

# New Covenant Theology: How It Differs from Covenant Theology's Covenant of Grace

## Introduction

I have defined, described and highlighted some 24 characteristics of New Covenant Theology (NCT) in the Brochure provided to you from the Book Table and they are also located on the seminary's website ([www.ptsc.org](http://www.ptsc.org)) as is the hard copy 14-page manuscript handout of this message to which I will be referring to today. So let's begin. NCT is indebted to Covenant (that is, Reformed) Theology for its teaching on the Sovereignty of God in Creation, Providence and Redemption, the Inspiration of Scripture, and the Doctrines of God, Christ, Salvation and Things to Come. But, today, as time will permit, from a book that I am writing, I will address how NCT differs from Covenant Theology (CT) by first **surveying the historical origin of Covenant Theology** and conclude by addressing **the theological heart of CT as a theological system**, which is **its one overarching covenant of grace**. In the process of the survey, I will also point out that **the one covenant of grace and infant baptism of covenant children are interdependent** and that **CT's teaching on infant baptism actually becomes the Achilles' heel, to major portions of its theological system**.

## A Condensed Historical Background to Covenant Theology

*Two things especially significant occurred in the first century and a half after the days of the Apostles. They were the rise of the monarchical bishop with its practice of infant baptism—both of which greatly affected the nature of the church in post-Apostolic Christianity. This was followed in the fourth century by the rise of the State-Church (Corpus Christianum)*

### The Rise of the Monarchical Bishop

It was not long after the close of the NT until recognition of a monarchical bishop came into being as early as the beginning of the 2d century. This practice distinguished between bishop and elder by elevating the role of one elder in each local church to that of bishop who then ruled over the other elders. By the next century in A.D. 251, for example, there were some 66 monarchical bishops in the churches of North Africa. This practice was led and taught by Cyprian (Bishop of Carthage; d. A.D. 258). Soon throughout Imperial Rome the practice of recognizing the monarchical bishop in the local churches increased with the Bishop at Rome receiving special honor. Through Cyprian and the traditional teaching of the martyrdom of Peter and Paul in Rome, the primacy of the Bishop of Rome and the doctrine of apostolic succession took root, although Papal supremacy was yet to come.

### The Practice of Infant Baptism

The Bible is silent regarding infant baptism. The earliest post-Apostolic writings of the *Didache* (A.D. 100-110), the *Epistle of Barnabus* (ca. A.D. 120-130), and the *Shepherd of Hermas* (ca. A.D. 150) were also silent. One of the first explicit mentions of infant baptism was made by Tertullian between A.D. 200-206 where he said that “the delay of baptism is preferable

. . . in the case of little children . . . when they become able to know Christ.”<sup>1</sup> Not until Cyprian (ca. A.D. 251-253) was the first defense of infant baptism made claiming *Apostolic* authority. Cyprian also taught the practice of infant communion, as did Augustine (d. A.D. 430).

## **The Union of Church and State**

In addition to *monarchism* evolving into Papal supremacy and the post-apostolic practice of *infant baptism*, the third major area which provides the historical context for the Reformation is the *state-church* union that came about in the 4<sup>th</sup> century under Emperor Constantine when he granted Christians freedom of worship with the Edict of Milan in A.D. 313 and by the end of the 4th century Christianity was recognized as the official religion of the Empire. The church had now become the body of Christendom (*Corpus Christianum*), a state-church, embracing the whole empire as a Christian society. Papal supremacy rose to dominancy, especially during the reign of Pope Leo the Great (A.D. 440-461) and Pope Gregory I (A.D. 590-604). The result was that between A.D. 313 and 590 the Old Catholic Church under its monarchical bishops became the Roman Catholic Church of the Middle Ages. Since then, the church of Christendom grew under the Papacy until the time of the Protestant Reformation.

## **The Reformation**

### **The First Front of the Reformation**

The doctrine and unbiblical practices of the Roman Catholic Church in a state-church political environment were instrumental in leading up to the *first front* of the Protestant Reformation in Germany in 1517 led by Martin Luther (1483-1546) and in Switzerland in 1523 led by Huldreich (Ulrich) Zwingli (1484-1531). The Reformers insisted upon the sole authority of the Bible and attempted to abolish all doctrines not taught in accordance with it, which included the mass, the granting of indulgences, the use of images, and the power of the papacy. Yet, some aspects of the abused practices of Roman Catholicism remained.

### **The Second Front of the Reformation**

The *second front*<sup>2</sup> of the Reformation originated in Switzerland. It began when an internal struggle broke out in Zurich late in 1523 and 1524 between Zwingli and some Swiss Brethren over Zwingli's abandonment of his previously announced plans to abolish the mass. Follow on differences then arose between Zwingli and the Brethren (derisively called Anabaptists, that is, rebaptizers) over the authority of the New Testament's teaching on the nature of the church and the practice of infant baptism.

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<sup>1</sup>Tertullian *On Baptism*, XVIII in Ante-Nicene Fathers [ANF], American ed., trans. S. Thelwall, vol. 3 (repr., Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1973), 678. However, citing John 3:5, Tertullian believed that “without baptism salvation is attainable by none”; *On Baptism* XII, ANF 3:674-75.

<sup>2</sup>See Leonard Verduin, *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1964), 11; and Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3<sup>d</sup> ed. rev., 8 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1958) 8:69-85.

