

Heinrich Bullinger, the First Covenant Theologian

Rev. Angus Stewart

The Development of the Doctrine of the Covenant (7)

Heinrich Bullinger's *A Brief Exposition of the One and Eternal Testament or Covenant of God* (1534) was the first book devoted to the subject of the covenant in 1500 years of the Christian church.¹ Because of its influence on the subsequent development of the doctrine of the covenant, Charles S. McCoy and J. Wayne Baker even go so far as to call it the “fountainhead of federalism,” federalism being another name for covenant theology.² Geerhardus Vos notes that Bullinger's *The Decades*—a series of five books each containing ten sermons—are “structured entirely by the covenant idea.”³ Furthermore, “The covenant [was] a prominent feature in his commentaries; in fact, [Bullinger's treatise on the covenant] was appended to his commentary on the epistles of Paul and the other apostles.”⁴ Though others had spoken of the covenant before, it is no wonder that Bullinger is widely recognised as the first covenant theologian.

Bullinger, like Ulrich Zwingli whom he succeeded in Zurich, was drawn to the study of the covenant, in part, in order to refute the Anabaptists, who advocated the baptism of believers only and rejected the baptism of the seed of believers. From that day to this, covenant theology has been inseparably intertwined with family baptism. In his *Brief Exposition*, however, the Swiss reformer does not refer to the “Anabaptists” or any of their leading theologians.⁵ His approach is more positive. He simply develops the idea of the covenant from the holy Scriptures and, here and there, opposes the Anabaptist notions.

¹An English translation by Charles S. McCoy and J. Wayne Baker is found in Charles S. McCoy and J. Wayne Baker, *Fountainhead of Federalism: Heinrich Bullinger and the Covenant Tradition* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), pp. 101-138. Hereafter Bullinger's *Brief Exposition* will be abbreviated *BE* followed by the page number as it is found in the *Fountainhead of Federalism*, e.g., *BE* 105.

²McCoy and Baker, *Ibid.*, p. 11.

³Geerhardus Vos, *Redemptive History and Biblical Thought*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P & R, 1980), p. 236.

⁴McCoy and Baker, *Op. Cit.*, p. 19.

⁵Bullinger, actually, directly attacks the “papal religion” *by name* in his “epilogue” on the antiquity of the Christian religion (*BE* 134-138).

Bullinger sees the covenant as the heart of biblical revelation:

The entire sum of piety consists in these very brief main parts of the covenant. Indeed, it is evident that nothing else was handed down to the saints of all ages, throughout the entire Scripture, other than what is included in these main points of the covenant, although each point is set forth more profusely and more clearly in the succession of times (*BE* 112).

After explaining the development of the doctrine of the covenant from the law and the prophets to Christ and his apostles (*BE* 112-117), Bullinger asks the rhetorical question, “who does not see that everything in sacred Scripture is directed to that testament or covenant as to a most certain target?” (*BE* 117). After all, “the prophetic histories are like living paradigms of this covenant” (*BE* 115), and the apostles “have undertaken a most purposeful exposition of this covenant” (*BE* 117). In his *Common Places of the Christian Religion*, Bullinger even declares, “the covenant and true religion are all one.”⁶

Unlike later covenant theology, Bullinger says nothing of a pre-fall covenant of works with Adam nor of an eternal covenant of redemption between the Father and the Son. Nor does he speak of covenant friendship within the Godhead between the three Persons of the Holy Trinity.

Bullinger’s main thesis is that the covenant is both one and eternal, as even the title of his book indicates. Tellingly, the first Scriptural passage he quotes is Genesis 17 (*BE* 104), a foundational chapter in the Bible for covenant theology to this day. Genesis 17:7 states in so many words that God’s covenant is *eternal*:

And I will establish my covenant between thee and me and thy seed after thee in their generations for an *everlasting covenant*, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee.

Thus Bullinger’s treatise is mainly a defence of the *unity* of God’s covenant, which, of course, goes hand-in-hand with the eternal duration of the covenant.

Before beginning his treatment of the unity of the covenant, Bullinger underscores God’s sovereign grace, that “we are saved solely through the goodness and mercy of God” (*BE* 105):

⁶Quoted in Ronald L. Cammenga, “Bullinger’s Covenant Conception: Bilateral or Unilateral,” *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*, vol. 30, no. 2 (April, 1997), 50.

The ineffable mercy and divine grace of the eternal God are proven, first, in that God offers this covenant not in any way because of the merits of humans but rather out of *the sheer goodness which is God's nature*. I do not know whether humans are capable of conceiving this mystery fully or conveying how praiseworthy it is (BE 104-105).

