

# **A Covenantal Ontology of the Triune God**

An Attempt to Expound the Relationship between the Covenant and Ontology  
and Answer Richard Phillips' Criticisms of My Views

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July, 2005

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## Preface

This essay is an attempt to develop further my thinking about the Trinitarian covenant while I respond to Richard Phillips' various criticisms of my books on the Trinity, especially the criticisms that the notion of a covenant among the Persons of the Trinity is mere speculation and that my views of Trinitarian ontology were unclear and confused. With regard to the first, I have presented more extensive evidence of a covenant relationships among the persons of the trinity. Included in that evidence is a suggested revision of the way we view the ontology of the Triune God. I hope that this essay can make some contribution toward the development of a distinctly Reformed view of the Trinity.

What I believe to be the distinctly Reformed contribution is a covenantal view of the Trinity. To the best of my knowledge that view was first explicitly formulated by Abraham Kuyper, but insofar as it is an extension of the doctrine of the covenant of Redemption, its roots sink deep into Reformed history. Herman Hoeksema followed Kuyper's view and translated relevant portions of Kuyper's work into English. Read in the light of Kuyper's view, Van Til's exposition of the Trinity appears, at least in places, to be following Kuyper.

James Jordan introduced the covenantal view of the Trinity to me and discussion on the Biblical Horizons email list with Jordan, Jeffrey Meyers, Peter Leithart, and Joel Garver has helped me to think through various aspects of Kuyper's view of the Trinity. Joel Garver, in particular, pointed out what he believed to be a legitimate complaint among Richard Phillips' criticisms of my book *The Eternal Covenant*. Joel agreed with Phillips that I had not expounded the relationship between the covenant and ontology very well. One of the main purposes of this paper is to attempt to repair that fault. Joel has offered helpful suggestions and interaction with earlier work on this essay, but he is not responsible for the form this essay takes and I am not sure that I have answered his criticisms adequately.

Hopefully, I have made a step in the right direction, because the issue itself is important. I believe a covenantal view of the Trinity unites a covenantal systematic theology in the doctrine of God, unites Biblical and systematic theology in the doctrine of the covenant, which functions as the center of each, and unites theology and worship in the vision of a Triune God of love who renews His covenant with us in our weekly communion with Him.

## **Arguing for a Covenant Among the Three Persons**

That there is a covenant among the Persons of the Trinity has been taken for granted in Reformed theology for hundreds of years.<sup>1</sup> No one doubts or denies this, even though they call it by different names. But this traditional doctrine has not developed to a truly Trinitarian insight nor has it provided the central organizing structure for Reformed theology, in spite of the fact that Reformed theology is most distinctively a theocentric theology. I showed in a previous essay that as a matter of fact, the covenant among the Persons of the Trinity is often presented as if it were binitarian instead of Trinitarian, but the real problem is that it is focused entirely on the salvation of the elect. It is not conceived of as fundamental to the relationships of the three divine Persons. What I argued in my essay is that the traditional Reformed doctrine of a covenant among the Persons of the Trinity must be refined so that the covenant is not seen merely as a means for an end, but as describing the fellowship of love shared by Father, Son, and Spirit.<sup>2</sup>

This essay argues for an even more fundamental thesis: the comprehensive relevance of the doctrine of the covenant for our understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity. Before I explain what that means, I must offer two qualifications. First, the argument made by this essay is tentative. It may be that there are implications to what I have written that I have not seen — implications that might undermine part or all of what I suggest here. If that is so, I will be happy to set aside whatever is in error. My purpose is to stimulate thought and deepen our understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity. If this essay fails to shed light on our knowledge of God, it may at least be useful negatively, pointing out a direction we ought not travel. Second, nothing suggested here is intended to supplant the traditional confession of the doctrine of the Trinity. I am suggesting a supplement to the traditional doctrine, one that expounds further the language of One God in Three Persons.

With these qualifications in mind, the thesis of this paper is that the notion of covenant is essential to the Biblical teaching about the relationships among the Persons of the Trinity. First, the Biblical language that provides the basis for the traditional Trinitarian doctrine of perichoresis is covenantal — a point I have already argued in previous essays. Second, the Biblical doctrine of the covenant stands behind the traditional Trinitarian doctrine of the five notions, four relations, and two processions.<sup>3</sup> It is the second point that represents a significant expansion on my original thesis.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Eternal Covenant* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2002), pp. 15-31.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 61-83.

<sup>3</sup> In traditional Trinitarian theology stemming from Thomas Aquinas, there are five notions: 1) unoriginatedness, 2) paternity, 3) filiation, 4) spiration, 5) procession. A notion is a “defining characteristic of a divine person.” Four of these notions are “relations of opposition”: 1) paternity, 2) filiation, 3) spiration, 4) procession. Three of these relations constitute divine persons. Paternity constitutes the Father as Father. Filiation constitutes the Son as Son. Procession constitutes the Spirit as Spirit. In the five notions and four relations, there are two processions, the Son’s being begotten of the Father and the Spirit’s being spirated by the Father and the Son. See: Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (New York: Crossroad, 1997), p. 3.

To argue for the comprehensive relevance of the Trinity, I will first review the reasons for believing in such a covenant, since my previous essay has been challenged.<sup>4</sup> Second, I offer for consideration the idea of a thoroughly covenantal ontology of God. As I said above, I am not defining a finished position, but putting forth an idea with the hope that it might be read by competent theological students who can offer Biblical and theological criticism. Whether or not my suggestion makes even a small contribution to the ongoing discussion of the Trinity depends upon the reviewers. I hope that at least a few good men will read this essay, give it some thought, and offer criticism.

## **The Covenant in God Demonstrated**

Is there a covenant relationship among the Persons of the Trinity? I believe the Biblical and theological answer must be yes. The most important reasons are the following.

1. What God does in time reveals who He is in eternity and His most characteristic act in establishing relationships with other persons in time is covenant making.
2. The relations among the Persons defined in the names Father, Son, and Spirit are distinctly covenantal.
3. The names of God used to describe Trinitarian relations are also the names used to describe God's covenant relationships with creatures.
4. Representation is a key covenantal idea and it is found in the relations of the Trinitarian Persons in the representation of the Father by the Son and of the Father and Son by the Spirit.
5. Some of God's attributes are described in language that is distinctly covenantal.
6. The Gospel of John speaks of God's covenantal relationship with us as parallel to the relationship between the Father and the Son.
7. The pre-creation covenant for the salvation of man would involve a change in the relations among the Persons of the Trinity to accommodate the creation, if they were not essentially related in covenant.
8. The dynamic of the Trinitarian ontology is emphatically covenantal.

### ***1. God's Acts in Time Reveal His Nature in Eternity***

The principle that what God does in time reveals who He is in eternity is thoroughly Biblical and far more important than some realize. To get a grasp of the significance of this principle, imagine if it were otherwise. If God's acts in history did *not* reveal who He is in eternity then we would have no basis for knowing who He really is and what He will do when history is over. If His works in history were incongruous with His eternal being, or revealed so little of Him that we could not really say anything about the eternal relationships of the Three Persons, then we could not say we know God. We would only know the historical God. He might turn out to be very different from the God we meet in heaven and live with for eternity.

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Phillips referred to my essay as offering "abstract speculation" and "unsound Trinitarian speculation" in his profoundly misguided essay, "Covenant Confusion." For Phillips essay see: [http://www.alliancenet.org/partner/Article\\_Display\\_Page/0,,PTID307086%7CCHID560462%7CCHID1787572,00.html](http://www.alliancenet.org/partner/Article_Display_Page/0,,PTID307086%7CCHID560462%7CCHID1787572,00.html).

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This is obviously not a Biblical notion. Nothing in the Bible suggests to us that God's self-revelation in history — both through His works and words — either is or could be inconsistent with or unrelated to His eternal being. On the contrary, He could not be other than what He has shown Himself to be in history unless His self-revelation were intentionally unintelligible, concealing who He is rather than revealing. To assume that God's works do not reveal who He is in eternity would be to fundamentally misunderstand and distort the whole Biblical idea of revelation.

Furthermore, He is unchanging. He reveals Himself to creatures in His words and works<sup>5</sup> because He is the God in whom the Three Persons fully reveal themselves to one another. The Father fully expresses Himself to the Son so that the Son knows Him fully and perfectly<sup>6</sup>. The Holy Spirit searches the deep things of God, the mind of the Father and the Son, so that He may reveal God to us (1 Cor. 2:10-12). Though what He reveals transcends our comprehension, we still know God truly. Indeed, in the very context in which Paul emphasizes that the Spirit of God reveals God to us because He is the One who truly knows the things of God, he even says, “we have the mind of Christ” (1 Cor. 2:16).

The traditional language for distinguishing God in Himself and God as He works in history is ontological Trinity and economic Trinity. Obviously these two must be one. Vern Poythress explains the distinction between the two notions and elaborates on the relationship between them.

Before we go on, we should include one clarification. In the analogical relation between God and human language, are we considering God as he is in himself, the ontological Trinity, or God as he reveals himself to us, the economic Trinity? We should recognize that much of the Bible focuses on God's relations to us and the historical outworking of redemption. God's Trinitarian character stands forth most fully and eloquently in the redemptive events where the Persons of the Trinity have a distinct role (e.g., Matt 3:16–17; Acts 2:33; Rom 8:11; 1:4; John 16:13–15). God reveals himself to us through the “economy” of redemption. We understand the Trinity through the economic relations of the Persons of the Trinity in their functions in creation, redemption, and consummation.

In John 1:1 and elsewhere, the Bible does sometimes focus more directly on aspects of the ontological Trinity, that is, on God as he is in his own existence before creation and independent of creation. But even here we recognize that the language is crafted for the purposes of nourishing our faith, enlarging our understanding, and promoting our redemption. Hence the language as a whole is tied in with “functional” or “economic” purposes.

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<sup>5</sup> The works of Jesus reveal both Jesus and the Father. See: John 5:36; 10:25, 37-38; 14:10-11.

<sup>6</sup> “All things have been handed over to Me by My Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him.” (Mat. 11:27) “Therefore Jesus answered and was saying to them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner. For the Father loves the Son, and shows Him all things that He Himself is doing; and the Father will show Him greater works than these, so that you will marvel.’” (John 5:19-20)

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Since God is our standard and his word is our standard, there is nothing more ultimate than this revelation of himself. We believe that God is true. He truly reveals himself, not a substitute. We believe it because God says so. Hence we believe that God is in conformity with what he reveals. The Trinity in economic operations reveals the ontological Trinity. Hence, I have not tried to separate in any strict or exhaustive way between functional (economic) and ontological statements. Such separation on the part of a creature would itself be a repudiation of creaturehood. The analogies we explore deal with God in both respects, ontological and economical.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, not only must we say that the ontological and economical Trinity are one, we must confess that it is beyond us to entirely distinguish between them. God reveals Himself to us as the One and Only Living God, who from eternity is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Therefore, the principle that God reveals Himself in history as He is in eternity is sound. But how far may it be applied? Do the facts that God creates the world through a covenantal process, always and only relates to man in covenant, and before the creation of the world plans the salvation of the elect through a covenant reveal something about the Trinitarian relations in eternity?

To even ask the question is to answer it. If creation itself is a covenantal act, then the only relationship God sustains to the whole created world is covenantal. How could that not reveal something about who He is? When we add that His relationship to His image, man, is always and only covenantal, and that man's fundamental relationships with other men are also covenantal, it is clear that the most basic relationships for those who image God are covenantal. If man images God in his most basic interpersonal relationships, with God or man, and if those relationships are always covenantal, the implication that interpersonal relationships in the Godhead are also covenantal seems inescapable. If personal relationships in the Godhead were not covenantal, why would the Triune God create His image in such a way that man is religiously, psychologically, and sociologically covenantal?

If this one argument were all we had to go on, one might well argue that it requires too bold a step to suggest a covenant relationship among the Persons of the Trinity. I personally do not think so. It seems to me that this argument alone is profoundly solid. But the fact is that this argument is not alone. It is only one piece of a larger puzzle that, when assembled, spells covenant in bold letters.

## **2. *Father, Son, and Spirit***

It is seldom reflected upon that the names Father, Son, and Spirit define relationships that are primarily covenantal.<sup>8</sup> Fatherhood *per se*, in other words, is a basically covenantal idea.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Vern Poythress, "Reforming Ontology and Logic in the Light of the Trinity: An Application of Van Til's Idea of Analogy," *Westminster Theological Journal*, vol. 57, no. 1, Spring, 1995, pp. 196-97.

<sup>8</sup> After completing this essay, I learned from Joel Garver about a lecture by Peter Wallace titled, "Covenant and Inheritance," in which Wallace argues that the Father/Son relationship is an eternal covenant. His approach is somewhat different from mine, but he arrives at the same conclusion, that an intratrinitarian covenantal relationship is central to our understanding of the Triune God. <http://www.peterwallace.org/essays/inheritance.htm>

<sup>9</sup> Poythress explains that terms and names are analogies. "By calling the Second Person of the Trinity 'the Word,' God invites us to see a relation between the Second Person of the Trinity and the speech of God at creation. The two are analogous. God alone fully knows the character of the analogy. But we can understand that he is saying

Sonship involves covenantal relations. Even the word “Spirit” exudes covenant. Given that these names define who God is in Himself for all eternity, nothing could be more significant for the doctrine of God. When we realize that in the Bible Father, Son, and Spirit are words describing covenantal relationships, then the fact that the Persons of the Trinity are most characteristically called by these names stands out as perhaps the most direct proof of a covenantal relationship among the Persons of the Godhead.

The words “father” and “son” speak to us first of all as words of human relationship. But they obviously have relevance to our understanding of God as well. We need to consider how these things fit together. Man as God’s image, man as a biological creature, the Biblical idea of sonship, and the Spirit of God as a distinctly covenantal blessing are fundamental issues.

### **Image and Covenant**

Man as the image of God is a covenantal creature. The covenant law of God is written in man’s heart, defining his psychology as covenantal and orienting man toward God in the center of his being. Man is thus defined primarily by his relationship to God. But every other relationship defines him also. To be a person is to be in relationships and to be defined by those relationships, at least to some — and I believe a very large — degree.

Thus, as image of God, man was created to be like God, to love and worship his creator, knowing himself as God’s covenant son and servant. As image of God, he was created to love the others who are also God’s image and to bless them. As image of God, he was created to rule the rest of God’s creation so that the world might glorify God through the realization of its full potential. Each of these relationships is covenantal and definitive of who and what man is. Image, therefore, is a covenantal notion.<sup>10</sup>

To say that is not to deny that Adam’s physique, his intelligence, his artistic ability, and his imagination all uniquely fitted for him as the image of the one true God and are part of what it means that he is God’s image. There is no reason to separate the physical characteristics of man from the notion of image, nor are man’s spiritual qualities irrelevant. But these aspects of man are seen to be part of a covenantal whole. Just as the physical creation manifests God and is in covenant with God under man, so also man is a covenantal being in his physicality.<sup>11</sup>

### **Biology and Image**

To see the Biblical basis for the assertion that “father,” “son,” and “spirit” are words that describe a covenantal relationship, we need to first consider what is to us the most basic aspect of

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that the two are analogous. We can even see some aspects of the analogy. In both cases the word of God has divine power and divine wisdom. In both cases God expresses who he is in what he says.” *Op. Cit.*, p. 188. In the same way, using the name “Father, Son, and Spirit” to name the One God invites us to see an analogy between human fatherhood and divine fatherhood, etc.

<sup>10</sup> Meredith Kline gives extensive exegetical and theological argumentation for the basic points above in his *Images of the Spirit* and *Kingdom Prologue*.

<sup>11</sup> Kline expresses it this way, “Under the concept of man as the glory-image of God the Bible includes functional (or official), formal (or physical), and ethical components, corresponding to the composition of the archetypal Glory. Functional glory-likeness is man’s likeness to God in the possession of official authority and in the exercise of dominion. Ethical glory is the reflection of the holiness, righteousness, and truth of the divine Judge (not just the presence of a moral faculty of any religious orientation whatsoever). And formal-physical glory-likeness is man’s bodily reflection of the theophanic and incarnate Glory.” *Images of the Spirit*, p. 31. I would add that all three of these dimensions are covenantal.



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the father and son relationship, the biological. We may think of the biological as strictly physical. But what I am arguing is that the biological and covenantal relationship between father and son presuppose and include one another. They belong together.

This can be seen first in the fact that the father and son relationship is part of a larger covenantal whole. That is, since the biological relationship between fathers and sons<sup>12</sup> is an extension of the covenantal relationship between husband and wife, it should be understood as covenantal in nature. The biological relationship functions primarily for the continuation of the family as a covenantal unit, therefore biology and covenant are inseparable. Perhaps we should say, the biological serves the covenantal.

This is a “theological” rather than an exegetical argument, but there is Biblical evidence for this in the second commandment. When we read that the sins of fathers may be punished until the third and fourth generation, while the blessings of God may be inherited for a thousand generations, it is clear that the generational relationships are conceived of in covenantal terms. Inheritance of God’s covenantal blessing or curse by biological children exemplifies the intersection of biology and covenant.

But we are not left to infer the covenantal nature of this relationship from the inheritance of covenantal sanctions or the fact that sons are born from the covenantal relationship of fathers and mothers. We have quite explicit testimony to the covenantal nature of the biological relationship between fathers and sons in the book of Genesis, where the genealogy in Genesis 5 unambiguously states it in the most profound theological language.

This is the book of the generations of Adam. In the day when God created man, He made him in the likeness of God. He created them male and female, and He blessed them and named them Man in the day when they were created. When Adam had lived one hundred and thirty years, he became the father of a son in his own likeness, according to his image, and named him Seth. (Gen. 5:1-3)

On these verses and their relationship to the creation account in Genesis 2, Meredith Kline observes,

Though with a careful restraint, biblical revelation thus intimates that this creating of man is a kind of divine authoring analogous to human procreation. What is thus simply suggested of father-son imagery in the record of creational origins becomes virtually explicit in the record of the birth of Seth in Genesis 5:1-3. In this passage a statement of Adam’s creation in the likeness of God is directly juxtaposed to a statement that Adam begat a son in his own likeness and image. Clearly we are being advised that there is a similarity between these two processes, both of which result in products like their authors. Adam’s fathering of a son provides the proper analogy to God’s creating of man and the relationship of Seth to Adam is analogous

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<sup>12</sup> I am not intentionally neglecting daughters here. The father/son relationship has a special meaning for the Trinity and I am therefore concentrating on it, but it is not my intention to leave my daughter out of the picture. However, the meaning of the daughter is somewhat different. The city of Jerusalem, which is pictured as God’s bride, is also His daughter. The symbolism of daughters is also covenantal, but it points to God’s relationship to His covenant people, who are both His daughter and His bride. (see, for example: 2Kings 19:21; Psa. 9:14; Is. 1:8; 10:32; 16:1; 37:22; 52:2; 62:11; Jer. 4:31; 6:2,23; Lam. 1:6; 2:1,4,8,10,13,18; 4:22; Mic. 1:13; 4:8,10,13; Zeph. 3:14; Zech. 2:10; 9:9; Matt. 21:5; John 12:15)

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to man's relationship to his Maker. Such is the understanding of the Genesis 5 genealogy reflected in the Lukan use of it when, tracing the lineage of Jesus, the evangelist concludes: "Seth, which was (the son) of Adam, which was (the son) of God" (Luke 3:38). The Lukan birth narrative throws an interesting light on the overarching creative presence of the Glory-Spirit in Genesis 1. Luke records Gabriel's words to Mary in which the origin of the second Adam is attributed to the overshadowing presence and power of the Glory-Spirit (as was the case with the first Adam) and the explanation for calling the holy one thus produced the Son of God is found in this special creative involvement of the Glory-Spirit (Luke 1:35). Here then is another indication of the father-like nature of God's act of creating man in the beginning. . . .

Since the Spirit's act of creating man is thus presented as the fathering of a son and that man-son is identified as the image-likeness of God, it is evident that image of God and son of God are mutually explanatory concepts. Clearly man's likeness to the Creator-Spirit is to be understood as the likeness which a son bears to his father. And that understanding of the image concept, according to which the fundamental idea is one of representational similarity, not representative agency, is further unmistakably corroborated by Genesis 5:1-3 as it brings together God's creation of Adam and Adam's begetting of Seth, expressing the relation of the human father and son in terms of the image-likeness that defines man's relation to the Creator. To be the image of God is to be the son of God.<sup>13</sup>

No one imagines that the case of Adam's relationship with Seth is unique, as if Cain and Able were not also in the image and likeness of Adam or as if the rest of the father and son relationships in Genesis 5 were not the same sort of relationships. The relationship between Adam and Seth here defined is the typical father and son relationship, the pattern of father and son that was established when God made Adam His son (Luke 3:38). Of course, in the context, the fact that Adam passed on his own sinful nature to Seth is the focus. But just as we do not imagine that only Adam and Seth sustained the relationship here specified, so also we do not imagine that if Adam had not sinned his sons would not be born after his image and likeness. Thus, the parallel between Adam being in God's image and Seth being in Adam's image means that Adam is a covenant person who reflects the God who created him, and Seth is a covenant person who reflects the father who begot him. Sonship means image and likeness which are covenantal notions involving representation and covenantal personhood.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> *Kingdom Prologue*, p. 45-46 (cf. also, pp. 50 ff., 62 ff., etc.). I doubt that the distinction here between representative similarity and representative agency can really stand. After all, as image and son of God, Adam rules the world as God's representative. Sons inherit their father's worlds and rule in their place, too. Note also that "the relation of the human father and son in terms of the image-likeness that defines man's relation to the Creator" necessarily brings in the covenant, since man's fundamental relationship to God is covenantal.

<sup>14</sup> For a fuller exposition of the idea of the original creation as covenantal, see Meredith Kline, *Kingdom Prologue*, p. 14-21. Kline interprets the original covenant as a covenant of works — with which I disagree — but his exegetical reasons for understanding creation as a covenant-making act are solid. He does not specifically identify the notion of "image" as a covenantal idea in so many words, but his view of creation certainly suggests it. In his *Images of the Spirit*, the covenantal nature of man stands out more clearly. See also, the sections referred to below concerning sonship.

## **Redemption, Sonship, and Covenant**

The importance of the Genesis creation narrative for the rest of the Bible cannot be overemphasized because it is often not adequately appreciated. In part this is because the Bible typically understates its allusions to larger narrative frameworks and earlier passages of Scripture, assuming the reader is aware of the connections. Thus, we need to keep the Genesis story in mind when we read of Israel's redemption. In the light of Genesis, there is special significance in referring to redemption from Egypt or Babylon in language emphasizing that God will be Israel's father.

Before we consider the Genesis connection, however, we need to look first at the redemptive meaning of fatherhood. In an excellent article on the subject of baptism and its relationship to the ideas of servanthood and sonship, Allen Mawhinney wrote the following.

In the OT, the Kingship of Yahweh is nowhere more clearly seen than in the deliverance of Israel from Egypt and the formation of the covenant people under Yahweh's Lordship. Although there are relatively few explicit references to God as "father" in the OT, a very high proportion of these are found in the context of references to the Exodus/Sinai events. That is, kingship and fatherhood are both used to describe God's redemptive work in the Exodus.