## Zwingli and the Swiss Brethren (Anabaptists)

The Swiss Brethren believed the NT taught that the church, the body of Christ (*Corpus Christi*), consisted of regenerate believers only. This soon became the major issue between Zwingli and the *Anabaptists*. A church comprised of those who confessed their faith in Christ meant a complete break from the medieval practice of a state-church (*Corpus Christianum*) and this necessarily excluded infant baptism.

## The Birth of Anabaptism

Anabaptism was born in Zurich on the night of January 21, 1525 when Conrad Grebel initiated believer's baptism by baptizing George Blaurock in the home of Felix Manz. "With this first baptism, the earliest church of the Swiss Brethren was constituted." It not only symbolized a revolutionary break with Rome, but it received a corresponding dissatisfaction from Zwingli. Zwingli knew if he renounced infant baptism that he would be opposed by the people and political rulers in the Zurich canton (district), that the Reformation break with Rome would be discredited. In brief, Zwingli feared that the Reformation in Switzerland would fail if Anabaptism succeeded.

## The Birth of Covenant Theology

Zwingli's answer to the Anabaptist rejection of infant baptism was to appeal to the analogy between OT circumcision and NT baptism and the unity of the Testaments. Although this analogy had long been used in church tradition as a basis for infant baptism, it was Zwingli who initiated a *covenantal mold* for it that birthed CT as a theological system. Zwingli held baptism to be the *covenant* sign under the New Covenant like circumcision had been the covenant sign under the Abrahamic Covenant. What Zwingli initiated laid the basis for what became the one covenant of grace<sup>3</sup>—different administrations teaching by those who came after him. The *one covenant of grace* system of Reformed Theology, as it subsequently came to be, thus holds that the church is generically one in both the OT and NT and that the covenant made with Abraham in Genesis 17 with its sign and seal of circumcision is fulfilled in the New Covenant with its sign and seal of baptism.<sup>4</sup> This *covenantal concept*, tied to the Abrahamic Covenant,<sup>5</sup> was initiated by Zwingli and developed especially by his successor, Heinrich (Henry)

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<sup>3</sup>"Zwingli defended the practice of paedobaptism on the grounds that there has been one covenant of grace between God and his people from the time of Adam to the present. . . . Upon this foundation—the continuity of the history of salvation and the unity of the covenant of grace—Zwingli goes on to make his case for infant baptism." Lyle D. Bierma, *The Covenant Theology of Caspar Olevianus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2005), 32-33.

<sup>4</sup>See John Murray, *Christian Baptism* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian & Reformed Pub. Co, 1962), 48.

<sup>5</sup>*Indeed, the Genesis 17 text became the key text of CT's covenant of grace theological system.* This is evident in the writings of Heinrich (Henry) Bullinger who, citing Genesis 17:7, wrote on baptism that "since the young babes and infants of the faithful are in the number or reckoning of God's people, . . . they are as well to be baptized, as they that be of perfect age which profess the christian faith." *The Decades of Henry Bullinger*, ed. Thomas Harding; Parker Society ed., 4 vols. (Cambridge: University Press, 1849-52; repr., 4 vols. in two; Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2004), 2:382. He acknowledged that "the Anabaptists do contend, that none is to be baptized, but he alone which both is able to be taught, and to believe, yea, *and make confession of his faith also* [*italics mine*]. . . . By this the Anabaptists do build upon a fickle foundation" (*ibid.*, 385-86).

Bullinger (1504-1575) and then by John Calvin (1509-1564). It continued to be developed by the German Reformers, Zacharias Ursinus (1534-1583) and Kasper Olevianus (1536-1587) along with other Reformed theologians in Germany, Holland, Scotland and England. Thus, the *covenantal concept* undergirding CT provided an *evangelical* basis for infant baptism, which meant that infant baptism, although not necessary for salvation, is a requirement for adult believers to baptize their infant children based upon the promise of the everlasting covenant of grace made with Abraham and his descendants.

### **The Significance of the Swiss and South German Anabaptists**

The significance of the Swiss and South German Anabaptists has often been distorted in Reformation history by not distinguishing them from the *Inspirationists and Rationalists*.<sup>6</sup> Admittedly, the Anabaptists had some major doctrinal deviations, but these early sixteenth century Swiss and South German Brethren—derisively called *Anabaptists*—should be an encouragement for us today regarding *their understanding of the nature of the church*. How so? Because of their uncompromising stand upon the sole authority of the Bible and the NT as normative for the church; for their stand for regenerated church membership, the rejection of infant baptism, separation of church and state; and for their subsequent influence upon the English General and Particular Baptists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>7</sup>

### **The Significance of infant baptism in the development of Covenant Theology**

The historical background to the Reformation and the *second front* between the Swiss Reformers and the Anabaptists show that infant baptism was a major reason for the doctrinal origination of Covenant Theology. The following will show the influence of infant baptism in the development of several Continental Reformed Confessions of faith and as classically expressed a century later in the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) with its Larger and Shorter Catechisms. The nature of the church inseparably linked to the issue over infant baptism of covenant children became a major doctrinal reason for the origination of both the General and Particular Baptists in England in the early and mid 17<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, this issue persists as a middle wall of doctrinal partition between Paedobaptist and Baptist churches today causing disunity within the body of Christ.

