civil office. Thus the discipline handed the ministers an effective veto over the careers of civil officials.

[45] Hooker, pp. 3-11. The topic continues through page 51 of the Cambridge edition, after which he turns to lay the theoretical foundations for his own view of a proper order for a Christian state. Hooker described the discipline this way:

> Of which discipline the main and principle parts are these: A standing ecclesiastical Court to be established; perpetual Judges in that Court to be their ministers, others of the people annually chosen twice so many in number as they to be judges together with them in the same Court: these two sorts to have the care of all men's manners, power of determining all kind of Ecclesiastical causes, and authority to convent, to punish, as far as excommunication, whomsoever they should think worthy, none either great or small excepted. p. 6.

[46] Denault. p. 87.

when resorted to, was considered a temporary measure to eventually bring the people back into the church with a restored standing. The Reformed did not suppose that this produced regeneration, but neither was it merely external means for an external end, as it brought all the people into contact with the means of grace, that is instruction in the Christian faith and hearing the preaching of the word.

With the reference to particular congregations in the quoted statement, we begin to see a more Baptist hierarchy of values coming in. The Reformed in Geneva greatly reduced the number of churches and vastly reduced the number of clergy. As far as they were concerned, the fewer the churches the easier it was to maintain a high quality of preaching in all of them. For the rest, catechism classes and the discipline served the purpose. Baptists, on the other hand, did not want to bring the whole nation, already under an external administration of the covenant, up to the standard of profession and conduct befitting covenant membership, but to purge from the church, meaning their little particular congregations, all those who did not measure up. Denault comments:

> Only authentic faith, according to the Baptists, allowed one to enter into the Covenant of Grace. Therefore, only those who had a credible profession of faith could make up the visible Church (which was not seen universally or nationally among Baptists, but locally.)[47]

Therefore, behind the two different covenant systems that Denault is contrasting are two conflicting visions of what is a Christian society, or even whether such a society is properly conceivable. Seen in this way, the Baptists were very much like the Socinians after all. Both were opposed to and constituted a threat to a Christian society, while for the Reformed a Christian society was the goal.

We no longer hear about this from the Reformed side. Some will defend a Postmillennial future conversion of the majority of the population. But they have in mind a voluntary conversion, not church and state working together to require attendance at Christian instruction and to enforce conduct befitting a Christian profession until the population as a whole adopts this as a way of life. When the Baptists talk about authentic faith, they mean a type of uncoerced voluntarism, and the Reformed/Presbyterians have come around to the Baptist view on this. The older Reformed/Presbyterian view is that you could not see the heart, but you could judge and enforce outward conduct, and the Covenant in its external administration is all the church authority could reach anyway.

[47] Denault, p. 87.

Denault says: "From a Baptist point of view, a Church of mixed nature, where some benefited from salvation and others from partial blessings, altered the spiritual nature of the covenant between Christ and His church and profaned the nature and the efficacy of the work of Christ."[48] From the Reformed point of view, a Church of a mixed nature is all that is attainable on earth, and Reformed theology is directed to deal with that reality, whereas Baptist theology is based on an unrealizable ideal. The Baptist will always profess a fictional view of the church, and then cope with the reality despite his theory. But behind this difference, which Presbyterians still assert, there is a covenant theology which at one time considered the covenant itself to be sufficient to deal with a whole society which exists in a mixed state, but under Christian administration. Few Presbyterians remain that would still uphold that covenant vision.

This begs an explanation of how Presbyterians could have come to abandon their covenant vision, and how sessions and consistories went from being city or district courts to merely the lowest level of ecclesiastical government. Two cases should suffice. In England, the struggle on behalf of the discipline went on for sixty-five years by a least some of the Puritans, if we date it from Hooker's writing to the Restoration. At the Restoration in 1660, it was the Puritans who were expelled from the churches. From here on the Puritans had chapels and dissenting associations, and were limited in their participation in society. This effectively became the start of denominationalism as the dissenting associations were of various sorts, congregational, Presbyterian, etc. The next century saw other groups, such as the Methodists, added to the denominations. From being a privation this came over time to be accepted as a normality, but from 1660 on the possibility of the discipline was out of reach, and dissenting churches could only function according to the Baptist idea of the covenant with the exception that Presbyterians and Congregationalists could still baptize infants. But the social dimension was out.