In this regard, it is important to note that the connotations of the word "father" are developed in the context of redemptive history and not that of cosmological discussion. This is clear from passages such as Ps 89:26. Yahweh affirms of the king of Israel, "He shall cry to me. 'Thou art my Father, my God, and the Rock of my salvation. Similarly the prophetic cry to Judah was raised, "Thou, O Lord, art our Father, our redeemer from of old is thy name" (Isa 63:16). The father is the redeemer, the one who formed Israel when he chose her and delivered her out of Egypt. This redemptive context gives definition to the expressions used in the next chapter. "O Lord thou art our Father; we are the clay, and thou art our potter" (Isa 64:8). It is the formation of the people of God, not the creation of the world or of all mankind, which is in view. This soteriological use of the word father ('ab) is the constant OT usage. The universe as a whole is not typically regarded as the son of God. Similarly there is no notion in these texts of Yahweh as the archetypal ancestor of Israel, the prime begetter, and biological source of the nation.

Because the father/son relationship between Yahweh and Israel is firmly rooted in the history of Yahweh's redemptive acts, those acts have determined the meaning of the relationship. Israel is Yahweh's son because he has chosen these people and redeemed them. This hope is expressed in the Isaianic oracle cited above, "Thou, O Lord, art our Father, our redeemer from of old is thy name" (Isa 63:16). The father's name was "redeemer" and it had been "redeemer" for generations. The superlative OT act of redemption was the deliverance from Egypt at which time Yahweh had made known to Israel his name and had constituted Israel as his own covenant people. . . .

God called his son out of Egypt and taught him to walk as a father teaches a child (Hos 11:1, 3). When the people apostasized, they were rebuked. "Do you thus repay

the Lord, O foolish and unwise people? Is not He your Father who has bought you (*qnh*)? He has made you and established you” (Deut 32:6). The parallelism of buying, making, and establishing and the “exodus” context of the passage (note the “name of the Lord” in Deut 32:3 and “rock” in 32:4) indicate that the making refers to the formation of the covenant people and not to any materialistic conception of God as literally making his son by procreation. That this spiritually understood filial relationship to Yahweh was thought to be based upon the exodus/Sinai complex of redemptive acts is indicated by the repeated occurrence of these exodus motifs in contexts which refer to God as Israel’s father. Especially frequent is the reference to the divine name. Israel’s status as son and relationship to its Father was based on the redemptive choice of Yahweh. God, the Redeemer, is King and Father.<sup>15</sup>

Although Mawhinney attempts to divorce the notions of fatherhood and sonship from the cosmological sphere, he makes clear the covenantal and redemptive meaning of the father and son relationship in the Old Testament. What he misses is the background for the redemptive language in the creation that Meredith Kline has expounded. God is first of all “father” to Adam. To Mawhinney’s exposition, we need to add that redemption means restoration. Since God was a father to Adam (Luke 3:38), it should be clear that for Israel to be brought back to God as her Father meant that she was restored to the kind of relationship that man originally enjoyed with God. To be redeemed by the grace of God is, in a manner of speaking, to be brought back into the Garden of Eden and to be allowed to enjoy the blessings that God intended to bestow on his beloved children in the beginning.

This aspect of salvation is brought to even greater clarity and very frequent expression in the New Testament, where those who are redeemed are typically called the children of God (John 1:12; 11:52; Acts 17:29; Rom. 8:16,21; 9:8; Phil. 2:15; 1John 3:1-2,10; 5:2), sons of God (Matt. 5:9; Luke 20:36; Rom. 8:14,19; Gal. 3:26) and brothers in Christ<sup>16</sup>. Fatherhood and sonship are indeed the language of redemption and salvation, but we need to emphasize here that the language of Biblical soteriology is emphatically and exclusively covenantal.

### **Baptism, Sonship, and Covenant**

Apart from these rather straightforward evidences of the covenantal nature of fatherhood and sonship, there is the evidence provided in the doctrine of baptism. Again I quote from the article by Mawhinney.

This conclusion is buttressed by the recognition of the connection between Christ’s Sonship and his baptism. The divine interpretation of the descent of the Holy Spirit is, “You are my Son.” The Spirit is the endowment of the Son of God for his

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<sup>15</sup> Allen Mawhinney, “Baptism, Servanthood, and Sonship” in *The Westminster Theological Journal*, Spring, 1987, vol. 49, no. 1, pp. 35-64.

<sup>16</sup> All of the verses speaking of Christians as brothers imply the brotherhood in Christ which some specify. See: Rom. 1:13; 7:1,4; 8:12,29; 10:1; 11:25; 12:1; 15:14-15,30; 16:14,17; 1Cor. 1:10-11,26; 2:1; 3:1; 4:6; 6:5,8; 7:24,29; 8:12; 9:5; 10:1; 11:2,33; 12:1; 14:6,20,26,39; 15:1,6,50,58; 16:11-12,15,20; 2Cor. 1:8; 8:1,23; 9:3,5; 11:9,26; 13:11; Gal. 1:2,11; 2:4; 3:15; 4:12,28,31; 5:11,13; 6:1,18; Eph. 6:10,23; Phil. 1:12,14; 3:1,13,17; 4:1,8,21; Col. 1:2; 4:15; 1Th. 1:4; 2:1,9,14,17; 3:7; 4:1,10,13; 5:1,4,12,14,25-27; 2Th. 1:3; 2:1,13,15; 3:1,6,13; 1Tim. 4:6; 5:1; 6:2; 2Tim. 4:21; Heb. 2:11-12,17; 3:1,12; 7:5; 10:19; 13:22; James 1:2,16,19; 2:1,5,14; 3:1,10,12; 4:11; 5:7,9-10,12,19; 1Pet. 1:22; 3:8; 5:9; 2Pet. 1:10; 1John 2:7; 3:13-14,16; 3John 1:3,5,10.

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ministry as the Suffering Servant, assuring him of the good pleasure of the Father in his life of obedience and sacrifice.

That a similar relationship exists between the Christian's sonship and baptism is confirmed by three lines of evidence. First, the sonship of the Christian is always regarded as a derivative sonship. By nature, man is a child of wrath. It is by union with the Son of God that man becomes a son of God. The Christian's baptism is the sign and seal of that union with Christ. That union with Christ of which baptism is a sign and seal includes (but is not limited to) the Christian's sonship.

Second, the baptismal washing is described as a "washing of regeneration" in Tit 3:5. Baptism is a sign of entrance into the family of God by being born again.

Third, the NT authors parallel Christ's baptism with the Christian's baptism and sonship. In Luke/Acts Luke presents Jesus' endowment with the Spirit for mission and assurance of sonship as parallel to the Pentecostal endowment of the Church for the continuation of the Messianic mission. Similarly the baptism of Christians in Acts is associated with the coming of the Spirit, the eschatological gift of the Father which makes men sons of God. Paul, in Ephesians, models his description of the adoptive sonship of Christians on the language which was used to describe Christ's baptism.

Baptism is, in part, a sign and seal of sonship. This is the teaching of the Reformed confessions. It is the teaching of the NT.<sup>17</sup>

The baptism of Jesus is parallel to the baptism of the Christian in that in both there is the work of the Spirit and the Father's declaration that the one baptized is His covenant son. Jesus' sonship is Messianic to be sure, but when He is called Son of God, there is much more involved than His messianic ministry. He is the eternal Son. His ministry as the covenantal Messiah stems from that eternal sonship. Neither the Father nor the Spirit could have become the Messiah and representative of the people of Israel because Israel is God's son and only a Son could represent Israel as Messiah. The parallel between the Sonship of the second Person and the sonship of those who are brought into God's covenant by baptism points to the covenantal nature of sonship itself and the relationship among the Persons of the Godhead.

In addition to the doctrine of baptism, there are other passages in the New Testament which draw parallels between our relationship with God the Father and the relationship between Jesus and the Father (John 15:8-10; 20:17, 21; Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6; Heb. 2:10-11; 1 John 3:1; Rev. 3:21). We are children of God and sons of God after the same pattern and likeness of Jesus as the eternal Son of God. That is, we are the created and re-created analogy that reflects the eternal relationship between Father and Son. Thus we have the right to call upon God as our Father, using the very language that Jesus used in the Garden, "Abba, Father" (Gal. 4:6).

More could be said about fatherhood and sonship, but it should already be clear that not only is the human relationship of fathers and sons patterned on the divine Father and Son relationship, but also the Fatherhood of God for man is a covenantal fatherhood, the fatherhood

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<sup>17</sup> Mawhinney, Op cit.

of a human father is a covenantal fatherhood, and the redemptive fatherhood of God is a covenantal fatherhood. To be a son, therefore, is to be in a covenant relationship with a father. For the Bible to speak of the eternal relationships between the Persons of the Trinity as a Father and Son relationship is already to say that the Persons of the Trinity relate to one another in a family covenant of love.

## **Spirit and Covenant**

How does the Holy Spirit fit into this covenantal picture? It may seem that “Spirit” is only vaguely covenantal. In fact, however, in the Bible, the Holy Spirit is *emphatically* covenantal. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the covenant. He is associated with covenantal creation in the very beginning and covenant making throughout the Scriptures.

The work of the Holy Spirit in the original creation is explicit from the second verse of Scripture: “and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters.” The fact that the creation of the world was a covenantal act and that the Spirit’s moving is central to that act, especially the creation of man, is the thesis of Meredith Kline’s *Images of the Spirit*. Kline wrote in his preface,

Overlooked though it has been, the idea of creation in the image of the Glory-Spirit is, in fact, a foundational and pervasive theme in the Scriptures. We come upon it in historical narration, symbolic representation in the cultus, didactic exposition, and eschatological expectation. The present work merely suggests selectively something of these biblical riches. Waiting to be pursued further also is the relationship of the *imago Dei* to certain other major biblical concepts. Once it is seen that God the Spirit in his theophanic Presence is the divine paradigm in the creation of the image of God, a conceptual overlap, if not synonymity, will be recognized between the *imago Dei* and concepts like messiahship and the Spirit’s filling or baptism of God’s people. And to perceive that it is the same Spirit by whose charismatic enduing the church is qualified to fulfill the great commission who also as Paradigm Creator of man in the image of God, endowed him to execute the cultural commission, is to possess a vital coherence factor for working out a unified world and life field theory, inclusive of creation and redemption and, within the area of the redemptive accomplishment of God’s creation designs, comprehensive of both holy and common vocations.<sup>18</sup>

The work of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament is often neglected, in spite of the fact that there are well over 100 clear references to the Spirit and his work. The Spirit is associated with the gift of life, prophecy, and other gifts that require special abilities and wisdom. On the whole, these are the same basic themes that we find in the New Testament. Explicit associations of the Holy Spirit with the covenant are rare in both testaments (Is. 59:21; 2Cor. 3:6; Heb. 10:29), but the underlying theme, as Kline points out, is pervasive.

In Genesis, when God creates the world the work of the Holy Spirit in the covenant act of creation is central (Gen. 1:2). The Spirit’s hovering over the world should be understood to be the way that God brings the word to bear on the creation. The Father breathes the Word by the

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<sup>18</sup> *Images of the Spirit*, p. 11

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Spirit/Breath and the Spirit applies the Word to the creation. The whole process is covenantal: God commands, the world obeys, God blesses the obedient creation.

It should be noted that this scenario, suggested by Meredith Kline's work on the Spirit in creation, supposes both that the Son proceeds from the Spirit and that the Spirit proceeds from the Son.

In creating all things, the Word of God who was in the beginning thus proceeded forth from the Spirit of God — as did also the incarnate word and the inscripturated Word. We are confronted again with this mystery of the Son's identity with the Spirit and his personal distinctiveness and his procession from the Spirit in the figure of that Angel associated with the Glory-cloud and called "the Angel of the Presence" (Isa. 63:9ff.; Exod. 32:34; 33:2, 12–15).<sup>19</sup>

Kline offers a revision to traditional Trinitarian doctrine in which the Son proceeds from the Father and the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son – in the West – or from the Father — in the East. In Kline's perspective, the Son proceeds from the Spirit and then the Spirit proceeds from the Son. That this is a Biblical reconstruction seems clear from the Gospels. Jesus is born through the power of the Holy Spirit overshadowing Mary (Mat. 1:20; Luke 1:35), according to Kline an allusion to the original creation of man.<sup>20</sup> Jesus is also filled with the Spirit and led by the Spirit. Indeed, we even read that the Spirit "*drove* him [Jesus] into the wilderness" (Mar. 1:12). In His death, also, He offered Himself up to God through the Spirit (Heb. 9:14). Thus, the Word proceeds from the Spirit, even as the Spirit proceeds from the Word. The Spirit does not exactly send the Son by commandment, as the Son sends the Spirit, but He does lead the Son into the world, and while the Son is in the world, all that He does is done in the Spirit.

The gift of the Messiah as the New Adam and as the leader of a New Covenant, therefore, is distinctly the work of the Spirit, just as the creation of the old Adam in the old covenant was distinctly the work of the Spirit. But we must also say that the Holy Spirit Himself is the promised gift of the New Covenant (Acts 1:4-5; 2:38-39). His indwelling the Church as the new temple of God corresponds to His covenantal indwelling of the tabernacle and temple in the old covenant era. In the gift of the tabernacle, the temple, and the restored temple of Ezra's day, the work of the Holy Spirit is prominent and His presence is what makes the temple God's covenantal throne and dwelling place.

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<sup>19</sup> "Creation in the Image of the Glory Spirit," *Westminster Theological Journal*, vol. 39, no. 2, p. 254.

<sup>20</sup> On this Kline writes, "As that is portrayed in Genesis 2:7, man was made a living soul by a divine inbreathing. That this is to be understood in terms of the vitalizing breath of the Spirit is evident from the quickening function attributed to the Spirit in Scripture, sometimes in passages reflective of Genesis 2:7. According to Psalm 104:29–31, when God sends forth his Spirit-Glory-Face, the face of the earth is renewed and living creatures are created. In Lamentations 4:20, "the breath (ruah) of our nostrils" stands in appositional parallelism to "the (Spirit-) anointed of the Lord." In the vision of Ezekiel 37, when God summons his Spirit-wind to breathe upon the lifeless in the valley, the valley comes to life with a host of living men (vss. 1–10, 14). At the coming into the world of the second Adam, it was revealed to his mother: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the Power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of you shall be called the Son of God" (Lk. 1:35). And when our Lord prophetically portrayed his creation of the new man(kind), he breathed on the disciples and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit" (Jn. 20:22). Clearly then we are to understand that it was the Spirit-Glory of Genesis 1:2, who had hovered over the lifeless deep-and-darkness sovereignly blowing where he would to bring the world into life, who was the divine breath that fathered the living man-son in Genesis 2:7."

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Whenever therefore we think of the Holy Spirit, we should think of God's covenant presence and blessing. It was so in the original covenant when God created the world, especially when He breathed life into man (Gen. 1:2; 2:7). It was so in the days of Moses and David (Ex. 14:19 ff.; Num. 11:17; Isa. 63:7-14; 2 Sam. 23:1-7; 1 Kings 8:10-11). It was so when God sent the Messiah to bring in a New Covenant (Isa. 11:1-5; 42:1-4; 48:16; 61:1-9; Mat. 3:16-17; John 1:32-34). It is so in the Church now and forever (Acts 1:5-8; 1 Cor. 3:16; Eph. 2:19-22). The Spirit is the Spirit of the Covenant because He is the Spirit of life.

### **Conclusion**

What we have seen, then, is that the three special and distinct names for the Persons of the Trinity are all names that express covenantal relationships. Fathers and sons are inevitably in covenant with one another — whether they think in these terms or not. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit who creates and re-creates in covenant. Since the words “father,” “son,” and “Holy Spirit” all define covenantal relationships in the created world, we must see the Father, Son and Spirit as Persons who relate to one another in an eternal covenant of love.

We must add to the discussion above the fact that the names of the Persons of the Trinity we have discussed are also *the name* of the Triune God — “in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Mat. 28:19b). There is one name for the Three Persons and that special Trinitarian name is covenant name “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” Add also that this definitive Triune name of God is used in the covenant ceremony of baptism (Mat. 28:19). Here, then, in one of the most important passages in the New Testament on the doctrine of the Trinity, Jesus speaks of the name of God in a manner that is distinctly covenantal and instructs us to use *that* name for the ceremony that initiates us into covenant with God. In the light of the covenantal meaning of the individual words “Father,” “Son,” and “Spirit,” Jesus' instruction brings to even greater clarity the reality of the eternal covenant of love within the Persons of the Godhead. To be baptized is to be introduced into that covenantal fellowship of love.

### **3. Names of the Covenant God**

This point overlaps quite a bit with the previous point, but I think it is distinct enough to be treated separately. In the previous section, I have shown that Father, Son and Spirit are words that first of all define a covenantal relationship. As we saw, human fathers and sons are in a covenantal relationship related to their biological relationship. In what follows, I will show that there are at least three divine names that describe relationships both among the three Persons of the Trinity and between God and His redeemed people. Since the relationship between God and His people being defined by these names is a covenantal relationship, we must infer that these names designate a covenantal relationship when used of the Persons of the Trinity also. Why? Because the relationship between God and His people is modeled after the relationship among the Persons of the Trinity. My previous point was that the names used for the Three Persons — Father, Son, and Spirit — have inescapably covenantal resonance. Now I wish to emphasize that certain names of the Persons of the Trinity are grounded in the analogy between the relationship of the Persons of the Trinity and God's relationship with us. If the one is covenantal, then by analogy, the other must be also.

We have already seen that the name “Father” is especially associated with the covenant. But God the Father is called Father both with reference to His relationship to Jesus the Son and in His relationship to us. Christ Himself suggested the parallel between the two relationships



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when He said, “I ascend to My Father and your Father, and My God and your God” (John 20:17b). The Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is our Father (Rom. 15:6; 2Cor. 1:3; Eph. 1:3; Col. 1:3; 1Pet. 1:3). Our Lord prayed “Abba, Father” in the Garden of Gethsemane and so can we (Mark 14:36; Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6). The same name is used to refer to our covenant relationship to God and to Jesus relationship to the Father. If our relationship is covenantal, then by analogy Jesus’ relationship to the Father is also.

The second name of God that is covenantally significant both in reference to intratrinitarian relationships and in our covenantal relationship with God is the name “Son of God” or “the Son.” We have already seen that Fatherhood and Sonship are covenantal notions. What is important to note here is that this covenantal name is used both of Jesus relationship to the Father and His relationship to us, suggesting the covenantal parallel.

It hardly needs to be demonstrated that the name Son or Son of God designates Jesus relationship to God the Father. But the name “Son of God” also signifies a relationship with us as a messianic title. The angel promised Mary that the Holy child to be born from her would be called “Son of God,” referring to Jesus as the coming Savior (Luke 1:35). When the demons meet Jesus and cry out “You are the Son of God” Jesus prevents them “because they knew Him to be the Christ” (Luke 4:41). John the Baptist associates Jesus name “Son of God” with the fact that He is the one who baptizes with the Spirit (John 1:33-34), a Messianic identification that Nathaniel imitates when he says, “Rabbi, You are the Son of God; You are the King of Israel” (John 1:49). This is the same Messianic faith that Martha confessed, “I have believed that You are the Christ, the Son of God, even He who comes into the world” (John 11:27). John himself tells us that he wrote his Gospel so that we may “believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God” (John 20:31). In each of these examples, the title “Son of God” is a Messianic title, often in apposition to “Christ,” “Messiah.” For John, the title “Son of God” is both a title that shows Jesus relationship to the Father as the eternal Son and also His relationship to us as Messiah and Savior (John 1:33-34, 49; 3:17-18, 35; 5:19-23, 25-27; 6:40; 10:36; 11:27; 20:31; 1 John 3:8; 4:14-15; 5:10, 20).

Thus, if the name “Son of God” means the one who is our covenantal Messiah and Savior, and suggests the covenant given to us in Christ, then by analogy the name “Son of God” implies covenantal relationship when used of the Son’s relationship to the Father. Much more can be said about the meaning of the name “Son of God” and why it is used in this analogous manner. But that is not my point here. I am simply pointing to the analogy and to the fact that when used of Jesus and His people, the name “Son of God” as a Messianic name defines a covenantal relationship. Exploring the fuller implications of this analogy requires another essay, but the key to the analogy seems to be representation, again a distinctly covenantal idea.

The third name that refers both to the intratrinitarian relationships and to God’s relationship to man is the name for Christ, “Word.” John tells us that “in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. This one was in the beginning with God” (John 1:1-2). Jesus eternal relationship to the Father is portrayed here by the name “Word.” The Word *was* in the beginning with God. In other words, the Word already existed before the beginning. Thus, the name “Word” is not merely a name of relation to the created world. It defines the intratrinitarian relationship. God is Three Persons who reveal themselves to one another fully. The Word speaks for all eternity by the Spirit, as Father, Son, and Spirit

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share a full fellowship of love, which is what John implies when he says the Word is “face to face” with the Father.<sup>21</sup>

When John speaks of the Word being “with” God, he is not only using the language of intimate fellowship, he is using the language of covenant. The most basic covenantal formula in the Old Testament is the promise of God to be with His people (Gen. 24:40; 26:24,28; 28:20; Deut. 2:7; 31:6, 8; etc. almost 100 times in the O.T.). For the Son to be “with God” suggests mutual covenantal blessing. The Father blesses the Son and He the Father.

At the same time, the name “Word” defines who and what Jesus is to us: “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life — the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us — that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ” (1 John 1:1-3). The Word is the Person of the Godhead who reveals God to us, whose words and life show the Father like no one else has or could (John 1:18), for He alone is the True Light (John 1:9), the Word who became flesh and thereby manifested the glory of the Father (John 1:14).

The covenantal significance of the name “Word” is clear. Jesus is the covenant Word from God. Some ambiguity about the referent of “word” in certain passages adds special emphasis to this point.<sup>22</sup> Is the Word of God in Hebrews 4:12 Christ or is it the Bible? What about the “word of God” by which the worlds were framed (Heb. 11:3)? 1 John 1:1 obviously refers to Jesus, but in language that intentionally also points to the covenant Word of Holy Scripture. 1 John 2:14 is ambiguous. Is the Word which abides in us our Lord, or the Word of Scripture. Revelation 1:2 and 1:9 both speak of “the word of God” and “the testimony of Jesus Christ” and both could be translated “the Word of God, even the testimony of Jesus Christ.” The traditional translation here is probably better, but in the writings of John, the expression “Word of God” even when clearly referring to Scripture may also allude to the person of Christ. The personal Word and covenantal word of Scripture could not be more closely associated.

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<sup>21</sup> Greek scholar A. T. Robertson explains the use of the preposition “pros” for the word “with” as follows: “Though existing eternally with God the Logos was in perfect fellowship with God. *Pros* with the accusative presents a plane of equality and intimacy, face to face with each other.” *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, vol. 4.

