

“Sam Renihan has served the church well on at least two fronts recently—one historical and the other biblical. His recently published doctoral dissertation, *From Shadow to Substance*, is an excellent historical survey of the development of seventeenth-century Particular (“Calvinistic”) Baptist covenant theology. His most recent work, *The Mystery of Christ*, in some senses, is a biblical presentation of the issues covered in his dissertation. *The Mystery of Christ* is well-written, displays ample knowledge of issues discussed concerning covenant theology by Baptists and paedobaptists, grounds its arguments in scriptural exegesis and theology, recovers old arguments for a new day, presents a cohesive map of the covenants of Scripture, and exalts our Lord Jesus Christ, the last Adam, throughout. Scholarly but never dry; exegetical but never pedantic; pastoral and practical but never trite; this is a fine work.”

Richard C. Barcellos

Pastor of Grace Reformed Baptist Church, Palmdale, CA, and Associate Professor of Exegetical Theology at IRBS Theological Seminary, Mansfield, TX. He is the author of *Getting the Garden Right: Adam's Work and God's Rest in Light of Christ* and *The Lord's Supper as a Means of Grace: More than a Memory*.

“What is this book good for?”

It establishes a clear linear understanding of the biblical text in its purpose of driving the reader to see how faithfully God executes His purpose in creation. The covenantal framework from Adam to Christ, from creation to consummation is a most apt way of seeing the flow of the entire biblical text. One is lifted into the journey to see the entire scope of divine providence work out the divine decree from generation to generation, book to book, event to event, person to person.

This book serves for an excellent and rich primer on covenant theology and demonstrates how it leads from the Covenant of Redemption to the final claiming and purifying of the people given by the Father to the Son. Profession of faith, baptism, Lord's Supper, and church discipline all are practiced as an expression of consistency with the eternal purpose of God in covenant. In this book one may come to a firm and clear grasp of such important ideas as continuity and discontinuity, positive law in relation to natural/moral law, Covenant of Works in relation to the Covenants of Redemption and Grace, and the finality of Christ as the one who consummates all the covenantal arrangements by His person and work.

This book is delightful to the point of entertainment to see how fittingly biblical texts open their meaning in the context of these covenantal discussions. How pertinently both biblical exposition and theological synthesis tie together the microcosm and macrocosm of Scripture finds the point of integration in the theme of covenant.

Renihan's writing also adds to the charm of this seriously theological work. Some of the most powerful points of synthesis have a literary lilt that gives memorable power to the overall argument: "God swept Israel off its feet as their redeemer, their husband, here to take her home to safety and blessing and prosperity, ready to shower her with good gifts." "Egypt's religion was... ancient, beautiful, artistic, creative, and tangible.... It is no surprise, then, that Israel broke the covenant only days after its pledge to keep the same. You can take Israel out of Egypt. But you can't take Egypt out of Israel." "God was so very kind to Israel, as seen in its history. But Israel was utterly faithless." "They failed to realize just how much the New Covenant would not be like the Old Covenant, and why that was such a blessed reality." "[T]he study of the mystery of Christ, His covenant, and His kingdom is a devotional experience. It is a way of wonderment, a path of praise. It is a balm, a salve, a nepenthe, a panacea, a cordial, a precious remedy, a sweet medicine, 'a sure and steadfast anchor for the soul' (Hebrews 6:19)."

Indeed, it is so; and Renihan's organization, insight, and style gives the reader every opportunity to see this."

Tom Nettles

Retired Professor of Historical Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky

"The themes of covenant and kingdom have always been crucial to Reformed thought, and Reformed theologians will surely be pondering and debating these issues until Christ returns. In this new volume, Sam Renihan offers a clear and engaging study that should help to keep this conversation going. One of the most useful things Renihan does—which readers across the Reformed spectrum should appreciate—is keep covenant and kingdom together, not as independent themes but as themes that absolutely depend on one another. While I am in no position to say how confessional Reformed Baptists should regard Renihan's work, I know that I, as a Presbyterian theologian, will from now on look to his book as a prime resource for Reformed Baptist covenant theology."

David VanDrunen

Robert B. Strimple Professor of Systematic Theology and Christian Ethics, Westminster Seminary California

“In *The Mystery of Christ* Samuel Renihan offers a compelling narrative arguing that the biblical witness coheres in the covenantal kingdom of its central character, Jesus Christ. While Renihan capably contributes to the growing literature of “progressive covenantalism,” he smoothly evinces a truth heretofore largely downplayed: Covenantal theology was the major biblical theology paradigm for Baptists at their beginnings in seventeenth-century England. This sharp young theologian is also to be commended for preserving a high view of Scripture while taking the historical nature and literary aspects of divine revelation seriously.”