In New England the situation was different because New England was Congregationalist from the beginning and Presbyterians a minority. This makes a difference because the Congregationalists held to a voluntarist, conversionist theology. For them, a profession of authentic faith had to include a narration of a conversion experience and those who had not undergone the correct experience were not admitted to church membership even if they had been baptized as children. However much they might believe and live an upright life, they could only pray and wait for God to convert them. Not being church members, they could not present their

[48] Denault, p. 95.

children for baptism. As a solution, some churches introduced the halfway covenant, so that such people could participate in church life to a degree and bring their own children for baptism. Thus we see that New England Congregationalism did not believe in nor practice the Reformed type of covenant theology, but neither did they accept the Baptist view. Yet the New England Congregationalist still had a type of vision of a Christian society. Baptists such as Roger Williams were expelled because they attacked the political and social basis of society with their view of a personal religion.

But for New England Congregationalism, the goal of discipline could not be to maintain the profession and conduct of a society-wide covenant membership, because conversionism meant that the unconverted had to be kept out of the external administration of the covenant. Therefore revivalism became the way to maintain the social order. From there it was downhill to the Second Great Awakening and the development of manipulative techniques to strike at the will and produce conversions, which by the early 20th century were mere "decisions". Eventually, Evangelical missions spread this shallow (that is decisionist and lacking a vision of Christian society) type of Christianity around the world.

The Old Covenants

As it has been indicated, in the Reformed/Presbyterian view both Old and New Covenants belong to the Covenant of Grace under the scheme of one covenant with two administrations. But the Old Covenant is actually a succession of covenants, e.g. the Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, etc., so not only must they be assimilated to a single covenant theologically, but also to administrations of that covenant consistent with its unity. That is, the way covenants were administered could not belie the fundamental covenant identity.

For the Baptists, as these covenants are not considered to be part of the Covenant of Grace, their exegesis can be treated in a much more individual manner, as it is not presupposed that a commonality must emerge.

Denault emphasizes the problem that this single covenant view imposes on the Reformed/Presbyterian interpretation. The most salient problem is the commands and conditional nature of the covenant with Moses, including, obviously, the giving of the law. He divides the solutions into two main groups, those that seek to give the conditions of the covenant a different character as fruits of grace and so view the covenant as essentially unconditional as the Covenant of Grace itself, and those that

separate the Mosaic Covenant from the others for special treatment that to some degree does remove it from the Covenant of Grace.

It is this last case that especially interests us. It is those among our contemporary theologians who follow this approach, not their predecessors from other eras, who really count. As they do not correspond to the era of Denault's study he confines them to a long footnote. He does not, however, tell us the things about them that it is important to know. Yet these things have become so major within contemporary theology that they require treatment in several sections below.

The Abandonment of Bicovenantalism

The loss of the Reformed/Presbyterian social vision of the covenant has already been detailed. In the Netherlands, however, partly through Arminian opposition, the Reformed church never achieved the position to impose the discipline in the manner of Geneva or Scotland. They developed their own Reformed social philosophy but did so reacting more to the modern age as such than to sinful human nature as such. There was a development of the Antirevolutionary Party and its ideology. By the late nineteenth century, Abraham Kuyper had added to this his concern about the intellectual dominance of atheist materialism. The solution that Kuyper and his contemporaries came up with was a new social philosophy, one that was covenantal, but premised on a new covenant system that was theologically bolted on to the covenant theology inherited from the past, that was maintained to explain justification and related doctrines. The new theology, though, effectively subverted bicovenantal theology. There were two parts to this.

The most obvious innovation was the introduction of a third type of covenant in addition to the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace. This was the Common Covenant, of which the covenant with Noah was the chosen Biblical example. This covenant was an administration of a new type of "grace" and this administration ran alongside of the other covenants until the end of the world. It was not like a dispensationalist dispensation that was only for a period of history. What was administered was common grace, which was not really grace, but which was called that because it required a theological name. Social institutions could operate under this Common Covenant, and they did not need to be understood in terms of the external administration of some other covenant. Common Covenant matters need not involve the church.

Actually, Kuyper postulated three types of grace, although he did not carry through this scheme consistently. There was common grace which

emanated from the Father and applied to the whole creation. This was a preserving grace. In addition there were two types of saving grace. Covenantal or church grace emanated from the Son and applied to the church as a covenantal body, and accounted for the special status of those in the visible institutional church. Individual or regenerating grace emanated from the Spirit and applied to the elect.[49] (This illustrates Kuyper's predilection for concocting theological schemes to solve problems.)