<sup>22</sup> Luther, in particular, emphasized the relationship between the written Word and the Incarnate Word. “Skevington Wood, on the other hand, opts for a more conservative position, stating that when Luther promoted Scripture’s authority against that of the Church, He ‘was not just ventilating a theory (but) trying to reflect the pattern of Scripture itself.’ Luther realized ‘the significance of the minutiae in Scripture,’ but this did not deter him, ‘since he believed each single word to be inspired.’ It was that Word that gave birth to the church, not vice versa; it was the Word which was parent and the church its offspring, for the Scripture bore its own ‘self-authenticating character of the inspired writers.’ Of course, a reading of Luther will show that ‘by the Word, he did not invariably mean Holy Writ,’ for besides referring to the text of Scripture, he sometimes used Word ‘with reference to Christ Himself, and sometimes with references to the content, or act of preaching.’ This view of Luther Wood sums up by stating that ‘all that Luther taught about the authority of the Bible and the nature of revelation found its climax and corollary in his doctrine of inspiration,’ for which ‘a miracle of the Spirit was required, (a miracle) parallel between the written Word and the incarnate Word.’” Eugene F. Klug, “Word And Scripture In Luther Studies Since World War II,” *Trinity Theological Journal*, vol. 5, no. 1, Spring 1984, p. 22.

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In this case, both the use of the name “Word” with reference to intratrinitarian relationships and with reference to Christ’s relationship with His people occur in contexts that are explicitly covenantal. We are not merely arguing by analogy here.

I have limited my argument to these three names because they seemed most clear. I think other examples could be added, but they would only further illustrate the point that there are some names used both of the intratrinitarian relationships and of God’s covenant relationship with His people. The use of the same designations of God for the two different relationships obviously presupposes an analogy between those relationships. If God is both Father to the Son and to us, there is some analogy here. If “Son of God” is a messianic title as well as the designation of the Second Person of the Trinity, there must be an analogy between Jesus’ relationship to His people and His relationship to the Father. If the Second Person can be designated “Word of God” with reference to the Father and also with reference to us, the two relationships defined by that phrase are analogous.

In the light of the previous point about the covenantal meaning of the words “father” and “son” it seems that in each of the names above, at least one aspect of the analogy between the intratrinitarian relationships and God’s relationship to us must be the covenantal nature of the relationships.

### **4. Representation in God**

Representation is one of the fundamental ideas of the covenant, as is clear from Paul’s exposition of Adam and Christ in Romans 5. Adam represented all men in the Garden of Eden and brought sin and destruction to his race. Jesus represented a new race of men in His incarnation and brought righteous and life to them. Though the word “covenant” is not used in this context, the representational relationship outlined belongs to the covenantal sphere. Like the relationship between Adam and his posterity, all Biblical covenants are built upon the representative principle. In the Biblical context, we may say that all covenants include representation and representation always implies some sort of a covenant. When the Bible speaks of the relationship of Father and Son in terms of representation, therefore, we must understand the relationship as a covenant.

The most important single verse of Scripture speaking explicitly of representation within the Trinity is Hebrews 1:3. Here the Son is said to be “ὁς ὢν ἀπαύγασμα τῆς δόξης καὶ χαρακτήρ τῆς ὑποστάσεως αὐτοῦ”. The latter phrase is especially relevant for the purpose of this paper. The noun χαρακτήρ comes from the verb χαράσσω, meaning to engrave. The noun may mean “a mark or an impression placed on an object” such as a coin. In this case, the lexicon suggests “something produced as a representation” and for Hebrews 1:3, “an exact representation of (God’s) real being.”<sup>23</sup> It has been translated variously.

the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person (KJV)

the brightnes of the glory, and the ingraued forme of his person (archaic spelling;  
Geneva Bible)

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<sup>23</sup> *A Greek-English Lexicon Of The New Testament And Other Early Christian Literature* (BDAG), ed. by Fredrick William Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, ), pp. 1077-78.

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the effulgence of his glory, and the very image of his substance (ASV)

the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature (NASV)

the brightness of the glory, and the impress of His subsistence (Young's Literal Translation)

the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being (NRSV)

the brightness of his glory and the figure of his substance (Douay)

Whether we speak of “ingrained form,” “express image,” “very image,” or “exact imprint,” the meaning is plain. The Son is the representative replica of the Father. He shows the Father exactly and perfectly. The Father's very nature and substance is exactly imaged in Him. However we translate the phrase, it speaks both of the Son's utter equality with the Father as well as the personal distinction between Son and Father. The Son is distinct as the representative and is equal because He perfectly and precisely images the Father in all His greatness and glory. Therefore, He is the only one who can truly “exegete” Him (John 1:18).

This is the reason that the Son — and He alone — is the Person of the Trinity who *could* become incarnate. The incarnate God would be the representative of God on earth. He would manifest God to man and mediate between God and man. Since it is the nature of the Second Person as Son to be the representative image of the Father, the exact replica of His hypostasis, it could only be the Son who could become the incarnate God. That the Son became the covenant representative in history is grounded in His relationship with the Father in eternity. The character and nature of the Son is defined by His relationship to the Father, a relationship analogous to that He sustains to us. He is the eternal symbol and manifestation of God the Father because He is the Son.

In other words, the Son is able to become the covenant representative of the people of God in history because of who He is in eternity. He reflected the Father's glory not only in the creation, but from before the foundation of the world, when, as the exact imprint of the Father's nature, He radiated the exquisite beauty of His being.

Cornelius Van Til's emphasis on the importance of representation for covenant brings this into perspective.

It may even be said that *Calvin's covenantal idea is Theism come to its own*. The covenant idea is nothing but the representational principle consistently applied to all reality. The foundation of the representational principle among men is the fact that the Trinity exists in the form of a mutually exhaustive representation of the three Persons that constitute it. The emphasis should be placed upon the idea of *exhaustion*. This is important because it brings out the point of the complete equality as far as ultimacy is concerned of the principle of unity and of diversity. This mutual exhaustion of the persons of the Trinity places one before the choice of interpreting reality in exclusively temporal categories or in eternal categories. The demand of the doctrine of the Trinity, when thus conceived is that reality be interpreted in exclusively eternal categories inasmuch as the source of diversity lies in the Trinity itself and could never be found in a sense world beyond God. Hence the problem of

the one and the many, of the universal and the particular, of being and becoming, of analytical and synthetic reasoning, of the a priori and the a posteriori must be solved by an exclusive reference to the Trinity.<sup>24</sup>

We might add that the problem of the nature of the covenant also must be solved by exclusive reference to the Trinity and be interpreted in eternal rather than temporal categories. The representative nature of the Triune Persons and the fact that the Son is the express image of the Father reveals the covenantal relationship among the Persons of the Trinity. As Van Til points out, it is because representation is fundamental to the relationship among the Persons of the Trinity that it is fundamental to the creation. Because God's very being is covenantal and representative, the Triune God creates the world in covenant with Himself and works all things in creation and redemption according to the representative principle.

### **5. Covenantal Attributes**

Francis Turretin noted that “goodness and the qualities contained under it (viz., love, grace and mercy) are occupied with the communication of good . . .”<sup>25</sup> In other words, he recognized that attributes like goodness necessarily involve interpersonal expression. To say that unless there is “communication of good” there can be no goodness is to say that unless the Persons of the Trinity communicate good to each other from eternity, goodness could not be an attribute of God. In the same way, love requires a beloved. Faithfulness is always faithfulness to another person. So far as I can tell, all of the attributes that describe God's moral character, even attributes like righteousness and truth, make sense only in the context of interpersonal relations. Though Turretin's point seems obvious, the odd truth is that this feature of the attributes of God has been largely ignored.

It is commonly known that among the Hebrew and Greek words for God's attributes are some that assume a covenantal relationship. Perhaps the clearest word is *הסד*, widely regarded as a technical covenantal term that always implies or presuppose a covenant relationship. Many other words that are used for God's “ethical” or “communicable” attributes also imply or presuppose a covenant relationship, too.

In fact, any attempt to define the attributes of God apart from the covenantal relationship of the three Persons invites an ancient critique known as Euthyphro's dilemma. The critique was originally formulated in a polytheistic context and is especially powerful there. But it has its modern form and it is often used to attack the God of the Bible. The question is asked: Is God's ethical goodness the result of God conforming to a standard of goodness? If so, we do not need to know God to know ethical goodness. The abstract standard exists by itself, apart from God. It also means that we can judge God, for He is required to conform to the ethical standard no less than we. If the ethical goodness that God demands is the expression of His own nature, then it is said to be arbitrary. If God were different, He might command murder rather than forbid it. What He commands and forbids is just the arbitrary imposition of His absolute will. In either case, we have a view that is unworthy of God. The God of the Bible cannot be thought of either

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<sup>24</sup> *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, p. 96. He goes on to say, “It was upon this foundation of a truly Trinitarian concept that Calvin built his conception of covenant theology.” P. 97.

<sup>25</sup> *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1992), vol. 1, p. 241.

as god that is subject to our judgment according to a standard outside of himself, nor as a god that is pure arbitrary will.

The Christian answer is that God is Himself the standard for ethical goodness and righteousness. His own Holy character is the ethical standard. But this does not erase the problem entirely, for most, if not all, of the terms defining ethical uprightness are social. What would it mean for God's own character to be the standard for ethics, if we conceived of God as a monad? A single lonely God, without relationship to any other cannot be good, for example, because, as Turretin pointed out, goodness is a word that describes how one relates to others. He obviously cannot be love, for the same reason. Some might think such a god could be righteous, but in fact, he could only be righteous in reference to a standard outside of himself or with reference to the arbitrary whim of his will. Allah, in other words, falls prey to the Enlightenment critique of God; he cannot answer Euthyphro.

But a Trinitarian view of God's attributes sets us free from this dilemma. The Triune God is a society in which each denies Himself to seek the good and blessing of the other. Righteousness, goodness, love, faithfulness, and truth all are defined in terms of the concrete interpersonal relationships of the Three. Righteousness, for example, is not an abstract idea or a mere principle. It is the way the Three Persons treat one another. Or, rather, it is one perspective on the way the Three relate to one another. It might be stated this way, righteousness means that each of the persons of the Trinity recognizes and protects the distinct properties of the other persons. Other ethical terms emphasize various aspects of the self-sacrificial, self-giving dedication of the Three for one another. Love, righteousness, faithfulness, and truth are indeed an expression of God's character, but arbitrariness is not possible because the One true God is a covenantal society of love. For Him to be anything other than what He is would undermine His very being.

In the Bible, each of these basic ethical terms is a covenantal term.<sup>26</sup> They define relationships between God and man as well as between man and man whether, as often, in the context of a specific covenant or, as in many other cases, in a generally covenantal context. Jews, for example are very conscious of the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants as defining their relationship with God and though they are not self-conscious of their rejection of these covenants, they will be judged in terms of them. Gentile pagans are in covenant in Adam, but they are not conscious of it and the details of what it means for a Gentile to be in the Adamic and Noahic covenants are harder to specify. It remains clear, however, that non-Christian men who reject the God of the Bible are still judged in terms of His revelation because it is a covenantal revelation which speaks authoritatively to men. It therefore brings men into judgment. They will be blessed or cursed in terms of their response, even though they may not have consciously "entered" into a covenant with God. They are in covenant with God in Adam and the revelation that God has given of Himself in history is authoritative for them. In that sense, then, all ethical terms and standards have a covenantal foundation in God Himself and in His covenantal relationship with mankind.

## **6. *Father and Son in John's Gospel***

John's Gospel supplies a relatively tight knit exegetical argument for the idea of a covenant among the Persons of the Trinity. Our Lord's famous prayer in John 17 uses language that

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<sup>26</sup> I offer more exegetical argumentation for this point in *Paradox and Truth*.

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seems clearly to presuppose a covenantal relationship between the Father and the Son when it speaks of the parallel to the covenantal relationship between the Persons of the Trinity and God's elect. However, expositions of John's Gospel frequently miss the covenantal language in chapter 17 and the covenantal focus of the whole Gospel because John does not use the word "covenant" even a single time. Yet, for those well acquainted with the book of Deuteronomy, John's covenantal language is clear. It pervades his Gospel, as John Pryor points out.<sup>27</sup>

It is especially noteworthy that on many occasions the injunctions to love God and to obey/keep his commands are brought together, so that we can see that love for God is always demonstrated by covenant obedience (Deut 6:5-6; 7:9; 10:12-13; 11:1, 13, 22; 19:9; 30:6-8; Josh 22:5). This Deuteronomic pattern (and note in 30:6-8 the promise of a renewed people, the foundation of the new covenant hopes) has been taken up by Jesus in John. Not only does the Johannine corpus use 'commandment' and 'to command' with greater frequency than the rest of the New Testament, but love for Christ and obedience to his commands are brought together in a way which reminds us of the Deuteronomic covenant obligations.<sup>28</sup>

The Deuteronomic themes of John's Gospel are especially prominent in chapters 13 to 17, the immediate context for the expressions that are especially under consideration. But the Gospel as a whole depicts the relationship between Jesus and the Father as covenantal, as the following illustrates.

### The Father

- 1) sends the Son as His representative;
- 2) gives the Son a mission to accomplish;
- 3) gives the Son commandments.

### The Son

- 1) rejoices to do the Father's will;
- 2) accomplishes the mission for which He was sent;
- 3) obeys the Father's commandments out of love.

This is the classic covenantal structure of God's relationship with Israel. 1) She was chosen from the nations to be His representative nation, a priestly nation to minister to all the other nations of the world. 2) She was given a mission to create a kingdom in the promised land that would glorify God and win the rest of the world. 3) She was given commandments by God that would enable her to fulfill her mission. Jesus is the true Israel, the true Vine (John 15). He fulfilled the mission that Israel failed to fulfill.

But there is also a sense in which He did not complete the work. Or rather, a sense in which He is still completing the work now. He is working through the Church, His body, to accomplish the full project that the Father gave Him. That is the reason that He says to His disciples, "As the Father sent me, so send I you" (John 20:21). Jesus' relationship with the

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<sup>27</sup> John W. Pryor, *John the Evangelist of the Covenant People*, pp. 161-63.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162.

Church parallels the Father's relationship with Him. They have the same covenantal structure, as can be seen from the words of Jesus in John 15.

Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love. If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. (John 15:9-10)

So, the Church is 1) sent into the world as Jesus' body and representative (she prays and works in His name) 2) with a mission (to disciple the nations of the world) and 3) commandments to enable her to fulfill that mission. This unmistakable covenantal parallel is the background for our understanding certain expressions in Jesus' prayer in John's Gospel.

In John 17 Jesus prays that the disciples may be one as He and the Father are one.<sup>29</sup> This oneness is based in the mutual indwelling of the Persons.<sup>30</sup> It is a unity of love at the same time that it is a unity of mutual indwelling.<sup>31</sup> John 17 describes the same relationship of representation, love, commandments, and glory that we find in John 15, the most emphatically covenantal chapter in the entire Gospel. Thus, in John 17 when Jesus speaks of the disciples being "in" Him, He is referring to the same covenantal relationship that He spoke of in John 15 when He exhorted them to abide in Him. And in John 17 when He speaks of the parallel between the Father being in Him and He being in the disciples, He is speaking of the same covenantal parallel that He spoke of in John 15. What He adds in John 17 is that not only are we in the Son as the Father is in the Son and the Son in the Father, but also we are in *both* Father and Son. The relationship described by the word "in" however is the same. It is the covenant of love that we are commanded to abide in by obedient love.<sup>32</sup>

## **7. Unchanging God of the Covenant**

Abraham Kuyper offered an argument for a covenantal relationship among the Persons of the Trinity that I regard as the most profound argument for such a relationship and as completely irrefutable. I have quoted and explained Kuyper's view at greater length in *Paradox and Truth*,<sup>33</sup> but the essential point can be seen in the following.

If the idea of the covenant with regard to man and among men can only occur in its ectypical form, and if its archetypical original is found in the divine economy, then it cannot have its deepest ground in the *pactum salutis* that has its motive in the fall of man. For in that case it would not belong to the divine economy as such, but would

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<sup>29</sup> "I am no longer in the world; and yet they themselves are in the world, and I come to You. Holy Father, keep them in Your name, the name which You have given Me, that they may be one even as We are." (11)

<sup>30</sup> "that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me. . . . I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me." (21, 23)

<sup>31</sup> "I have made Your name known to them, and will make it known, so that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them." (26)

<sup>32</sup> For an expanded version of this argument, see "The Trinitarian Covenant in John 17" at trinitarianism.com.

<sup>33</sup> *Paradox and Truth: Rethinking Van Til on the Trinity* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2002, second revised edition), pp. 73 ff.



be introduced in it rather incidentally and change the essential relations of the Three Persons in the divine Essence.<sup>34</sup>

I cannot quite imagine how any reformed theologian can disagree with Kuyper here. If the three Persons of the Godhead do not have a covenantal relationship among themselves essentially and eternally, then they entered into a covenant with regard to man. Of course, God's plan is eternal so there is nothing in the way of eternal versus temporal here. The point is that the relationship between the three Persons considered apart from man and apart from the fall of man into sin would have to be regarded as not covenantal. But the contemplation of the fall of man into sin and the method of redemption introduced for the first time (so to speak) a new sort of relationship among the Persons. Now the Father, Son, and Spirit (though He is often left out) enter into a covenant.

This is odd in the extreme. If Father, Son, and Spirit do not relate to one another in covenant essentially in their fundamental intratrinitarian fellowship, why should the contemplation of man's fall and redemption introduce something new and different in their relationship? And how should we think of God as the unchangeable God, if intratrinitarian relationships have been fundamentally and essentially changed in the *pactum salutis*?

Apparently this argument has been considered speculative.<sup>35</sup> It is not. To assert that the fundamental nature of the relationship among the three Persons of the Trinity cannot change because of considerations regarding man and history seems to be a plain and inescapable deduction from the fact of God's immutability. God is who He is from eternity and to eternity. What He does in regard to man — even when we are speaking of His eternal plan — does not and cannot introduce a new sort of relationship into the Godhead — as if the three Persons related without a covenant apart from considerations of man and history but then find it necessary to enter a covenant when those considerations are introduced. It would mean that God's *ad extra* relations such as planning the creation of the world, the fall of man into sin, and the redemption of fallen man introduce *ad intra* changes, a new sort of relationship between the Father, Son, and Spirit. Rather than positing a change in the nature of the relationships among the Trinitarian Persons, we must see *pactum salutis* as manifesting who and what God is in eternity. If the reader grasps this point — which is not speculation but theological reasoning in the most refined sense of the word — then all the other arguments simply confirm this obvious theological deduction.

## **8. Covenantal Dynamic**

When I speak of a covenantal dynamic in the Trinity, I am thinking especially of the procession of the Holy Spirit, though I believe that the Father's begetting the Son should be understood in the same manner. I concentrate here on the procession of the Holy Spirit because it seems to me to be clearer.

At the same time, the procession of the Spirit is controversial. The Eastern and Western branches of the Church have disagreed on this point for hundreds of years. In the East, the procession of the Holy Spirit is understood to be procession from the Father only. In the West, the Spirit is said to proceed both from the Father and the Son. I believe the Western view is

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<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, p. 295.

<sup>35</sup> Richard Phillips, "Covenant Confusion" [http://www.gpts.edu/resources/resource\\_covconfusion.html](http://www.gpts.edu/resources/resource_covconfusion.html).

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correct but I am not going to argue for it here. I am going to assume it since I am writing in the context of the Western Church and virtually anyone who reads this essay will already take the Western view for granted. What is important for this essay is to consider the implications of this view. First, we need to consider the significance of the fact that the Spirit proceeds both from Father and Son. Then we need to consider how that is related to the Scriptures that form the basis for the Western view.

Cornelius Van Til stated the profound significance of the Western view succinctly.

Athanasius and Augustine did much to make more clear that all three of the persons are co-ordinate. And an important point in this connection was to show that the Holy Spirit proceeds not only from the Father but also from the Son (filioque). It is only if the Spirit proceeds from both that the inter-communion of the Persons of the Trinity is eternally complete. The Western Church more clearly than the Eastern saw that the co-ordination of the persons and their exclusively internal intercommunication could not be expressed without the filioque clause.<sup>36</sup>

The Spirit proceeds eternally from the Father to the Son and then from the Son back to the Father. In this way, the communion of the Persons is complete. This fullness of communion between the Persons of the Trinity is what distinguishes the Western view from the Eastern and in my opinion what gives the Western church a richer understanding of the ontological Trinity.

But we must understand that the Western view that the Spirit proceeds from both Father and Son is a doctrine of the ontological trinity based upon what God does in history. All branches of the church and all denominations who hold to the Trinity agree with what Bavinck says when he writes, “The ontological Trinity is reflected in the economical Trinity.”<sup>37</sup> There is simply no other way to build the doctrine of the ontological Trinity.

So what, then, is the Scriptural basis for the doctrine of procession? Bavinck, following church tradition, supports the doctrine of the procession of the Spirit from both Father and Son by reference to two passages in the Gospel of John: 14:26 and 16:7. But both of these verses refer to the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church. They are not first of all or primarily about an eternal procession.

Bavinck explains,

But this procession in time is a reflection of the immanent relation existing between the three persons in the ontological trinity, and is based upon generation and spiration. The generation of the Son is the eternal arche-type of the incarnation of the Logos, and the procession from the Father and the Son is the proto-type of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Hence, the church-fathers derived the knowledge concerning the eternal and immanent relations existing between the persons of the trinity from what was revealed concerning those relations in time. In this they were correct.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1978), pp. 225-26.

<sup>37</sup> Bavinck, p. 117.

<sup>38</sup> Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God*, p. 320.

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If the procession in time is the ground for our doctrine of the procession in eternity, then it is vital that we consider the nature of this procession. What does the gift of the Spirit mean? The gift of the Spirit is associated with all of the blessings of salvation. He testifies to us of God's love and assures us that we are His children. He is the pledge of all the blessings we shall enjoy in the future as well as the highest and greatest blessing we have in the present. To sum up all that the Spirit is and means requires that we see Him as the essential gift of the new covenant. Here is where the doctrines of procession and the covenant intersect.

Consider the nature of promise of the Holy Spirit in John's Gospel. If we ask the question what distinguishes the new covenant from the old, the answer from John's Gospel is, "the gift of the Spirit." This is emphasized in John's Gospel through the announcement of John the Baptist, the proclamation of Jesus in the temple at the feast of tabernacles (7:37-39), and the teaching of Jesus in John 14-16. The Holy Spirit was never really given until after Jesus' resurrection. Jesus explained to the disciples that the Spirit was with them, but after the resurrection He would be in them (John 14:16-17).

This importance of the Holy Spirit as the promise of the new covenant is seen in the synoptic Gospels primarily in the ministry of John the Baptist. John announces that the Messiah is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit, virtually defining the Messiah in terms of the gift of the Spirit. The fulfillment of this promise in the book of Acts further confirms the point. The gift of the Spirit of God on the day of Pentecost is the inauguration of the new covenant. Thus Richard Gaffin writes, "the gift of the Spirit, shared by all believers, is the eschatological essence of the new covenant, the fulfillment of the Father's promise, the downpayment and firstfruits of the resurrected life."<sup>39</sup>

What John the Baptist predicted and John's Gospel emphasized through the teaching of Jesus was that the Holy Spirit would bring in the age of the New Covenant. The gift of the Spirit, which is predicted in the passages that form the basis for the doctrine of eternal procession, is predicted not in the language of ontological relationships, but in the language of new covenant promise. The gift of the Spirit embodies all that the new covenant is and means.