Malcolm B. Yarnell III

Research Professor of Systematic Theology, Southwestern Seminary,
and author of *The Formation of Christian Doctrine*, *Royal Priesthood*
in the English Reformation, and *God the Trinity: Biblical Portraits*

“Sam Renihan has written a clear, concise and forthright account of the covenants, their history and their theological and religious significance. This has required skills in theology, exegesis and biblical history, including the study of the place of typology in the Old Testament as this was made plain in the anti-types of the New Testament. It is not surprising that these topics, viewed together, are of some complexity, and without careful attention, the seeds of misunderstanding will quickly grow and entangle. So, a reliable guide, such as the author has provided, is indispensable.

Another emphasis of the book is on the Mystery of Christ. Not only in the culmination of the Father’s covenantal purposes and in the Incarnation and self-offering of the incarnate Son, the one whose saving power is now seen to be active in the calling of the Christian church, His Kingdom. But from the New Testament, Christ is seen to have been retroactively at work in the faith of the saints of ancient Israel and Judah, and of the pre-Christ Gentiles who together formed the faithful remnant ‘chosen by grace’ during the Old Testament. For Christ, appearing in ‘the fullness of time,’ is the fulcrum of the eternal Covenant of Redemption, and so He is the Redeemer of the elect in every epoch, the same yesterday, today, and forever. Dr. Renihan has further enlivened and enriched his account by numerous historical allusions and quotations mainly from his beloved English Particular Baptists of the seventeenth century. Such a book, so carefully written, requires an equally careful reading. The book will richly repay its readers who take their time to weigh the author’s words.”

Paul Helm

Emeritus Professor of the History and Philosophy of Religion, King’s
College, London

“In recent years the gospel church’s discussion of these matters has been enriched by the appearance of Reformed Baptist literature, numbers of excellent new books have rolled off the presses, and in this latest book, written by Dr. Samuel Renihan, we find a considerably important contribution to the issue. It is necessary reading, especially for theological students and thoughtful men who are profiting much from the fellowship, preaching and godly lives of our paedo-baptist brothers, both those alive today and those whose ministries over the centuries we have greatly profited from.”

Geoff Thomas

Assistant minister in Amyand Park Baptist Chapel, London

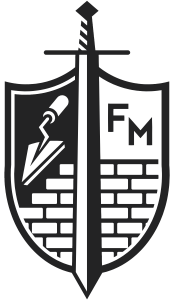
The Mystery of Christ, His Covenant, And His Kingdom

By
Samuel Renihan



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For Owen

My firstborn, precious, only one,
I bid you look to God's own Son.
Receive, inherit, and embrace
In Christ the covenant of grace.
The promise is for you, and all
Whose faith is in the gospel call.

Acknowledgments

This book has been forming in my mind for a long time, shaped by the past and present. My classes and classmates at Westminster Seminary California and the Institute of Reformed Baptist Studies were invaluable for developing my understanding of these truths in a community of diverse and, at times, opposing ideas.

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My wife, Kimberly, has been excited about this project all along. My copastors at Trinity Reformed Baptist Church gave me time to work on it as I prepared to teach the abovementioned classes.

I am also thankful to my father for referring my work to Jared Longshore, and to Jared for so excitedly and supportively bringing my manuscript all the way to publication.

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Preface

This book seeks to develop and present the covenant theology of the Bible through a thorough study of the Scriptures. Studying covenant theology is a devotional experience that enriches one's understanding of the unity of God's purposes, enhances preaching from any text, informs one's understanding of the church, assures God's people of the security of their salvation, and much more. But above all, studying the covenant theology of the Bible magnifies the majesty of the triune God's plan of redemption.

The plan and outline of this book is broken up into four parts, each with their own subdivisions. The first part deals with methodology, system, and hermeneutics. The second, third, and fourth parts move through the Bible in chronological order, covering three kingdoms and their respective covenants.

As a Particular Baptist theologian, Nehemiah Coxe, said in his work on covenant theology,

I will only add this: that on the whole, my aim has been to speak the truth in love and to take my notions from the Scriptures, not grafting any preconceived opinions of my own onto them. Where the evidence of truth appears, let it not be refused because it is offered in a mean dress and presented under the disadvantage of a rude and unpolished style. But consider instead the reason of what is said and with the noble Bereans search the Scriptures to see whether these things be so or not. And the Lord give you understanding in all things.¹

¹ Nehemiah Coxe, *A Discourse of the Covenants That God made with Men before the Law. Wherein, The Covenant of Circumcision is more largely handled, and the Invalidity of the Plea for Paedobaptism taken from thence discovered* (London: John Darby, 1681), vi-vii.

Part One

Methodology and Hermeneutics

1

Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology in Covenant Theology

Introduction

Covenant theology is not an easy subject to study. It is even more difficult to teach or write about it because covenant theology seeks to understand and explain the united purpose of God in all history past, present, and future. This is no small task.

The Apostle Paul tells us that the riches of God's wisdom, knowledge, judgments, and ways are unsearchably and inscrutably deep (Romans 11:33). And when confronted by the thought of swimming in such a sea of infinity, or even of leading others by the hand through it, our reaction ought to be humble silence broken only by the very doxology Paul proclaimed when confronted by the same: "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen" (Romans 11:36).