The other innovation was the sphere covenants or sphere sovereignties. Here Herman Bavinck was perhaps the more influential in terms of theologically validating the idea of family, church, and state as spheres each operating under its own covenant. At the same time sphere sovereignties were brought in by Abraham Kuyper. The source of these ideas was not reformed but in theosophy, with which Kuyper was fascinated.[50] The important point is that sphere sovereignties could be seen as metaphysical law spheres in philosophies such as that of Herman Dooyeweerd, while at the same time could be defined as covenants by someone else, at the same time suggesting that they were talking about the same thing.

Thus, today we find Reformed Baptists talking about the sphere sovereignties of family, church, and state, as it gives them an entry into social theory without taking on the issues between the Covenant of Grace and the various other covenants explored by Denault.

The Dutch invasion

The new Kuyperian tricovenantalism and sphere covenants were brought to America by Dutch immigrants who established their own denominations and schools. From there they entered Presbyterianism when Gresham Machen established his new Westminster Seminary and could not recruit enough qualified Presbyterian faculty, resorting to Dutch Reformed men. Cornelius Van Til brought both types of the new Kuyperian covenantalism there. Van Til gave the Common Covenant further development in terms of dialectical mutual conditioning with the Covenant of Grace. He called the Common Covenant a "limiting notion", that is, it sets the boundaries to the area of operation of the Covenant of Grace, yet it

[49] Abraham Kuyper, *Common Grace, God's Gifts for a Fallen World* (Bellingham, Wash.: Lexham Press, 2016), pp. 2-4.

[50] For the background of sphere sovereignty and related ideas see: J. Glenn Friesen, *Neo-Calvinism and Christian Theosophy: Franz von Baader, Abraham Kuyper, Herman Dooyeweerd* (Calgary: Aevum Books, 2015, 2021) and Tim Wilder, *Theosophy Van Til and Bahnsen: How Neo-Calvinism deformed apologetics* 2nd ed. (Rapid City: Via Moderna Books, 2024).

was essential to the revelation of the operation of special grace as having the character of grace.[51]

In the Christian Reformed Church, from which Van Til came, common grace received a further development (with which Van Til apparently agreed) in mixing in with matters of the Covenant of Grace in a general favorable will of God to save all. This produced yet another denominational split. This use of common grace and the common covenant idea are usually neither explained together nor distinguished, leaving common grace as a very confused and confusing notion.[52]

Van Til also popularized Dooyeweerd's philosophy in Presbyterian circles.[53] Further dissemination of the ideas came through avid Van Tillians such as R. J. Rushdoony and other Christian Reconstructionists.

Presbyterian tricovenantalism

At the Westminster seminaries (now two) tricovenantalism received further development by Meredith Kline. He bent and broke the limits of the accommodation of the Mosaic Covenant within the Covenant of Grace. Kline introduced an alternative theological paradigm of two registers. There was an upper register, heavenly and ultimately of eschatological reality, and a lower register of earthly history. From time to time the upper register would break through into the lower giving an anticipation of the eschatological end of history. The Mosaic covenant, and the life of Israel in Canaan under it, was a major case of such a breakthrough of the upper register. The economies of the covenants could be explained in subordination to this metareality.[54]

This theology of two registers was updated to constitute the Radical Two-Kingdom theology, and now the Two-Age theology, where the two registers are replaced by the present age and the age to come, which are

[51] Cornelius Van Til, "Nature and Scripture", *The Infallible Word: A Symposium by the Members of the Faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1978) Third edition. See especially pp. 268 and 276.

[52] This is very strange, in that in his essay Van Til definined special and common grace as exclusive opposites in their covenantal expression.

[53] For an account of the Dooyeweerd controversy and Van Til's relationship with it, see Tim Wilder, *Time and Worldmaking: John Frame and the Reformational Philosohies* (Rapid City: Via Moderna Books, 2024).

[54] For an overview of Kline's theology with a discussion of its suitability to support contemporary tricovantalism see Michael Beck, *Covenantal Lord and Cultic Boundary: A Dialectical Inquiry Concerning Meredith Kline and the Reformed Two-Kingdom Project* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2023).

both manifested in the church in a paradoxical way. But with them, not only did the social area operate independently under the Common Covenant, but institutions belonging to the Covenant of Grace had to keep aloof from those matters.