Bavinck uses these verses as the basis for the doctrine of eternal procession because of the analogy between what God does in time and who He is in eternity. What I want to add is that this analogy suggests more than simply that the Spirit proceeds. He proceeds as the gift of covenantal love. The dynamic of the Spirit's procession from the Father to the Son and from the Son back to the Father is, therefore, a covenantal dynamic. God is eternally active, the Father always sending the Spirit of covenantal love to His Son and the Son always responding. The Spirit is always moving in covenantal procession.

Augustine spoke of the Spirit as the bond of love between the Father and the Son. There is nothing wrong with that language, unless we take it to suggest that somehow the Spirit is less personal than Father and Son. To prevent such a tendency, we need to add that the Son is also the gift of love from the Father to the Spirit. For just as the Father sent the Spirit into the world, He also sent the Son. If the one implies an eternal sending, why not the other? And just as the Son sends the Spirit into the world, the Spirit also brings about the birth of the Son (Luk. 1:35), empowers the Son (Mat. 12:28), and sends the Son into the wilderness (Mar. 1:12). It seems to me our doctrine of the Trinity would be more biblically rounded if we saw the Father not only sending the Spirit to the Son who sends the Spirit back in reciprocal love, but also understood the

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<sup>39</sup> Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., *Perspectives on Pentecost: New Testament Teaching on the Gifts of the Holy Spirit* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979), pp. 45-46.

Father to send the Son to the Spirit, who sends the Son back in reciprocal love. The dynamic of the Trinity is the dynamic of covenantal love expressed in the mutual sending, receiving, and responding in love with both Son and Spirit as both givers to and gifts of the Father.

## **Covenant and Ontology**

Ontological questions are important from more than one perspective. They have often arisen in conflict, being forced onto the church by heretics who attempt to corrupt her Trinitarian faith. Arians, for example, denied the full deity of Christ, claiming that He was created. Answering Arianism and eliminating its influence from the Church was very much a part of the early work on the doctrine of the Trinity. Questions concerning the nature and being of God have been part of the arsenal of non-Christian enemies who attack Christianity for holding false and inconsistent views of God. Celsus, a second century opponent of the faith attacked the doctrines of Christ's deity and incarnation, regarding them (and others) as nonsense. Porphyry in the third century claimed to respect Christ as a teacher, but pitied those who worshipped Him as a God. Questions about God's being have also arisen in the Church's task of teaching the Word of God, for knowing Him is the most important truth for His people to know. Thus, apologetics, evangelism, church discipline and Christian theology and worship all demand a full development of the doctrine of the Trinity.

Ontological questions about God include every question that can be asked about His being and existence. How shall we think about the oneness of God's being? What is the relationship between God's essence and the Persons of the Trinity? What is an attribute and how are the attributes related to the essence and to the Persons? A major question related to the being of God is the matter of divine simplicity. If God's essence is simple, not composed of parts or divisible, how should we think of the Persons of God?

In the traditional Latin theology of God, the Trinitarian Persons are defined in terms of five notions, four of which are relations of opposition and three of which are person constituting. The five notions are unoriginatedness and paternity with reference to the Father, filiation with reference to the Son, and spiration and procession with reference to the Spirit. The four notions which are considered relations of opposition are begetting, being begotten, spirating and being spirated. The three person-constituting relations are paternity, filiation, and procession. Two of these are processions, filiation and procession.

In the traditional scheme, Father, Son, and Spirit are defined simply and strictly in terms of their relationships with one another as these relationships are "ontologically" understood. By "ontologically" understood, I mean that these notions and relations define who and what the persons are. The Son is said to be the eternally begotten Son. His procession from the Father in the form of being begotten constitutes who and what He is as a Person. The traditional understanding of God is also ontological in the sense that ideas like notion, relation of opposition, and person-constituting relation have to be defined in relation to the one essence of God. Much of the problem in stating the doctrine of the Trinity has been found in expressing the doctrines of the notions, relations, and processions in such a manner that it does not compromise the oneness of God, on the one hand, or, on the other hand, reduce the Persons to mere modes. In other words, the attempt has been to express the ontology of the Persons so as to escape both the extremes of tritheism and modalism.

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Much of the effort expended benefits the whole church by helping Christians think about the greatness of our God. Much of the effort, however, benefits only those theologians who can wade through the ontological swamp of abstruse terminology and abstract philosophical discussion. Perhaps these discussions have weeded out a few heretics or prevented the growth of some heretical tendencies. It is hard to say. One thing that seems clear, however, is that the Bible has much more to say about the relationships between the Persons than traditional Trinitarian theology. The economic Trinity contains riches that have never been mined for the doctrine of the ontological Trinity. Why the gap? Perhaps in part because so long as we focus on ontology, we simply have no way of saying what we want to say. It is beyond us. We are facing the paradox of God and there is no expression of the doctrine that is going to be free of problems.

All of our theological talk about God is stuttering at best. It is not that we do not know Him. We certainly do. But the God whom we know is too great for us. He transcends our understanding. When we try to think of Him and describe Him, we inevitably confront some sort of paradox. When we try to remove the paradoxes and speak of Him more plainly, we inevitably fall into some sort of heresy. These in fact are our only choices: paradox or heresy.

The orthodox Christian doctrine of the Trinity has been hated and rejected by some who call themselves Christians as well as by Muslim, Jews, Christian cults, atheists and others. One of the main reasons for rejecting the doctrine of the Trinity is that it appears contradictory. To confess it is to confess faith in something mysterious and wonderful beyond comprehension. Thus it is rejected. The paradox is an offense. On the other hand, some who call themselves Christians as well as Muslims, Jews, Christian cults and others solve the problem of the One and the Many by simply confessing the ultimacy of the One. Modalism is the heresy that says God is one, and the Persons of the Godhead are simply different roles God takes in history. Thus, sometimes He is Father, sometimes Son, sometimes Holy Spirit, but He is always and only the one God. This is a solution to the problem of multiple persons in the one God that Muslims and Jews can accept from the rational side of things. The only offence that remains is the identification of the historical man Jesus with God.

The opposite solution to the paradox is tritheism, but it is the road less traveled. The historical tendency is toward unity. The oneness of God is upheld at the expense of a rich understanding that He is three no less than one. He is one love and three loves. We cannot really put it all together.

## **Ontological Questions**

In this second chapter, I will consider questions of Trinitarian ontology. Richard Phillips critique of my books *Paradox and Truth* and *The Eternal Covenant* evinced confusion on my views of the Trinity and as a result of his critique, that confusion has spread. In response, I decided to devote this chapter to Trinitarian ontology. I should add here that perhaps it is in part because my books did not contain a fuller statement on trinitarian ontology that Phillips misunderstood what I wrote. To help clear matters up, I am offering here what I hope will be a fuller and clearer explanation.

Ontological questions are important from at least three perspectives, dealing with heresy, answering objections to Christian faith, and teaching the Word of God. Historically, the most important questions have often arisen in conflict, being forced onto the church by heretics who attempted to corrupt her Trinitarian faith. Arians, for example, denied the full deity of Christ, claiming that He was created. Answering Arianism and eliminating its influence from the Church was very much a part of the early work on the doctrine of the Trinity. Conflict with non-Christian enemies of the faith has been another important influence on the Church. Questions concerning the nature and being of God have been part of the arsenal of those who attack Christianity for holding false and inconsistent views of God. For example, Celsus, a second century opponent of the faith attacked the doctrines of Christ's deity and incarnation, regarding them (and others) as nonsense. Porphyry in the third century claimed to respect Christ as a teacher, but pitied those who worshipped Him as a God. Of course, conflict is not the only reason the Church developed a sophisticated doctrine of God. Questions about God's being naturally arise in the process of teaching the word of God to believers. After all, the truth about God is the most important doctrine in the Bible. Thus, apologetics, evangelism, church discipline and Christian theology and worship all demand a full development of the doctrine of the Trinity. Whether it be in dealing with heresy, answering non-Christian objections or teaching the Word to God's people, we must be able to answer fundamental ontological questions.

Ontological questions about God include every question that can be asked about His being and existence. How shall we think about the oneness of God's being? What is an attribute and how are God's attributes related to His being. What is a Person and what is the relationship between God's essence and the Persons of the Trinity? How are the attributes related to the Persons? A major question of Christian ontology of God that influences our answer to all of the questions mentioned so far is the matter of divine simplicity. How can an absolute one be described as having multiple attributes and persons?

### ***The Inherent Difficulty of the Questions***

Charles Hodge and Robert Lewis Dabney both emphasize the inherent difficulty of questions about the being of God. In speaking of God, we are addressing the most profound and sublime subject man can consider. No sane man can be unaware that he is infinitely beyond his depth. Why then speak? Why not be silent and save the world the trouble of reading "words

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without knowledge?” The answer is that God has revealed Himself to us. We are not speaking on our own. His self-revelation invites and even commands us to speak. Christian ministers, as I said above, have an obligation to speak of God. Indeed it is the very essence of their calling.

The obligation, however, is to speak of Him according to His Word. We are called to unfold the riches of His self-revelation. Mere speculation is inappropriate. It is more than inappropriate, it is an ungodly imposing our pet theories onto the Biblical doctrine of God or reducing the Biblical God to the dimensions of our conceptual categories. In denouncing mere speculation, however, we have to be careful that we are not denouncing careful theological thinking designed to answer attacks against Biblical faith or to conscientiously expound the faith to God’s people.

Every question about the ontology of God is controversial. Even among Reformed writers, there is disagreement about how we should think of divine attributes and their relationship to God’s essence, how we should define a Trinitarian Person, how we should think of the relationships among the Persons, and how we should think of the relationship between the persons and the essence of God.

Charles Hodge has a relatively extended discussion of the definition of an attribute and the relationship of attributes to the essence of God in which he explains different approaches and refers to Reformed writers disagreeing on the matter. On the definition of a Trinitarian Person, some reformed writers, like Cornelius Van Til and John Murray, have no difficulty speaking of a person as a self-conscious subject. Many older writers in the Reformed tradition follow classic Western definitions inherited from Aquinas and the theology of the Middle Ages. Thus, William G. T. Shedd defines a person as “a mode of the existence of the essence.” What this means is that Van Til’s view of the Trinity and Shedd’s view of the Trinity differ significantly. The same can be said of the more recent writer, Robert Reymond, whose discussion of the Trinity differs significantly from both Van Til and Shedd, though his view of a person is the same as Van Til’s. With regard to the relationship among the persons of the Trinity, Reymond, whose systematic theology may become popular in Presbyterian schools, denies the traditional Nicene doctrines of the eternal generation of the Son and the eternal procession of the Spirit.<sup>40</sup> This contrasts with most writers in Reformed history, but not all.

In spite of the inherent difficulties and the broad disagreement, it is also common for theologians to discuss these issues in terms of what they believe to be the direction of the logical thrust of a particular line of thinking. Consider this quotation from Augustus Strong.

*The attributes have an objective existence.* They are not mere names for human conceptions of God — conceptions, which have their only ground in the imperfection of the finite mind. They are qualities objectively distinguishable from the divine essence and from each other. The nominalistic notion that God is a being of absolute simplicity, and that in his nature there is no internal distinction of qualities or powers, tends directly to pantheism; denies all reality of the divine perfections; or, if these in any sense still exist, precludes all knowledge of them on the part of finite beings. To say that knowledge and power, eternity and holiness, are

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<sup>40</sup> Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), pp. 317-41.

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identical with the essence of God and with each other, is to deny that we know God at all.<sup>41</sup>

Whether or not Strong is correct in his understanding that the attributes of God have an objective existence, the fact is this quotation condemns the thinking of the majority of the older Reformed theologians in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, who held to a strong view of the simplicity of God and taught the view — or something very close to the view — that Strong labels “nominalism” and charges with tending “directly to pantheism.” Needless to say, there have not been many pantheists among Reformed theologians. Where we think a particular view *must lead* and what men actually think are not necessarily the same. However consistent we try to be, all of us are inconsistent in many things, and it is sometimes our inconsistencies that save us.

The point is that we need to understand that we are dealing with issues that good men disagree about. In spite of significant differences on these matters, the men I am going to discuss are all reformed and all of them are orthodox. Their differences are not unimportant and will have an impact on their theology. But theology is an ongoing discussion. Over time as we learn from each other and develop the implications of our thinking, some views are recognized to be wrong, or at least less helpful. Sometimes the developing discussion leads to a significant advance that brings blessing to the church. In the end what we seek is to speak the truth in love so that we may grow up in all aspects unto Him who is the Head, even Christ (Eph. 4:15).

With the difficulty of the subject in mind and a clear notion of our purpose, then, let us consider these questions in more detail.

### ***Two Tendencies in Trinitarian Thought***

First, I think it is important to point to two general trends in Reformed thought. In fact, these are two general trends that characterize Christian thought about God in general, but they are also found among Reformed thinkers as well. On the one hand, there are theologians whose basic concern is to guard the doctrine of God’s oneness. Often this may be because of fighting against heresies or attempting to respond to Muslim and Jewish critics of Trinitarian faith. The result, however, is that they do not do justice, in my opinion, to the full Biblical truth about God’s threeness.

Of course, the opposite tendency is to overemphasize God’s threeness with the result that our doctrine of the oneness of God suffers. In most cases, this is a matter of emphasis. Taken to the extreme, the overemphasis on the oneness of God is seen in the heresy modalism, in which the three persons of the trinity are reduced to mere names for God or roles that the one God assumes. God is one God who works in the world and manifests Himself in various ways. Father, Son, and Spirit are not persons but simply different roles the one God plays. The opposite extreme, an overemphasis on God’s threeness, results in the heresy known as Tritheism. Father, Son, and Spirit are not three persons in the one God, but three different gods. Though it is often not thought of as such, Arianism is a form of tritheism or perhaps bitheism because it asserts that the Son was created by the Father and has been exalted to the status of a god. When reading discussions of the Trinity the opposite dangers of modalism and tritheism occupy much attention.

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<sup>41</sup> Augustus Strong, *Systematic Theology*.



There is another danger, however, that is related to both of them. That is the danger of rationalism. By rationalism in this context I mean the danger of attempting to force the doctrine of God to fit the limits of our puny intelligence. If the biblical doctrine of God must be expressed in language that will satisfy the demands of our intellect and remain within the reach of our minds, I believe we will be forcing it into a minute mold. To state the full biblical doctrine of the trinity does confront us with paradox. In my opinion, this is not a problem, it is an inescapable feature of advanced knowledge of any sort in any realm. Why should it be different in theology? We are not taught about God so that we can reduce Him to our neat little formulas but so that we can worship Him with all our hearts. The truth about God leads us to bow before Him and commit our minds and hearts to Him. That He transcends our efforts to comprehend Him is not a problem. It should be taken for granted.

With that in mind, I want to briefly discuss the doctrine of the Trinity as it is developed in three very different Reformed writers, William G. T. Shedd, Cornelius Plantinga, and Cornelius Van Til. These men illustrate the wide divergence in Trinitarian theology. None of them has usually been considered heretical — though some of Van Til’s critics do charge him with heresy. They all affirm the basic truth of the Trinity but with very different emphases.

### **William G. T. Shedd**

William G. T. Shedd was one of the great American Presbyterian theologians of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Although dated, his *Dogmatic Theology* and *Historical Theology* are still important reading for students of theology. His discussion of the doctrine of the Trinity illustrates the tendency in Reformed theology, and in Western theology in general, to overemphasize God’s oneness. Like many of the older Reformed theologians, his discussion of the Trinity follows that of Thomas Aquinas.

The following quotations show how Shedd defines a Trinitarian person.

The term “person” does not denote an attribute of the essence, but a mode of the essence; that is, a particular “form” of its existence, according to the term used by St. Paul, Phil. 2:6. It is proper to speak of a trinitarian mode, but not of a trinitarian attribute. A trinitarian person is sometimes defined as a “relation” of the essence. . . . By a “relation” here is not meant an external relation of God to the finite universe; as when the essence is contemplated in relation to space and time, and the attributes of immensity and eternity are the result; but an internal relation of the divine essence toward *itself*. It is the essence in a certain mode, e.g., the Father, as related to this same essence in a certain other mode, e.g., the Son.<sup>42</sup>

The elder Protestant theologians and symbols defined a divine person to be, a *mode of subsistence* marked by a certain peculiar characteristic: *modus subsistendi*, *τρόπος ὑπάρξεως*. The divine essence with the characteristic which Scripture denominates generating, is the Father; the same numerical essence with the characteristic called filiation is the Son; the same numerical essence with the characteristic called procession, is the Spirit. This peculiarity, which is technically the “hypostatical character,” constitutes the personality of a trinitarian person; that which distinguishes him from the others. And this personality of a trinitarian person

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<sup>42</sup> William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, vol. 1, pp. 267-68.

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must not be confounded with that of the essence. The paternity of the Father, or the Sonship of the Son, is not the same thing as the personality of the Godhead.<sup>43</sup>

His discussion of divine attributes includes a careful distinction between a person and an attribute.

The difference between a Divine attribute and a Divine person is, that the person is a mode of the *existence* of the essence; while the attribute is a mode either of the *relation*, or of the external *operation* of the essence. The qualifying adjective “external” is important; because the internal operation of the essence describes a trinitarian person. When the Divine essence energizes ad intra, the operation is generation, or spiration, and the essence so energizing is the Father, or the Son; but when the Divine essence energizes ad extra, the operation is omnipotence, or omniscience, or benevolence, etc. A trinitarian person is a mode of the essence; a divine attribute is a phase of the essence.<sup>44</sup>

While Shedd clearly follows Aquinas in defining a person as an internal relation of the divine essence, in places he expresses the doctrine of the trinity in terms more personal than Aquinas seems to use. Shedd’s longer discussion does much to qualify the impression that might be received from Aquinas that a trinitarian person is a rather abstract and impersonal mode of relation of the essence. But the fact remains that a person is defined as a subsistent relation, a mode of the existence of the essence. The point of the abstract language is to preserve the oneness of God. To avoid tritheism, Shedd believes he must assert that the three “hypostatical consciousnesses constitute the one self-consciousness of the divine essence.”<sup>45</sup> For Shedd, there must not be three understandings, or three wills, in the Godhead. In conclusion, for Shedd and many in the Reformed tradition, a trinitarian person is not a self-conscious subject but a mode of subsistence — an abstract and relatively impersonal notion at best.

### **Cornelius Plantinga**

Cornelius Plantinga Jr. published a famous article on the doctrine of the Trinity in which criticized the kind of view espoused by Shedd.<sup>46</sup> According to Plantinga, the Augustinian tradition, which Shedd also expounds, teaches a view of God that is impossible to believe. On the one hand, the traditional Augustinian understanding teaches that God is three true persons who love one another and interact as persons, a view based upon the Scriptures, especially the Gospel of John. On the other hand, influenced by Greek philosophy, the Augustinian view also teaches that God is one in such a way that the threeness of God fades into a monistic background. Plantinga explains that the traditional view holds that the Father *is* the essence of God, and the Son *is* the essence of God, and the Holy Spirit *is* the essence of God, but God is one essence not three. The result of the traditional emphasis on the oneness of God is that the three Persons tend to be reduced to something less than persons.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., pp. 277-78.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., pp. 335-36.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 282.

<sup>46</sup> “The Threeness/Oneness Problem of the Trinity” *Calvin Theological Journal*, 23, No. 1 (April, 1988). Hereinafter referred to as TOPT.

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In this Plantinga stands in the line of what has almost become the standard critique of the Latin theology rooted in Augustine and epitomized in the theology of Thomas Aquinas. As defined by Thomas, the Trinitarian Persons are understood in terms of five notions, four of which are relations of opposition and three of which are person constituting. The doctrine of the five notions structures the whole Western doctrine of trinitarian ontology from Thomas onward, including the trinitarianism of most Reformed theologians, even American Presbyterians like William Shedd and Charles Hodge.<sup>47</sup> As I pointed out previously, the five notions are unoriginatedness and paternity with reference to the Father, filiation with reference to the Son, and spiration and procession with reference to the Spirit. The four notions which are considered relations of opposition are begetting, being begotten, spirating and being spirated. The three person-constituting relations are paternity, filiation, and procession. Two of these are processions, filiation and procession.

The three person-constituting relations define the Persons. Paternity is the relation which defines the Father as the Father of the Son. Filiation defines the Son as the One who is begotten. Procession is the relation which constitutes the Spirit as Spirit. These relations establish, or seem to establish, relative differences among the persons. But, in Plantinga's words, "Thomas simplifies things so aggressively that even that difference is eventually washed out. For each person is identical with his relation: the Father just is paternity; the Son just is filiation; the Spirit just is procession. Further, these relations themselves, Thomas explicitly says, are all really the same thing as the divine essence. They differ from it only in intelligibility, only in perception, only notionally, not ontologically. For everything in the universe that is not the divine essence is a creature."

Thus, in the theology of the Western church after Aquinas, the Persons of the Trinity tend to be reduced to the three constituting relations. That is, a trinitarian Person is defined as a subsistent relation within the essence of God. Why such an abstract definition of a Person? In order to preserve the doctrine of the Trinity from criticisms from Muslim and Jewish philosophers who attack it as polytheism. Aquinas in particular, but Western theology in general, has been very sensitive to assertions that what the church believes is a form of polytheism or tritheism. If the three Persons of the Trinity are seen as Persons who love one another, communicate, and live in a fully personal relationship, then there are three *subjects* in God, not one. This doctrine is attacked as tritheism. Theologians who fear that accusation and the tendency toward tritheism at a practical level emphasize the oneness of God. In the West, ever since Augustine, oneness has held a higher place than threeness.

As Plantinga sees it, when theologians are talking about the Bible, they emphasize threeness, but when they begin to theologize, they emphasize oneness. He claims the two strands of their thinking cannot harmonize.

What he proposes in the place of traditional Western trinitarianism is a social view of the Trinity.<sup>48</sup> Plantinga explains, "According to this view, the holy Trinity is a transcendent society or community of three fully personal and fully divine entities: the Father, the Son, and the Holy

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<sup>47</sup> Hodge wrote, "The several persons of the Trinity are distinguished by a certain 'property,' as it is called, or characteristic. That characteristic is expressed by their distinctive appellations. The first person is characterized as Father, in his relation to the second person; the second is characterized as Son, in relation to the first person; and the third as Spirit, in relation to the first and second persons. Paternity, therefore, is the distinguishing property of the Father; filiation of the Son; and procession of the Spirit."

<sup>48</sup> The following paragraphs explaining Plantinga's view are copied from my book, *Paradox and Truth*.

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Spirit or Paraclete. These three are wonderfully unified by their common divinity, by the possession by each of the whole divine essence — including, for instance, the properties of everlastingness and sublimely great knowledge, love, and glory.” Each of the three persons on this view is distinct, but “scarcely an individual or separate person.”