As students of covenant theology, therefore, we must be both humble and diligent. We must be humble enough not to pry and peer into what is not ours to know. Yet we must be diligent in studying that which God has made known for our good and His own glory. This study of the covenants is offered with the sincere desire and intent of testing and limiting all that is asserted by that certain, sufficient, and infallible rule of faith, the Word of God. And in an effort to be as faithful as possible in this purpose, this covenant theology begins by discussing methodology. A subject of such size requires appropriate preparation, tools, and methods.

Prepare your work outside; get everything ready for yourself in the field, and after that build your house (Proverbs 24:27).

Part of this preparation is being aware of key methodological challenges inherent to covenant theology. In particular, we will discuss the challenge of the relationship of biblical theology and systematic theology as it pertains to the study of covenant theology.

In his excellent volume on theology proper, James Dolezal notes that “Biblical theology, with its unique focus on historical development and progress, is not best suited for the study of theology proper.”¹ Because God is pure act, effecting creation but unaffected by creation, a method based on progressive developing history is not the appropriate approach for that area of study. Dolezal rightly opts for a contemplative approach to the doctrine of God. However, the covenant theologian is faced with a somewhat more methodologically complex task. Covenant theology specifically addresses the historical development and outworking of God’s redemptive plan while simultaneously systematizing the elements into a soteriology, a practical ecclesiology, a sacramentology, and more. All treatments of covenant theology, therefore, must walk the balanced path of a system that pays proper attention to the development of history. To proceed responsibly, this challenge must be considered in at least four ways.

1. Scope and Simplicity

The first challenge to a proper balance between biblical theology and systematic theology in covenant theology is that of scope and simplicity. Covenant theology covers, by necessity, the entirety of the Scriptures, beginning with Adam and creation and ending with Christ and the consummation. Covenant theology discusses, by definition, the forest and the trees, the macro and micro perspectives of the Scriptures. And not only does covenant theology bring to light the large and small details of the progress of redemption, but it also interprets and explains their theological significance and systematic implications.²

¹James Dolezal, *All That Is in God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2017), xv.

²There is one feature that I am intentionally passing over in this study of the movement of redemptive history and the biblical and systematic theology that summarize it. That is the Sabbath. And my reason for doing so is simply that it has been done in far greater quality and quantity than I can provide by Richard Barcellos in *Getting the Garden Right: Adam’s Work and God’s Rest in Light of Christ* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2017). The Sabbath precedes and transcends Israel and its covenants and finds an abiding and obligatory expression in the first day of the week after the resurrection of Christ.

The scope of covenant theology makes it a subject that defies simplification and generalization. A map that names only the continents, or only countries, will not help the traveler on the ground. So also, a covenant theology that does not draw the small interconnecting lines that unify the larger sections is deficient and unreliable. The author or teacher of covenant theology may strive for a simple and clear style, but there is a quantity of material to be taught that no quality of eloquence can, or should, reduce.

The necessary result of the scope of the subject is that a theological system deriving from covenant theology must be built from the ground up, giving full and due weight to the trees that constitute the forest. A map of a forest should go no farther than the trees themselves. So also, the scope of covenant theology should caution us against facile reductions or generalizations. Whatever is concluded must be built on supporting premises, and the supporting premises must be studied as completely and thoroughly as possible.

2. Creation, Covenant, and Consequences

The second challenge to a proper balance between biblical theology and systematic theology is the fundamental distinction between creation and covenant. That which God created and made, and the ordinary course and progress of the same, can be said to be natural. That which God does beyond nature is supernatural. Covenants fall into the latter category. They are not a part of the natural created order.

By virtue of being a creature, man owes complete obedience to God. By virtue of being Creator, God is owed man's complete obedience. In this natural Creator-creature relationship, God does not owe a reward to man for his obedience. The only due response from God to man is the approval of justice. "You have done what was asked of you." But man's obedience does not merit or earn anything as a reward. Jesus taught His disciples that masters do not owe servants a reward for doing that which they are already obligated to do. And so, the servants are to say, "We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty" (Luke 17:10). The servant cannot hold out his hand for a reward as though he has placed the master in his debt.

Paul taught this to the Athenians.

24 The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, 25 nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything (Acts 17:24–25).

Elihu taught this to Job.

5 Look at the heavens, and see; and behold the clouds, which are higher than you. 6 If you have sinned, what do you accomplish against him? And if your transgressions are multiplied, what do you do to him? 7 If you are righteous, what do you give to him? Or what does he receive from your hand? 8 Your wickedness concerns a man like yourself, and your righteousness a son of man (Job 35:5–8).

And God reinforced the same.

Who has first given to me, that I should repay him? Whatever is under the whole heaven is mine (Job 41:11).

As God is not worsened by man's unrighteousness, so God is not improved by man's righteousness. Nor does He receive through man's service something that He lacked so as to necessitate a reciprocation from God to man. As Nehemiah Coxe said, "None can oblige God, or make him their Debtor, unless he condescend to oblige himself by Covenant or Promise."³

The Westminster Confession, Savoy Declaration, and Second London Baptist Confession affirm this.