Bullinger next proceeds to answer the key question: Who are the children of Abraham? In the “debate about the children of Abraham” (BE 106), he is not only concerned with the unity of the people of God in all ages, but also the truth that the children of believers in the New Testament age “have by no means been excluded from the covenant” (BE 106). Indeed, the Swiss theologian later refers to Jehovah as “the God of little children” (BE 132)—a beautiful name for the Triune God.

Bullinger appeals to Jeremiah 4:4 and Romans 2:28-29 as proof that the “true seed of Abraham” are not the “carnal seed” but the “spiritual seed” (BE 107). He also quotes Galatians 3:29: “And if ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed.” Clearly believers in both old and new testament days are “in the covenant” as the seed of Abraham (BE 107). But the covenant, Bullinger notes, also includes the seed of believers (Gen. 17:7, 10). He refers to Christ’s word concerning the “little children” that “of such are the kingdom of God” (Luke 18:16) and to Paul’s teaching that the children of believers are “holy” (I Cor. 7:14; BE 107). As holy, covenant seed and members of the kingdom of heaven, the “children of the faithful [must] be freely received into the church by baptism” (BE 108).

In the *Second Helvetic Confession* (1566), Bullinger states his case antithetically:

We condemn the Anabaptists, who deny that young infants, born of faithful parents, are to be baptized. For, according to the doctrine of the Gospel, “theirs is the kingdom of God” (Luke xviii.16), and they are written in the covenant of God (Acts iii. 25). Why, then, should not the sign of the covenant of God be given to them? Why should they not be consecrated by holy baptism, who are God’s peculiar people and are in the Church of God? ... We therefore are not Anabaptists, neither do we agree with them in any point that is theirs (chapter XX).⁷

Bullinger's interpretation of the blessings promised the Old Testament saints is excellent. The covenant promise of Canaan (Gen. 17:8) was "fulfilled literally" but also speaks of "the eternal inheritance, especially life in heaven" (*BE* 109). Abraham "hoped for an everlasting fatherland, holding this earthly land in contempt, and thus searched for an eternal land, not merely a carnal or earthly one" (Heb. 11:8-10, 13-16; *BE* 118). In all this, "God wished to reveal to them what his nature is, or how his statement 'I will be your God' should be understood" (*BE* 110). "Most important," Bullinger continues, alluding to Galatians 3:16,

Abraham was promised the Lord Jesus, in whom is all fullness, righteousness, sanctification, life, redemption, and salvation (I Cor. 1:30), of whose fullness we have all received, grace for grace (John 1:16), because it pleased the Father that all fullness dwell in him, and through his blood on the cross he has made peace with everything that is in heaven and on earth (Col. 1:19-20; *BE* 110).

Indeed, "in the one and eternal covenant of God," Bullinger states, "Jesus is the inheritance itself" (*BE* 110).

Bullinger's Christological and typological understanding of the Old Testament Scriptures (*BE* 125)—a superb illustration of the Reformed hermeneutic: Scripture interprets Scripture—enables him to affirm that "Israel was a spiritual people" (*BE* 123).⁸ He then proves his thesis by citing three witnesses: Jeremiah (Jer. 7:21-23), Stephen (Acts 7) and Paul, whom he believes wrote Hebrews (Heb. 11; *BE* 123-124). Since the true Israel is a "spiritual people," it is evident that, "There is therefore one covenant and one church of all the saints before and after Christ, one way to heaven, and one unchanging religion of all the saints (Psalms 14 and 23)" (*BE* 118). As well as appealing to the classic proof texts for the unity of the church (e.g., John 10:16; Rom. 11; I Cor. 10:1-4; *BE* 118), Bullinger cites Augustine in this regard at length (*BE* 119-120). The Swiss theologian's argument is simple: if there is "only one church" in all ages, then there is only "one covenant" (*BE* 120).

Bullinger is not ignorant, however, of the "great diversity of the covenants" (*BE* 128). He explains that these are only different administrations of the one, eternal covenant of God.

⁷Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 3 (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1877), p. 891.

⁸For Bullinger's typology, see, e.g., *BE* 110, 121, 123, 133, 137.

... it is certain that the nomenclature of the old and new covenant, spirit, and people did not arise from the very essence of the covenant but from certain foreign and unessential things because the diversity of the times recommended that now this, now that be added according to the contrariety of the Jewish people. These additions did not exist as perpetual and particularly necessary things for salvation, but they arose as changeable things according to the time, the persons, and the circumstances. The covenant itself could easily continue without them (*BE* 120).