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<sup>6</sup>“Failure to distinguish between the Anabaptists, inspirationists, and rationalists has led to gross misunderstanding of the entire Radical Reformation” (Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, 21). The authority for Anabaptists was the NT; for the Inspirationists, immediate illumination of the Spirit; for the Rationalists, primary emphasis on the place of reason in interpreting the Scriptures. This distortion of lumping the three groups under the single derisive rubric of Anabaptist also extended and was used a century later in calling the Baptists in England “*Anabaptists*,” an appellation “wrongly” attributed to them and prominently refuted on the title page of all five editions (1644, 1646, 1651, 1652, 1653) of the First London Baptist Confession of Faith.

<sup>7</sup>See William R. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story*, 3<sup>d</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1996), 301-302. Indeed, it was the “layman’s theologian,” **Pilgrim Marpeck**, a prominent Anabaptist, who emphasized “the separation of church and state . . . [and] set forth that **believers’ baptism as an act of obedience of a committed disciple in contrast to those who held it to be a means of grace.**” He taught that to hold that the OT as equally authoritative for the Christian would abolish the distinction between the OT and NT and lead to “**most dire consequences**” (ibid., 123, 126; **highlight mine**).

*The one covenant of grace and infant baptism teaching of Covenant Theology are interdependent; each one necessary to support the other. For example, Pierre Marcel, a respected Reformed pastor of the French Reformed Church, has openly acknowledged that “with the rejection of the covenant of grace every possible foundation of infant baptism disappears.”*<sup>8</sup> And Herman Bavinck, a highly regarded Reformed paedobaptist theologian, speaking historically of the Reformers’ defense of infant baptism against Anabaptism, expressly stated that “**this covenant [the covenant of grace] was the sure, scriptural, objective ground upon which all the Reformed, together and without distinction, based the right to infant baptism. They had no other, deeper, or more solid ground.**”<sup>9</sup>

A major purpose of what follows shows how it is that—both then and now—*the Reformed doctrine of infant baptism is inseparably linked to its one covenant of grace, which is vehemently against Anabaptist/Baptist opposition to infant baptism, but its teaching ends up becoming the Achilles’ heel, exposing the lack of exegetical and biblical hermeneutical support for the heart of Covenant Theology’s one covenant of grace—different administrations teaching.*

### **Johannes Oecolampadius (1482-1531)**

In 1522, the German born Oecolampadius, a contemporary and friend of Zwingli, became the principal reformer and a professor of theology in Basel, Switzerland and the pastor of St. Martin’s Church. Before Oecolampadius’s death in 1531, he wrote the first draft of the *First Confession of Basel*, which was revised in 1532 and first published by his successor, Oswald Myconius, in 1534. The Confession was a brief statement of the Reformed faith in twelve short articles directed against the Roman Catholics and the Anabaptists. The last article, Article XII, entitled *Against the Error of the Anabaptist* states in part:

We publicly declare that we not only do not accept but reject as an abomination and as blasphemy the alien false doctrines which are among the damnable and wicked opinions uttered by these factious spirits, namely, that children (whom we baptize according to the custom of the apostles and the early Church and because baptism has replaced circumcision) should not be baptized.<sup>10</sup>

### **Heinrich Bullinger (1504-1575)**

Bullinger was the successor to Zwingli and the main author of the first Reformed Creed of national authority, the *First Helvetic Confession* (1536). In Article 25, it accused the Anabaptists of introducing “alien and ungodly doctrines into the Church.” Bullinger was the sole author of the *Second Helvetic Confession* published in 1566. Chapter 20 of this later confession states:

We condemn the Anabaptists, who deny that newborn infants of the faithful are to be baptized. For, according to the evangelical teaching, of such is the kingdom of God, and they are written in the

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<sup>8</sup>Pierre Ch. Marcel, *Baptism: Sacrament of the Covenant of Grace*, trans. Philip Edgcumbe Hughes (London: James Clarke & Co., 1953; American repr. Cherry Hill, NJ: Mack Pub. Co., 1973), 199; **highlight** mine.

<sup>9</sup>Herman Bavinck, “Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation” in *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 525; **highlight** mine.

<sup>10</sup>*Reformed Confessions of the Sixteenth Century*, ed. Arthur C. Cochrane (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 96.

covenant of God. Why, then, should the sign of the covenant not be given to them? Why should those who belong to God and are in his Church not be initiated by holy baptism?<sup>11</sup>

Bullinger developed Zwingli's understanding of the covenantal concept making it the major way in which to interpret the Bible. For Bullinger, the covenant arrangement between God and man began with Adam in the *protevangelium* (Gen. 3:15), was confirmed as one covenant of grace with Abraham, and fulfilled in Christ with the sacramental sign of the covenant being *holy baptism*<sup>12</sup> for administering to all in the church of God, including infant children of faithful parents.