The distance between God and the Creature is so great, that although reasonable Creatures do owe obedience unto him as their Creator, yet they never could have attained the reward of Life, but by some voluntary condescension on God's part, which he hath been pleased to express, by way of covenant (2LCF 7.1).⁴

Covenants, therefore, are not natural arrangements.⁵ Covenants involve the distribution of benefits, either freely promised or conditioned on some action, that otherwise would not be available to the creature, such as confirmed eternal life, the land of Canaan, kingship over Israel, or salvation in the blood of Christ. Covenants include obligations beyond those naturally required, such as the commands regarding the trees in Eden, the command of circumcision, or the command of baptism. Covenants are arrangements provided by God beyond the natural Creator-creature relationship.

³ Coxe, *A Discourse of the Covenants*, 6. "Such a priviledg, and nearness to God, as is included in Covenant-Interest, cannot immediately result from the relation which they have to God as Creatures...for the Lord owes not unto Man the Good promised in any Covenant he makes with them, antecedently."

⁴ 2LCF is following SD, which slightly modified WCF 7.1.

⁵ For an excellent discussion of this, see Richard C. Barcellos, *The Covenant of Works* (Palmdale, CA: RBAP, 2016), 36–46.

Because covenants are not natural arrangements, the specific nature and details of any given covenant are no more and no less than what God makes them to be. Their details cannot be discovered, determined, or defined apart from God's sovereign institution because they do not exist apart from God's sovereign institution. They are not natural. The parties of the covenant and their respective commitments are limited to that which God has instituted.

The distinction between creation and covenant aligns, systematically speaking, with two other distinctions. The first is the distinction between natural law and positive law. The second is the related distinction between natural religion, and instituted religion.

Natural law refers to the universal moral law of God impressed on the mind of man. Positive law refers to indifferent things prescribed or proscribed for a particular period, place, and people. In Romans 2:14–15, Paul teaches that there is an equivalent morality between Jews and Gentiles, an equivalence that connects an innate or natural knowledge of the moral law with the outward writing down of that law in the Ten Commandments at Sinai.

14 For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. 15 They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts.

Thus there is a natural law, a natural knowledge of what is right and wrong, though sinners suppress, pervert, and reject that knowledge.

In addition to these universal and abiding laws, the Scriptures speak of other laws that rose and fell with specific covenants. These are positive laws. For example, Hebrews 9:10 speaks of “regulations for the body imposed until the time of reformation.” They were laws added for a time, designed to be removed. Circumcision was once binding, and now it is not. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7:19, “For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God.” It is interesting that Paul calls a command nothing, then tells us to keep God's commands. That is because circumcision is not a moral or natural duty, and having been abrogated, it is nothing. These kinds of laws are positive laws. As they were added, so they can be subtracted.

Positive laws are a part of the New Testament as well. Consider Philippians 4:8–9,

8 Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about

these things. ⁹ What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

In verse 8, Paul directs the Philippians to those things that are inherently or naturally true, honorable, and just. They would be so for Jew or Gentile, believer or unbeliever. And then he goes on in verse 9 to refer to those things which have been instituted for their church life.

The point to be grasped is that man has natural obligations to God, but God is free to add additional commands. Those additional commands are no more and no less than what God has made them. And man's obligation is to obey them exactly.

Very much related to this is the distinction between natural religion (or natural worship) and instituted religion (or instituted worship). Many modern Christians know and believe this distinction, but under the name of the Regulative Principle of Worship. Natural religion is the worship that man owes to God by virtue of the Creator-creature relationship. This is a part of natural law. All mankind knows that they must worship God. But the way in which God is to be worshipped, i.e., instituted worship, is regulated by God's commands. As William Ames put it,

The parts of religion are two; natural worship, and voluntary or instituted worship...Instituted worship is the means ordained by the Will of God, to exercise and further natural worship...This worship [depends] upon the most free institution of God...No worship of this kind is lawful, unless it hath God for the Author, and ordainer of it...There is opposed unto this instituted worship, as unlawful, that will-worship which is devised by men.⁶

Heinrich Bullinger likewise distinguished between the law of nature which is "an instruction of the conscience, and as it were a certain direction placed by God Himself, in the minds and hearts of men, to teach them what they have to do, and what to eschew"⁷ and ecclesiastical laws which are "taken out of the holy scriptures, and not invented or brought to light by the wit of man."⁸

The regulative principle of worship, built on this foundation, sums up the truth that we are not to add to or subtract from God's instituted wor-

⁶ William Ames, *The Marrow of Sacred Divinity* (London: Edward Griffin, 1642), 249, 307–315.

⁷ Heinrich Bullinger, *Fiftie Godlie and Learned Sermons, Divided Into Five Decades, Containing The chiefe and principall points of Christian Religion, written in three seuerall Tomes or Sections* (trans. H. I.; London: Ralph Newberie, 1587), 100. (2:1).

⁸ Bullinger, *Decades*, 108.

ship, because the way in which He is to be worshipped derives only from God's revelation on the matter. We are not free to draw inferences in this arena.