Bullinger declares that “all the ceremonies were fulfilled by Christ,” citing Hebrews 8 and Ephesians 2 (*BE* 123). He continues,

Since they were types and shadows of eternal things, they became obsolete. So, that ancient religion, which was thriving in that golden age of the patriarchs before the law was brought forth, now flourishes throughout the entire world, renewed and restored more fully and more clearly by Christ and made perfect with a new people, namely, the Gentiles, as though a new light had been introduced into the world (*BE* 123).

Christ’s coming also effects a change in the sacraments (*BE* 130-132), so that now “Baptism and the Eucharist” are “the new testament symbols of the covenant and of divine grace already confirmed through Christ” (*BE* 132). What about the children of believers “who die either before they have begun to live [i.e., before birth] or before they could be inscribed among the people of God with the sacred sign of the covenant” (*BE* 131)? Bullinger answers,

We believe ... such infants to be saved by the grace and mercy of God, by whom they are not prejudged as by those who judge them only according to the rites of the church (*BE* 131).

This is a “stronger” view than that later stated in the *Canons of Dordt* which merely states that “godly parents have *no reason to doubt* of the election and salvation of their children whom it pleaseth God to call out of this life in their infancy” (1.17).

Today’s reader of the *Brief Exposition* is struck by Bullinger’s frequent references to “conditions” in the covenant. He writes that “the Decalogue itself seems

to be almost a paraphrase of the conditions of the covenant” (BE 113), and he stresses that magistrates must govern justly and Christians must submit to and obey the civil authorities in all things lawful (BE 113-114).

But Bullinger’s “conditions” are not prerequisites to entering the covenant or works that we do that maintain the covenant. Thus he did not advocate what is today called a “conditional covenant,” contrary to the thesis of McCoy and Baker.⁹ Bullinger tells us what he means by “conditions.” In his first reference to “conditions,” he speaks of our “*duty*” and the “*responsibilities*” we have (BE 108). By “conditions,” Bullinger means “what [God] *demands* from us in return, and what is *fitting* for us to do” (BE 109). Elsewhere, he writes that “conditions” are what God “*demands and expects* from us” (BE 110), that is, our “*duties*,” the “things [which] must be *observed* by us” (BE 111).

For the Swiss reformer, the covenant is the revelation of “the unity, power, majesty, goodness, and glory of God” as the One who is *our* God: “I will be thy God” (BE 112). Moreover,

... whatever has been said about [Christ’s] justice, about the sanctification and redemption of the faithful, about the sacrifice, the priesthood, and the satisfaction of Christ, about the kingdom and eternal life, and, further, about the calling of all peoples, about spiritual blessings, about the abrogation of the law, about the glory of the church gathered from Gentiles and Jews are foretold in this single [covenant] promise: “And all the nations will be blessed in you and you will be the father of many peoples; wherefore from now on your name is not Abram, but you will be called Abraham” (BE 112).

Then Bullinger speaks of our calling—“faith in God,” obedience to the ten commandments, “true justice,” “cultivating equity and charity,” etc.—which is “summed up in these few words: “You, however, shall keep my covenant, you shall walk before me, and you shall be complete or upright”” (BE 112). Thus for Bullinger, we must obey God in the consciousness that He is *our* God who has redeemed us in the blood of Christ; not as a condition to inclusion or continuance in God’s covenant.

In fact, the Swiss reformer quotes, Augustine, the African father, to the effect

⁹McCoy and Baker declare that Bullinger’s “entire theological system was organised around the idea of a bilateral, *conditional* covenant” (*Op. Cit.*, p. 24; italics mine).

that those who perished in the wilderness wanderings “did not belong to this covenant” (BE 127). Then he quotes the German reformer, John Oecolampadius—again with approval—that the covenant “always has been one and will remain one, not only as it is in eternal election ...” (BE 128). Thus covenant and election are explicitly linked.