### **John Calvin (1509-1564)**

By the time Calvin wrote the first edition of his *Institutes* in 1536, he was aware of the Anabaptists and their rejection of infant baptism as Zwingli had been some ten years earlier. By 1537, in Calvin's first stay in Geneva, he had personal contact with some Anabaptists.<sup>13</sup> By the 1539 edition of the *Institutes*, Calvin addresses the agreement of God's covenant in the OT and NT. He writes that the points of agreement can be explained in that "the covenant [of circumcision] made with all the patriarchs is so much like ours [the covenant made with us after Christ's advent] in substance and reality that the two are actually one and the same. Yet they differ in the mode of dispensation."<sup>14</sup> Only the sign of the covenant, "the manner of confirmation is different—what was circumcision for them was replaced for us by baptism."<sup>15</sup> "If the covenant [made with Abraham in Genesis 17:7, 10] still remains firm and steadfast, it applies no less today to the children of Christians than under the Old Testament."<sup>16</sup> Clearly, Calvin's defense of infant baptism against the Anabaptists is based upon the covenant promise God made with Abraham. And this is integral to his theological system. Indeed, it is no understatement to say that Calvin's teaching of one covenant in redemptive history becomes the basis for the later development of Covenant Theology's one covenant of grace—different administrations hermeneutical system.

### **The Belgic Confession (1561)**

The chief author of the Belgic Confession, first written in French, was Guy de Brès. It was later translated into Dutch, German and Latin. It was revised and adopted by the Synod of Dort in 1619. Since then, the Belgic Confession and Heidelberg Catechism have been the recognized symbol of the Reformed Churches in Holland, Belgium, and of the Reformed (Dutch) Church in America. According to Schaff, the Belgic Confession, on the whole, is recognized as "the best symbolical statement of the Calvinistic system of doctrine, with the exception of the

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 283.

<sup>12</sup>But baptism is not the sign of the New Covenant; the sign is the cup of remembrance. Jesus said: "This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this in remembrance of Me" (I Cor. 11:25; see Luke 22:20).

<sup>13</sup>Calvin married an Anabaptist widow in 1540 named Idelette de Bure. She and Calvin had a son who only lived a few days. She passed away in 1549.

<sup>14</sup>John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), II. X. 2.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., IV. XVI. 6.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., IV. XVI. 5.

Westminster Confession.”<sup>17</sup> The Belgic Confession, as revised at the Synod of Dort in 1619, states in Article XXXIV on “holy baptism” that—

We detest the error of the Anabaptists, who . . . condemn the baptism of the infants of believers, who, we believe, ought to be baptized and sealed with the sign of the covenant, as the children in Israel formerly were circumcised upon the same promises which are made unto our children.<sup>18</sup>

### **The Heidelberg Catechism (1563)**

This catechism was largely prepared by the German Reformer, Zacharias Ursinus (1534-1583); perhaps assisted by Kasper Olevianus (1536-1587). However Olevianus did write an important catechetical work on the covenant of grace (ca. 1575). Question 74 in the Heidelberg Catechism asked “Are infants also to be baptized?” The answer:

Yes; for since they, as well as their parents, belong to the covenant and people of God, and both redemption from sin and the Holy Ghost, who works faith, are through the blood of Christ promised to them no less than to their parents, they are also by Baptism, as a sign of the covenant, to be *ingrafted* into the Christian Church, and distinguished from the children of unbelievers, as was done in the Old Testament by Circumcision, in place of which in the New Testament Baptism is appointed.<sup>19</sup> (Italics mine)

In his exposition of Question 74 to the Heidelberg Catechism, Ursinus wrote “that denial of infant baptism is no trifling error, but a grievous heresy, in direct opposition to the word of God, and the comfort of the church.”<sup>20</sup>

### **The Scottish Confession of Faith (1560)**

This confession was composed by six men, John Knox (ca. 1513-1572) being prominent. It became the official doctrinal statement of the Church of Scotland until superseded (though not discontinued for the sake of unity) by the Westminster Confession of Faith. Disdain for the Anabaptists is explicitly stated in Chapter XXIII on “To Whom Sacraments Appertain.” It states: “We hold that baptism applies as much to the children of the faithful as to those who are of age and discretion, and so we condemn the error of the Anabaptists, who deny that children should be baptized before they have faith and understanding.”<sup>21</sup>

### **The Westminster Confession of Faith (1647)**

The Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms (approved by the Westminster Assembly in December 1646 with Scripture references provided early in 1647 and adopted by the English Parliament in 1649) states in Chapter XXVIII on

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<sup>17</sup>Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed., rev. and enlarged in 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1919), 1:506.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 3:427.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 3:331.

<sup>20</sup>Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. from the original Latin by G. W. Willard (Phillipsburg NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., n.d.), 368.

<sup>21</sup>Cochrane, *Reformed Confessions*, 182.

baptism: “Baptism is a sacrament of the New Testament, . . . a sign and seal of the covenant of grace . . . [and, based upon Gen. 17:7 that] infants of one or both believing parents are to be baptized.” In answer to Question 166: “Unto whom is baptism to be administered?” The **Larger Catechism** also refers to Genesis 17:7 and states that “infants descending from parents, either both, or but one of them, professing faith in Christ, and obedience to him, are in that respect within the covenant, and to be baptized.” In answer to Question 95, “To whom is baptism to be administered?” the **Shorter Catechism** refers to Genesis 17:10 and states that “the infants of such as are members of the visible church are to be baptized.” Hence, the covenant promise that God made with Abraham and his descendants (Gen. 17:7, 10) is held by the WCF to be the same in substance with the New Covenant for “believers and their children” (Acts 2:39a), only the sign, is said to have changed from circumcision to baptism (Col. 2:11-12).<sup>22</sup>