The three persons are not, in this view, “three miscellaneous divine persons each of whom discovers he has the divine essence and all of whom therefore form an alliance to get on together and combine their loyalties and work.” A view of this sort would certainly be tritheistic. It is not, however, tritheistic to view the Father, Son, and Spirit as distinct persons who not only share a common divine essence, but who also mutually indwell one another so perfectly and completely that we must say there is “in the divine life a mysterious, primordial in-ness or oneness relation that is short of a oneness of person but much closer than mere common membership in a class.” This is what Biblical words like Father and Son point to, for the Son has a relationship with the Father so that the two persons “are of one substance not only generically but also quasigenetically. The Son is not only equally divine with the Father; he is also the Father’s Son; he is, so to speak, his Father all over again. Father and Son are not just members of the class of divine persons; they are also members of the same family.”

What this means is defined carefully.

Each of Father, Son, and Spirit possesses, then, the whole generic divine essence and a personal essence that distinguishes that person from the other two. Both kinds of essence unify. The generic essence assures that each person is fully divine. The personal essences relate each to the other in unbroken, unbreakable love and loyalty. For the Father has essentially the property of being permanently related to the Son in an ineffable closeness akin to a parent/child relation. The Son has essentially the property of being permanently related to the Father in an ineffable closeness akin to a child/parent relation. Let us say that the Spirit has essentially the property of being the Father and Son’s loyal agent. They in turn have the complement of this property: it is essential to them to have the Spirit as their loyal agent.

On the social view, the Athanasian Creed affirms that the Father is divine, the Son is divine, and the Spirit is divine, yet there are not three Gods. On this social view, the denial of tritheism has at least three possible interpretations, any or all of which could be the meaning of the creed. First, God may be used, as it often is in the New Testament, as the special name of the Father, in which case, the Athanasian Creed affirms that there is only one fount of divinity, only one God in the way that the Father is God. Second, God may be used as the name for the divine essence. There are, then, three persons but one and only one generic Godhead or Godness, which each of the persons possesses. This accords with the traditional Latin interpretation of the Trinity, unless it is said that the three persons do not possess the divine nature, but are each identical to it. Third, one could use the word God to designate the whole Trinity, as Augustine does. What this means is that “the Father is a divine person, the Son is a divine person, and the Holy Spirit is a divine person; yet there are not three ultimate monarchies, but only one, the holy Trinity. For though each of the three is a divine person, each is also essentially related to the other two divine persons such that none alone is God the Trinity.”

The problem of equivocation in the use of the word God — for each of the three above explanations involves using the word “God” in two slightly different ways in the two verses of the Athanasian Creed — is “no particular problem: verses 15 and 16 do not form an argument that would be invalidated by equivocation. They rather make a sequence of confessional assertions that, on the reading just offered, need to be understood precisely in order that their coherence might be preserved.” Tritheism is also clearly not a problem here, unless one has determined beforehand that the very idea of three fully personal entities is tritheist. Historically tritheism was, as Plantinga points out, the Arian view that there are three divine persons, two of which are ontologically inferior to and created by the first, but all of whom are worshipped as God. Arianism taught the worship of “second-rate divinity” and, thus, was polytheistic. For worship belongs only to God but in Arianism the Son and Spirit, who were creatures of the Father, entirely separate beings both from each other and from the Father, are nevertheless treated as equal to the Father, treated as gods and objects of worship. Arianism taught the worship of one God and two creatures all in the name of God. That is certainly tritheism and polytheism.

Plantinga closes with the affirmation that the social view is in fact the Biblical analogy, for in the Bible the Church as one body but many members is the analogy suggested by Christ in John 17:21.

I wrote a detailed critique of Plantinga’s view of the Trinity in my book, *Paradox and Truth*. In my opinion, Plantinga suggests a number of important points, but one of the basic problems of his view is that it fails to solve one of the main problems it was designed for. Plantinga believes the traditional Western view lacks rational clarity, teaching that God is both one person and three. What he offers instead, however, is a view that teaches that God is both one essence and three. This is suggested in his words: “Each of Father, Son, and Spirit possesses, then, the whole generic divine essence and a personal essence that distinguishes that person from the other two.”<sup>49</sup> The fact that he equivocates on the use of the word essence saves him from the charge of asserting a simple contradiction, but it also points to the fact that the traditional view escapes contradiction in the same way. Plantinga construes the traditional position in an unusual manner as the assertion that God is one Person and God is also three Persons. Many would repudiate this portrayal of the doctrine, but for those who accept it, the answer to the problem of apparent contradiction is the same as Plantinga’s: it is not a logical contradiction because of the equivocation on the word “person.”

### **Cornelius Van Til**

Cornelius Van Til’s view of the Trinity was explicit about the assertion that God is both three Persons and also one Person. He has been severely criticized by some for holding to a contradiction, but if Plantinga is correct in his analysis of the Western view, Van Til is simply making explicit what has always been implicit in the Western view. Where Van Til differs, however, is in his insistence that both the one and the three in God are equally ultimate. Van Til would not agree with the tendency in the West to subordinate the three to the one. In that sense, Van Til may be closer to Plantinga. But I think he might find Plantinga’s view weak in the opposite direction, insufficient emphasis on God’s oneness.

Van Til’s understanding of the Trinity seems to have been formulated partially through the influence of Charles Hodge. At least it is in conformity with Hodge’s assertion that God is

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<sup>49</sup> TOPT, p. 51.

addressed as a single person. Van Til may also have been borrowing from Shedd when he wrote, “God is a one consciousness being and yet he is also a tri-consciousness being.” Shedd described the trinitarian consciousness in slightly different but suggestive language when he wrote, “the three persons are so real and distinct from each other, that each possesses a *hypostatical* or trinitarian consciousness different from that of the others. . . . These three hypostatical consciousnesses constitute the one self-consciousness of the Divine essence.”<sup>50</sup> He further explained, “It must be noticed that the Divine self-consciousness is not a fourth consciousness additional to the three hypostatical consciousnesses, but is the resultant of these three. The three hypostatical consciousnesses are the one Divine self-consciousness, and the one Divine self-consciousness is the three hypostatical consciousnesses. The three hypostatical consciousnesses in their combination and unity constitute the one self-consciousness. The essence in being trinally conscious as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is self-conscious. As the one Divine essence is the same thing with the three persons, and not a fourth different thing by itself, so the one Divine self-consciousness is the same thing with the three hypostatical consciousnesses, and not a fourth different thing by itself. In this way, it is evident that the three hypostatical consciousnesses are consistent with a single self-consciousness, as the three hypostasis themselves are consistent with a single essence. There are three persons, but only one essence; and three hypostatical consciousnesses, but only one self-consciousness.”<sup>51</sup>

Whether or not Van Til was borrowing from Shedd and Hodge, his view on the Trinity is consistent with much of what they wrote, but also a development of their views. What he added was a clear emphasis on the equal ultimacy of the one and the many. Whereas the Western tradition since perhaps the time of Augustine has tended to emphasize God’s oneness more than His threeness, Van Til insisted that God must be no less one than three, and no less three than one. In every sense and from every perspective, oneness and threeness must be equally ultimate.

In this respect, Van Til brought a new perspective on the doctrine of the Trinity. With Van Til’s doctrine, it is possible to fully confess God’s threeness, including the personal relationships among the persons. The Persons of the Trinity are not reduced to mere modes of relation within the essence and the threeness of God is not seen as an embarrassment to the doctrine of His oneness, for unless the one and the three are equally ultimate, neither can have any real meaning. Although Van Til’s proffered solution to the problem of the one and the many was implied by traditional trinitarian doctrine, he may have been the first to state it explicitly.

Treating threeness and oneness as equally ultimate means that the Three Persons must be seen as having personal relationships, a point Plantinga emphasized. This is obviously related to the idea of a covenant among the Persons of the Trinity. If God is both three subjects and one subject, three consciousnesses and one consciousness, then a covenantal relationship among the three Persons is conceivable as an aspect of their interpersonal unity and harmony.

Of course, Van Til was not the first to suggest a covenant among the Persons of the Trinity for that was part of traditional Reformed doctrine, though it has not usually been understood as an aspect of the *ad intra* trinitarian relationship. In the Presbyterian tradition, the covenant of redemption is seen as a covenant formed for the salvation of man between the Father and the Son or among all three Persons of the Trinity. It is clearly a means to an end and is an aspect of God’s response to the problem of sin. It is not thought of as an extension of the internal relations of the three Persons, but as a covenant entered into with regard to the external

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<sup>50</sup> Shedd, p. 282.

<sup>51</sup> Shedd, p. 283.

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relations of God to the creation. In that sense, the Presbyterian doctrine envisioned a change in God. In order to cope with the problem of sin, the Persons of the Godhead entered into a relationship that was new and different from their eternal and essential internal relations.

Though his emphasis on the equal ultimacy of the threeness and oneness of God makes possible the doctrine of a covenant among the Persons as an aspect of their ad intra relationship, Van Til himself did not explicitly refer to such a covenant. However, since it was part of the Dutch Reformed tradition, at least from the time of Abraham Kuyper, perhaps earlier, Van Til must have been familiar with it. As I pointed out in the previous chapter, Kuyper criticized the idea of the covenant of redemption as a merely ad extra covenantal relationship. Why would the three persons of the Trinity enter into a covenant to deal with the problem of sin in the world if the covenant was not essential to their ad intra relationship?

Van Til seems to be following Kuyper's view when he describes the three Persons as mutually representative. It is worthwhile to consider again the words of Van Til I quoted in the previous chapter.

It may even be said that *Calvin's covenantal idea is Theism come to its own*. The covenant idea is nothing but the representational principle consistently applied to all reality. The foundation of the representational principle among men is the fact that the Trinity exists in the form of a mutually exhaustive representation of the three Persons that constitute it. The emphasis should be placed upon the idea of *exhaustion*. This is important because it brings out the point of the complete equality as far as ultimacy is concerned of the principle of unity and of diversity. This mutual exhaustion of the persons of the Trinity places one before the choice of interpreting reality in exclusively temporal categories or in eternal categories. The demand of the doctrine of the Trinity, when thus conceived is that reality be interpreted in exclusively eternal categories inasmuch as the source of diversity lies in the Trinity itself and could never be found in a sense world beyond God. Hence the problem of the one and the many, of the universal and the particular, of being and becoming, of analytical and synthetic reasoning, of the a priori and the a posteriori must be solved by an exclusive reference to the Trinity.<sup>52</sup>

Van Til makes a number of important points here. First, the covenant idea, he says, is nothing but the representative principle applied to all of reality. This makes the whole creation covenantal in the nature of the case. God does not enter into a covenant with man after creating him, for man is created as God's image. Man is God's representative and therefore a covenantal being from the first. The same is true in a general way for the rest of creation, since all the creation is a revelation of God, representing Him in a secondary sense. As Van Til says, the representative idea must be applied to all reality.

Second, Van Til sees the source of this representative, which is to say, covenantal principle in the eternal relations of the persons of the Trinity. The covenant in God is not merely a covenant between Father and Son, nor is it merely an agreement entered into for the sake of the salvation of the world. To quote again one sentence from the previous paragraph: "the Trinity exists in the form of a mutually exhaustive representation of the three Persons that constitute it."

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<sup>52</sup> *A Survey of Christian Epistemology*, p. 96. He goes on to say, "It was upon this foundation of a truly Trinitarian concept that Calvin built his conception of covenant theology." P. 97.

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In this sentence Van Til clearly defines the eternal, internal relations of the Persons of the Trinity as representational and therefore covenantal.

Another quotation from Van Til shows how important this is for his whole understanding of theology.

It were quite legitimate and true to say that the foundation of all personal activity among men must be based upon the personality of one ultimate person, namely, the person of God, if only it be understood that this ultimate personality of God is a triune personality. In the Trinity there is completely personal relationship without residue. And for that reason it may be said that man's actions are all personal too. Man's surroundings are shot through with personality because all things are related to the infinitely personal God. But when we have said that the surroundings of man are really completely personalized, we have also established the fact of the representational principle. All of man's acts must be representational of the acts of God. Even the persons of the Trinity are mutually representational. They are exhaustively representational of one another. Because he is a creature, man must, in his thinking, his feeling and his willing, be representative of God. There is no other way open for him. He could, in the nature of the case, think nothing at all unless he thought God's thoughts after him, and this is representational thinking. Thus man's thought is representative of God's thought, but not exhaustively representative.

The doctrine of original sin is based upon this purely theistic, because purely biblical, concept of representation. Since the whole being of God, if we may in all reverence say so, is built upon the representational plan, it was impossible for God to create except upon the representational plan.<sup>53</sup>

Note how the doctrine of representation in Van Til connects his doctrine of God and creation. The first point — all of reality is representational — is grounded in the second point — the Persons of the Trinity are mutually representative of one another. Covenant in God is the source of the covenantal reality of the world. When I made this point in my book, I was simply following Van Til and Kuyper. It was not the invention of some new speculative idea.

Third, the phrase “mutually exhaustive” repeatedly used here by Van Til is his own idiom for what is traditionally called “perichoresis.” In *The Defense of the Faith*, Van Til wrote the following.

Using the language of the One-and-Many question we contend that in God the one and the many are equally ultimate. Unity in God is no more fundamental than diversity, and diversity in God is no more fundamental than unity. The persons of the Trinity are mutually exhaustive of one another. The Son and the Spirit are ontologically on a par with the Father.<sup>54</sup>

Fourth, Van Til relates this covenantal nature of God and the perichoretic mutual indwelling of the Persons of the Trinity to the problem of the one and the many. In fact, he sees

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<sup>53</sup> *Survey of Christian Epistemology*, p. 78-79.

<sup>54</sup> *Defense of the Faith*, p. 25.



it as the key to the problem of the one and the many because it connects the Triune God and the creation in terms of the principle of covenantal representation. God is three Persons who mutually indwell one another and therefore they are mutually exhaustive of one another. Each fully represents the other, sharing the same essence as equally ultimate Persons. This covenantal indwelling and mutual representation in God is the answer to the problem of the one and the many. God is one Person in the sense that the Three so fully indwell one another that they have a single consciousness. He is also Three Persons who each are fully Personal subjects, self-consciously relating to one another.

The doctrine of the Trinity as expounded by Van Til is the basis for what I wrote in my books *The Eternal Covenant* and *Paradox and Truth*. The view of the Trinity espoused there in some respects simply making more explicit what Van Til says in the previous quotations. Van Til places the idea of the mutual representation of the Persons of the Trinity at the very center of his doctrine of the Trinity by relating it to the problem of the one and the many. He also makes the covenant among the Persons central because he sees representation as an aspect of the mutual indwelling of the Persons and the key to the relationship between the Persons of the Trinity and the creation. God creates the world in covenantal and representational form because He is a covenantal and representational God. Being who He is, Van Til says, He could not do otherwise.

Van Til's doctrine is not really unique to him, even if his way of presenting it is. Abraham Kuyper, the most important Dutch thinker in the late 19th and early 20th centuries held a covenantal view of the Trinity. Herman Hoeksema held a view similar to Van Til's, emphasizing that the covenant is not a means to an end, but the very life of the triune God. The doctrine of God that I set forth in *The Eternal Covenant* simply combined various strands of Dutch theology, and in terms of that Dutch trinitarianism criticized Westminster theology. There was nothing in the book that was really new or original. But it apparently raised questions.

## **Conclusion**

What we have seen in this section is that three Reformed theologians, William G. T. Shedd, Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., and Cornelius Van Til have views of the Trinity that differ significantly. It seems to me fair to say that Shedd emphasized the oneness of God, Plantinga the threeness of God, and Van Til the equal ultimacy of both. But all three are orthodox and respected Reformed writers. The diversity in their exposition of the Trinity has not provoked doubt about their confessional faithfulness. If we included an exposition of Robert Reymond and Robert Letham, more recent Reformed writers, we would see that there is not only diversity, but serious debate about fundamental ontological issues among orthodox Reformed theologians, for Reymond regards the eternal generation of the Son and the eternal procession of the Spirit as errors<sup>55</sup>, while Letham regards both doctrines as essential to our understanding of God<sup>56</sup>.

My books offer a mere restatement of Kuyper's view, while Reymond criticizes views that have been considered essential to orthodox Trinitarianism. Reymond's book is praised highly on the back cover by J. I. Packer, Edmond Clowney, John Frame, and Roger Nicole. Whatever these men thought of his view of the Trinity, they did not see it as undermining his whole

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<sup>55</sup> Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Nelson, 1998), pp. 317-341.

<sup>56</sup> Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity in Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2004).

position. If we are going to consider Reymond's contradiction of traditional orthodoxy as confessionally viable, Kuyper's view should obviously not be considered heresy.

### ***The Covenant in God and the Ontology of the Persons***

One of the questions raised by my books was the relationship between the covenant among the Persons of the Trinity and trinitarian ontology. How shall we understand the relationship between ontology and covenant? Are the Trinitarian Persons 1) merely united by the bond of the covenant (what I have been misunderstood as affirming), or 2) is their union an ontological sharing of being, or 3) is it possible that covenant and ontology overlap? I believe the answer is given in part in Van Til's statements on perichoresis — though for reasons I do not know he does not use the traditional language here. Van Til describes the three Persons as being both mutually exhaustive of one another and as being fully representational of one another. The two notions are clearly related in the previous quotations. But Van Til does not put all of this together for us. Neither did I in my two books.

I would like to try to put things together explicitly now. I am going to set forth what I believe is the covenantal ontology of God. Three perspectives on the ontological relationships among the Persons of the Trinity suggest that ontology and covenant overlap in God. The first perspective is the doctrine of the mutual indwelling of the Persons, perichoresis. A second is the doctrine of the processions, including both the eternal generation of the Son and the procession of the Spirit. The third comes from John 1:1.

First, with regard to perichoresis, it seems to me that the mutual indwelling of the three Persons of the Trinity — their absolute ontological interpenetration — may be said to constitute them as a single Person, with a single consciousness. Of course, this does not in any way compromise the vitality of each Person. God remains integrally three even in the absolute unity. This is an aspect of the mystery of the three in one that we cannot begin to fathom, but I agree with Van Til that this is what the Scripture teaches and I believe that in stating the mystery in bold terms as he does, he is being faithful to the word of God. Please note that there is equivocation here on the word Person. As John Frame points out, in Van Til's formula, the word "person" does not mean precisely the same thing when he says that God is one Person and that He is three Persons<sup>57</sup>. Equivocation is not a problem in this case because we are not stating an argument when we confess that God is both One Person, in a sense, and three Persons in a related but indefinably different sense. Though my language is slightly different from his, what I have set forth here is simply restating Van Til.

The interpenetration of the three Persons of the Trinity must be understood as covenantal according to Van Til's description, because he says it is representational and for Van Til representation is the very essence of the covenant. But does that mean it is not ontological also? No. Van Til also asserts that "each of the persons of the trinity is exhaustive of divinity itself."<sup>58</sup> He also quotes with approval Bavinck's statement that "Each person is equal to the whole essence of God and coterminous with both other persons and with all three."<sup>59</sup> And again, "There is a deep and rich differentiation in the personal relationships between the three persons of the Trinity. The persons of the Godhead are mutually exhaustive of one another, and,

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<sup>57</sup> John Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1995), p. 69.

<sup>58</sup> *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, p. 220.

<sup>59</sup> *Introduction to Systematic Theology*, p. 229.

therefore, of the divine essence.”<sup>60</sup> Van Til’s language, then, points both to covenant and ontology as essential to perichoresis.

What I think we should say here is that covenant and ontology overlap in God. While perichoresis is traditionally understood to be ontological language, and the language of indwelling can be naturally understood ontologically, a covenantal perspective is not inconsistent with the ontological. The covenantal perspective is suggested by the language that the Bible uses to describe God’s covenantal presence with believers and His covenantal actions. For example, the Spirit’s indwelling the temple is a covenantal indwelling; it is not a matter of ontology. The Spirit is present everywhere because He is God. To speak of Him *dwelling* in the temple is to speak of Him being present to bless His people, or to discipline them if they break His covenant. Thus, Solomon speaks of His presence in covenantal language in his great prayer to dedicate the temple (1 Kings 8:15). The Son’s indwelling of His people is similar, as the Gospel of John makes clear (John 15:1-16). We abide in Christ by keeping His commandments, just as ancient Israel could enjoy the indwelling presence of God in the temple by keeping God’s commandments. God’s indwelling His people, then, is a covenantal indwelling.

However the same sort of language is used of the relationships of the persons of the Trinity (John 17:21, etc.). The analogy suggests a covenantal dimension to the Father’s being “in” the Son but there is nothing inconsistent between the covenantal and the ontological. In Herman Hoeksema’s words, the covenant is the very life of the Triune God.

Having said this, we must add that in God the mutual indwelling of the Persons of the Trinity is *not* covenantal in the sense of being an “agreement.” If we begin by defining the covenant as an agreement, then thinking of a covenantal relationship among the persons may indeed seem odd, as if they existed separately and decided to become one. But “agreement” is not a Biblical definition of covenant, especially as it applies to the Persons of the Trinity. I think we should say that in God, the covenant bond is the mutual ontological indwelling of the Persons of the Trinity. The mutual commitment of love and the fellowship the three have with one another express the covenant bond. This is the way God exists necessarily. It is not a voluntary agreement. The covenant among the Persons is ontological because it is of the essence of who God is and how He necessarily exists as Three Persons.

Second, in the first chapter, I showed that the Biblical notion of fatherhood is a covenantal notion. Fathers and Sons are covenantally united. What this means for the ontological Trinity should be clear. If the Son is eternally begotten by the Father, then He is in an eternal covenantal relationship with the Father. If the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the covenant, the gift that creates the bond of the new covenant, then the gift of the Spirit from the Father to the Son and from the Son back to the Father that Van Til describes as the eternally complete inter-communication of the trinitarian persons, is an expression of the eternal covenant. Eternal generation and eternal procession are covenantal ideas that express the fundamental ontology of the Trinitarian Persons.

Related to the eternal generation of the Son and procession of the Spirit is the notion of representation. The Son is the “exact representation” of the Father because He is begotten of Him. The Spirit is another comforter like the Son because He proceeds from the Son and the Father as covenant representative. Each of the Persons of the Trinity represents the others in a perfect harmony of fellowship. They reflect one another in perfect mutual representation because they share the same essence. Note that understanding generation and procession in

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<sup>60</sup> *Introduction to Systematic Theology.*, p. 232.

terms of covenantal representation eliminates every hint of ontological subordinationism since it assumes their totally equality in essence.

Third, the Son is called the Word of God in John 1:1. When John says, “in the beginning,” he alludes to the creation of the world in Genesis 1, a six-day series of creative actions that were all accomplished by speaking a Word. In the creation of the world, the Word of God is clearly His covenant command. God spoke the authoritative Word and the non-existent world came into obedient and covenantal existence. In the creation, the covenantal implications are clear. But John 1:1 is speaking of pre-creation relationships between Father and Son. That the same title is used here is significant in itself, but, as we saw in the first chapter, John uses other covenantally pregnant language here. The Word is “with God.” The title for Jesus “Word” is used in the Gospel of John to show us the internal communication of the trinitarian Persons. The depiction of the Father speaking the Word by His Spirit from all eternity is very much like the notions of the generation of the Son and the procession of the Spirit, differing primarily in being explicitly posited. Since “Word” is a name for the second Person, the relationships implied are ontological, even though the language of John 1:1 is emphatically covenantal. It is this covenantal ontology which comes to expression in the creation of the world. Because the Father speaks the Word by His Spirit from all eternity in the covenant love of the Trinity, He created the world by speaking His covenant Word. The ontology of Father, Word, Spirit, therefore, is a covenantal ontology.