Consider Cain and Abel, for whom the sacrifice of one was regarded but not the other's. If God requires the firstfruits of the flock, that does not mean, by inference, that the firstfruits of the field are likewise acceptable. Positive laws and instituted religion are not natural, though they presuppose natural obligations of obedience and worship. And therefore, positive laws are to be understood and obeyed exactly as they are instituted. As a Particular Baptist, Edward Hutchinson, said, "You dare not offer strange fire to the Lord, which he hath not commanded, nor profane an Ordinance; you know that Baptism (being a part of instituted worship, not found in nature's garden) has of itself no virtue, but what it receives from the institutor."⁹

The all-important connection of these truths for the relationship between biblical theology and systematic theology in covenant theology is that because covenants are not natural arrangements, "not found in nature's garden," there are certain senses in which they are not the proper subjects of consequential, or inferential, arguments. And thus, one must be careful not to over-systematize or draw connections and proportions from that which is what it is only by virtue of sovereign institution. To put it another way, necessary consequences don't work for covenants because there is no necessity in covenants. Covenants are not natural. They are not a part of the created order.

Necessary consequences are conclusions that must be true, by necessity.¹⁰ The conclusion is necessarily derived from necessary premises. For example, the Scriptures tell us that there is one God who alone is the sub-

⁹ Edward Hutchinson, *A Treatise Concerning the Covenant and Baptism Dialogue-wise, between a Baptist & a Poedo-Baptist, Wherein is shewed, That Believers only are the Spirituall Seed of Abraham; Fully discovering The Fallacy of the Argument drawn from the Birth Priviledge* (London: Francis Smith, 1676), v of an unpaginated preface.

¹⁰ A Particular Baptist, Thomas Delaune said A necessary consequence is that which proves the matter concluded certainly to be. Yea, *certe ita esse, nec aliter se habere posse* [It is so certain, that it could not be otherwise]. There must be *tam necessaris nexus, & indissolubilis dependentia* [So necessary a connection and indissoluble dependence], such an infallible dependence between the *subject* and *predicate*, that the *conclusion* must be *universally* and *perpetually* true. And every necessary consequence demonstrates *a priori*; For *Demonstratio est ex prioribus, notioribus, & causis* [The demonstration is composed of things prior, things better known, and the causes of the thing]. Thomas Delaune, *Truth Defended, Or a Triple Answer to the late Triumvirates Opposition in their Three Pamphlets* (London: n.p., 1677), 2.

ject of our worship and service. The Scriptures also ascribe divine activity and human worship to the Father, to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. So, we conclude by necessity that there is one God in three persons, the holy Trinity.

But there is no natural necessity in covenants. Covenants in themselves are not necessary, neither are their parties, precepts, and promises. And thus, what one covenant is has no necessary connection to what another covenants is. This clarifies the connection of the distinction between creation and covenant to the distinctions between natural law and positive law, as well as natural religion and instituted religion. As it would be illegitimate to tell everyone in the world that they must buy red cars, because that is not a part of natural law, and as it would be illegitimate to tell believers to worship God through Mary, because that is not a part of instituted worship, so it would be illegitimate to determine the nature of any given covenant, and any part of it, apart from God's institution of that covenant. On a map, the shape and size of one country is no indication of the same in another country. And to draw up a map where one country becomes the pattern for others, when there is no natural connection, will yield a false and useless map.

A Particular Baptist, Henry Lawrence, expressed this truth,

But in instituted ordinances, the reason of which lies in nothing else, but a particular will of the institutor, it is bold and unsafe to institute above what is written in the new covenant, at least in any essential thing, concerning either the parts of the ordinance, the manner of administration, and the subject of them...

The sum is, that it is unsafe arguing from one institution to another, because the inferences and consequences cannot be drawn from our reason, as not falling under the judicature of common light, or spiritual reason in the general, but of a particular distinct & independent will in Christ, from whence, not from the reason of the thing they draw all their virtue and efficacy, the reason that makes it good to us, being only the impression of his will upon it; but especially this will take place in ordinances of differing covenants, for the ordinances of each covenant are fitted to the meridian of that covenant.¹¹

Too many times, systematic conclusions are included in covenant theologies without an actual necessity in the conclusion. For example, circumcision was given to Abraham as a seal (Romans 4:11). Putting aside for now the full meaning of this text in its context, some conclude that

¹¹ Henry Lawrence, *Of Baptisme* (Rotterdam: n.p., 1646), 179–86. Spelling updated.

therefore all covenants have seals and apply the term to baptism, not as an illustration to explain baptism, but as a part of their theological system to be received and believed. Some have noted that blood is spilled in connection with a covenant and conclude therefore that apart from a blood-ritual there is no covenant. Some have noted that families are included in covenants and have concluded therefore that families are a necessary feature of all covenants.