### Historical Summary

This historical survey has shown that the nature of the church has been greatly affected by post-apostolic and medieval church history and by Reformed Theology’s one covenant of grace teaching that the church is generically one and the same in both the OT and NT with only the sign of the Abrahamic and the New Covenant changing from circumcision to baptism. It is also no over statement to say that the genesis of CT’s one covenant of grace theological system began with Zwingli in defense of infant baptism against the Anabaptists. Indeed, the role that infant baptism has had in the development of CT is readily admitted by Reformed theologians of the past and present. Geerhardus Vos, who has been called the “father of Reformed biblical theology” by the editor of his shorter writings, wrote: “In Switzerland the Reformers had come into direct conflict with the Anabaptists. . . . In their defense of infant baptism they reached for the Old Testament and applied the federal [covenant] understanding of the sacraments to the new dispensation. Zwingli did this in 1525.”<sup>23</sup> **This argument—which is in direct conflict with the major biblical hermeneutical principle that the NT interprets the OT**—was picked up by Heinrich Bullinger, Zwingli’s younger successor, John Calvin and other Continental and English Reformers as expressed in their 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century theological writings and confessions of faith. A result of Zwingli’s “debates with the Anabaptists made the covenant the main argument for the Reformed understanding of infant baptism.”<sup>24</sup>

I cite again, Herman Bavinck, a respected early 20<sup>th</sup> century Dutch Reformed theologian wrote: “**This covenant [of grace] was the solid, biblical, and objective foundation upon which all the Reformers unanimously and without exception rested the legitimacy of infant**

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<sup>22</sup>But this understanding interprets the NT by the OT and not only leaves out the last half of Acts 2:39 which teaches that the promised gift of the Holy Spirit (verse 38) is for “as many as the Lord our God shall call” thus requiring one to answer the call, but also misinterprets Colossian 2:11 which is speaking of the “circumcision made without hands” (i.e., regeneration) and the believer’s identification with Christ being buried with Him in baptism and being raised up with Him through faith (v. 12) thus requiring one to exercise faith. This is how the NT interprets the OT, hardly supporting the WCF’s teaching of infant baptism of covenant children.

<sup>23</sup>Geerhardus Vos, *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Pub. Co., 1980), 236.

<sup>24</sup>Robert L Reymond, *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, 2<sup>d</sup> ed., rev. and updated (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 503.



**baptism.**<sup>25</sup> Just how important is infant baptism to Covenant Theology? Herman Hoeksema, a mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Dutch Reformed theologian, has answered this question by boldly declaring:

**Infant baptism is not a matter of lesser importance, but of the greatest moment.** *He* who does not acknowledge it or who belittles it shows thereby at the same time that he does not understand the great and basic idea of God’s Word, [namely,] that the Lord establishes His covenant with believers and their seed in the line of continued generations.<sup>26</sup>

John Murray, a leading CT theologian immediately after stating that “**the church is generically one in both [OT and NT] dispensations,**” wrote: “**the basic premise of the argument for infant baptism is that the New Testament economy is the unfolding and fulfillment of the covenant made with Abraham and that the necessary implication is the unity and continuity of the church.**”<sup>27</sup>

The purpose of this *historical summary* was to show that there is abundant documentation for asserting that *the Reformed doctrine of infant baptism is the doorway that opens up the heart of Covenant Theology’s one covenant of grace theological system.* As much as **New Covenant Theology** agrees with Reformed Theology on the nature of God and the sovereignty of God in creation, providence and redemption, it **differs with how Covenant Theology explains its theologically deduced one overarching covenant of grace—different administrations teaching and its interdependent linkage with infant baptism.**

## The Covenant of Grace as a Theological System

The reader needs to know that when I speak of the *theological system* of the covenant of grace that I use it in a more inclusive way than just the covenant of grace itself. As a *system*, the covenant of grace traditionally includes the covenant of redemption and covenant of works. When speaking of the covenant of grace as set forth in the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF), it refers to the second covenant that God made with Christ as the Second Adam; the first covenant being a covenant of works made with the First Adam.

### The Covenant of Grace Defined

The covenant of grace as taught by Reformed Theology may be defined<sup>28</sup> as *one* in redemptive substance that *covenantally overarches* all of redemptive history first made and promissorially given in the *protoevangelium* (Gen. 3:15) with Christ as the Second Adam and in

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<sup>25</sup>Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. by the Dutch Reformed Translation Society, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008) 4:525 (**highlight** mine).

<sup>26</sup>Herman Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed*, trans. from the Dutch by Homer C. Hoeksema (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1971), 84-85; **highlight** mine. See also his *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. Homer C. Hoeksema (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Pub. Assoc., 1966), 695. Hoeksema for 40 years occupied the Chair of Dogmatics in the Theological School of the Protestant Reformed Churches in Holland.

<sup>27</sup>Murray, *Christian Baptism*, 48; **highlight** mine.

<sup>28</sup>This definition is a conflation of the teaching of the WCF and several other Reformed sources from the past and present.

Him with all the elect as His seed (Gal. 3:16), then historically advanced more fully in the Abrahamic Covenant and differently administered thereafter under the Old and New Covenants.

