

Hebrews 8:7-13
Maurice Roberts

Introduction

The passage here under review refers to the subject of covenant. The term 'covenant' is found or else implied some seven or eight times in the short space of these few verses. For this reason alone the passage should be of great interest to us. This is so because the concept of covenant has been of very great importance in the development of all theology, especially in the period since the Reformation. Even more than that, we can say that the concept of covenant has been an organising principle in Reformed theological thought. The very idea of covenant, or of covenants, may be said to have been the frame of reference for the entire scheme of our Systematic Theology as a whole.

That this is so is reflected in the subtitle of a very recently published book on theology by Dr. Peter Golding. He entitles his study "Covenant Theology" and adds the sub-title "the key of theology in Reformed thought and tradition". This work runs to some 236 pages and was published as recently as 2004. Peter Golding is a disciple of the late Dr. D. M. Lloyd-Jones of Westminster Chapel. His book is recommended.

Then there is another reason why we should be interested in the whole subject of covenant. It is because of the rise, especially in America, of certain movements and ideas which show signs of moving away from orthodoxy. These include the "New Covenant Baptists" and very recently the "Auburn Avenue Presbyterians". These latter have described their theology under the phrase "The Federal Vision". "Federal" of course is just another word for "Covenant". This is a very recent development, having emerged from the 2002 Auburn Avenue Presbyterian Church (PCA) in Louisiana, USA.

Perhaps still more disturbing is a view known as "Covenantal Nomism", which is ascribed to the Jewish religion of Paul's day. This idea is traceable to E. P. Sanders, whose book "Paul and Palestinian Judaism", written in 1977, has, in the words of Principal Philip

Eveson, “revolutionised New Testament scholarship” (The Great Exchange, Philip H. Eveson, DayOne, 1996, p. 126).

The subject before us, then, could hardly be more relevant or more essential for us to grasp clearly and to understand if we are to appreciate our historic Reformed theology or to evaluate various doubtful new trends in the wider world of theology today.

I. The Significance of this Covenant passage in the Epistle to the Hebrews

To appreciate why the writer to the Hebrews places this argument about God’s covenants in this Epistle we shall need to try to discover what was the pastoral situation which he was addressing in his hearers. What circumstances were they in that required him to explain why God’s covenant had been adjusted? What sin were they in danger of falling into? The answer to these questions, I believe, is in the following evidence:

(1) He gives them grave warnings:

Hebrews 2: 1–3

3: 7–19, esp. 12–14

4: 1, 11

5: 11–12

6: 4–8

10: 23, 26–31, 37–39

12: 3–13, 25

It is clear from these exhortations and solemn warnings that the church to which this Epistle was addressed was in very grave danger. They faced the threat of apostasy itself. Not once or twice but repeatedly they are urged not to give way to unbelief. If they neglect what they had earlier heard from the apostles of Christ, confirmed as those apostolic teachings had been by miracles and charismatic signs, they will become like a field fit only for the fire and nothing more.

Nowhere in the New Testament do such fearful warnings appear as are given to this church. The very language is fearful to read: to “crucify...the Son of God afresh”, to “fall away”, to be no better than a field which “bears thorns and briers”, to be “hardened through the deceitfulness of sin”, to “sin wilfully”, to be in such a state of soul that “there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins”, to “tread under foot the Son of God”, to “count the blood of the covenant wherewith we are sanctified an unholy thing” – these and such like warnings were not said to a church with only minor errors but to a church in the utmost danger of total and final apostasy.

We are surely right to regard all these warnings as coming from God to the professing Christian church of the Jews of that period. God was about to turn from the Christ-rejecting Jewish people to open a door of faith for the Gentile world. A new day had dawned. A new chapter had opened in the purpose of God for our world. Soon the Jews would be confirmed in unbelief by the judicial abandonment of a righteous God. So Christ had warned them: “Your house is left unto you desolate” (Matt. 23:38). So Paul explained it: “The casting away of them [the Jews] is the reconciling of the world”; “as concerning the gospel, they [the Jews] are enemies for your sakes” (Rom. 11:15,28).