Denault's footnote cites the Radical Two-Kingdom or Two-Age theologians, including J. V. Fesko, David VanDrunen, and Michael Horton, as examples of those who separate the Mosaic Covenant from the other covenants for special treatment.[55] It is the Abrahamic covenant that is taken by these as more the model for the identity to the Covenant of Grace. Oddly, for this point Denault cites John Murray.[56]

PRESBYTERIAN MONOCOVENANTALISM

Where John Murray should come in is in connection to a third alternative to the two Denault mentions of reinterpreting the conditionality of the Mosaic covenant or of separating the Mosaic from the other Old Testament covenants. This third alternative Denault confines to a footnote.

> A third alternative was foreseeable and consisted simply in considering the Covenant of Grace as being conditional (or partly conditional). This tendency eventually led the paedobaptists toward the controversy of the *Federal Vision* and NPP [New Perspectives on Paul], cf. Jeffrey D. Johnson, *The Fatal Flaw of the Theology Behind Infant Baptism*, chapters 8. and 9.[57]

If the Federal Vision is where it led, John Murray (again at Westminster Seminary) is where it began, in his moving away from the idea of the Covenant of Works. What Denault fails to explain is that what is in effect here is monocovenantalism, in which the Covenant of Grace swallows up even the Covenant of Works. There is, then, no fundamental contrast between grace and works. Therefore the attraction of the New Perspectives, with its idea that, in rejecting law, Paul was only referring to Jewish cultural practices as no longer functioning as the distinguishing markers of the faith community.

It was Murray who wanted Norman Shepherd as his successor, and then Gary North championed Murray and Shepherd as setting the proper theological standard, with the Federal Vision being a subsequent phase of this development.

As it developed the tricovenantalists and the monocovenantalists became ultra-enemies, but with each claiming that there was no logical possibility of a stable bicovenantal middle.

Of course, the Lordship Salvation controversy among the Baptists preceded the rise of Shepherd or the Federal Vision, showing that Baptists are not immune to these issues.

[55] Denault, p. 111.
[56] Denault, p. 111.
[57] Denault, p. 102n.

THE BAPTIST VIEW OF THE OLD COVENANT

Denault provides a detailed treatment of Baptist interpretations of the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants. It emerges that the Baptists have to split the Abrahamic into two covenants to separate the "two posterities". This puts me in mind of the troubles that the tricovenantalists have with their Noahic Common Covenant, which they must split into two covenants to separate the redemptive and the common parts.

On the whole, though, this part of Denault's book made a surprising impression on me in that the ideas and the approaches to the texts discussed were so familiar. Having been raised and educated in dispensational Baptist theology, I was surprised to find that these Covenantal Baptist interpretations were largely the same. I suppose the explanation is that in making its way from Darby's Plymouth Brethren circles into Baptist churches, the dispensational doctrine took on a considerable modification in its application to texts by the existing Baptist interpretive traditions, which kept a form of their covenantalism alive.

For the same reason, interpretations favored by the Baptists are what first strike me, as it is with these that I first and for years after was presented the Biblical texts. This makes me a rather poor critic of this part of Denault's book.

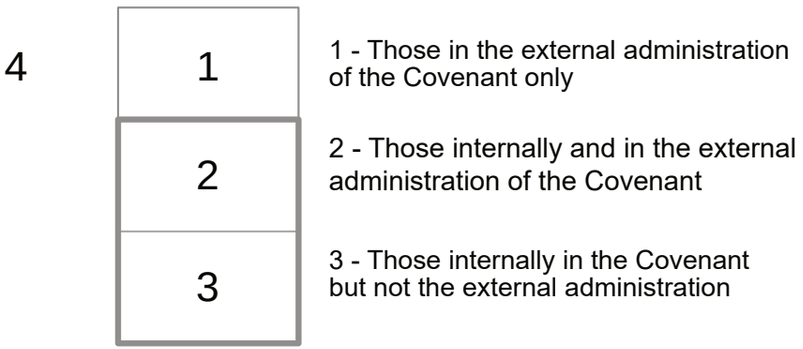
The New Covenant

Denault ends with the New Covenant. He sees problems for the Presbyterian view in that the Bible calls it a new covenant, and also describes it as having various new characteristics. I will only point out that this matter has come up in the debates between dispensationalists and various covenant theologians, who point out how old the new things are, so the nature of the newness, also insisted on by dispensationalists, has been challenged in those debates.