Because the covenant of grace is understood to *overarch*<sup>29</sup> all of redemptive history, it becomes the central structure—the heart—of the theological system of Reformed Theology. **“The basic premise of the argument for infant baptism is that the New Testament economy is the unfolding and fulfillment of the covenant made with Abraham and the necessary implication is the unity and continuity of the church.”** Hence, **“the church is generically one in both [OT and NT] dispensations.”**<sup>30</sup> **“There are not therefore two covenants of grace differing in substance, but one and the same under various dispensations.”**<sup>31</sup> **Thus, only the sign changes from OT circumcision to NT baptism.** The continuity of the history of salvation and the unity of the covenant of grace is absolutely foundational for supporting infant baptism of covenant children. Nearly 500 years ago, Zwingli wrote:

If there is, indeed, one covenant and one people of God throughout redemptive history, children of NT believers are no less a part of that covenant than were the children of the OT believers, nor are they any less entitled to the sign of that covenant. NT baptism has replaced OT circumcision, but like circumcision baptism signifies and seals covenantal promises extended to God’s people long before they themselves are able to respond to them in faith.<sup>32</sup>

## A Maze of Understanding among Reformed Theologians

*A maze of understanding (?)* exists among Reformed theologians over whether to equate the covenant of grace with an eternal covenant of redemption between members of the Godhead. Reformed Paedobaptist scholars John Murray and O. Palmer Robertson do not hold to a pre-temporal covenant of redemption and thus equate the covenant of redemption with the covenant of grace occurring in time. Indeed, New Covenant Theology agrees with Robertson when he states:

Affirming the role of redemption to the eternal counsels of God is not the same as proposing the existence of a pre-creation covenant between Father and Son. A sense of artificiality flavors the effort to structure in covenantal terms the mysteries of God’s eternal counsels. Scripture simply does not say much on the pre-creation shape of the decrees of God. *To speak concretely of an intertrinitarian “covenant” with terms and conditions between The Father and Son mutually endorsed before the foundation of the world is to extend the bounds of scriptural evidence beyond propriety.*<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>“The **one overarching ‘covenant of grace’** [emphasis mine] was historically advanced and administered after Genesis 3:15 by God’s historical covenants” with Noah, Abraham, Israel, David, “and finally through the administration of the New Covenant, . . . Jesus Christ himself being the Mediator of the New Covenant between God and his elect.” Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, 2d ed. rev. and updated (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 406.

<sup>30</sup>Murray, *Christian Baptism*, 48; **highlight** mine.

<sup>31</sup>WCF, VII, vi, 6; **highlight** mine. See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II, x, 2.

<sup>32</sup>Huldreich Zwingli, *Zwinglis Werke*, vol. 91 of *Corpus Reformatorum* (Leipzig: M. Heinsius Nachfolger, 1927): 617, quoted in Lyle D. Beirma, *The Covenant Theology of Caspar Olevianus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2005), 33-34.

<sup>33</sup>O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1980), 54; italics mine.

However, perhaps the more dominant teaching of Reformed Paedobaptist Theology (including present-day Reformed Baptist teaching<sup>34</sup>) distinguishes between these two covenants by holding that *the covenant of redemption was a pre-creation covenant* made in eternity past between the Father and the Son for the salvation of the elect and that the covenant of grace began in Genesis 3:15 with Adam and Eve as an outworking in history of an **eternal covenant of redemption** rather than an outworking of God’s **eternal purpose** (Eph. 3:11; II Tim 1:9).<sup>35</sup> In either case, whether the covenant of redemption is viewed as eternal or synonymous with the covenant of grace, the covenant of grace is viewed as one overarching redemptive covenant in which all the biblical covenants, including the New Covenant, are understood to be covenantal administrations of it in history. This is a major inconsistency within CT. **Covenant Theology’s one overarching covenant of grace—no! God’s one overarching, immutable, eternal purpose—yes!** They are not to be equated.

Indeed, the term *covenant* is never used in Scripture to refer to an intra-Trinitarian, pre-creation covenant within the Godhead. To say that it does, makes a divine *covenant* interchangeable with God’s *eternal purpose, will, counsel, or predetermined plan*. But this *interchangeability* is never taught in the Bible. Yes, covenant and God’s eternal purpose are related but they are not interchangeable. So, why not use scriptural terminology when it is readily available? The reader can discern that God’s eternal purpose and the covenantal execution of His purpose in time and history are not the same thing, “*for God executes nothing in time which he had not ordained from eternity, and appointed all the means and circumstances whereby it should be brought about.*”<sup>36</sup> And this includes God’s covenants planned to occur in history as a means to execute His eternal purpose.<sup>37</sup> This can be readily discerned using an English Concordance to see where *covenant* occurs (*berith* in OT and *diathēkē* in the Greek translation of the OT and in the NT). The *context* of those passages will show that *covenant* is never used interchangeably with God’s *eternal purpose (prothesis)* of salvation (e.g., Eph. 3:11; II Tim. 1:9). Neither is *covenant* used interchangeably with God’s *counsel or plan (boulē), predetermined (horizō) plan (boulē), or predestination (proorizō)*. See explicit OT and NT examples in Job 42:2; Psalm 33:11; Isaiah 46:10; Acts 2:23; 4:28 and Ephesians 1:11. Covenant Theology, therefore, is wrong; there is no pre-creation covenant of redemption. Rather, **God’s**

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<sup>34</sup>See Fred A. Malone, *The Baptism of Disciples Alone: A Covenantal Argument for Credobaptism Versus Paedobaptism* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2003. In partial agreement with paedobaptist covenantalists, Malone writes that “covenantal Baptists believe in the decrees of God and the Covenant of Redemption before the foundation of the world. . . . [Thus] the New Covenant is . . . the fulfillment of that **eternal Covenant of Redemption** to save God’s elect people (2 Timothy 1:8-10).” *Ibid.*, 52-53 (emphasis mine).