But at this date there was still a church of the Jews. Some thousands in Jerusalem had come to believe in Christ. But as time had gone on this Jewish church had declined markedly in faith and understanding. They were now in the last stages of spiritual declension. This Epistle to the Hebrews, I suggest, is God’s final warning before the curtain of judgment descends on them. In A.D. 70 the city and nation were destroyed. God’s people fled to Pella and there were safe. But the kingdom of God’s grace was about to be removed from Jerusalem and to be transferred to nations all over the Gentile world who would bring “forth the fruits of it” (Matt. 21:43). So much, I suggest, is indicated by the ominous “warning passages” of Hebrews.

(2) But the writer of Hebrews does much more than issue warnings. He structures the entire Epistle in such a way as to present a cumulative argument to demonstrate that the

religion of Jesus Christ is the highest and most perfect that the world has ever known. This the writer does by placing the religion of the Old Testament in its various aspects alongside the Christian religion and, by highlighting the contrasts, showing the superiority of Christianity in every way and at every point.

Let me show you some of the ways in which he does this:

1. The manner of its revelation:

The O.T. religion was revealed over some thousand years of history by varied methods and means of revelation. But Christianity was revealed by God in a single generation (chap. 1:1–2).

2. The Founder of Christianity is above even the Angels and is a Divine Being. This is argued in the first chapter by an array of quotations from the Book of Psalms (chap. 1:5–14).

3. The Founder of Christianity is above Moses, the great Hero of the Jewish People. “This man was counted worthy of more glory than Moses, inasmuch as he who hath builded the house hath more honour than the house (chap. 3:3). Moses was a faithful servant; but Christ a faithful Son” (3:5–6).

4. The Priesthood of Christ, being of the Order of Melchizedec, is of a higher order than that of the Levitical Order (chap. 5:6 f; 6:20 f). Not only so, but as a priest Christ offered a more excellent sacrifice than those offered up by the Levitical priesthood – for he offered up HIMSELF and by this one sacrifice saved all his people and put an end to the need for any further sacrifice (chap. 7:27).

5. The Covenant which God has made with his people in Christ is more excellent than that which he had made previously in the Mosaic period of history (chap. 8:7 f).

6. There is a far greater display of God’s grace and love in the religion of Jesus Christ than there was in that which Moses inaugurated (chap. 12:18–24). Whereas the Old

Covenant was accompanied with a display of God's awful power and severity, the New Covenant is preeminently an exhibition of God's mercy and love. See v.18 f compared with v. 22 f.

By the means of these and similar powerful arguments the writer to the Hebrews seeks to persuade his hearers of the fact that Christianity is in the whole of it and in every part of it superior to Old Testament religion. The sad fact however appears to be that the Jewish nation and church to which these doctrines and exhortations were first addressed did not heed the warnings but tragically drifted into that Rabbinical Judaism from which it has not extricated itself even to the present day.

For the purposes of our present study I point out how appropriate it is that the writer to the Hebrews should have made use of this argument concerning the covenants. It ought to have shown the hesitating Jewish Christians that it is folly to hanker after the old familiar forms of Old Testament worship. The whole sacrificial system and ceremonial law was but a shadow of the mediatorial work of Jesus Christ. To go back from the reality to the shadow is to light a candle at noonday. Once the Old Testament rituals had been superseded by Christ's completed work and the New Covenant age had fully arrived it was not merely ignorance to go back to Old Covenant forms; it was – and is – nothing less than apostasy. God's warning comes in these terms: "If any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him" (10:38).

History confirms what Holy Scripture affirms: "That which decayeth and waxeth old is ready to vanish away" (8:13). The New Covenant age came with the consummation of Christ's finished work – by his death, burial, resurrection, ascension and bestowal of the Spirit on Pentecost. For forty years God allowed the Old to co-exist side by side with the New. But in A.D. 70 Old Covenant worship was violently swept away at once and forever.

II. Exegesis of Hebrews 8: 7–13.

v. 6: To be precise, this paragraph begins at verse 6. It is important to notice this because verse 6 throws important light on the author's reason for introducing this argument about the old and new covenants. It is to show the superiority not just of the New Covenant but of the Priesthood of Christ over that of the Levitical Priesthood of the Old Covenant. This is clear from verse 6. We might paraphrase the general thought here like this: "If you want proof of the superiority of Christ's priesthood over the Levitical priesthood, you have it staring you in the face when you examine the terms of the New Covenant as that is revealed by God in the prophecy of Jeremiah". So the interest here in covenant is not confined to covenant as such but to covenant as it is indicative of a higher and more effectual priesthood.

