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Review: Calvinism, Federalism, and Scholasticism: A Study of the Reformed Doctrine of Covenant

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The dictionary remains invaluable not simply for the study of pentecostalism and the charismatics but for understanding those evangelicals who remain outside the movements as well. For until one begins to realize how many of the same currents feed into and flow back and forth between the various traditions, one is not likely to understand evangelicals as a whole very well at all.

While reading through this magnificent work I kept puzzling over one basic question. Why was something comparable not compiled long ago on the Wesleyan and Keswickian holiness movements?

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Calvinism, Federalism, and Scholasticism: A Study of the Reformed Doctrine of Covenant. By Stephen A. Strehle. Bern/Frankfurt/New York: Peter Lang, 1988, 418 pp., $53.60.

In this timely and scholarly work Strehle sets forth an "etymology" of the concept of covenant/*pactum*, both in its origins in Franciscan speculations on divine freedom and especially in its central role in the systems of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Reformed orthodoxy. The critical relationship between the scholastic (nominalistic) views of God and covenant and those of Calvinism (particularly from Beże onward) involves an emphasis on divine voluntarism beneath which both the nature and attributes of God and, significantly, the work of Christ are subsumed.

As Strehle points out, this is not a study of the history of covenant theology, which would include a chronological and biographical "who got what from whom" agenda. Nor does it claim to be in any way complete (how could it be?). It is rather a presentation of the statements of representative theologians from the high scholastic tradition (Aquinas, Bonaventura, Scotus, Ockham) through the first-generation Reformers to the high Protestant scholasticism of the seventeenth century (Cocceius, Witsius, Turretin) in the context of their overall systematic program, a program in which they identified the notion of covenant as the central idea of theology. The central concern, then, is the relationship and formative theological influence between Calvinistic judgments upon the covenant and those of scholasticism upon the same issue.

Within this overall scheme, rising from a conceptual relation to the freedom of God, Strehle reflects on several subsequent features of federal theology. From its early formation at Zurich the unity of the covenant is a prominent feature, especially with its capacity to unify all of the dealings of God with men in both Testaments. Though there were challenges to this absolute, nonhistorical and often anachronistic oneness of covenant (especially from the dispensational distinctives of Cocceius and his followers, among others), orthodoxy was normally rigid in its desire for the one in spite of testimony for the many in the historical outworking of God's purposes. Another feature of vital significance in the late developing features of covenant theology, in light of its basis in divine freedom, is the late-sixteenth-century emergence of the "covenant of works" (for Adam) and the seventeenth-century emergence of the "eternal covenant" (*foedus operum* and *pactum pacis*). The first spoke of a way to God apart from Christ, the second an odd, even improper, inner "dealing" of an anthropomorphically portrayed Trinity. Both described divine voluntarism arising from speculative reflection on God (or what lies behind the

word and works of God apart from Christ). A further feature of interest within the developing federal theology was its bilateral nature. Man and God were seen as reciprocally related. Even though attempts were made to lessen the force of such a view, still God is seen to depend on certain conditions wrought within man. Yet, for Strehle's argument, probably the most important feature of the scholastic (nominalistic) disposition of Calvinism and its view of covenant is to be seen in its view of the relation and means of relation between God and man. Union is *ex pacto* to the discounting of any intrinsic connection in Christ. As seen in forensic justification, limited atonement and supralapsarianism, as well as in federal headship, God via voluntaristic *imputatio* asserts something to be what it is not. As "free" he can do and does what he pleases.

The result, says Strehle, of doctrines molded in a construct drawn largely from a nominalistic view of absolute divine freedom (though its extremities are often modified) and philosophical phantasms is to "presume that God has no essential rationale and sapience or especially that such freedom can preempt the divine exigency for righteousness and justice." Where covenant, seen as a divine, voluntary condescension, is employed to offset the lack of parity between God and man (a Franciscan grace-works framework), all finally becomes a divine fabrication or divine fantasy relating together two things that in fact are unrelated. Justification in Christ, as an apt example of such divine voluntarism, becomes a divinely willed *imputatio* or fiction. Justification is external to the believer. Justification becomes separated from the reality of regeneration. Ultimately Christ and Christ's work become unnecessary to what God in his freedom pronounces simply in justification. The resulting alien righteousness, as a contrivance of the Father, has lost touch with the definitive revelation of God in Christ *pro nobis* and *in nobis*. Strehle points to Luther's critical soteriological insights, and the need to think of God as God is revealed. In other words, *theologia crucis* avoids the impieties of *theologia gloriae*, which seeks to unveil the divine counsels.

This is a work of immense importance, not only in laying bare the formative roots of the theology of many of us in Protestant evangelicalism today but also as a further step in the mutual recognition and understanding between the varieties of covenant and dispensational theologians (cf. Strehle's careful analysis of the rise of both, side by side, within the historical development of Reformed orthodoxy). This work is a veritable library of the development of Reformed thought in its relation to scholasticism. The footnotes are both extensive and helpful and given in the original Latin, German, French and English, taking the willing reader directly to the relevant context for each theologian. All in all the work is quite readable, which, with its erudition and depth, is most remarkable.

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Two Hundred Years of Theology: Report of a Personal Journey. By Hendrikus Berkhof. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989, 316 pp., $24.95.

During an interview I conducted with him at his home in Leiden in 1989, I asked Berkhof to identify both the Christian gospel and the best way to present it and defend it in the modern world. He replied that because the gospel was so rich and multifaceted, and because the shape and content of modernity was always changing, no once-for-all and unambiguous answer could be given to that question.

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