<sup>35</sup>Again, in agreement with Paedobaptist brethren, Malone states: “The Old Testament covenants of promise and the New Covenant fulfillment are all administrations of that historical Covenant of Grace (or way of salvation), which is the historical outworking of the **eternal Covenant of Redemption.**” *Ibid.*, 71 (emphasis mine). Notice that Malone has given another meaning for the covenant of grace as the “way of salvation” which may be helpful, but he still wrongly equates the “eternal Covenant of Redemption in II Timothy 1:9 with God’s **eternal purpose**. NCT holds that this admixture of terms creates doctrinal confusion; yet, agrees with Malone’s statement elsewhere that “one’s definition of what is a covenant will determine one’s final [understanding of] covenant theology.” *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>36</sup>Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, 2 Vols. in One (repr. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 1:338; *italics* mine.

<sup>37</sup>“To place any covenant into eternity past ignores the fact that the covenants of Scripture are all initiated in time.” Tom Wells, “What Is This Thing Called the New Covenant” in *Reformation and Revival* 6, no. 3 (Summer 1997): 49.

**eternal purpose is worked out in redemptive history in covenantal administrations of His eternal will** (*thelēma*, Eph. 1:11; Matt. 6:10).

In brief, NCT teaches that there is neither explicit biblical evidence nor biblical support to substantiate Reformed Theology's covenant of redemption: ***a plan of redemption, yes! a covenant of redemption, no!*** Who has been Jehovah's counselor (Isa. 40:13-14; Rom. 11:34)? No, no one! The Triune God needs no counselor!

### **The Order of Historical Development of Reformed Theology**

The reader should be made aware of a couple of other things. First, the historical development of Reformed Theology's three theological covenants was *originally* developed in reverse historical order from that as presented later in a fully developed system. The first covenant developed by RT was the covenant of grace (ca. 1525-1600). It was followed historically, with some overlap, by the covenant of works (ca. 1560-1650), and then by a third covenant, the covenant of redemption (ca. 1640-1700).<sup>38</sup> This order is important to show not only the process of development, but also that RT was developed in the historical milieu of a state-church society (*Corpus Christianum*) and the medieval practice of infant baptism by the Catholic Church. Why? Because the Reformation and Reformed Theology were shaped by these factors as well as the Scripture.

### **Summary Points on Behalf of New Covenant Theology**

In closing this message, at least ten points need to be emphasized on behalf of NCT. ***First***, NCT affirms that it does hold to a covenantal understanding of biblical history, to include understanding **Genesis 3:15 as a post-Fall gracious covenant of promise** to be worked out in redemptive history. How so? Because **a Divine covenant is often based upon nothing more than God's promise**,<sup>39</sup> which NCT believes to be the case in Genesis 3:15 as expressly stated to be so in Galatians 3:16 with God's promises spoken to Abraham and to his *one seed*, that is, *Christ*.

***Second***, in agreement with John Owen's writing on Hebrews 8:6 regarding the centrality of promise(s) undergirding Divine covenants, NCT believes—

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<sup>38</sup>Although sporadic elements of the following three theological covenants may have existed earlier, the formal beginning and protracted development did not take place until later. *The covenant of grace* was being developed—in the era *ca. 1525-1600* via the writings of Huldreich Zwingli (d. 1531), Johannes Oecolampadius (d. 1531), John Calvin (d. 1564), Heinrich Bullinger (d. 1575), as well as Zacharias Ursinus and Kasper Olevianus, Jerome Zanchius (d. 1590) & later by Robert Rollock (d. 1599) in his writing "On the Covenant of God" in 1596; *the covenant of works*—in the era *ca. 1560-1650* via the writings of Zacharias Ursinus (d. 1583), Kasper Olevianus (d. 1587), Robert Rollock, the Irish Articles of Religion (1615), the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647-1649); and *the covenant of redemption*—in the era *ca. 1640-1700* via such major representative writings as the writings of Johannes Cloppenburg (d. 1652), Samuel Rutherford (d. 1661), Johannes Cocceius (d. 1669), Francis Turretine (d. 1687), Herman Witsius (d. 1708).

<sup>39</sup>See, John Gill, *A Body of Doctrinal Divinity* (London: 1839; repr. Swengel, PA: Reiner Publications, 1965), 215. Called "a special promise" in Article XII of the 1646 ed. of the First London Confession of Faith.

that every covenant between God and man must be founded on and resolved into “*promises*.” Hence essentially a promise and a covenant are all one; and God calls an absolute promise, founded on an absolute decree, his covenant, Gen. ix. 11. . . . The being and essence of a divine covenant lies in the promise. Hence are they called “the covenants of promise,” Eph. ii. 12.<sup>40</sup>

Indeed, NCT holds to this biblical understanding of Divine covenants because God’s eternal purpose for mankind is covenantally structured and administered throughout the history of redemption.