2. The term "covenant" used so often in this section is "a word of much more comprehensive meaning than the English term by which it is translated. It signifies an arrangement, a constitution, an order of things, an economy" (John Brown, Commentary on Hebrews, p. 367).

John Owen the Puritan states that the Hebrew word for "covenant" (BERITH) does not merely mean "a compact properly so called, but a free, gratuitous promise also" (Commentary on Hebrews, vol. 6, p. 135). He thinks that the word DIATHEKE in Greek "signifies a 'covenant' improperly; properly it is a 'testamentary disposition'" (Ibid.) A covenant properly, he says, is in Greek SYNTHEKE. It may well be that the New Testament writers avoid the word SYNTHEKE and universally use DIATHEKE to avoid implying that God's covenant of grace has strict conditions attached to it. All orthodox writers are concerned to say that the Covenant of Grace does not have strict conditions which we have to fulfil. Owen puts it like this: "The covenant of grace, as reduced into the form of a testament, confirmed by the blood of Christ, doth not depend on any condition or qualification in our persons, but on a free grant and donation of God; and so do all the good things prepared in it" (Op. cit., p. 138).

The statement made in verse 7 therefore, when it calls the New Covenant “better”, is contrasting the benefits enjoyed by Israel and Judah under the promises and provisions of that Old Covenant with the “better” benefits of those who now live under the Christian dispensation.

What were the benefits promised to those who lived under that Old Covenant? (1) a country to live in (2) anticipation of God’s blessing if they obeyed his revealed will (3) a revealed pattern of worship suited to the people of God in that age of the world (4) expectation of the coming of the Messiah, who would be born from that nation (5) the republication of God’s Moral Law as the rule of their lives (6) a Civil Law inspired by God for the government of their national life till the Messiah came. These and the like were great benefits. But in what respects was this Old Covenant deficient, or inadequate? In these respects: (1) It did not of itself guarantee the eternal salvation of any who lived under it. In the Old Covenant age many were saved and many more (probably) were lost eternally. The point is: the Old Covenant did not guarantee the salvation of those who lived under it, as the New Covenant does; (2) It did not of itself alter the nature or change the spiritual condition of those who were under it. In New Testament language, “They are not all Israel who are of Israel” (Rom. 9:6). On the other hand, the New Covenant, which is made in Christ with the elect, is effectual in bringing all its subjects into a state of grace and keeping them in it till they all reach a state of glory.

In verse 6 the question arises: Who is the “mediator” meant in O.T. times? I think there are 2 possibilities: (1) Moses (I think this is Owen’s view) (2) The High Priests in succession (John Brown’s view (Op. cit., p. 367)). I leave this open for discussion later.

SUM OF v. 6: Looked at from every angle, the Christian faith is superior to what preceded it. It has a better Mediator, a better covenant and better promises.

v. 7: The argument here is from first principles. The very fact that a second covenant has been promised by God and made the subject of O.T. prophecy should be enough to convince us that there was an inherent weakness in the first covenant. If the first had been perfect there would have been no need for the second.

The “fault” in the first covenant was just this, in the words of John Brown: “It could not expiate moral guilt; it could not wash away moral pollution; it could not justify, it could not sanctify, it could not save” (Op. cit., p. 370). In these and similar respects it was imperfect. “The law made nothing perfect”, as the writer to the Hebrews himself puts it (Heb. 7:19).

NOTE: The author of Hebrews cannot of course mean by this expression that none were saved in the period before Christ. Rather, his meaning is that those in the period before Christ who were saved were so in virtue of what Christ was to do when he came and not in view of the inherent power of the law. That some were saved in the earlier period he makes very clear in chapter 11.

It was the folly of the Jewish leaders of this period of history that they imagined that salvation would come to men by a strict observance of the law.

vv. 8 – 12 : The writer here gives an extended quotation from Jeremiah 31:31–34.

He prefixes this quotation with the information that God “found fault with them” (v. 8).

This has been taken in different ways by commentators:

- (1) with the Jews of old;
- (2) with the terms of the Old Covenant. Owen takes the former view; Brown the latter.

F. F. Bruce’s comment on this early part of v. 8 is to this effect: “‘He saith’ in the sentence which introduces the quotation means ‘God says’ (cf. chp. 10:15, where the same oracle is introduced as the Holy Spirit’s witness); ‘finding fault with them’ refers to the terms in which the oracle itself charges the Israelites with breaking God’s earlier covenant” (Commentary on Hebrews, p. 169–170).

