

The Development of the Doctrine of the Covenant (3):

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The Early Church, Part 2

In the last issue of the BRJ, we saw that the early church's work in formulating the doctrines of the Trinity and the Person of Christ is foundational to the development of the doctrine of the covenant.¹ We shall now consider other areas of the early church's thought which concern the covenant.

Not only may all of the topics of theology be considered covenantally but several specific teachings of Presbyterian and Reformed churches are developed in the light of the doctrine of the covenant. We may identify the following: (1) the fellowship between the Three Persons in the Holy Trinity; (2) Adam's relationship with God in the state of innocence; (3) Adam's covenant headship of the human race and Original Sin; (4) Christ's covenant headship over the elect human race; (5) the doctrine of the Christian life as one of fellowship and thankfulness; (6) the place of children in the church including paedobaptism, catechetics and Christian education; (7) the unity of the church from the beginning to the end of the world; and (8) the unity of the two testaments and progressive revelation.²

The early church did not explicitly develop the first six topics of the above list in the light of the covenant. However, she clearly understood the covenant as a means for establishing the unity of the church and the unity of the Old and New Testaments, the seventh and eighth doctrines listed above.

¹In this article, the early church is used to refer to the post-apostolic church up to and including the Council of Chalcedon (451), with the exclusion of Augustine (354-430) whom we shall consider later in the series (DV).

²Cf. Peter Y. De Jong, *The Covenant Idea in New England Theology 1620-1847* (Eerdmans, 1945), p. 50.

First, let us consider the early church's use of the covenant as a basis for the *unity of the Bible*. Irenaeus (flourished c.175-195) writes,

But one and the same householder produced both covenants, the Word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, who spake with both Abraham and Moses, and who has restored us anew to liberty, and has multiplied to us that grace which is from Himself.³

Irenaeus proceeds to explain how the new covenant is greater than the old (IV:ix:2) before discussing God's progressive revelation whereby Christ's people "make progress through believing in Him, and by means of the [successive] covenants ... gradually attain to perfect salvation" (IV:ix:3).

John Chrysostom (c.349-407) expresses the truth that the author of the old and new covenants is the same in more explicitly Trinitarian terms:

As the old covenant was given not by the Father only, but also by the Son, so the covenant of grace proceeds from the Father as well as the Son, and their every act is common: "All things whatsoever the Father hath are mine" (John xv:16).⁴

Second, the early church also used the covenant to establish the *unity of the church of all ages*. Justin Martyr (c. 100-165), after quoting Jeremiah 31:31-32, the classic text on the new covenant, writes,

Jesus Christ ... is the new law, and the new covenant, and the expectation of those who out of every people wait for the good things of God. For the true spiritual Israel, and the descendants of Judah, Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham (who in uncircumcision was approved of and blessed by God on account of his faith, and called the father of many nations), are we who have been led to God through this crucified Christ.⁵

³Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, IV:ix:1, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, vol. 1 (Eerdmans, repr. 1987), p. 472.

⁴Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Epistles of St. Paul the Apostle to the Galatians and Ephesians*, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 13 (Eerdmans, repr. 1983), p. 6.

⁵Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, xi, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, vol. 1 (Eerdmans, repr. 1987), p. 200.

The unknown author of the *Epistle of Barnabus* (c.100) writes pointedly, “But let us see if this people [the church] is the heir, or the former [the Jews], and if the covenant belongs to us or to them.”⁶ His answer is clear: the Jews were once the people of God, but since they have rejected the Son of God now the covenant belongs to the church. Justin Martyr puts it succinctly. He tells Trypho, a Jew, that the “Scriptures” are “not yours, but ours.”⁷

So far we have seen, first, that the early church’s work on the Trinity and the Person of Christ is foundational to the development of the doctrine of the covenant and, second, that the early church clearly used the covenant as a basis for establishing both the unity of the Old and New Testaments and the unity of the church of all ages. Now we shall see, third, that the early church’s conception of salvation is not inconsistent with covenant fellowship.

The church fathers did not define the *covenant* as a bond of friendship between God and His people in Jesus Christ. Did they, however, approach the conception of *salvation* as fellowship with God? On this point we have to acknowledge that the fathers are not always very detailed, nor are they always correct, in their treatment of the *content* of salvation.⁸ For example, they did not fully grasp many of the implications of salvation by grace alone, for most of them taught that man still has free will in some sense and often they lapsed into moralistic strains. This is evident from an earlier quotation from Justin Martyr that “Jesus Christ ... is the *new law*, and the new covenant.”⁹ To their credit, they would say that salvation is necessary, that it is the work of God through Christ and by the

⁶*Epistle of Barnabus*, xiii, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, vol. 1 (Eerdmans, repr. 1987), p. 145.

