

Pascal Denault

**The Distinctiveness of Baptist Covenant Theology: A Comparison Between Seventeenth-Century Particular Baptist and Paedobaptist Federalism**

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Pascal Denault, the pastor of a Reformed Baptist Church *l'Église évangélique de St-Jérôme*, wrote a book that deals with the historical research of one of the neglected but very valuable theological currents, that of a Baptist Covenant Theology. Covenant Theology (also known as *federalism*) is a biblical interpretive framework that uses the theological idea of a covenant as its organizing theological principle, and is mainly associated with paedobaptist Reformed churches, i. e., churches that baptize not only those who profess faith, but children of believers also.

Meanwhile, it is relatively unknown that Particular (Calvinistic) Baptists of the seventeenth century developed their own stream of Covenant Theology which followed the main outline of mainstream federalism, but inserted some changes that greatly reflected on their ecclesiology, and especially on their theology of baptism. Those Baptist pastors and theologians thought that their current of federalism not only ensured the correct understanding of ecclesiology and the correct answer to the question “Who are proper recipients of the sacrament of baptism?” (6) – but that it also serves as a friendly corrective to the main current of federalism, a corrective originating more naturally from the study of Scriptures.

In his introduction, pastor Denault explains the terminology that will be used, and then briefly introduces the leading proponents of paedobaptist and credobaptist federalism. For example, among the first we meet William Ames, Herman Witsius, Samuel Petto and Francis Turretin, while among the Baptists we meet John Spilsbury, John Bunjan, Nehemiah Cox and Benjamin Keach. It is also interesting that the author aligns John Owen, probably the most famous puritan theologian, who was a Presbyterian at first, but later in life became a paedobaptist Congregationalist, with theologians representing a Baptist branch of federalism. According to the author, his reason for doing so is “progression in Owen’s thinking.” (21) Namely, his Covenant Theology assumes the contours of Baptist Covenant Theology to such an extent that the fact of Owen’s paedobaptism is considered “inconsequential” (20). On the contrary, Baptist federalists thought that „Owen, without realizing it, was destroying Presbyterian federalism in his writing.“ (21)

First chapter (27-33) is about the *Covenant of Works*. “The Puritans considered that the presence of a promise and of a threat accompanying the commandment in Genesis 2.16-17 was an indication that this was not a simple law, but a covenant” (27) between God and Adam. “The Covenant of Works had a simple way of functioning: if Adam had obeyed, he and his posterity after him would have retained life and would have been sealed in justice; but his disobedience marked the entrance of death into the world. The fall placed Adam and all of his posterity under condemnation.” (28) Both Presbyterian and Baptist federalists agree upon the nature and function of the Covenant of Works, but nonetheless they diverge when it comes to the relation between the Covenant of Works and the Old Covenant. Paedobaptists considered the Old Covenant to be an administration of the Covenant of Grace. In other

words, they believed that the Covenant of Grace had two administrations: the Old and the New Covenant. On the other hand, Baptists regarded the Old and the New Covenant as opposed to each other, and therefore different from each other, not only by the degree of grace involved, but also by their very “substance and kind.” According to Denault, “For the paedobaptists, the expression ‘the curse of the law’ referred to the Covenant of Works, while for the Baptists, it referred to the Covenant of Works, but as being reaffirmed in the Old Covenant.” (32)

Chapter two (35-97) dives into the analysis of *the Covenant of Grace*. The author explains that 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. All those who were objects of God’s grace were in the Covenant of Grace.” (35) In order to understand the implications of the Covenant of Grace, Denault brings up the example of Socinians, who did not believe that people were saved through faith in Christ during both Testaments. Rather, they thought that Old Testament sacrifices were not only typological pointers to Christ, but that they have intrinsically cleansed people from their sins (36-37). As a reaction to this view, “the reformed had 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.” (37) Therefore, they believed that covenants with Abraham, Moses and David were merely various administrations of the Covenant of Grace that was revealed to Adam and Eve in Genesis 3:15.