My personal view however is that Brown is correct. Surely God is here said to find fault with the Old Covenant as such. This he does when in Jeremiah 31:31–34 he announces that he will make a new covenant with his people.

The extensive quotation: several things are here to be observed:

(1) The quotation does not exactly correspond with the Hebrew of Jeremiah here or with the Septuagint Greek. To say this is to say that as an inspired writer he expresses the mind of God in Jeremiah 31 perfectly but in rather different words. O.T. quotations in the N.T. are often slightly varied in wording but they always convey the mind of God. Such variation is a help to us and acts as a commentary on the original passages quoted. Such quotations are extremely rich and frequent in this Epistle as one would expect where an inspired writer is expounding the truth of the gospel to a people steeped in the O.T. scriptures.

(2) The covenant which is referred to as “new” here cannot be the covenant which Josiah made but must refer to the Christian religion and to nothing else.

(3) The names of those with whom this new covenant was to be made are said to be “the house of Israel and the house of Judah” (v. 8). This expression may be understood in either of two ways:

- (1) as representing the elect of all nations in N.T. times – spoken of as ‘Israel’ and ‘Judah’ in a spiritual but not in an ethnic sense;
- (2) as meaning ethnic Israel or Jewry, who would one day be grafted into their own olive tree again at a date still future (see Brown, Op. cit., p. 372). This would fit Rom. 11.

(4) The “newness” of this covenant – in what does it consist? This is another point which it will be profitable to have discussion, I would suggest. But the “newness” may well be thought to consist in a number of factors:

- (1) the efficacy of the New Covenant to bring about a spiritual change in the souls of men: “Impart this new heart” (F. F. Bruce).
- (2) the eternal as well as spiritual character of it. This is well brought out by John Brown: “Into that [old] covenant they were brought as natural descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; into this [i.e. the new covenant] they will be brought by walking in the steps of these patriarchs’ faith. That [old] covenant was external, and temporary; this [new one] is spiritual and eternal (Op. cit., p. 372).
- (3) Fisher in his Catechism answers the question, Why is the covenant of grace called the new covenant? in this way: “Because it is always to remain in its prime and vigour, without the least change or alteration” (1998 Ed., p. 390).
- (4) We need also to take account of the words of Calvin, who says: “Here is expressed the difference between the covenant that then existed and the new one...The Prophet [Jeremiah] might have otherwise said only, ‘I will renew the covenant which through your fault has come to nothing’; but he now expressly declares that it would be one unlike the former’ (Commentary on Hebrews, p. 188).

In these things then we may think that the covenant’s newness consists: its efficacy, its ability to save all who are in it, its abiding vigour and its essentially different character from the old covenant.

(5) The benefits of this New Covenant are by the writer stated to be these:

- (1) the law of God would be inscribed not on tables of stone as before, but on fleshy tables of the heart;
- (2) that God would be their God and those in the covenant would be God’s people really and spiritually; not just outwardly or nominally;
- (3) that all would be taught by God and none would need to be taught by his fellow. This must be meant in the sense that, however much they helped one

- another, all the elect would receive supernatural illumination directly from God's Spirit and none would be left in ignorance of God as Saviour and Lord;
- (4) all and every sin, and that of every kind, will be pardoned by God in those who are in his New Covenant. This includes all sins done in their pre-conversion and post-converted states.

Such then are the marvelous terms of this New Covenant in Christ which now excels the Old one and supersedes it.

NOTE: The Old Covenant has therefore ceased to exist. Whoever professes to worship or serve God now out of reverence to Moses' law or the rituals of the Old Testament need to have it pointed out to them that they worship God after a manner that is now out-of-date and, indeed, no longer existant. So this passage on the two covenants concludes: What has decayed and waxed old has in fact completely vanished away.

III. The Covenants here Referred to and the Importance of "Covenant" in Theology

1. Hebrews 8: 6–13 refers to two covenants. The question now arises: What two covenants are here contrasted one with another? The possibilities are the following:

(1) The Covenant of Works made with Adam contrasted with the Covenant of Grace made with us in Christ.