## **Conclusion**

These three perspective are simply an application of what we have seen in the first chapter where I presented some of the Biblical and theological reasons for believing in a covenant among the Persons of the Trinity. If indwelling is a fundamentally covenantal idea and the Persons of the Trinity indwell one another fully and wholly from eternity, then they share a covenantal fellowship of perfect unity and oneness. The ontology of the Persons and the covenantal unity of the Persons are identified since God is what He is in His internal relations necessarily. The begetting of the Son and the procession of the Spirit, as eternal ontological relations of the three Persons of the Godhead constitute a covenantal relationship among the Persons that is essential to who God is. The Father eternally speaks the Word by the Spirit in covenantal self-revelation because it is His nature to reveal Himself.

All of this shows clearly that the covenant idea is not primarily that of agreement. The Father, Son, and Spirit do, of course, agree with one another and they do plan the creation of the world and the course of history and redemption together. Agreement is a function of the covenantal relationship, not its definition. Even among men this is true. I did not take Adam as my covenantal representative by signing a contract or taking an oath. It is my nature to be a covenantal creature and I cannot escape what is impressed upon my very being. Whether I like it or not, I must relate to God and other persons in covenant. In the end, I will be judged in covenant.

Men enter into agreements with one another and establish covenants with one another by ceremonies and oaths, or by signing documents because for a human person all covenant making is an *opera ad extra*, so to speak. We are single persons and when we make a covenant we are dealing with another outside of us. But the ceremonies we perform and the documents we draw up and sign are expressions of the fact that we are the image of the Triune God who speaks the Word from eternity. Ceremonial oath taking, feasting, singing and dancing reflect the Covenant

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God in whom three Persons dance and sing in a perfect fellowship of love and joy for eternity. It is in the difference between what is ad extra and what is ad intra that the analogy between the Covenant God and His covenant image display a basic divergence.

Having said that the ontology of the three Persons is covenantal, there is a misunderstanding that must be avoided. The statement that the three coming together in covenantal union constitute the one may seem to subordinate God's oneness to His threeness. Oneness might seem to depend on threeness in a way that threeness does not depend upon oneness. If the one and the many are to be equally ultimate, we cannot construe the doctrine of the Trinity in such a fashion. To the above, we must add that God is ontologically one in such a way that makes the mutual covenantal indwelling possible. It is because of the ontological oneness that the three Persons can mutually exhaust one another and represent one another with such fullness. The unity of God is the presupposition of the possibility of the kind of covenantal threeness God is, just as the three Persons must find the fullness of fellowship and love in the unity of the covenant. Unity and Diversity are thus equally ultimate — each presupposing and finding expression in the other.

### ***The Covenant in God and the Attributes***

Plantinga's critique of the traditional view of the Trinity included reflection on the relationship between the attributes of God and the Persons of God. In the traditional Western view each attribute is co-extensive with the whole being of God and with every other attribute. The traditional view teaches, according to Plantinga, that "in God persons and attributes are identical, as are persons and the sum of the attributes, the divine essence." He explains more fully.

Thus, for Augustine the Father is great, the Son is great, and the Holy Spirit is great, and yet there are not three greatnesses (not *tres magnitudines*), nor three greats, nor even three who are great (not *tres magni*), but only one great thing (only *unum magnum*). In the Augustine/Neo-Platonic Trinity there is exactly one divine essence or substance or nature. This divine essence, says Augustine, is 'the thing that God is.' God the Trinity is simple. God the Trinity is identical with the divine essence. In fact, in the Trinity each of Father, Son, and Spirit is identical with this one thing, with this one divine essence. No one is just an instance of it, or an exemplification of it, for then each would have greatness or other attributes only by participation and could not, therefore, be ultimately divine. Each of Father, Son, and Spirit is identical with greatness itself, or with the greatest possible thing. In Book 6 it turns out that each of the attributes—greatness, almightiness, holiness, and so on—is identical with all the others. In Book 7 Augustine rejects the whole apparatus of genus/species/individual in application to God. There aren't three species—Father, Son, and Spirit—of the one genus God, or three individuals—Father, Son, and Spirit—of the one species God, for whether conceived of as genus or species, God, or the essence of God, has exactly one instance. God the Trinity is the only instance of Godness, the essence of God. God the Trinity is moreover identical with Godness-itself, the only divine thing. And each of Father, Son and Spirit is identical with that

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thing. So Godness itself, the only divine thing, the Trinity, and each of Father, Son, and Spirit all turn out to be really the same thing.<sup>61</sup>

Plantinga's summary of the doctrine of Augustine shows the problem of identifying the attributes with the essence and with each other. In the end, Godness itself, the only divine being, the Trinity, each of the Persons of the Trinity and each of God's attributes are identical. This has the effect of reducing everything to one. In Plantinga's words Augustine's doctrine is "heavily monist and Neo-Platonic." He quotes the well-known saying of Harnack that Augustine "only gets beyond modalism by the mere assertion that he does not wish to be a modalist."

It also seems odd to identify attributes with an essence and not a person. If we were only thinking of attributes that could be considered impersonal, like eternity or infinity, then attributes thought of as qualifying an abstract essence is conceivable. All things have attributes in that sense. But God is not a thing. He is not impersonal either in His oneness or His threeness. His Personhood is not an attribute stuck onto an essence. When we think of God, therefore, even notions like infinity should not be thought of as qualities that belong to an abstract and impersonal essence. God is totally personal. Love, faithfulness, righteousness, goodness and the other attributes that are sometimes called moral attributes all define persons, especially persons as they interrelate. In the Bible, these attributes are covenantal. Love, for example, only has Biblical definition within covenantal relationships. To say that God is love is to say that He is three Persons who relate in self-giving to one another, each sacrificing Himself to seek the blessing of the other.

In the traditional Western view, the only attribute that the Father has as Father is paternity. The Son is *defined* as filiation. The Spirit *is* procession. One attribute alone defines each of the Persons as a mode of relation within the one essence of God. In the traditional view, the Father has no other attributes that distinguish Him as Father from the Son. Whatever is gained by this philosophically, this is clearly not a Biblical construct. Plantinga is correct to argue against this view of God's attributes as Neo-Platonic.

However the doctrine should be formulated in philosophical and theological language, the doctrine of God's attributes must take into account that the Father loves the Son in a way that is different from the way the Son loves the Father. For the Gospel of John clearly describes the fellowship of love between Father and Son in a manner that points to distinctions in their loves. The Father loves the Son as a Father and so gives the Son commandments and a mission. The Son loves the Father as a Son and so delights to do His will and to fulfill the work He has been given. Faithfulness, righteousness, goodness, and other attributes similarly differ according to the nature of the relationship.

If, in the traditional doctrine, the Father possessing one attribute, paternity, does not present a problem for the doctrine of God's unity and does not compromise the three sharing a single divine essence, why should it be thought to compromise God's unity if the Father possess all the attributes in a particularly fatherly way so that paternity defines how God the Father expresses the attributes? If each person possesses all the attributes according to the distinction of His own person, then the attributes become the attributes of Persons, which is the way we would normally think of attributes.

This means we would have to change Augustine's formula. Instead of saying the Father is great, the Son is great and the Spirit is great, but there are not three greatnesses or even three

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<sup>61</sup> TOPT, p. 45-46.

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who are great but only one great thing, we would have to say that the Father is great, the Son is great, and the Spirit is great, but these three great Persons are also one great Person. All the attributes of God belong to God in the unity of His being as well as in the three Persons. Just as the notion of Personhood must be different when applied to the oneness of God, so also the attributes would be different in an indefinable manner. When we contemplate God in the absolute oneness of His being, it may be legitimate to say that the attributes of God all equal each other and are co-terminous with the being of God. But when we contemplate God in His threeness, each of the attributes comes to unique expression in the covenantal relationships of Father, Son and Spirit. Or, perhaps we should say that the Father, Son, and Spirit each possess the attributes in a manner that is appropriate to the Person.

I am not going to attempt anything like a summary statement on the whole doctrine of God's attributes. I simply want to emphasize that to regard each of the Persons of the Trinity as persons in the full sense of the word requires us to see each of them possessing all of the attributes in a unique manner. There are subtle but important differences in what it means for a father to be righteous and what it means for a son to be righteous for the simple reason that fathers and sons have different responsibilities in the relationship. Our doctrine of God's attributes has to take those differences into account without going to the opposite extreme of so emphasizing the differences that we undermine God's unity.

### **Conclusion**

I hope that this has clarified my understanding of the Trinity and demonstrated that the notion of a covenant among the Persons of the Trinity does not carry with it inherent dangers of a tendency toward tritheism. Remember I am simply rephrasing Abraham Kuyper, Cornelius Van Til and Herman Hoeksema and I do not know of anyone suspecting them of tritheism. The idea of a covenant as one of the defining marks of the internal relations of the Persons of the Trinity perhaps is one of the distinctive aspects of Dutch Reformed theology. It may be that part of the misunderstanding that arises is rooted in the differences between Presbyterian and Dutch Reformed theology.

In my books I referred to James Jordan's definition of a covenant and the fact that he systematically relates it to the doctrine of the Trinity. It was Jordan who pointed me to the Dutch theologians to begin with. And the doctrine that I am teaching somewhat more explicitly than they did is faithful, I believe, to the doctrine they taught. Presbyterians may indeed disagree, but the arguments for a covenant among the Persons of the Trinity that have come from Abraham Kuyper and Cornelius Van Til still have to be answered. I hope that this essay helps those who may have misunderstood what I wrote in my books and I would like to say that if I get the opportunity to revise my books, I will add material to make a fuller statement of the doctrine so that readers will not be misled by the fact that only one aspect of the Trinitarian ontology appears in the essay.

## **Monocovenantalism and Other Problems:**

### **Answering Phillips' Specific Charges**

In this chapter, I intend to answer some of Phillips specific criticisms and to address the issue of the covenant, that is, so-called monocovenantalism. Before we turn to the details here, let me mention that I have written an article and published it on our web site that explains why I believe that Phillips has so grossly misunderstood my position<sup>62</sup>. I want to reiterate that I do not believe Richard Phillips is intentionally misrepresenting me. I have come to suspect that he is not as theologically competent as he should be. But that is the not the deepest issue. What I believe is that he suffers from paradigm blindness. He cannot see what I have said and what I mean because his own paradigm is so deeply rooted in him that he cannot read my view with the sympathy necessary to understanding. When he reads me through the colored glasses of his own view, he is hardly unique. All of us are both given sight by our paradigms and also have our sight clouded by our paradigms. None of us has achieved the perfect paradigm yet.

And it may well be that I am misunderstanding some things that Phillips says because of my paradigm. I hope not. I can say for myself that I was converted to the Reformed faith from the outside. I was previously a dispensationalist. It has been 20 years now since I was converted to Reformed faith and coming into it as a deeply convinced dispensationalist has made me think through things and study things in a way that those raised in the Reformed faith do not have to do. I hope that has given me an ability to see things from more than one perspective and to think through different paradigms more clearly. But perhaps not. The point here, at any rate, is that Phillips has so grossly misrepresented my views that I cannot imagine an explanation other than paradigm blindness. I am not willing to believe that he is dishonest or that he quotes me out of context with intention. I disagree with Phillips' view on the Covenant of Works and I will show that he has not understood my views, but I am not trying to denigrate the man himself. I will try to respond to each criticism clearly, but it is not my intention to be severe. What I believe we have here is gross misunderstanding because of paradigm blindness, a common disease in theological debates.

### **Specific Criticisms**

Phillips essay made a number of specific criticisms, most of which I have not yet taken the time to answer. Though I see them as arising through misunderstanding and not as being particularly important, I will offer a brief response to some of his comments on my books.

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<sup>62</sup> [http://www.berith.org/essays/covenantal\\_confusion.htm](http://www.berith.org/essays/covenantal_confusion.htm)



### ***A Different Gospel***

First, Phillips seems to be accusing me of teaching a different Gospel. In his introduction, he says clearly that some people are using the word “covenant” with a new meaning that also brings with it a new theology. Phillips begins his discussion of this new idea of covenant by referring to my two books, *Paradox and Truth* and *The Eternal Covenant*. He adds, “I believe the result is the propagation of a new and different gospel from the one taught in the great Reformed confessions and in the Bible.” To suggest that I am preaching a new and different Gospel is a very serious charge.

When he explains what this “new” idea of covenant is, however, he acknowledges that I am actually repeating Abraham Kuyper. Perhaps it is better to say that I am reintroducing Kuyper’s position on the trinity and the covenant because I believe it has never been given a fair and full hearing in America. But please note: Kuyper is not recent theologian and his views on the covenant hardly fit into the category of “new.” Nor has anyone, to the best of my knowledge, ever accused Kuyper of denying the Gospel. Herman Hoeksema teaches the same view of the Trinity and the covenant. Again, he is not recent nor has anyone accused him of teaching a new and different Gospel because of his views of the covenant. In fact, the view of the covenant taught by Kuyper and Hoeksema is relatively common among the Dutch Reformed.

My work is also rooted in Van Til, and Jordan. Jordan’s work is the most recent, but he is clearly drawing on Van Til and the Dutch tradition in general. The definition of the covenant which I quoted came from Jordan’s *The Law of the Covenant* published in 1984. Again that hardly qualifies as new. Moreover, this book comes with an introduction by John Frame. Frame apparently did not believe that Jordan radically distorted covenant theology, offered a defective doctrine of the Trinity, or altered the Gospel. Nor has anyone else suggested so for the last 20 years.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with disagreeing with this view. Characterizing it as a new idea strikes me as odd. But the real point is that if my repeating what Kuyper and Hoeksema taught about the trinity and the covenant is going to be opposed as a distortion of the Gospel, Phillips is going to have to show either 1) that Kuyper’s view of the covenant also denied or distorted the Gospel or that 2) my view significantly diverges from his so that my view undermines what his preserves. Phillips has not attempted anything of the sort.

### ***Covenant and Lordship***

Second, Phillips argues that covenant is an aspect of God’s Lordship and therefore not an aspect of the intratrinitarian relationships. He says, “With this in mind, I would like to suggest that there are in fact better explanations for the preponderance of covenant in history than that the Trinity must involve an essential covenant relationship. The first is that the Creator-creature relationship necessarily involves lordship and lordship expresses itself through covenant, a point Smith himself labors to make. But this situation does not pertain ontologically to the Trinity. Covenant is the outflowing of God’s lordship as manifested in commands, sanctions, and promises of blessing. But as the Council of Nicea insisted so long ago, there is no ontological

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subordination within the Godhead, hence no lordship, and hence no covenant, which is, by Smith's own reckoning, a function of lordship."

There are two things to be noted here. One, in the Bible, a father can be called lord (Gen. 31:35) and Jesus referred to the Father as His God (Rev. 3:12). If we thought of the Father's relationship to the Son as analogous to lordship, since the Father commands the Son and gives Him a commission, etc., the fact that covenant involves lordship would not contradict the notion of a covenant among the Persons of the Trinity. Nor would such lordship imply ontological subordination. When we speak of the Father commanding the Son and sending the Son into the world or of the Son's obedience to the Father, we are not suggesting either ontological subordination or that the Son is in any respect ontologically inferior to the Father. He is inferior in office. The Son is under the Father and bound to submit to Him. But the Son is not inferior to the Father in the possession of the attributes of God. They share the same single divine essence. Ontological subordination is not in view.

Two, if Phillips believes that the Covenant of Redemption was a covenant among Father, Son, and Spirit whereby they planned the salvation of the world, then even in his view, the notion of covenant is not restricted to Lordship or to God's relationship with the creation. The Persons of the Trinity are covenanting with one another. However, not all reformed theologians have believed in a Covenant of Redemption and those who do disagree about the details. There have been some who deny the Covenant of Redemption and assume that in the Covenant of Grace, Christ enters into a covenant with God not as the Second Person of the Trinity, but as a representative man, the head of a new humanity. If Phillips holds a view of this sort and does not believe in a Covenant of Redemption, then in his understanding, the covenant idea may be restricted to the sphere of God's relationship with the creation.

But it is common for reformed theologians to believe in a Covenant of Redemption. For those who do, there is a covenant among the Persons of the Trinity. Which brings us back to Kuyper's problem. Why should the Persons of the Trinity enter into a covenant with one another? The Covenant of Redemption is an intratrinitarian covenant. No doubt it contemplates lordship over the world, but that is not the point. The Covenant of Redemption itself is a covenantal arrangement among the Three Persons, or at least the Father and the Son. In this covenant, Father and Son in order to deal with the problem of sin enter into a covenant with one another. In the Covenant of Grace, Christ stands as the representative of His people and the mediator between God and man, but in the Covenant of Redemption, Father, Son, and Spirit are covenanting with one another to save the elect from sin. As Berkof wrote: "Now we find that in the economy of redemption there is, in a sense, a division of labor: The Father is the originator, the Son the executor, and the Holy Spirit the applier. This can only be the result of a voluntary agreement among the persons of the Trinity, so that their internal relations assume the form of a covenant life. In fact, it is exactly in the trinitarian life that we find the archetype of the historical covenants, a covenant in the proper and fullest sense of the word, the parties meeting on a footing of equality, a true *suntheke*."<sup>63</sup> Thus, the Covenant of Redemption is an

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<sup>63</sup> L. Berkof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939), p. 266.

intratrinitarian covenant. What Kuyper asks is why the Persons of the Trinity in planning the salvation of the world make a covenant?

It seems to me that Phillips has not quite grasp the point of Kuyper's view. It may be that he does not believe in a Covenant of Redemption so that Kuyper's point is irrelevant from his perspective. But he has not made this clear. And however we view things, all of this has nothing to do with whether or not one's view is a denial of the Gospel.

### ***Tritheism***<sup>64</sup>

Third, Phillips argues that I have done serious damage to the doctrine of the Trinity. In his words, "Apart from its intended recasting of covenant theology, Smith's teaching does grave damage to the doctrine of the Trinity. Smith, following James Jordan, argues that the form of unity within the Trinity is covenant. This is a serious departure from orthodox Trinitarian theology, falling into a tacit tri-theism. Instead of the classic view that the Trinity is three persons united in one being, this view argues that the Trinity is three divine persons united by a social bond. Smith's presents his final conclusion in strikingly tri-theistic terms: 'God is three persons united in covenantal love.'"

Again, this is a complex charge. To begin with, I have never asserted that the unity of the Persons is first of all or fundamentally a covenant, as if the Three Persons were not one in Being but only one in a covenantal relationship. For that matter, neither of my books was attempting to set forth a full view of the Trinity. I believe I made it clear that I was suggesting matters that should be added to the traditional doctrine of the Trinity. Admittedly, the subject is sufficiently complex that misunderstanding naturally arises.

Another aspect of the problem is Phillips' view of the covenant. Since Phillips regards the covenant as an agreement, he apparently assumed I was asserting a unity based upon an agreement. This suggests that the three persons exist independently but on the basis of an agreement called a covenant, they become one. This is not my view. In the first chapter I have spoken more about this and it should not be necessary to repeat all of this now. But to make things clear, I do *not* believe that the Three Persons exist as independent Persons who are one only on the basis of an agreement. I have already outlined my view. The three Persons of the Trinity share the same divine essence. One essence not divided among three but perfectly and inscrutably shared by the three so that each is the whole essence. Also, the Persons mutually indwell one another so entirely that each of them is perfectly unified with the other. Perichoresis is covenant and perichoresis is ontology.

Now I do not see anything like tri-theism in what I have said, but it is true that emphasizing that the Persons are united in a covenantal fellowship of love does seem like tritheism to some because it means that there are three subjects in God. Three "I"s who relate to one another as subjects. For some, like Karl Barth, this smacks of tritheism. I disagree. I do not regard this as tritheism at all. I regard it as Biblical truth. The Father loves the Son and gives Him commands and instruction. The Son loves the Father and always does those things which please Him. The Gospel of John sets forth not only clear distinctions among the Persons but also

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<sup>64</sup> On tritheism, see: [http://www.berith.org/essays/tritheism\\_and\\_christian\\_faith.html](http://www.berith.org/essays/tritheism_and_christian_faith.html)

very real personal relationships. This would only be tritheism if one denies that they share the same divine essence.

I agree with the Dutch tradition as exemplified in Kuyper and Van Til that the Bible demands that we regard the three Persons as full persons in every sense of the word. If that were tritheism, then it would be the “tritheism” of the Bible. The Gospel of John especially, but all of the Gospels in fact, present the Son of God as a personal self in the fullest sense of the word. He loves the Father and does the Father’s will because of his devotion to the Father. He sends the Holy Spirit to be another comforter like Himself. Here are three Persons who share personal fellowship with one another. In fact, their personal love and fellowship is the ideal for man’s relationship with God, as our lord said: “Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love. If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father’s commandments and abide in His love.” (John 15:9-10) Berkhof refers to these and other passages saying, “the self-distinctions in the Divine Being imply an ‘I’ and ‘Thou’ and ‘He,’ in the Being of God, which assume personal relations to one another.”<sup>65</sup>

### ***Confusion***

Fourth, related to this, Phillips thinks my view confused. At least that is the best word I can think of to summarize what he has to say in the next quotation. “As Smith proceeds from this thesis, he seems to be aware of the tri-theistic leanings of his argument. Thus he tries to temper it by advancing perichoresis, that is, mutual indwelling, as the basis of Trinitarian union — in which case there is no need for covenant as the basis of union. Later still, he tries to distinguish covenantal union from ontological union, noting vaguely that ‘in God covenant and ontology intersect or share common ground.’ But the damage is done: if the three divine persons of the Trinity have an ontological union of essence — one based on a shared being and mutual indwelling — then it is hard to see how one being is joined together by covenant, unless we totally redefine the meaning of the word *covenant*, which is the whole point of Smith’s exercise.”

Now, let me say that I was not then, and am not now, aware of any tritheistic leanings in my view. If believing that Father, Son and Spirit are persons in the fullest sense that the word bears — or, actually, in a fuller sense than we can finally comprehend — then of course, there are a lot of tritheists in recent trinitarian history, including Van Til.

Interestingly, Phillips’ final phrase seems to undermine the whole point of his paragraph: “unless we totally redefine the meaning of the word *covenant*, which is the whole point of Smith’s exercise. “ If the whole point of my essay is to redefine *covenant* and redefining *covenant* solves the problem, then it seems to me he should do a whole lot more with my definition of the *covenant*. Repeating Witsius hardly serves as an answer to Kuyper’s view.

But I am afraid that Phillips completely missed the point of my pointing to perichoresis. What I am saying is that the very idea of mutual indwelling is a covenantal notion, as I pointed out in the previous chapter. The mutual indwelling of the Persons of the Trinity is an evidence of the covenantal ontology of God.

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<sup>65</sup> Berkhof, p. 88.