Paedobaptists thus held to their “one covenant under two administrations” model, while in the same time differentiating between administrations of the Covenant and its substance. In other words, it is possible to be a part of the Covenant of Grace, but to be excluded from the its substance. This distinguishing between the administration and the substance permitted the Presbyterians to admit two types of people being members of the Covenant of Grace: “regenerated and the unregenerate.” (49) Naturally, this meant that the Covenant of Grace may be formally joined not only by those who truly *believe*, but also by their children (although Baptists questioned why then is it not lawful for believers’ slaves and servants to join the New Covenant, as was the case with the Old Covenant).

Despite this disagreement on the nature of the Covenant of Grace, Denault shows that Particular Baptists had always wanted to preserve the unity with their paedobaptist brethren (55). However, this was made difficult by the fact that to the Presbyterians, because of baptism of believers only and the difference in admission into the Covenant, Baptists were too much alike the Socinians, Anabaptists and the Arminians (38). For this very reason, Baptists endeavored to emphasize the unity of the Covenant of Grace in both Testaments (56) in terms of the substance of salvation, which was the same in both Testaments (57). Nevertheless, Baptists discarded the Presbyterian model of the Covenant of Grace as one covenant under two administrations, and they have put forward their own. Under this model they asserted that “before the arrival of the New Covenant, the Covenant of Grace was not formally given, but only announced and promised (revealed).” (62) In other words, as opposed to Presbyterian federalism which could be summarized as “*one covenant under two administrations*,” Baptist federalism would then read: „*one covenant revealed progressively and concluded formally*

*under the New Covenant* .“ (63, italics are author’s). Moreover, Baptists believed that the New Covenant represents the accomplishment of the promise, namely, the accomplishment of the Covenant of Grace (63). This led them to a different hermeneutics and different theological terms. With regards to hermeneutics, Baptists regarded that their system of federalism allows the Scripture to interpret itself, while paedobaptists “transgressed this rule by interpreting the biblical covenants based on a theological concept rather than on revelation.” (79) Unlike the paedobaptists, who were too rigid in their theology, Baptists had a flexibility which enabled them to be balanced in their theology, both with regard to paedobaptists and with regard to Socinians (82). In terms of theology as a natural outcome of hermeneutics (83), Baptists regarded that there is only one category of people who are within the Covenant of Grace – born again believers – and, therefore, only one manner of entry into the Covenant, through faith. In other words, “only faith constituted a valid entry into the Covenant of Grace.” (85) Another theological outcome of the Baptist model was their own understanding of the effectiveness of grace in the Covenant of Grace. They regarded that it is not possible for the members of the Covenant of Grace *not* to end up in eternal glory (89). In turn, paedobaptists believed that not all members of the Covenant of Grace were elected unto salvation. Baptists saw a problem with that, since in this case “the efficacy of the grace of salvation could not reach out endlessly to the people of the Covenant even if the people had Christ as a mediator,” because under it “the reach of the death of Christ (was extended) to all the members of the covenant, but limited (in) its salvific efficacy to the elect.” (91) In contrast, Baptists, along with their oblivious paedobaptist ally, John Owen, deemed that “the New Covenant is made with them alone who effectually and eventually are made partakers of the grace of it.” (93, the author cites John Owen’s *An Exposition of Hebrews 8:6-13*, 303) Lastly, Baptists considered the Covenant of Grace to be absolutely unconditional (96).