It might be argued that there are several points in favour of this view:

- (1) the contrast here between one Covenant that is broken and one that will be effectual;
- (2) the two familiar passages in Rom. 5: 12–19 and I Cor. 15: 21–22, where Paul contrasts Adam and Christ in a manner that might appear to be analogous;
- (3) the clear evidence here that one covenant has not got the advantage of Christ's mediation, while the other has.

(2) The Covenant of Sinai (however it is viewed) contrasted with the Covenant of Grace made with us in Christ.

The arguments for this view appear to be stronger than for the previous view:

- (1) The decaying covenant here is one which was still visible but about to vanish. This could appropriately be said of the Sinaitic covenant but not of that made with Adam and broken some thousands of years before this time;
- (2) The decaying covenant is explicitly said to have been made when God took Israel and Judah out of Egypt (v. 9). This could only be a reference to the Covenant at Sinai.
- (3) references to Moses, Aaron, sacrifice, etc.

SUM: I submit that the contrast is between the Covenant at Sinai and the Gospel Covenant. The Covenant of Works made with Adam is not what is in view here – at least, not directly.

2. Our next concern is to determine what sort of covenant the Sinaitic Covenant was: a covenant of works? a covenant of grace? or in some sense both? To put the matter in another way, How is the Covenant of Sinai related to the Covenant of Grace - clearly, our passage here makes it evident that these two covenants differ significantly one from another. How are we to define this relationship?

The following opinions have been held on this:

- (1) Some of the Puritans took the view that the covenant at Sinai (referred to by Sinclair Ferguson as 'the fourth covenant' in his excellent book "John Owen on the Christian Life", p. 28) "was simply the covenant of works, and that its great principle was 'Do this and live'".
- (2) Other of the Puritans followed Calvin in regarding the Sinaitic covenant as the covenant of grace.

(3) John Owen was reluctant to adopt this latter view. He adopted what Sinclair Ferguson calls “a third, mediating position” (Op. cit., p. 28). Owen’s attitude to the Sinaitic covenant may be summarised in the following points:

- (1) Man cannot please God now through the broken Covenant of Works.
- (2) Even so, “The law [of Sinai] thus declared and written by him [God] was the same...materially, and for the substance of it, with the law of our creation, or the original rule of our covenant obedience unto God” (Owen, Works 19: 388).
- (3) Yet, this does not mean to say that the [Sinaitic] law is the covenant of works “absolutely”.
- (4) To be more precise, Owen said that, though at Sinai there was a “renovation of the first covenant [i.e. of works] materially unto them, they were so far freed from its covenant terms as that they had a relief provided against which they could not answer to it, with the consequences thereof” (Owen, 19: 389).

SUM: Owen took the view that the people with whom God made the Sinaitic covenant were “in one sense under the covenant of grace, and yet in a dispensation governed by the principles of the covenant of works” (Sinclair Ferguson, Op. cit., p. 29). Stating the same thing in other words, Sinclair Ferguson says: “Sinai should not then be thought of as the covenant of works; but Sinai does involve a renewal of the principles which partly constituted the covenant of works” (Ibid.).

Those who wish to pursue these and related studies should read the following books especially: “John Owen on the Christian Life” by S. B. Ferguson. “The Grace of Law” by Ernest Kevan. No doubt, these points will be taken up in a moment for discussion.

If I may express my own view on the Sinaitic Covenant I would put it like this:

- (1) It was primarily a covenant of grace. A covenant of works is of no use at all to sinners. Once the covenant of works made with Adam was broken it remained in force, and ever will remain in force, as the reason why God must punish unconverted sinners and visit

them all in the end with death in all its terrible forms. So Sinai was fundamentally an expression of the covenant of grace.

(2) But it was a revelation of the covenant of grace which was by God deliberately mixed with much fear. This is seen in the terrifying theophany on Mount Sinai when it was given. It is also seen in the severe punishments prescribed by God in the Judicial Law.

(3) Its nature was preparatory to this Christian era, in which the covenant of grace is revealed with less of fear and more display of God's love.

(4) There was in the worship of the Sinaitic covenant an intentional burdensomeness. This involved endless sacrifices with their endless reminder of sin and with their inability to "make the comers thereunto perfect" (Heb. 10:2).