**Third**, NCT differs greatly with CT’s explanation of the covenant of grace as one **overarching covenant**—a theologically deduced covenant that, without biblical warrant, confuses the **overarching** nature of its **covenant** of grace with God’s **eternal purpose**. ***I cannot emphasize this point too strongly: that which overarches all of redemptive history is God’s eternal purpose/decreed/plan/will—not the covenant of grace!*** In fact, the lack of clarity in definition of terms has caused confusion and an inconsistent use of doctrinal terms through the years among both Paedobaptists and Baptists.

**Fourth**, a large part of the confusion over terminology is the **direct result** of covenant theologians, starting with Zwingli and Bullinger in the 1520s and with others to this very day, **who without exception try to justify infant baptism of covenant children** as members of the covenant of grace and “*ingrafted into the Christian Church*”<sup>41</sup>—**confusion at its best!** They do this by making the outworking of *one theologically deduced “covenant of grace”*—which admittedly is virtually understood to be the same as the “everlasting covenant” made with Abraham (Gen. 17:7) and its covenant sign of circumcision—to **overarch** all of redemptive history. They say that the only change is not a change in covenantal *substance* under the OT and NT; rather, it is only the covenant sign which changes from OT circumcision to NT baptism under the New Covenant administration of the **one overarching** covenant of grace.

**Fifth**, aside from answering this teaching by pointing out that the NT is totally silent concerning infant baptism and **the sign of the New Covenant not being baptism but the cup of remembrance** (Luke 22:20 and I Cor. 11:25), it is necessary to affirm that *it is the covenantal design of God’s Gospel Promise in Genesis 3:15 that is worked out in redemptive history through the biblical “covenants of promise”* (Eph. 2:12) culminating with the consummation of the *better promises* of the *new and everlasting covenant* of Hebrews 8:6 and 13:20.

**Sixth**, New Covenant Theology has a theology of the covenants because *covenants* are biblical and because God’s covenants with man reveal how He governs creation and man in redemptive history.

**Seventh**, NCT holds that God’s will, “will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10) and that His eternal kingdom purpose “carried out in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 3:11) is the *Christotelic*<sup>42</sup> focus of the Bible as God administers His will covenantally in time.

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<sup>40</sup>John Owen, *An Exposition of Hebrews*, ed. W. H. Goold, 7vols. in 4 (Evansville, IN: Sovereign Grace Publishers, 1960), 3:65.

<sup>41</sup>Question 74 in the *Heidelberg Catechism*.

<sup>42</sup>A *Christotelic* hermeneutic is an interpretive technique which views Christ as the ultimate goal or end of Scripture (Luke 24:27, 44).

**Eighth**, NCT dissents from Reformed Theology’s teaching of the *one covenant of grace theological system* to explain redemptive history. It has disagreements with: (1) all three covenantal teachings of Covenant Theology,<sup>43</sup> believing that they are based too much upon *theological deduction*;<sup>44</sup> (2) equating the historical outworking of God’s *eternal purpose* with an *eternal covenant*; and (3) interpreting the NT by the OT in its must defense of infant baptism of covenant children—a violation of sound biblical hermeneutics.

**Ninth**, the doctrinal partitions that sadly divide sovereign grace theology held by both Presbyterians and Baptists cannot be broken down for the gospel’s sake without questioning the heart of Reformed Theology’s system of Covenant Theology, namely, its one *overarching covenant of grace*. Since the writing of the Westminster Confession of Faith, Baptists have dealt with the *result* of CT for over 360 years by rightly rejecting its doctrine of the church consisting of *a mixed multitude caused by the practice of baptizing infants* of one or both believing parents, but they have not adequately dealt with the *cause*, the heart of CT’s whole doctrinal system, namely, “*the covenant of grace*” itself.

**Tenth**, Covenant Theology must be answered by *exegetically and biblically answering the explanation of its theologically deduced one overarching covenant of grace with its infant baptism of covenant children—the Achilles’ heel to major doctrinal portions of its theological system*.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, heeding especially to the later point could, in God’s timing, lead not to just “*recasting*” the need for systematization of Covenant Theology as the noted Reformed Theologian, John Murray has said,<sup>45</sup> but to explaining the way of God more accurately. It could and should lead to *replacing* within the *theological system* of Covenant Theology major teachings on the historical beginning (Acts 1:4-5) and nature of the Church comprised only of confessing believers as the corporate, spiritual body of Christ (Col. 1:18, 24; I Cor. 12:13).<sup>46</sup>

## Soli Deo Gloria

Gary D. Long  
Faculty President  
Providence Theological Seminary  
Colorado Springs, CO  
[www.ptsc.org](http://www.ptsc.org)

A message delivered at the seminary’s doctrinal conference in Colorado Springs, 7/27/2012

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<sup>43</sup>That is, the covenants of grace, works and redemption addressed more extensively in separate chapters of my forthcoming book, which will biblically demonstrate—but not as explained by CT—that there is also a pre-Fall covenant of obedience taught in Genesis Chapter 2 that precedes the post-Fall covenant of promise in Chapter 3.

<sup>44</sup>See Jeffrey J. Niehaus, “An Argument Against Theologically Constructed Covenants” in the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 50, no. 2 (June 2007): 259-73.

<sup>45</sup>John Murray, *The Covenant of Grace* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed Pub. Co, 1988), 5.

<sup>46</sup>I have written extensively on the theological significance of the Pentecost event in forming the corporate body of Christ in Appendix A to my book, “*Context! Evangelical Views on the Millennium Examined*.”