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But Phillips was right that I did not express myself concerning the relationship between covenant and ontology very well. I have tried to correct that in this essay. I have tried to say more clearly that covenant in God is ontology and ontology is covenantal. God is what He is essentially. He does not change. When Kuyper taught that the Persons of the Trinity relate eternally in covenant, he offered a view of who God is essentially. Kuyper posits that covenant is the way the Persons of the Trinity relate as Persons. I am not sure whether Kuyper viewed the covenant as an eternal personal relationship grounded in the ontology of the persons as mutually indwelling one another, or as identical to the ontology of the persons. I am assuming the later — that Kuyper thought of the covenant among the persons as another way of stating the basic ontology of the Persons. I am not sure if Kuyper ever considered the evidence from the Biblical idea of begetting or not. But he seems to have understood covenant as essential to the eternal relationships between Father, Son and Spirit and therefore to have viewed the covenant as a feature of the ontology of God. Hoeksema says the covenant is the very life of God.

To speak of a covenantal ontology implies that what is voluntary among men is essential to God's being. But that should not be a problem since it is the same with begetting and sending. Among men begetting a child involves voluntary activity and voluntary relationships. Commissioning and sending do also. We cannot have relationships of this sort with other men without interacting with persons who are outside of us. But in God, begetting and sending are eternal and necessary internal relationships. They are not merely voluntary relationships and they do not concern how God relates to Persons outside Himself. Begetting, sending, and mutual indwelling express the covenantal life of God. They reveal God as a God of love in whom the three Persons live a life of mutual joy and fellowship, mutual self-denial and self-giving.

### *Anti-forensic Agenda*

Fifth, Phillips apparently believes that I define a covenant as a relationship because that allows me to accomplish my anti-forensic agenda. He speaks as if my work on the covenant among the Persons of the Trinity is part of a conspiracy to undermine the Reformed faith. Here are Phillips' words, "Following this revisionist approach in which the biblical structures of covenant are removed, Smith proceeds throughout *Eternal Covenant* to apply covenant to practically everything with little definition. Covenant is relationship, and so it becomes hard to know what it is about a relationship that makes it a covenant, except that it becomes whatever Smith wants to make of it at any given time. As such, covenant serves as an ideal vehicle for Smith and his cohorts' purpose, which, it becomes clear, is a way of defining salvation in such a way as to remove the forensic theory of justification as classically understood in Reformed thought."

This is another case of a complex assertion. Three points in response are important. One, I have no cohorts and I am not conspiring with a cabal of crafty people for some surreptitious purpose. Two, I do not deny the forensic theory of justification. Three, since it has been suggested here that I am redefining the idea of the covenant in order to promote an agenda, let me point out that John Murray devoted an entire essay to refuting the classical reformed view of the covenant as an agreement. In his conclusion, Murray wrote, "And when we remember that

covenant is not only bestowment of grace, not only oath-bound promise, but also relationship with God in that which is the crown and goal of the whole process of religion, namely, union and communion with God, we discover again that the new covenant brings this relationship also to the highest level of achievement. At the centre of covenant revelation as its constant refrain is the assurance ‘I will be your God, and ye shall be my people’.”<sup>66</sup>

John Murray’s definition of the covenant as “not only the bestowment of grace, not only oath-bound promise, but also relationship with God” is behind my redefinition of covenant. I read Murray before I read Jordan. He was among of the Reformed thinkers who influenced me away from dispensationalism and his work on the Covenant of Grace is one of my favorite books. Though John Murray viewed a covenant as a relationship, he did not deny the forensic theory of justification.

O. Palmer Robertson, too, denies that a covenant is merely an agreement. He wrote, “Extensive investigations into the etymology of the Old Testament term for “covenant” (בְּרִיתָה) have proven inconclusive in determining the meaning of the word. *Yet the contextual usage of the term in Scripture points rather consistently to the concept of a “bond” or “relationship.”*<sup>67</sup> And again, “A long history has marked the analysis of the covenants in terms of mutual compacts or contracts. But recent scholarship has established rather certainly the sovereign character of the administration of the divine covenants in Scripture. Both biblical and extra-biblical evidence point to the unilateral form of covenant establishment. No such thing as bargaining, bartering, or contracting characterizes the divine covenants of Scripture. The sovereign Lord of heaven and earth dictates the terms of the covenant.”<sup>68</sup> Again, O. Palmer Robertson does not deny the forensic theory of justification.

Defining the word covenant as a relationship does not imply denial forensic theory of justification. In my case, I do believe that Adam’s sins were imputed to all mankind since he was the covenant head of the human race in the Garden. I also believe that the righteousness of Christ is imputed to the new humanity which He died to save. I believe that justification is a judicial declaration that believers are righteous in Christ. I do not know where or when I have ever said anything that even remotely suggests that I deny “the forensic theory of justification.”

## **MonoCovenantalism**

We are now ready to consider one of Phillips most serious charges and misrepresentations. What follows is an extended quotation from Phillips, in which he distorts my views beyond recognition — at least by me.

Kline’s assertion bears out with particular clarity in the case of Ralph Smith, with whose book *Eternal Covenant* I began this study of covenant confusion. Smith’s book follows essentially the same outline as I have in this seminar, only with far

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<sup>66</sup> John Murray, *The Covenant of Grace* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1953), pp. 31-32.

<sup>67</sup> *The Christ of the Covenants* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), p. 5.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15

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different conclusions. Starting with his speculations on covenant as the ontological basis of Trinitarian union, he moved forward to redefine covenant not as a pact but as a gift of relationship. As I have done, he then moved forward to consider the covenant of works, which he assailed, making God's covenant with Adam no different from any other redemptive covenant presented in the Bible.

Where does this lead him? Smith posits, without qualification or embarrassment, that God's covenant with Adam in the Garden is the same covenant God offers to sinners today for their salvation, without modification since the Fall. This is the mono-covenantal scheme in full bloom. Where Adam failed, despite his sinless state, we sinners are now to succeed if we are to be declared just by God. Like Adam we have received God's covenant favor and must simply maintain it "by being faithful, living out his faith in God by doing works that correspond to with it... The basic situation is still similar. We are required to be faithful to the covenant by having a living faith in God, one that works by love."

As Kline foretold, having removed the covenant of works what Smith really has abolished is the covenant of grace. What about Christ's saving blood? Smith allows that we need to be forgiven through Christ "when we sin," which one gains the impression is not likely to be very often for a faithful covenant keeper. But we are justified by works, that is, by our works, at least so long as we continue to do them. One wonders what impact was made by the Fall; it must have been very slight if the view of Smith and Shepherd and others if their camp is correct. Perhaps here more than anywhere else, in its low view of the Fall, this new theology of covenant intersects with Roman Catholicism, along with sharing an approach to justification which depends on the grace of God working *in us* rather than the alien righteousness of Christ imputed *to us* by grace and through faith alone."

It may help to list the charges here:

1. I am said to believe a covenant is the basis for the ontological union of the Trinity.
2. I have made the covenant with Adam no different from any other redemptive covenant presented in the Bible.
3. Phillips says, and here I must quote, "Smith posits, without qualification or embarrassment, that God's covenant with Adam in the Garden is the same covenant God offers to sinners today for their salvation, without modification since the Fall."
4. It is claimed that I have abolished the Covenant of Grace.
5. It is claimed that I see the fall as having only a slight impact.
6. It is claimed that I hold to a view of justification which "intersects" — whatever Phillips means by this — with the Roman Catholic view of justification based on God's work in us rather than Christ's righteousness being imputed to us.

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All of this is thought to be the result of my monocovenantalism. I will try to answer each of these assertions, though I will vary the order in my answer since some of the points are minor and do not require much explanation.

With regard to point one, I have answered it in the first two chapters. Rather than making a covenant the basis for the ontological union of the trinity, I make the ontology of the Trinity covenantal. If ontology in God is covenantal, then neither depends upon the other.

Point 5 that I see the fall as having had only a slight impact on man is simply not true. I hold to the total depravity of man.

Point 6 was that I believe in a Roman Catholic view of justification. This is related to Kline's assertion referred to at the beginning of the quotation. Kline wrote: "What this amounts to is a retreat from the Reformation and a return to Rome." So, according to Phillips, I am among those returning to Rome because denial of the Covenant of Works carries with it that implication. I disagree. Denial of the covenant of works does not mean denial of the Gospel and the effort to prove that it does is quixotic at best. With respect to justification, as I said previously, I do believe in the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the elect. We are justified by what Christ did for us on the cross not by what God does in us by the Spirit, though the two are not separated in Biblical soteriology. There can be no justification without sanctification.

Points 2, 3, and 4 require more explanation. First, let me answer points 2 and 3 together. They are essentially the same. He asserts that I make the pre-fall covenant with Adam "no different from any other redemptive covenant presented in the Bible." Later he says, "Smith posits, without qualification or embarrassment, that God's covenant with Adam in the Garden is the same covenant God offers to sinners today for their salvation, without modification since the Fall."

The short answer to this is that I do not believe the pre-fall covenant with Adam to be "no different from any other redemptive covenant presented in the Bible" and I do not believe that the "covenant with Adam in the Garden is the same covenant God offers to sinners today for their salvation without modification since the fall."

I have written an entire book on what I believe about the covenants and it is available free online for anyone who wishes to look into it. Of course, I cannot complain if someone criticizes me without reading one of my books, but I have written enough on the subject of the covenant that there really is no need for this kind of misrepresentation.

Now for the long answer. To begin with, are Phillips assertions in these points indeed what I have asserted in the places he refers to — or anywhere else for that matter? No. Let me quote at length the original context that Phillips is referring to in the section I quoted from him.

Kline's two basic criticisms of the traditional Covenant of Works have profound implications. If Adam's relationship with God is by creation a covenant relationship that defines what it is that man is God's image and if merit for Adam means "covenantal faithfulness," then what is required of Adam is that he persevere in the covenant by being faithful, that he live out his faith in God by doing works that correspond with it. In this way, though Adam has no sin nature and is not in a covenant of redeeming grace, he is in a position similar to ours. He is in covenant with God and what is required of him is just perseverance, faithfulness to the



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covenant. What is required of a Christian? We could say, believe! Nothing more, nothing less! That would be a correct answer, as far as it goes. But we could add, as James did, that faith without works is dead. Adam's problem in the Garden was not his theological orthodoxy, it was a problem of orthopraxy. His works were contrary to faith in God. In Adam's case, without the provisions of forgiveness that come with the Gospel, one sin brought about the end of the covenant. In our case, because of the death of Christ, we can repent and return unto God when we sin. But the basic situation is still similar. We are required to be faithful to the covenant by having a living faith in God, one that works by love (Gal. 5:6).

In the fuller context of the words quoted by Phillips it is clear that what I am trying to do is draw out the implications of Kline's critique of the traditional view. As I said in my book, Kline is one of the most profound critics of the traditional view, even though this is not often appreciated.

Since this is relevant to understanding my position, let's just take a minute to look at Kline's critique of covenant theology. First, the traditional view, expressed in the Westminster Confession, implies that the covenant is added on, after the creation of man as a special act of condescension. Kline says, No. Creation in the image of God already means covenant.

Second Kline has rejected the whole medieval notion of merit and redefined the word. Kline's follower, Lee Irons, admits that he is revising the view of the Reformed confessions. I agree with his revision. But make no mistake about it. It is Kline here who is revising the reformed tradition. Not me. I am simply agreeing with Kline — except that I don't criticize the Westminster Confession as severely as he does.

To get a good picture of just how radical Kline's critique is, consider the question of merit. Lee Irons, explaining Kline's position and showing how it is a revision of traditional reformed views wrote, "the voluntarist school of thought had a significant impact on Reformed formulations of covenant theology. Scholars suggest that Zwingli, Bullinger, Calvin and others in the first generation of Reformed theologians to develop the rudiments of what we now know as covenant theology derived much of their impetus and inspiration for covenantal thinking from the voluntarist wing of medieval theology." The voluntarist wing of medieval theology is, of course, Franciscan, Roman Catholic theology.

Irons explains that the Reformation made great strides in developing a truly covenantal view of salvation. Justification was understood to be based upon the righteousness of another. But a problem remained, according to Irons. Even the Reformation perpetuated what he calls "the remnants of an ontologically based system of merit and justice." Irons asserts that Reformed theologians view of the Covenant of Works was defective. In his words, "While unequivocally rejecting the notion of congruous merit in the operations of God's gracious restoration of fallen man, covenant theologians did not scruple to smuggle this concept right back into their system, but this time in the pre-fall situation." In this regard, he blames the Westminster Confession: "Note the fundamentally voluntarist reasoning of the Westminster Confession's opening statement on the covenants" at which point he quotes from WCF Chapter Seven, paragraph 1. "The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto him as their Creator, yet they could never have any

fruition of him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God's part, which he hath been pleased to express by way of covenant".

Irons explains that "This statement is representative of the mainstream of seventeenth century Reformed thought. [18] All the basic elements in this statement are derived directly from the Franciscan notion of covenantal or congruous merit" His indictment of the theology of the Westminster Confession could not be expressed in stronger language. "Do we not see the covenant being appealed to as a way of allowing the finite creature to obtain a reward from an infinite Creator? Is there not a hidden premise that human works, if viewed according to the strict standard of an ontologically-defined justice, are intrinsically disproportionate to the prospect of enjoying God in eternal blessedness? It seems that the covenant is being introduced to overcome the awesome metaphysical chasm between God and the creature in order to make possible that which would otherwise be impossible — man putting an infinite, a se God in debt by a finite obedience. It presupposes an ontological scheme of moral valuation which places God and the creature on opposite ends of the scale of being. This supposed ontological disproportion is what accounts for the inherent inability of the creature to do anything meritorious apart from a covenantal "condescension" on God's part. But once the covenant is superimposed upon the created order, then the creature can produce obedience and expect a reward in return. But this obedience is necessarily congruous merit, merit that has been freely and graciously accepted by God by virtue of his self-commitment to the terms of the covenant."

Irons clearly agrees with the verdict of Steven Strehle "that the Reformed were deeply influenced by Franciscan voluntarism and its attendant pactum theology."

Irons concludes this section of his essay in the following words.

Although we are grateful to our Reformed forefathers for the overall covenant scheme they have bequeathed to us, we must ask ourselves whether some of the details of that scheme may have come from a polluted source. Have we gone far enough in our covenantal thinking? Or do we still harbor ontological presuppositions regarding justice and merit? Is the distinction between condign and congruous merit helpful? Is it legitimate to take a distinction, which in its original formulation was part and parcel of the Semi-Pelagian drift of the late medieval church, and apply it to pre-fall covenantal arrangements?

It is imperative that we reexamine these and related questions. No longer will it be possible to appeal simply to the Reformed tradition on these points as if the die has already been cast. As usually happens in historical dogmatics, the errors of succeeding generations of theologians provide a new opportunity for us to hone our formulations more sharply. Arguments which before seemed innocuous and traditional are now seen, in light of their gospel-undermining tendencies, to be seriously flawed and in need of a critical evaluation and systematic overhaul.

We have to keep in mind that Irons is speaking here of the Westminster Confession of Faith as harboring ontological presuppositions which contain a Semi-Pelagian drift. Irons and Kline are claiming that the theology of the Westminster Confession is seriously flawed and in need of critical evaluation and systematic overhaul because it incorporates Gospel undermining

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tendencies. It is hard to imagine stronger language in criticizing the theology of the Westminster Confession, yet Kline and his followers are considered the great defenders of Westminster. Phillips appeals to Kline against me as if Kline's theology is traditional reformed theology when in fact Kline offers very significant revisions of traditional reformed theology.

It is true, of course, that I am also suggesting revisions to traditional Reformed theology. But my criticisms of the Westminster Confession are less radical. I only said that its view of the covenant is inconsistent. What I suggested is that we should revise the Confession according to the true genius of the Confession. That is, bring the Confession's theocentric focus and its doctrine of the covenant together by seeing the covenant among the Persons of the Trinity as the paradigmatic covenant.

My critique of the Covenant of Works — though not at all original with me — was from two perspectives. First, I criticized the Covenant of Works from the perspective of biblical theology. The Covenant of Works simply does not fit the Genesis narrative. Nor does the theology of the Covenant of Works fit the rest of the flow of the Biblical Covenants. Covenant theology speaks in terms of the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace, but the Bible speaks of the covenants with Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David. It refers to the old covenant and the new covenant. The covenantal structure of the Bible itself should provide the framework for our covenant theology.

Second, I criticized the Covenant of Works from the perspective of systematic theology. Here there are two general problems. One is that the doctrine of the Covenant of works involves numerous inconsistencies. The other is that the Covenant of Works — a covenant with man in the Garden — becomes the paradigmatic covenant for understanding the covenant of redemption, a covenant between the three persons of the trinity. Why should the persons of the trinity make a covenant to procure man's salvation to begin with? And why should that covenant be modeled after the covenant with Adam? Rather than a covenant with man as the central and organizing theme for all of systematic theology, I believe that we should view the covenant among the trinitarian persons as the central and organizing theme and re-interpret the covenant in the Garden in terms of the covenant among the persons of the trinity.

As I said, the critique of the Covenant of Works outlined here is not original with me. It is a composite from various sources, including especially James Jordan and Herman Hoeksema. A recently published article by Jordan footnoted an article by W. Wilson Benton Jr., a leading pastor in the PCA. Benton's arguments against the doctrine of a Covenant of Works, published in 1980, are essentially the same as mine, though he includes a great deal more in the way of historical criticism. Benton concludes that the Covenant of Works is "without biblical foundation" and calls for a revision of covenant theology so that "the covenant concept can be freed from the shackles of a system which has confused, if not corrupted, that biblical truth."<sup>69</sup>

Essentially every criticism I have made against the Covenant of Works has been made by a prominent member of the PCA and has been in print for 20 years. No one that I know of suggests that Benton denies the Gospel. To the best of my knowledge, no one in the PCA has

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<sup>69</sup> "Federal Theology: Review for Revision" in *Through Christ's Word: A Festschrift for Dr. Philip E. Hughes*, W. Robert Godfrey and Jesse L. Boyd III, ed. (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1985), 180-204.

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ever recommended judicial proceedings against him for holding views that imply a denial of justification by faith.

Keeping in mind that I am simply rephrasing criticisms of the Covenant of Works that have been presented by others, let me repeat briefly what I have said before, though in somewhat different language.

Meredith Kline's critique of traditional Reformed theology brought to light some of the basic problems in the doctrine of the Covenant of Works. Though he does not specify who he is referring to, Kline was in fact pointing to the Westminster Confession when he wrote:

It is not the case, as some theological reconstructions would have it, that the covenant was superimposed on a temporally or logically prior noncovenantal human state. The covenant character of the original kingdom order as a whole and of man's status in particular was given along with existence itself.

The Confession speaks of the Covenant as a gift to man who is already created and enjoying a pre-covenantal natural relationship with God. This is problematic for a number of reasons, but it is also inconsistent with the notion that the law of God is written on the heart of man in his creation (WCF: 4:2; etc.). It is common in Reformed theology to refer to the law written on the heart as evidence of a covenant and an aspect of the Covenant of Works. But if the law written in man's heart is an aspect of the Covenant of Works, then the Covenant of Works is not an agreement that man enters after he is created, it is impressed in his very being. To be in God's image is to have the Covenant of Works inscribed in one's heart. The nominalism that Lee Irons finds in the Confession is offset by the doctrine that man is an essentially and inescapably covenantal creature. We have both the idea that the Covenant is a post creation gift to man and the idea that the covenant is inscribed in man's nature.

If the covenant is inscribed in man's heart — whether we call it a Covenant of Works or not — it is clear that the covenant cannot be defined as an agreement. Though that definition is common in the history of Reformed theology, it is hard to imagine how an agreement can be inscribed in the heart.

Ironically, even Kline's objections to what he calls a departure from Reformed theology illustrate my point that Reformed theology's doctrine of the Covenant of Works is hopelessly inconsistent. Kline emphasizes that without merit, there can be no Covenant of Works and without the Covenant of Works there can be no Covenant of Grace and thus no Gospel.

But a survey of Reformed opinion about the notion of merit in the Covenant of Works shows clearly that it is Kline who departs from the Reformed tradition. It is common in the reformed tradition to deny the possibility of Adam earning merit before God. The Covenant of Works is almost always understood to be a gracious covenant. And most Reformed writers will say that whatever good Adam did, whatever test Adam might pass, he would still be rewarded by grace. His achievements could never merit the blessings granted. Thus, from Kline's perspective, most of the theologians in the history of Reformed theology understood the Covenant of Works in terms that virtually undermine the Gospel.

On this point, I disagree with Kline. I believe the traditional denial of the possibility of merit for Adam is quite correct. But I agree with Kline that if one were to attempt to formulate a

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consistent doctrine of the Covenant of Works, it would require a stricter view of merit. Kline differs from the tradition by being more consistent than others.

Kline and Irons also offer a fundamental revision to the notion of merit in order to rescue the term from its medieval and Franciscan connotations. Merit for Kline simply means fulfilling the stipulations of the covenant. When we speak of Adam's merit, therefore, we are not thinking in terms of ontological separation between God and man, but simply of the Covenant that God gave Adam. Fulfillment of the covenant's stipulations earns the reward as a matter of strict justice. God made conditions and offered promises to Adam if he would fulfill the conditions. God had made a legally binding promise and He would keep it. Winning the promise, then, is a matter of merit in the sense that it is simply a matter of doing what the covenant requires.

By redefining merit as faithfulness to the stipulations of a covenant, Kline has eliminated the medieval problems associated with it. But I suspect that many of his readers still read the medieval idea when they see the word merit. They are not translating the word "merit" into "fulfill the stipulations of the covenant" or some similar expression. In that sense, the continued use of the word merit is confusing. The point is, however, that in arguing for merit and against any grace whatsoever in the Covenant of Works, Kline is differing from the Reformed tradition, not upholding it. He believes that his revision is necessary for the preservation of Reformed theology, that he is eliminating a dangerous error. But as long as he continues to use the word "merit," I personally believe that he perpetuates a problem. Of course, that is secondary to the larger issue of the Covenant of Works itself. With regard to the Covenant of Works, we have to understand that Kline denies the Westminster doctrine and introduces a new one, even claiming that his new version is essential to the Gospel.

What makes the Covenant of Works doctrine problematic and confused is the crucial issue of Adam's pre-fall status. Here is another area where I disagree with Kline. But on this point also he differs from many in the reformed tradition. The issue of Adam's pre-fall status concerns whether or not Adam was justified — using the word improperly, of course, since Adam was created without sin or the need of justification as the word is usually used. If Adam was an unjustified man, that is created with something like "neutral" status and therefore in need of earning righteousness, justification, and life through his faithfulness to the covenant — the view apparently espoused by Kline — then we do have a situation that might be defined as a Covenant of Works. This, therefore, is the question: *Was Adam created with a status like that of a justified man, enjoying the blessings of the covenant as a child of God? Or, Was Adam unjustified, neutral, or in some sort of special status in which he was not yet able to enjoy blessing until he earned it? Was Adam's status like that of a man who does not yet possess the blessings of life because he has not yet earned the merit he needs to be justified? Or was he already in possession of life and blessing?* This is an important issue for understanding the Covenant of Works.

It is also important for understanding Phillips misunderstanding of my position. I referred to the Christian's position as being similar to Adam's. In saying that I was assuming Adam was created righteous and holy and therefore right before God, regarded as God's son and enjoying the blessings of the covenant. If that is true, then Adam's pre-fall situation is similar to the Christian's. He, too, was a child of God enjoying the blessings of the covenant. When I said all Adam had to do was be faithful, I was speaking of perseverance, not justification. Adam, in my

view, was already right before God. Like Christians, Adam too had to be faithful, not in order to be right before God, but in order to be saved in the end. Perseverance is not the ground of the Christian's salvation, but he cannot be saved without it. The same would be true for Adam.