(5) Taking the nation of Israel as a whole, the Covenant at Sinai was to true believers in Israel a covenant of grace and salvation. But at the very same time, that same covenant at Sinai was to unbelievers in Israel misunderstood and misconstrued as a covenant of works. It was this capital error which drew from Christ his extremely stern condemnation of the religion of the Pharisees. Their error was to suppose their God-given religion to be a system of salvation by works and by merit. They were blind to the great central truth of God's covenant with their nation – that it was first and above all else a religion of free grace.

NOTE: We might note in the passing that the exact same error is made, whether by Liberals or Roman Catholics, when they even turn Christianity itself into a religion of salvation by human works and human merit.

This leads us to say that the whole concept of Covenant has, especially since the Protestant Reformation, been of major importance. Our subject requires that something, however briefly, be said on this subject:

1. Professor John Murray draws attention to the above point in the words: “Covenant theology denotes a development of theological thought and construction within the Reformed or Calvinistic tradition...Calvinistic theology is...a distinguishing feature of the Reformed tradition because the idea of covenant came to be an organising principle in terms of which the relations of God to men were construed: (The Encyclopedia of Christianity, vol. 3, pp. 199–200).
2. “Covenant” in theology is conceived of as an agreement between parties.
3. The earliest Reformed treatise on the theme of covenant is that of Henry Bullinger in 1534.
4. Typically theologians look at this theme under four headings: (1) the contracting parties, i.e. God and man; (2) the conditions of the covenant; (3) the promises of the covenant; and (4) the threatenings of the covenant.
5. One area of dispute over the centuries has been on the question of the “conditions” of the Covenant of Grace. It is perhaps best in this regard to view the covenant of grace as having as its conditions repentance and faith in Christ. However it should be added that God, in the covenant of grace, not only requires but also provides to the sinner these conditions, since faith and repentance are the gift of God. This calls to mind the following prayer of Augustine of Hippo: “Grant what thou commandest, and command what thou wilt”. This subject became extremely important in the Marrow Controversy of the 1720’s and ‘30’s.
6. It should be noted that the early post-Reformation theologians did not construe the relation of God to unfallen Adam as a covenant – still less as a covenant of works. In this early period the creeds and confessions used the term “covenant” only in reference to the provisions made by God for man’s redemption. Calvin, for example, did maintain that Adam ruined all mankind when he ruined himself. But he did not refer to “the Adamic constitution as a covenant of works or a law” (John Murray’s words, Op. cit., p. 201).

7. The earliest reference to a covenant of works made by God with Adam – a doctrine so familiar to us from the Westminster Standards – appears to be in Gaspar Olevianus. The doctrine of the covenant of works appears clearly in Robert Rollock at the close of the sixteenth century. Rollock had as a premise to his theological thought that “God speaks nothing to man without covenant” (J. Murray, Op. cit., p. 202). From this date on the concept of the covenant of works is found firmly established in Reformed Theology.

8. The first time the concept of a covenant of works appeared in a creed was in The Irish Articles of 1615.

9. The two covenants contrasted in Hebrews 8 were, as we have argued, those of Sinai and the Christian gospel. It is worth noting that Calvin took this view. In his Institutes he devotes two chapters to the similarities and differences between the Sinaitic and the New Covenants. Reformed Theology has followed the pattern of Calvin’s thought. That is to say, these two covenants are regarded as one in substance but different in the mode of their administration.

10. It remains to be added to this brief note on the history of “covenant” in Reformed Theology, that the concept of a Covenant of Redemption between the three Persons of the Godhead, did not emerge until the middle of the seventeenth century. This distinct mode of thought is expounded fully in Johannes Cocceius, Francis Turretine and Herman Witsius, among many others. “In Samuel Rutherford the designation ‘Covenant of Redemption’ is the characteristic one”, according to Professor J. Murray (Op. cit., p. 213).

We pass to a final section in which notice is taken of some recent departures from orthodox views of the covenant in some professedly evangelical churches.

IV. Some Recent Misapplications of the Concept of the Covenants

In the time remaining I shall confine myself to a brief statement of these influential developments over recent years. These are:

- (1) The New Perspective on Paul;
- (2) New Covenant Theology; and
- (3) The Federal Vision – alternatively known as The Auburn Avenue Theology.