Each of these conclusions may be true. The point is simply that they are not *necessarily* true because the features of one covenant cannot be used to determine the features of another covenant. There is no natural necessity, inference, or proportion between things instituted, things positive, things supernatural, things covenantal. And systems built on inferences derived from covenants, which are neither natural nor necessary, will therefore contain unnecessary, and likely illegitimate, consequences. As Nehemiah Coxe said, because covenants are instituted by God and do not arise from any natural state, “our Knowledge and Understanding of them, must wholly depend upon Divine Revelation...seeing the nature of them is such as transcends common Principles of Reason or natural Light.”¹²

This distinction between creation and covenant, with its methodological implications for consequences, does not deny the analogy of faith. The limitation of the details of one covenant to the institution of the covenant is not the same as the limitation of the details of one covenant to one passage of Scripture. The Word of God may speak of one covenant in many places, and they are all to be consulted and considered as constituting the final word on the matter.

Nor does this distinction teach a hyper-biblicism that refuses to see a covenant without the presence of the word. Quite to the contrary, if covenants are not natural, and if God provides precepts and promises to a party, coupled with threats, then it is this very distinction between creation and covenant that tells us that something special, something beyond nature, is happening. And to identify a covenant in such a case is the necessary consequence of the Word of God, meaning that it is the Word of God.

Neither do these methodological considerations indicate that we are disallowed from developing a systematic vocabulary of covenant theology. Rather, these considerations help us to realize that one’s system must not violate the limitations and boundaries of the nature of covenants by connecting that which is not connected, by drawing inferences and proportions where there is no natural necessity.

¹² Coxe, *A Discourse of the Covenants*, 13.

3. The Law and the Gospel

Covenant theology must pay attention to biblical theology's progress and specifics, and then build a system that reflects this. In so doing, the Scriptures teach that there is a fundamental continuity that runs through the discontinuity of a progressive story. One way in which classical covenant theology in the Reformed tradition has expressed this balance between that which stays the same and that which changes is through the distinction between the law and the gospel, considered two ways.

The first of those ways is the distinction between the law and the gospel, *substantially* or *doctrinally*. These names are used because this distinction teaches that the law and the gospel are two opposite paths of righteousness. They are opposite in kind (substance). They are opposite teachings (doctrines). This distinction reflects the biblical instruction of many passages, such as Romans 11:6, Ephesians 2:8, and Galatians 3:2. The distinction between the law and the gospel as opposite paths of righteousness was at the heart of the Reformation itself, as theologians began to see the error of Rome's conflation of faith and works.¹³ We can see this beginning with Martin Luther who said,

The law and the Gospel are two contrary doctrines...For Moses with his law is a severe exactor, requiring of us that we should work and that we should give...Contrariwise, the Gospel gives freely and requires of us nothing else but to hold out our hands and to take that which is offered. Now, to exact and to give, to take and to offer are clean contrary and cannot stand together.¹⁴

The law and the gospel are two opposite paths to a righteous standing before God: a perfect record of personal obedience, or a perfect record of imputed obedience. This substantial distinction between the law and the gospel is the foundational bedrock and common denominator of Reformed covenant theology. If rejected, the heart of the "protest" against Rome is rejected.

In addition to this substantial contrast, the Reformers also spoke of the law and the gospel in a *historical* sense. They spoke of the law and the gospel as two historical time periods, the Old and New Testaments. The

¹³ "The doctrine of Faith that justifies without works, ought to be retained unmingled, and uncorrupt in the Church, because...it is most catholic, and altogether unreprouvable." Heinrich Bullinger, *Common places of Christian Religion* (trans. John Stockwood London: Tho. East and H. Middleton, 1572), 559. (4:1).

¹⁴ Martin Luther, *A Commentarie of M. Doctor Martin Luther Vpon The Epistle of S. Paul to the Galathians* (London: Thomas Vautroullier, 1575), fol. 97. Language updated.

Old Testament is called the law in a broad sense due to the prominence and dominance of the law of Moses before the coming of Christ. And the New Testament is called the gospel in a broad sense due to the clarity afforded by the incarnation, Christ's earthly ministry, and the subsequent writings of the New Testament. So, it is common to speak of "the time of the law" and "the time of the gospel." These are simply two historical phases of one united redemptive history. John Calvin defended the legitimacy of both distinctions,

And hereby also is their error [proven wrong], which do never otherwise compare the law with the gospel, but as they compare the merits of works with the free imputation of righteousness. Although indeed this comparison of contraries be not to be rejected....But the gospel did not succeed in place of the whole law, that it should bring any diverse mean of salvation, but rather to confirm and prove to be of force, what so ever the law had promised, and to join the body to the shadows.¹⁵

Calvin not only affirms these two distinctions but explains them. He argues that the law and the gospel are indeed substantial opposites relating to righteousness, but that they were both present in the times of the law and the gospel. In other words, condemnation in Adam and salvation by grace through faith in Christ run uninterrupted throughout a progressive history.¹⁶

This is the teaching of Hebrews 11 that affirms that there were many believers in the Old Testament who believed in the same promises as New Testament believers, though the promises that they believed were revealed in more shadowy forms. The inheritance and eternal destiny of those Old Testament saints is the same as those of the New Testament. So, though there was a progressive history of revelation, there was a fundamental unchanging continuity of salvific benefits. The law and the gospel as opposite substances or doctrines run throughout the law and the gospel as successive time periods.