⁷Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, xxix, p. 209.

⁸Cf. J. N. D. Kelly:

The student who seeks to understand the soteriology of the fourth and early fifth centuries [and, of course, the previous few centuries] will be sharply disappointed if he expects to find anything corresponding to the elaborately worked out syntheses which the contemporary theology of the Trinity and the Incarnation presents (*Early Christian Doctrines* [HarperSanFrancisco, rev. 1978], p. 375).

Spirit, and that it includes the forgiveness of sins, a godly life, membership in the holy, catholic church, a part in the resurrection of the just and the joy of heaven, but it was not fleshed out by them as fully and as accurately as it would later be in Reformed theology.

However, in the church fathers' various presentations of salvation or man's chief blessedness or the Christian life they do speak of fellowship and a living relationship with God and we do see suggestions of friendship with the Triune God as the chief good. The fathers as a whole, especially in their apologetic writings, often speak of Christ as providing the *knowledge* of the true God. *Immortality*, sharing in the deathless life of God, is often spoken of as a major benefit of salvation.⁹ Moreover, *divine felicity and love* are frequently presented as man's chief good in life.

Clement of Rome (flourished c.90-100) refers to the covenant in more than one place in his letter *I Clement* but only in quotations from the Bible and without any development (xv, xxxv). He speaks of love as a bond but makes no reference to the covenant in this connection (xlix).¹⁰ However, when he first mentions Abraham he immediately describes him as the "friend of God" (x). Later, he again gives him this same honorific title (xvii). Clement clearly liked this idea of friendship with God. He did not call it *covenant* friendship, nor did he go on to develop the idea of being a friend of God but he found this conception attractive.

In the anonymous *Epistle to Diognetus* (c.130), we read that

God ... formed [man] after His own image, to whom He sent His only begotten Son, to whom He has promised a kingdom in

⁹Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho*, xi, p. 200; italics mine. See also Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, IV:xii:1-5, pp. 475-476.

¹⁰Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 1 (University of Chicago Press, 1971), pp. 153-154.

¹¹David Engelsma points out that the fathers had a conception of an unbreakable bond in their view of marriage (*Marriage: The Mystery of Christ and the Church* [Reformed Free Publishing Association, rev. 1998], pp. 181ff.). But they did not consider whether the *covenant* was an unbreakable bond.

heaven, and will give it to those who have loved Him. And when you have attained this knowledge, with what joy do you think you will be filled? Or how will you love Him who has first loved you? And if you love Him, you will be an imitator of His kindness.¹²

A life of loving God and rejoicing in Him and imitating His kindness is clearly one of communion with our blessed Creator and Redeemer.

Robert Schnucker points out that Origen (c.185-c.254) argues in his book *On Prayer* that “prayer is not a petition, but a participation in God’s life.”¹³ Surely, “participation in God’s life” involves fellowship with the living God.

In a passage in which he compares the two covenants, Chrysostom states that, “There [in the old covenant], it was slave with master, here [in the new covenant], it is friend with friend.” He goes on to speak of the covenant blessings as “life everlasting,” “the Holy Spirit,” “heaven” and being “born” as “sons of God” so that “we are all one from the side of Christ.”¹⁴ This is a highly significant quotation, for here Chrysostom says that life in the new covenant is *friendship with God in the enjoyment of all the blessings of salvation*. To say the least, however, this insight into the covenant is rare.

To summarize, the fathers did not see covenant friendship as the apex of our salvation and hence did not subordinate the various covenantal blessings to the idea of fellowship. With a little thought, however, all or most of their perspectives on salvation could be related to covenant friendship with God.

¹²*Epistle to Diognetus*, x, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, vol. 1 (Eerdmans, repr. 1987), p. 29.

¹³Robert Schnucker, “Origen,” in *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, gen. ed. J. D. Douglas (Zondervan, 1974), p. 733.

¹⁴Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Epistles of St. Paul the Apostle to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series*, ed. Philip Schaff, vol. 13 (Eerdmans, repr. 1983), p. 287.