Here we must again take issue with McCoy and Baker. One of their main arguments for their thesis that Bullinger taught a conditional covenant is that he “held to a doctrine of *single* predestination.”¹⁰ While it is true that Bullinger laid less emphasis upon predestination than many and even shrank from some of Calvin’s most robust presentations, it is not true that Bullinger held only to election and not to reprobation. In his work *The Decades*, Bullinger defines and confesses *double* predestination, election *and* reprobation:

... the predestination of God is the eternal decree of God, whereby he hath ordained either to save or destroy men; a most certain end of life and death being appointed unto them.¹¹

Bullinger did, however, teach that the covenant is a “pact” or “agreement.” After a brief introduction (BE 101), he begins his *Brief Exposition* with a study of the etymologies of three words for covenant (Hebrew: *berith*; Greek: *diatheke*; Latin: *testamentum*; BE 101-103). This constitutes his chief argument for the covenant as a pact.

Modern linguistics rightly raises questions about this approach, especially if it is the *main* evidence. Laying aside the etymology of *testamentum* (since Latin is not a biblical language), we shall briefly consider the findings of contemporary scholarship on the etymologies of the Hebrew and Greek words. Our conclusion is that modern studies contradict Bullinger’s understanding of the etymologies of both *berith* and *diatheke*.

The article by Moshe Weinfeld in the *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* reckons that it is very dubious if *berith* comes from the Hebrew root *brh* (as Bullinger held, on the basis of the scholarship available to him).¹² Instead, he

¹⁰McCoy and Baker, *Ibid.*, p. 25; italics mine.

¹¹Quoted in Cammenga, *Op. Cit.*, 58. On this page and the next, Cammenga provides other citations from Bullinger proving that he held to double predestination.

¹²Moshe Weinfeld, “*berith*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 2, eds. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, trans. John T. Willis (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), pp. 253-255.

argues that the “most plausible solution seems to be the one that associates *berith* with [the Akkadian word] *biritu*, ‘clasp,’ ‘fetter.’” This presents God’s covenant as a “*bond*” with His people.¹³ Gottfried Quell, writing in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, has the same view of *berith*.¹⁴

Johannes Behm concludes his article on the Greek word for “covenant” in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* with this summary of *diatheke*:

... from first to last the “disposition” of God, the mighty declaration of the sovereign will of God in history, by which He orders the relation between Himself and men according to His own saving purpose, and which carries with it the authoritative divine ordering, the one order of things which is in accordance with it.¹⁵

Thus modern study of the Hebrew and Greek words for “covenant” lends no support for the idea that God’s covenant is a pact or agreement, never mind a *conditional* compact. Instead, these word studies point to God’s covenant as a sovereignly disposed (*diatheke*) bond (*berith*) with His people in Jesus Christ.

Elements of Bullinger’s *Brief Exposition* lend support for this view of the covenant. He writes that in the covenant God has “*bound* [us] to himself with an *indissoluble bond*” (BE 115). Later, he states that in the Old Testament “the entire covenant was contained in the sacrament of the covenant,” namely circumcision, and that “by ... circumcision God *bound* the faithful to himself, commanding that they *adhere* to him in faith and innocence” (BE 132). Moreover, Abraham, of whom Bullinger makes great use in arguing for the unity of the covenant, is referred to as the “*friend* of God” (BE 114). This all points to the covenant as a bound of friendship and fellowship in Jesus Christ.

Jaroslav Pelikan noted that Bullinger’s view of the covenant is centred in the Saviour. Using some of the Swiss theologian’s words and phrases, Pelikan summarises Bullinger’s position: “Christ [is] the ‘consummation’ of the covenant, for in him it [has] appeared ‘most excellently, purely, and clearly of all.’”¹⁶ In his

¹³Weinfeld, *Ibid.*, p. 255.

¹⁴Gottfried Quell, “*diatheke*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 2, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), pp. 107-108.

¹⁵Johannes Behm, “*diatheke*,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 2, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), pp. 134.

¹⁶Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 4 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 243.

Brief Exposition, Bullinger sees God's covenant with His people established in the incarnation and death of the Son of God:

What am I to say about Christ the Lord, who, not only in every teaching but also in his most astounding incarnation, explained and confirmed in a marvelous and living way that eternal covenant of God made with the human race? For when the true God assumed true humanity, then he no longer acted with words or arguments, but by that very event he bore witness to the greatest mystery in the entire world, namely, that God admitted humans into the covenant and into partnership, indeed that he bound them to himself with an indissoluble bond by the highest miracle of love, and that he is our God. Thence, truly we also believe the name given to Christ in Isaiah (7:14), when he is called "Emmanuel," which is to say, "God with us" (*BE* 114).

It is significant that where Bullinger treats of Christ, the "consummation" of the "eternal covenant," there he expresses the rich biblical conception of the "indissoluble bond ... of love" between God and His people in "Emmanuel," the One who is personally "God with us."