Covenant theology must give due attention to the continuity of salvation throughout history, as well as the progressive revelation of God in

¹⁵ John Calvin, *The Institution of Christian Religion* (London: Reinolde Wolfe and Richard Harrison, 1561), fol. 68r. II. 9. 4. Spelling updated.

¹⁶ In Calvin's context, this counteracted two extremes. It counteracted the Roman Catholic teaching that the gospel was a new law, a more gracious demand that we are able to fulfill. To the contrary, the law and the gospel are mutually exclusive opposites. They are of opposite kinds, i.e., substances. Likewise, these distinctions counteracted the extreme of some Anabaptists who denied salvation in the Old Testament. Each of these two cases conflates the substantial and historical distinction. Reformed theology upheld their balance.

the same. One way in which this balance has not been maintained in the past is by covenant theologies that equate the Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic covenants with the new covenant, or covenant of grace, based on the continuity of salvation throughout them and their contribution to the progressive revelation of Christ and his mission. The problem is that in such a system, a progression of covenants becomes one covenant, and the system therefore controls, reduces, and flattens out the progressive nature of the biblical material from which it is derived. That which stays the same has wrongly reinterpreted that which changes.

In covenant theology, where covenants are not a part of the created order, the system of covenant theology is especially and necessarily dependent on, and determined by, the biblical data. And the covenant theologian, or student of covenant theology, must maintain the proper balance between the law and the gospel, substantially and historically. Salvation is indeed by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, as it has been ever since its announcement in Genesis 3:15. But the relation of each subsequent covenant to this promise must be considered individually, and any system raised from these details must account for the ongoing progress of history.

4. History and Mystery

Closely connected to the foregoing consideration of the law and the gospel as doctrinal opposites and successive time periods is the acknowledgement of the relation between history and mystery. Paul states in several places that salvation for a people from all nations through the death and resurrection of the Messiah of Israel is the full and final plan of God for the entire world, and that this was made known prior to the advent of Christ. To use Paul's phrase, this was the "mystery of Christ" (Ephesians 3:4; Colossians 4:3). And, by virtue of being a mystery, this cosmic plan was not known in fullness prior to the death, resurrection, ascension of Christ and the subsequent pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost.

A mystery, as expressed by Paul, is not something intentionally hidden so as not to be found or understood, but rather something revealed partially, something made known incompletely. Mystery is not a means of concealing but revealing. Mystery is a mode of revelation, a way of communicating.¹⁷ And Paul rejoiced in the privilege of explaining the mystery.

¹⁷ On the concept of mystery, and an analysis of all of its uses in the Bible, see the masterful treatment of G.K. Beale and Benjamin L. Gladd, *Hidden But Now Revealed: A Biblical Theology of Mystery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014). On page 20, they define mystery as "the revelation of God's partially hidden wisdom, particularly as it concerns events occurring in the 'latter days.'"

Interpreting mystery presupposes that the interpreter is unpacking and explaining in greater fullness some antecedent revelation. This is what Paul did by making the word of God “fully known” (Colossians 1:25). It was his great pleasure and privilege to unveil and explain the master plan of God, the union of a new mankind in the new, and last, Adam awaiting the inheritance and enjoyment of a new creation for all eternity, through a new covenant.

Paul says in Colossians 1:25–27 that the “Mystery” is *Christ in the Colossians* (“Christ in you”) and that this mystery was hidden for “ages and generations.” The mystery is the inclusion of the Gentiles in the consummation of all things effected by the Jewish Messiah. In Ephesians 3:4–12, Paul tells the Ephesians that the “Mystery of Christ” was “not made known...in other generations as it has now been revealed.” This “plan” and “eternal purpose” was “hidden for ages.” Paul speaks similarly in Romans 16:25–26, where he calls the preaching of Jesus Christ the “revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages” and has now been announced to the world. This was the plan from the beginning, Paul argues in Ephesians 1:9–10, the “mystery of his will.”¹⁸

This mystery was not clearly perceived, and in most cases it was misunderstood by the very recipients of its revelation.¹⁹ Even after Christ’s resurrection, the disciples (n.b., plural) asked Jesus about the restoration of the kingdom to the Jews (Acts 1:6). Even after Pentecost, Peter needed the vision of the clean and unclean animals (Acts 10) to teach him to forget the Jewish lines of social division. The Jerusalem council shows that there were still issues among Christians regarding these matters. The books of Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, and Colossians are especially concerned with explaining what the true gospel is, and how it naturally flows from the Old Testament, *in light of questions from both Jews and Gentiles*.

The Jews struggled to understand how the blessing for the nations through the Jewish Messiah was *not* being Jewish, but rather being some-

¹⁸ Paul makes a fascinating statement in 1 Corinthians 2:7–8, that this mystery was so unknown that the rulers of this age would not have crucified Christ had they known it. If Satan knew that this was the means by which his head would be crushed under the heel of the Son, he would not have possessed Judas and precipitated the capture and crucifixion of Christ. “7 But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. 8 None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory.”