As the Reformed/Presbyterians hold that the New Covenant is part of the Covenant of Grace, and the Baptists hold that the New Covenant is the Covenant of Grace, there is considerable agreement in this area, with the principal conflict being how the membership is to be conceived of, both in nature and extent, as in the baptism of children.

Summing Up

For a review of the categories and conceptions of covenant membership, the following diagram will provide labels for the different classes.



The long rectangle in the diagram represents the extent of the Covenant of Grace. The upper part within thin borders is the external administration of the Covenant, and the lower part with thick borders represents the membership in the substance or internal Covenant. Outside of the rectangle are those who are not in the Covenant either really or externally.

Population 1 is made up of those who are under the external administration of the Covenant, through baptism, formal membership on church rolls, instruction in the Word through participation in worship services, etc. However, they are not regenerate and therefore are not in the substance of the covenant, represented by the box with thick borders.

In the Reformed/Presbyterian view of Population 1, this can be a very substantial group, however, how they are regarded and explained is subject to enormous variation.

In the foundational era, this group was deliberately maximized through the idea of the Christian society. Nearly everyone in such a society was baptized, instructed, participated in public worship, and was subject to the discipline. The object was not to maximize the size of Population 1 at the expense of Population 2 but to maximize the access to the means of grace which were needed for someone to potentially become part of Population 2. The real object was to increase Population 2, the really regenerate, but it was thought to be was a real advantage, both to Population 1 and Population 2 members, for as many people as possible to be in the upper box of the external administration of the Covenant compared to having a large Population 4 of those outside even the external administration.

Today's Reformed/Presbyterians typically are as guarded as are the Baptists in allowing membership in the upper box (thin borders) of the external administration, as they also regard Population 1 as only a byproduct of our ignorance of who is genuinely regenerate, and to be a bad thing to be minimized to the extent possible.

The main exception to the point above is the treatment of children of Christian parents. The Reformed/Presbyterians baptize these on the basis of the promise of their parents. There is no agreement on the exact theological basis for this practice. The Episcopalians call their baptism 'christening' which comes from the idea that it is baptism that makes the children Christian. This is the case even with those who combine this with a covenant concept.

Some Reformed baptize children as a recognition that they are already Christians. That is, they are put under the external administration of the covenant because by birth they are in it. They generally refer to them as "children of the covenant". The problem becomes how to explain the sense in which they are already in the covenant, if they are not really in it by regeneration, nor yet externally in it by baptism.

Others *presume* that the children are or will become regenerate and call the basis of this baptism a "judgment of charity". Some, especially some Presbyterians, assume that the children are not regenerate, and rely on some other rationale for why it is proper for these children to be, for a time, under the external administration of the covenant only. During the Westminster Assembly a controversy broke out over the location of the baptistry in the church building. The Presbyterians wanted it in front near the communion table below the pulpit to symbolize that both were subordinate to the preaching of the word. The English wanted it in back by the door to symbolize the baptism was the entry into the church. Thus, for the Reformed/Presbyterians, in the case of baptized children, there will be diversity or ambiguity in how they are seen in connection with Population 1 and Population 2.

Population 2 is both under the external administration of the covenant and really in the substance of it as well. This is the ideal, which Reformed/Presbyterians would like for everybody, so it would not seem to be a theoretical problem. Practically, though, restrictive customs have grown up about this group. Acting somewhat like Baptists, certain Congregationalists and Presbyterians have tried to separate Population 2 from

Population 1, and either practically or officially created a halfway covenant class. The New England case was discussed above. But some Presbyterian groups, particularly in Scotland, as well as some Dutch Reformed, have tried to restrict communion to those who are really, really spiritual and thus confident of their regeneration, or their "deservingness", while the majority of the congregation may only be spectators, while the select group goes forward to have communion.

Population 3 presents a problem for the Reformed/Presbyterians, who sometimes even want to deny that it exists. This is those people who have saving faith but are not under the external administration of the covenant. If we consider the founding era when these concepts were formulated, people were under the external administration by default, and unless they got themselves excommunicated by some egregious offense they remained under the external administration. Partly this was pragmatic and partly it was theoretical. It is important always to bear in mind that the Reformed scheme was to bring the whole population under the hearing and training in the word, through the strengthening of the external administration of the covenant. This meant that those who had access to the means of grace were already in Population 1 or Population 2, that is under the external administration. With the rise of denominations, congregations began to make lists of enrolled members and membership also came to be limited to those who agreed to denominational distinctives. It was those who were enrolled in some denomination, officially organized as an association or not, that were members of the institutional church.