Phillips at one point says we have to look to the Bible for an answer to our questions about the Covenant of Works. But he does not deal with what the Bible says in Genesis 2 at all. We are told, "So clear is the biblical testimony as to creation and fall, involving a Covenant of Works between God and Adam, that Neo-Orthodox objectors like Karl Barth and James B. Torrance simply rejected the testimony of Genesis chapters 2 and 3 as mythological. They realized that they could not object to the Covenant of Works and still accept the teaching of those chapters." After this, Phillips makes various assertions about the Covenant of Works being clear and undeniable, but he never talks about what is written in Genesis. Nor does he interact with what I have pointed out about these chapters.

To answer the question about Adam's state, we cannot simply quote the parallel between Adam and Christ. The parallel between Adam and Christ is a parallel of two heads and two races. But it does not necessarily indicate Adam's status. If Adam was like an unjustified man working his way to justification, then the parallel in Romans 5 would work along the lines Kline suggests. If Adam is right before God and only required to persevere by faith in righteousness, the parallel in Romans 5 still stands. What is important in Romans 5 is that both Adam and Christ are regarded as the covenant heads of their respective races. Adam is the head of the old humanity. Messiah is the head of the new humanity. Adam's apostasy from God brought condemnation and death to the race he represented; Messiah's faithfulness to God brought justification and life to the race He represented.

That there is more than one way to read the details here was shown by John Murray in a small but important book devoted to the discussion of the imputation of Adam's sin.<sup>70</sup> One thing that emerges clearly from his investigation of Romans 5 is that Reformed writers hold vary diverse views on the subject. Which is to say again that simply referring to Romans 5 and the parallel between Adam and Christ in Romans 5 does nothing to answer the basic questions about a Covenant of Works. We have to go back to the Genesis text.

We have to consider how Genesis answers the question of Adam's status before the fall. Following the Romans 5 formula of righteousness, justification, life, we have to ask whether the story in Genesis pictures Adam as not yet enjoying the blessings of life. Is Adam — as Kline's version of the doctrine of the Covenant of Works would have it — an unjustified man put in a place in which he must earn merit — however conceived — in order to obtain the verdict that he is righteous and thereby enter the blessings of life?

The answer from Genesis is clearly and emphatically, No! Adam is in the place of blessing already. He is dwelling in the sanctuary of God. For the Garden of Eden is the symbolic sanctuary of the world. It is the place where God meets man and fellowships with him. As Kline points out, the presence of God in the Garden of Eden was the same glory cloud that descended upon the tabernacle and temple. What the narrative in Genesis shows us is that Adam dwelt in the most holy place. Though Adam was immature and though it was possible for him to

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<sup>70</sup> John Murray, *The Imputation of Adam's Sin* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1977).

fall, there is no question about the fact that he was given the highest degree of blessing possible at the time of his creation.

For Meredith Kline Adam did not enjoy the “eschatological” blessing of life. His use of the word eschatological here suggests that Adam enjoyed life and blessing to a degree, but not the “final” blessing. There is a sense in which this is true. Everyone agrees that Adam was not confirmed in holiness and that confirmation in holiness is one of the greatest eschatological blessings. But apart from confirmation in holiness, Adam enjoys the blessings of life in a paradise that is the Biblical paradigm for heaven. Adam’s dwelling in the sanctuary of God and enjoying the presence of the glory Spirit indicates the highest blessings of life in the Garden.

This is entirely incongruous with the idea of a Covenant of Works. An unjustified Adam should be on the outside of the Garden looking in. He should be trying to earn the privilege of entering the Garden to dwell with God. An unjustified man should not be in God’s sanctuary enjoying the direct presence of God’s glory. The story of Adam in the Garden suggests that he already enjoyed the blessings of life. What about eschatological blessing? Eschatological blessing waited for the eschatological era. If we follow Gerhardus Vos’ exposition of 1 Corinthians 15, we understand the eschatological era to be the era of the resurrection and the spirit. If Adam had not sinned, he would not have immediately entered into the eschatological blessings that Paul speaks of in 1 Corinthians 15. Those blessings would have waited for the eschatological era. The question of eschatological blessing is not really relevant to the question of whether or not Adam was justified and had the blessing of life.

But there is another question that is very relevant: Did Adam have access to the tree of life? Both John Murray and Meredith Kline assume that Adam did not have access to the tree of life and they explain themselves in similar language. Kline wrote: “We are probably to assume then that man had previously been apprised of the symbolic import of the tree of life and accordingly realized that, though not it but the tree of knowledge was more specifically the forbidden tree in this special testing, nevertheless his partaking of the tree of life was reserved for an appropriate future time and purpose.”<sup>71</sup> Murray wrote: “Although from Genesis 3:22 we infer that Adam had not partaken of the tree of life, and although it was not forbidden as was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (cf. Gen. 2:16), yet, apparently, by the arrangements of providence or of revelation, it was recognized as reserved for the issue of probationary obedience.”<sup>72</sup>

Contrary to both Murray and Kline, the book of Genesis suggests nothing of the sort. The Reformed tradition however is not unanimous on this point. What does the text of Genesis show us? Here are the words of Genesis 2:16-17: “The LORD God commanded the man, saying, “From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die.” (Gen. 2:16-17). First, God invited Adam to eat from *every* tree of the Garden. Then He added the prohibition of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Since there were only two trees in the Garden with names, this is not merely permission to eat from the tree of life, it is a virtual invitation. Even though Adam is immature, one of the first things he learned was the significance of names and

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<sup>71</sup> *Kingdom Prologue*, p. 94.

<sup>72</sup> *Collected Writings*, vol. 1, p. 48.

naming. The fact that only these two trees had names and one of them was forbidden would naturally attract him to the other.

Thus, I believe it is relatively clear that Adam had access to the tree of life. Given the symbolic meaning of the tree, this is an important point. If Adam had access to the tree of life before the fall, then he must have been right before God, with a status similar to that of a justified sinner. His dwelling in the Garden-sanctuary already makes that clear enough, but access to the tree of life further establishes the point.

It is worth pointing out that on this point, Calvin disagrees with Murray and Kline. Calvin's view is worth quoting at some length because his is relatively typical of Reformed thinking. .

. . . He gave the tree of life its name, not because it could confer on man that life with which he had been previously endued, but in order that it might be a symbol and memorial of the life which he had received from God. For we know it to be by no means unusual that God should give to us the attestation of his grace by external symbols. He does not indeed transfer his power into outward signs; but by them he stretches out his hand to us, because, without assistance, we cannot ascend to him. He intended, therefore, that man, as often as he tasted the fruit of that tree, should remember whence he received his life, in order that he might acknowledge that he lives not by his own power, but by the kindness of God alone; and that life is not (as they commonly speak) an intrinsic good, but proceeds from God. Finally, in that tree there was a visible testimony to the declaration, that 'in God we are, and live, and move.' But if Adam, hitherto innocent, and of an upright nature, had need of monitory signs to lead him to the knowledge of divine grace, how much more necessary are signs now, in this great imbecility of our nature, since we have fallen from the true light? Yet I am not dissatisfied with what has been handed down by some of the fathers, as Augustine and Eucherius, that the **tree of life** was a figure of Christ, inasmuch as he is the Eternal Word of God: it could not indeed be otherwise a symbol of life, than by representing him in figure. For we must maintain what is declared in the first chapter of John (John 1:1-3,) that the life of all things was included in the Word, but especially the life of men, which is conjoined with reason and intelligence. Wherefore, by this sign, Adam was admonished, that he could claim nothing for himself as if it were his own, in order that he might depend wholly upon the Son of God, and might not seek life anywhere but in him. But if he, at the time when he possessed life in safety, had it only as deposited in the word of God, and could not otherwise retain it, than by acknowledging that it was received from Him, whence may we recover it, after it has been lost? Let us know, therefore, that when we have departed from Christ, nothing remains for us but death.

Allow me to make a few points in passing, one if we are going to claim that anyone who views Adam as justified in the Garden inescapably denies the parallel between Adam and Christ in Romans 5 and thereby denies the Gospel, we are going to have trouble fitting Calvin into our procrustean bed, for he seems clearly to view Adam as right before God and enjoying the tree of life. Indeed — this is my second point — Calvin even refers to the tree of life in the language of



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the Lord's Supper — “as often as he tasted the fruit of that tree” and “should remember.” By saying the tree is a figure of Christ, the connection with the Lord's Supper is even more clear. Calvin sees Adam as innocent and upright, with access to the sacrament of the tree of life from which he would partake often to remind himself of the grace and kindness of God in giving him life. Third, Calvin speaks of Adam needing to persevere. In so doing, he sees Adam's position as similar to that of the justified Christian today. So he says that Adam could not retain life without acknowledging that it came from God. He sees the sacrament in the Garden as important for Adam's faith and draws the parallel to the Lord's Supper.

I agree with this view of Adam and the tree of life in the Garden. But this is contrary to the notion of a Covenant of Works. Or, I should say, to a consistent picture of the Covenant of Works. Because it is not unusual for Reformed theologians to assert both that Adam was in a Covenant of Works and that he was allowed access to the tree of life. Murray and Kline attempt to be more consistent, but even in their case, there is so much in the Garden of Eden that points to life and Kline has expounded it so eloquently that the inconsistency is striking. Adam obviously is enjoying the blessings of life in the Garden with God at the same time he is thought to be under a Covenant of Works in which he is waiting for blessing in the future because he is not yet justified.

My own conclusion is that the Covenant of Works doctrine, as traditionally conceived, does not stand. It is full of inconsistencies and can not be made to fit the story in Genesis.

### *Covenant of Love*

The question then is, What is the alternative? Phillips claims that I believe in what he calls “a mono-covenantal scheme” and that such a view implies a denial of justification by faith. Neither of these assertions is true. Though I deny a Covenant of Works, I do believe that the Bible presents the covenant in two forms, the old covenant and the new covenant. The redemptive historical division of covenant history is not the same as the Covenant of Works/covenant of grace distinction. But it is a bi-covenantal view that takes seriously the historical import of the coming of the Messiah and the gift of the new covenant.

I also believe in justification by faith. It came as a complete surprise to me that someone could read my books and infer that I somehow must deny justification by faith, but, as I said in the essay published on the internet, this is the way paradigm blindness works. Phillips believes he knows what my theology must imply. In fact, however, he is telling us what my theology must imply in terms of the presuppositions of his theology. He has not been able to gain an internal perspective on the theology he is opposing.

The view I proposed in my book *The Eternal Covenant* follows part of Kline's revision of the understanding of the covenant in Genesis. Rather than seeing the covenant with Adam as a post creation gift based upon a natural relationship between Adam and God that is prior to and more fundamental than the covenant, I agree with Kline that the whole act of creation was covenantal. When Adam was made from the ground on the sixth day, it was covenantal dirt that God used to construct him and it was covenantal air that the Spirit breathed into his lungs. Adam was a covenantal creature from the beginning in every aspect of his existence. So was the rest of creation.

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I believe that God created the world this way because He is a covenantal God, a God in whom the Three Persons relate in a covenant of love and life. God created the world covenantally because the world is the expression of who He is. The whole creation declares His glory as the Covenantal God of love and life.

When we view the covenant as the inner life of the three Persons of the Trinity, the bond of love and friendship between Father, Son, and Spirit, we have a unified worldview that is centered on the Triune God Himself. Traditional reformed theology offers little connection between the doctrine of who God is and the doctrines of creation and redemption. But when doctrine of God the Trinity is seen as covenantal, the Trinity can finally be the key to all Christian doctrine because the doctrine of the covenant, which is clearly the center of biblical and systematic theology, is the expression of who the Triune God is<sup>73</sup>.

Seeing the covenant as the expression of who God is does not mean “mono-covenantalism.” I do view the covenant as twofold. There is an old covenant in Adam and a new covenant in Christ. But these two covenants are not the same as the traditional reformed Covenant of Works and Covenant of Grace. The two covenants should be understood in terms of redemptive history, not as two covenant options hovering over the history of the world. It may be overstating the case to call the traditional doctrine static, but it certainly tends to be static. In the Westminster view, from the fall onward all men are either in the Covenant of Works outside of Christ or in the covenant of grace in Christ. That is not what the Bible presents.

In the Biblical picture, the covenant given to Adam is renewed with redemptive provisions that look forward to the gift of a new covenant at the time in the future when the seed of the woman comes. Until then, men are in Adam which means under the old covenant and condemnation. Like Adam after the fall, they have to offer animal sacrifices. Like Adam, they are not permitted to return to the sanctuary. But they also have the promise of the Messiah to come and by faith in Him, they are saved on the basis of the new covenant to come.

For men in Adam, there is racial covenantal progress. The covenant given to Noah includes greater revelation of God and His grace and greater responsibility for man. The covenants given to Abraham, Moses, David and the Israelites who returned from exile exhibit the same progressive growth in revelation of who God is and the same progressive growth in the blessings and responsibilities of the covenant. But there is no salvation until the Messiah comes. The world was waiting for him.

When Jesus comes, dies on the cross and rises from the dead, the world is definitively changed. The old covenant era is over. The world that had been defiled and unclean because of Adam’s sin is now clean. There is no longer a distinction between the holy land and the unholy land because the whole world has been finally cleansed by the death of Christ. God’s people are now all priests and all have the right to enter into the most holy place through the blood of Jesus. We are even seated with Christ at the right hand of God. The differences here are not merely positional; they are historical. What Jesus did through his death and resurrection changed the

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<sup>73</sup> I have tried to show something of what it means to consider the doctrine of the Triune God as central to all Christian thought in my introduction to the Christian worldview, *Trinity and Reality*, published by Canon Press.

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history of the world more fundamentally than any other event since the fall of man, even more than the Noahic deluge.

Such a view of the covenant does not undermine the parallel between Adam and Christ. Adam was created as God's image, which means that he was a covenantal creature. The covenant was inscribed in his heart and from his first moment, he enjoyed covenantal fellowship with the triune God. The covenantal relationship that Adam had with God was an extension of the Trinitarian covenant to man the creature. Adam was brought into the fellowship of love that is essential to who God is. In the nature of the case, this fellowship of love is absolutely pure and righteous. No sin can be tolerated or even imagined in the Triune fellowship of love. A breach in the covenant between Father, Son, and Spirit would be the death of God. It is not conceivable. In a similar way, for Adam to break the covenant means that he kills himself. He cut himself off from the love of God and the fellowship of the Trinity.

The reason that breaking the covenant in the Garden meant death is not that God made an arbitrary and very strict penalty to apply to a relatively small offense. It is rather that Adam and Eve were created into the most intimate and holy covenant fellowship. They were the image of the most Holy God. Any unrighteousness whatsoever would destroy their relationship with God. Father, Son, and Spirit are perfectly open with one another, perfectly devoted to one another, totally self-sacrificial in their pursuit of the blessing of the other. Their fellowship is a fellowship of light in which no darkness at all can enter. When Adam introduced sin into the sanctuary of God, he had to be judged. He had to be cast out.

When God reached out in grace to Adam after the fall, it was a renewal of the Adamic covenant with redemptive provisions. Those redemptive provisions already promised the gift of a new covenant. The seed of the woman would be another representative head of the race like Adam was, but he would defeat Satan and save mankind from the misery introduced by Adam. It was only because of the promise that a new covenant head would come and save man that the Adamic covenant could be renewed. Until the time that the seed of the woman came and defeated Satan, Adam and his descendants would have to be outside the Garden looking in. They were under the sentence of death, but the promise of a new covenant leader meant the promise of life sometime in the future.

When Jesus came into the world, he was born, Paul says, under the law. Paul is not talking about the Covenant of Works. He is talking about the law of Moses. Jesus had to be circumcised. Circumcision is a bloody sacrifice and an aspect of the old covenant under which man is condemned. Although it is clear that he began to visit Jerusalem even before he was 20, from the time that he officially became an adult, Jesus was required to visit the temple three times a year and participate in redemptive ritual. He also submitted to baptism. In all of this, Jesus was very much unlike Adam. Adam in the Garden was inside the sanctuary enjoying the fullness of God's blessing. Jesus though sinless was with sinful men outside the sanctuary offering sacrifices that could never really take sin away. Jesus had to submit to rites that expressed God's hatred of man's sin because He could only inaugurate a new covenant by satisfying the wrath of God that had come upon man in Adam under the old covenant.

As the new and final representative man, he was faithful to God, loving Him with all his heart and strength. He loved his neighbors so much he died for them. His keeping of the

covenant was necessary because only one who was holy and pure could bear the sins of the world as a substitute. His satisfaction of the wrath of God on the cross and resurrection unto life defeated sin, death, and Satan. His people are saved by faith in Him alone.

That is a rough and simple sketch of how I see the parallel and I do not see how my view of the covenant or of Adam's and Christ's covenant headship endangers the doctrine of justification by faith. I have never even hinted that we are justified by faith plus our good works or that justification was based upon God's work in us rather than Christ's work for us. I do agree with the Reformed tradition that good works are necessary for salvation, but not as contributing grounds for our justification. They are the natural and inevitable outworking of true faith. The only faith that saves is the faith that works by love.

## **Conclusion**

That brings me to the conclusion of this essay. I hope that I have answered the questions and concerns that Richard Phillips brings up and that my answers clarify my views. As I have said in this essay and indicated in my books, I am not offering anything original in the views I have put forth here. There is little here that can be rightly labeled recent. My critique of the Covenant of Works repeats what Herman Hoeksema wrote in his dogmatics, published in 1968, and what W. Wilson Benton wrote in his essay published in 1985. James Jordan and many others have criticized the Covenant of Works along similar lines. The doctrine of a covenant among the Persons of the Trinity was introduced to me by James Jordan. Kuyper and Van Til persuaded me that it was true. In any case, it is not a new idea. Nor does it imply tritheism. All of which should indicate, I hope, that what I am doing is not novel, original, or dangerous.

My statements about perichoresis in the book *Paradox and Truth*, published in 2000, are virtually the same as those made by Lane G. Tipton who published an article in the fall 2002 issue of the *Westminster Journal*. Tipton's article, entitled "The Function Of Perichoresis and the Divine Incomprehensibility," is an exposition of the importance of perichoresis in Van Til's understanding of the Trinity. He shows the same connection between Van Til's and Hodge's doctrine of perichoresis that I pointed out. He speaks in the same way of perichoresis bringing the three Persons of the Trinity into one. He does not use the covenantal paradigm, but otherwise his language is much the same as mine.

Though no doubt, they would not agree with all that I have written, recent Reformed writers Peter Wallace and Rowland Ward both believe in a covenant relationship among the Persons of the Trinity and both see the intratrinitarian relationship as the source of God's covenants with man. Ward writes of the Trinitarian covenant in terms virtually identical to mine.

The Bible speaks of the three persons of the Trinity in terms of love and fellowship and faithfulness. In God himself there is an ordered relationship, a personal

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commitment of love, a covenant bond between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.<sup>74</sup>

It is also worth mentioning in passing that they also both hold to the Covenant of Works, and the form in which Peter Wallace expresses the doctrine fits quite well with my own understanding of the covenant, since he sees Adam as a son who is only required to persevere in faithfulness in order to inherit the blessing of the covenant.<sup>75</sup> If that is an acceptable interpretation of the Westminster doctrine of the Covenant of Works, then I could subscribe to it also. But the point is that holding to an intratrinitarian covenant does not necessarily mean that one must deny the Covenant of Works. It is also noteworthy that neither of these men has been publicly accused of tritheism for holding views similar to Abraham Kuyper's and Peter Wallace is relatively favorable to, though not entirely uncritical of, the view of Norman Shepherd.

Let me end this on a personal note. My initial response to Richard Phillips article was surprise that anyone could so utterly misunderstand what I wrote. As I learned more about Phillips from people who knew him, I understood that he is a good man. His record shows he is academically capable. That is why I tried to take time to understand how he could so drastically misread me. As I said, I believe it is a case of paradigm blindness.

It reminds me of my dispensational days and the critiques of dispensationalism that I read before I was converted to reformed theology. I found them very unpersuasive and dismissed their criticisms because it seemed obvious that they not understand dispensationalism. But in seminary I discovered that it works both ways. When I wrote a paper on amillennial eschatology, I realized that dispensationalists had not been fair to the Reformed theologians either. It came as something of a shock to discover that dispensational criticism of reformed hermeneutics suffered from gross bias and misrepresentation. It was not until many years later that I actually converted to Reformed theology, but the lesson I learned in seminary stuck.

Cornelius Van Til's works on apologetics and Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* helped me to understand why it is so difficult to interact fairly with views different from our own. We all read others through the colored glasses of our own theories and experiences. It is the only way anyone can read. The point, then, is not to throw away our own glasses but to learn how to see with other glasses also in an effort to understand where the other person is coming from.

I was converted to Reformed theology about 20 years ago though the process of conversion began earlier, almost 30 years ago when I read an book review by Benjamin B. Warfield in the April 1919 Princeton Theological Review criticizing Lewis Sperry Chafer's view of sanctification. Warfield persuaded me that the dispensational view of the Christian life suffered from serious problems. I began to read John Murray. Later Dr. John C. Whitcomb, in our apologetics class, introduced us to Cornelius Van Til. In 1981 I began to read Van Til seriously. To help me understand Van Til, I also began to read John Frame, Vern Poythress, R.

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<sup>74</sup> Rowland Ward, *God & Adam, Reformed Theology And The Creation Covenant (An Intro To The Biblical Covenants, A Close Exam Of The Covenant Of Works)* (Melbourne: New Melbourne Press, 2003), p. 19. I am indebted to Joel Garver for this quotation.

<sup>75</sup> Wallace, <http://www.peterwallace.org/essays/inheritance.htm> .

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J. Rushdoony, and Greg Bahnsen. It was in the early 80s that I also came in contact with the writings of James Jordan.

These men and other persuaded me that dispensationalism was wrong and that Reformed theology was essentially correct. John Murray's exposition of the covenant was more persuasive to me than the dispensational view. James Jordan and Gerhardus Vos gave me a wholly different picture of redemptive history from the one I previously held. They did not persuade me by quoting confessions and catechisms. I was persuaded of reformed theology because I could see it was more Biblical than dispensationalism. The Scripture changed my mind.

Reformed theology is built on the foundation of Sola Scriptura and it is committed to the principle of continuing reformation and growth. It would be a tragedy for Reformed thinkers to substitute a commitment to Reformed confessions for Sola Scriptura or to give up the quest for further reformation. What I fear is that the loose use of words like "heresy" and "heretic" will inhibit the development of reformed theology. It is important to fight for the truth of the Gospel, but it is also important to be able to distinguish when we are contending for the Gospel and when we are simply being contentious. We must not give up debate, but conduct it in the godly and humble manner that furthers our understanding of the truth of Scripture and promotes the progress of the Gospel.

Good and upright is the LORD;  
Therefore He instructs sinners in the way.  
He leads the humble in justice,  
And He teaches the humble His way. (Psa. 25:9-10)