In chapter three (99-143) Denault specially addresses the *Old Covenant*, namely, the Sinaitic Covenant. The main controversial issue between Presbyterians and Particular Baptists in the seventeenth century related to the Old Covenant was about the question of its nature. While paedobaptists mainly thought that the Old Covenant was *de facto* the first administration of the Covenant of Grace, Baptists believed that the Old Covenant was, by its nature, a Covenant of Works, which “could exist in parallel and simultaneously with the Covenant of Grace without compromising it.” (102) This they regarded based upon the fact that in the Old Covenant obedience was regarded as a condition for the promised inheritance, while in the Covenant of Grace obedience is always the result of the blessing received through the Covenant, which makes it unconditional (103). Of course, Baptists did not deny that the Old Covenant contained deeds of God’s grace and goodwill (106). Yet, the difference between the New Covenant as a Covenant of Grace and the Old Covenant as a Covenant of Works was in the fact that the New Covenant “gives what God orders” (109) and thus „successfully produces salvation in all its members, because it is unconditional.” (110)

Further, the author deals with the issue of the Abrahamic Covenant, also considered by the paedobaptists a Covenant of Grace, because of the promises given through it which were fulfilled in the New Covenant. Therein Baptists assert the nature of the Covenant of Grace, whereby Abraham received the promise which indeed *revealed* the Covenant of Grace to him,

but was not *concluded* until the New Covenant (116). Furthermore, they asserted the dualistic nature of those who belonged to the Abrahamic Covenant. Their main passage was Galatians 4:22-31, from which Baptists like Nehemiah Cox concluded that Abraham did not have one posterity of a mixed nature (converted and unconverted), but two distinct posterities with their respective promises (120). We see the same thing in the Mosaic Covenant, which was “a progression of the covenant of circumcision.” (129) According to Particular Baptists, the purpose behind the Mosaic Covenant was threefold: (a) to preserve “both the messianic lineage and the Covenant of Grace,” (b) to point “typologically towards Christ,” and (c) to imprison “everything under sin in order that the only means to obtain the promised inheritance was through faith in Christ.” (130) Indeed, Baptists thought that the nature of the Old Covenant as a Covenant of Works was extremely important in order to understand that it existed “not so that Israel would look for life by this means, but so that Christ would accomplish it.” (139) In other words, “God, therefore, reaffirmed the Covenant of Works in another covenant that allowed for a righteous person to substitute himself for sinners,” (140) and this provided Christ with “a covenantal frame to bring about redemption.” (143)

The last chapter (145-154) is on *the New Covenant*. This relatively short chapter is almost completely devoted to the manner whereby Baptist Covenant Theology emphasizes the *newness* of the New Covenant, unlike the Presbyterians who did not really believe that “the New Covenant was new.” (145) The main difference between the Old and the New Covenant pertained to the conditional nature of the Old Covenant and the unconditional nature of the New Covenant. “The promises of the Old Covenant were preceded by an ‘if’ that made them conditional on man’s obedience, while the promises of the New Covenant were marked by a divine monergism.” (148) Moreover, the backbone of the unconditional nature of the New Covenant was in the fact that Christ fulfilled the conditions of the Covenant of Works which was confirmed in the Old Covenant. “Thus, the New Covenant was unconditional for all its members, but it was not for its mediator: Christ.” (149) Further, the New Covenant promises that all its members would “participate in the substance of the Covenant of Grace.” (153) This substance of the Covenant of Grace pertained to three blessings: “the Law written on the heart (regeneration), the personal and saving knowledge of God and the forgiveness of sins.” (153) Furthermore, God made sure to express that this substance will not be inherited by only a part of His people, but by all of them, in Jeremiah 31:34: “And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”

In the end, it can be concluded that this book by pastor Denault is an important contribution to the development of contemporary protestant theological thought in general and Baptist federalism in particular. This is a time of great theological wanderings, even in Bible-respecting conservative thought. For example, similar questions to these have been raised by Presbyterian theologians (namely, Kline vs. Murray/Gaffin debate), and then there is also the emergence of the *Progressive Dispensationalism* and the *New Covenant Theology*, indicating that there is a certain discontentment with existing theological systems. Since “there is nothing new under the sun” (Ecc. 1:9), all students of theology and the Bible can benefit from

reading *The Distinctiveness of Baptist Covenant Theology* and historical Particular Baptist writings, and perhaps find some contemporary questions already answered.

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