Divergencies also developed. The Orthodox Presbyterian Church recognizes that Baptists can be saved. Some congregations of the Canadian Reformed Church have declared that saving faith is the exact contents of their confessions, the Three Forms of Unity, not a word more or less. Some Reformed Churches require for membership an agreement to their entire confessional statements and to the decisions of their synods besides. Some Presbyterians are much broader, even admitting Baptists to their churches. The idea of institutional church membership has become a confused mess.

What is evident is that the concept of church membership and its restrictions is entirely different from what was the case when the Reformed theology was formulated. The Reformed/Presbyterians have largely capitulated to Baptist practice if not theory. A practical consideration should also be mentioned. Whereas before, church membership meant having to go through catechism training, attending the weekly lecture/sermons, singing some psalms, and partaking of communion, now it is focused on attending the weekly show, full of all manner of things offensive to persons of taste and intelligence, because Christianity is considered to be basically emotive.

A review of the diagram from a Baptist perspective will bring out their different way of thinking. Population 1 is a reality that Baptists only acknowledge with extreme reluctance. They may deny that it exists in Baptist congregations, and say they are a "church of believers". However, forced to admit that they actually do baptize, instruct, and discipline, and that is by definition an external administration of the covenant, they can next be asked how they know that they only do these things to regenerate persons. In fact, as some of these persons apostatize, it is evident that Baptists do have an external administration to those who are not in the substance of the covenant, that is they have a Population 1 in their churches. Usually, the Baptist will squirm a great deal before admitting this, then as soon as possible afterward go back to denying it. The embarrassment for the Baptists is that they claim that they are baptizing those who are in the Covenant but, as they cannot know who is in the Covenant, the real basis of their practice must be something else. The basis must be either a presumption or some externalities, such as a profession. In that case, they are seen to really have an external administration of the Covenant on the basis of externalities; just the thing for which they criticize the Reformed/Presbyterians!

More than that, Baptists will often project their belief that Population 1 does not exist onto others and some of their arguments against Presbyterians, evident from time to time in Denault's book as well, assume that Presbyterians also believe that there is no Population 1, and thus must hold that everyone in the external administration of the covenant is also in the substance of the covenant, so that it must be on that basis that Presbyterians act.

While the Reformed in the early days tried to maximize the population under the external administration of the covenant, and presumably Population 1 was relatively large, at the expense of Population 4 of those entirely outside the covenant, the Baptists did the opposite. They tried as much as possible to eliminate Population 1, by testing and restricting those who were permitted to come under the external administration of the covenant, preferring a large Population 4 to the existence of a Population 1. If this meant living in a non-Christian society, the Baptists were willing to pay that price.

Baptists usually seem much more willing than Presbyterians to acknowledge the existence of Population 3, those of genuine faith, but outside the institutional church. To be in Population 3 meant coming in from Population 4, a population which in the first place Reformed/Presbyteri-

ans tried to minimize, and Baptists tended to maximize. Also Baptists, in their refusal to baptize children but desiring to think of those dying in infancy as saved, have to place them in Population 3, though the problem then becomes explaining how they get there.

From all the discussion so far some general conclusions can be reached. Reformed/Presbyterian covenant theology has gone through a revolution in how it is practically understood and applied, such that neither the Baptists nor today's Reformed/Presbyterians really understand what it at first was about. Second, for many Reformed/Presbyterians covenant theology is broken. Successive waves of severe revisionism, first that of the Neo-Calvinists and second that of the Radical Two-Kingdom theologians or their opposites the monocovenantalists have effectively created new covenant theologies while trying to hide the extent of their departure from the original theology. Third, for Baptists, covenant theology is also broken, in that increasingly Baptists have recourse to the mentioned neo-calvinist revisionism of sphere-soveregnty in order to accommodate a wider view of God's purposes in creation than mere personal soul salvation.

Of course, for many other Baptists and for the Radical Two-Kingdom group, the restricted applicability of covenant theology is just what they desire. Their view of the societal role of religion is much like that of the Socianians and of the Enlightenment. They prefer their theology broken.