1. The “New Perspective” on Paul

Dr. Tom Wright, now Bishop of Durham, following the line of thought introduced by E. P. Sanders in his book “Paul and Palestinian Judaism” (1977), has given a new meaning to the concept of justification. The emphasis, says Tom Wright, falls not on God’s judicial pronouncement that a sinner by faith in Christ is deemed to be righteous. Rather, justification is, according to Wright and others who hold to this “New Perspective”, to be viewed as “covenant community status” (P. Eveson’s phrase in “The Great Exchange”, 1996, p. 143). So then, a justified person is now re-defined as one who is in the membership of God’s covenant people. Put briefly, the sinner gets into God’s covenant by faith; but he stays in it by his good works. James Dunn, another “New Perspective” theologian, considers the Damascus Road Experience of Paul not as his conversion but as a commissioning to take the gospel to the Gentiles. It is very clear that Wright, Dunn, McGrath and other “Covenant Nomists” are theological revisionists, not the least harm of whose teaching is that it is giving a place to human works where the New Testament gives none.

I recommend “The Great Exchange” by Philip Eveson as a sound response to this “New Perspective” teaching.

2. “New Covenant Theology”

This is a recent movement mainly among Reformed Baptists. One of its leaders is John Reisinger, brother of Ernie Reisinger. Among the divergent views taught by this group are the following ideas:

- (1) The Ten Commandments are the old covenant made with Israel at Sinai.

- (2) The view that O.T. laws can be divided into moral, ceremonial and judicial is wrong. John Reisinger writes: “Everything that God commands is ‘moral law’ to the individual commanded” (“Tables of Stone”, quoted by Dr. Alan Cairns in his Dictionary of Theological Terms, 2002, p. 303).
- (3) The Decalogue is not a rule of life for Christians in the covenant of grace.
- (4) Christ as our new Lawgiver has enlarged, expanded and raised the standard of holiness expressed in the Ten Commandments.
- (5) O.T. believers are saved by grace through faith in Christ but are not included in the Church.
- (6) O.T. believers are part of Christ’s body and bride, but not of his Church.
- (7) Baptism is not now the N.T. counterpart to circumcision.
- (8) There are no such things as “covenant children”.
- (9) There is no place for infant baptism in the N.T. church.

My own suspicion is that the unorthodox elements in this scheme of theology have been brought in to bolster arguments used by Presbyterians in support of infant baptism. To be fair, “New Covenant Theology” is not so antinomian as it appears to be on first acquaintance. It is gratifying to know that John Reisinger’s view of the Moral Law is comprehensively answered in the excellent book on that subject by his own brother Ernie Reisinger. I especially recommend his book “The Law and the Gospel”, Presbyterian and Reformed, 1997.

New Covenant Baptists attempt to steer a middle course between Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism. One recent book of great usefulness in understanding and refuting this view is: “In Defense of the Decalogue” by Richard C. Barcellos (Winepress Publishing, PO Box 428, Enumclaw, WA 98022 USA. ISBN 0 9654955 9 0).

3. The Federal Vision Teaching

This is also referred to as “The Auburn Avenue Theology” from a PCA Church in Louisiana, USA, located in a street in the town of Monroe of that name. This teaching is

extremely new. It may be said to have begun in 2002. However in the USA and Canada it is creating havoc. It cannot be long before its influence will also be felt over here in the UK.

(1) The Federal Vision emphasises the external aspect of grace, i.e. Baptism. The covenant is represented as having “objectivity”. By birth alone the children of believers are thought of as being blessed with salvation. It is felt to be repulsive to evangelise covenant children or to seek to lead them to a personal faith in Christ. To argue that a child must have faith is to say that salvation is not really of grace.

(2) Emphasis is placed not on the need for faith, repentance and the new birth, so much as on the need for “faithfulness” within the covenant. This seems to imply a place for works as essential for salvation. It is hard to believe that this emphasis would not lead to mere outward, nominal Christianity.

(3) This emphasis on “faithfulness” as a condition for realising the blessing of the covenant is shared with the “New Perspective” and the writings of Norman Shepherd, whose views on justification are known widely to be faulty.

(4) Federal Vision writings abound in references to covenant but they do not give sufficient prominence to the Lord Jesus Christ.

(5) In my judgment the Federal Vision, if not refuted, will reduce evangelical churches to sheer nominalism in the next generation.

The Federal Vision, I believe, is the next Oxford Movement – not in the Anglican Church but among Presbyterian churches. The book to read on this subject is: “The Auburn Avenue Theology – Pros and Cons” published by Knox Theological Seminary, Fort Lauderdale, Florida, USA, dated 2004.