¹⁹ Beale and Gladd begin their discussion of mystery by noting the Jewish confusion and disbelief of Jesus’ mission and message. Cf. Beale and Gladd, *Hidden But Now Revealed*, 17–19.

thing distinctively not Jewish from their perspective.²⁰ The Gentiles struggled to understand how they were connected to the Jewish Messiah but not to ethnic Jews, especially in light of the fact that the vast majority of the Jews and their teachers vehemently rejected this specific element of the Christian message. The Gentiles were particularly susceptible to the argument that aligning with the Jewish Messiah meant submitting to the Jewish laws. The general question from both sides is “How is a resurrected Jewish Messiah who gathers a people from all the world, irrespective of Jewish descent or obedience to Jewish laws, the natural fulfillment of the Jewish Scriptures and religion?” Paul delighted in answering this question and prayed for wisdom to know how best to do it (Colossians 4:3–4).

The “Mystery of Christ” as used in the New Testament to explain the relation of the Old and New Testaments is of paramount importance to covenant theology and demands much greater attention in covenantal literature than it has received. If, according to Paul, the “Mystery of Christ” is that which was hidden and is now revealed, any covenant theology that does not address this in fullness is by definition deficient and does not follow the biblical pattern of explaining God’s plan for the fullness of time. It is the legend to the map of redemptive history.

Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself declared that the Old Testament speaks of Him (Luke 24:25–27). Paul reasoned about Jesus from the Old Testament (Acts 28:23). Realizing that the Messiah’s mission is made known via mystery long before His advent, one’s biblical theology and systematic theology must be balanced in light of the manner in which the Bible itself explains the relation between history and mystery. Christ is present throughout all Scripture, and all saints in all ages have derived their salvation through Him alone. But Christ was present as a mystery.

Without jumping into a full consideration of the mystery of Christ at this time, the purpose of mentioning it here is that a covenant theology’s treatment of the Old Testament *must* preserve the presence of Christ *as a mystery*. And one’s covenantal system must not so flatten out the progress of redemptive history that it effectively, even if unintentionally, unveils the mystery before its actual unveiling.

In a very real way, a proper covenant theology that is sensitive to history and mystery should confuse, though not confound, a pre-Pentecost disciple. Christ and His covenant were made known through mystery, a partial revelation fully unveiled and explained from Pentecost onward.

²⁰ Paul, of course, argues that the most Jewish thing possible is to believe in Christ, because Abraham did, and Jewish identity is nothing other than descent from Abraham (Romans 4:1–3).

Conclusion

These four methodological considerations are necessary foundations for the relationship of biblical theology and systematic theology in covenant theology. The scope of the subject cautions us against simplistic treatments. The distinction of covenants from creation qualifies the role of consequences in covenant theology. The law and the gospel considered substantially and historically remind us that there is a fundamental continuity amidst the discontinuity. And the nature of the revelation of the plan of God in Christ as a mystery requires us to resist unveiling Christ and His covenant before history itself does.

But, in addition to arriving at a proper methodology, there is a reaction much more fundamental that these considerations ought to provoke within us. When one considers the mystery of Christ and the confusion that surrounded it during Jesus' ministry, the apostles' ministry, and ever since, we ought to return to where we began—humble silence and praise. If Paul called God's purposes unsearchable, if Paul asked for prayer that he might have wisdom concerning how to explain God's plan, and if Peter acknowledged that some of the things that Paul wrote were difficult to understand, then it seems like folly even to contemplate writing on the subject.

When one considers the grand scope of covenant theology, the precision of its distinctions, and the balance of its continuity and discontinuity, the teacher, writer, and student of covenant theology should pause and hesitate long before continuing. Each one of us should pray earnestly and humbly for the Spirit's help to have the wisdom necessary to understand the depth of the riches of God's eternal purposes.²¹

Who can sail such a vast sea and not go off course? Who can climb such a tall mountain and never slip? Who can explore such a deep forest and not forget some of its paths? Who can know the mind of God and explain the mystery of His will, the mystery of Christ? Whatever success the believer has, it is only by God's assisting grace illuminating and enabling such a one to sail straight, climb high, and learn the limits of the forest. The one who takes this knowledge and draws a map for others can make no

²¹ In light of the humility that covenant theology ought to instill in its students, the way in which believers have turned it into a battlefield is unacceptable. When the revelation and explanation of the mystery of Christ becomes a source of aggression and division between brethren, a diligent self-examination and repentance is in order for all parties involved. The mystery of Christ and His covenant is not a weapon of war, means of mischief, or source of schism. It is the gospel for the nations. It is union with God and communion with all His children in one Lord, one Spirit, one baptism, one covenant.

boast and gain no glory because if they succeed, they are only highlighting the majestic glory of God's wise purposes.

33 Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! 34 "For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?" 35 "Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?" 36 For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen (Romans 11:33–36).