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THE COVENANT OF GRACE
IN PURITAN THOUGHT
by
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PREFACE

This study of covenant theology focuses on the views of Puritan divines in the period dated approximately 1585 to 1660. These years witnessed the emergence and blossoming in England of Puritan covenant thought, as well as its transplantation to the American scene and early expression there. Major attention is accorded to the English writers, inasmuch as their work was prolific and spanned the entire era under consideration, though the emigration of several to New England in the 1630s produced an important first generation of American divines whose contributions to this pattern of thinking are likewise included.

Three further words of preliminary explanation might also be added: (1) Although "covenant theology" or "federal theology" became a predominant mode of theological interpretation among Puritans during these seventy five years, use of the covenant idea was stronger among some than among others. Focus in this study has therefore been primarily on the former. (2) The study has sought to examine not only the idea of covenant as such, but also the broader theological content incorporated into the covenant understanding. Thus it is in fact an examination of major themes in Puritan theology seen, however, through the lens of the "covenant of grace." And (3) in so presenting Puritan ideas, it seeks to identify and portray the general mainstream Puritan point of view as related to these matters. Though occasionally variations within this broad based Puritan outlook are examined, the chief task is to describe its common features. Comparison is frequently made, however, between these views of the main body of Puritan divines and those of others at each of the outer edges of the Puritan movement, the Arminians on the left and the Antinomians on the right.

I wish to thank Pacific School of Religion for sabbatical freedom that on more than one occasion, before my retirement, made possible study at the British Museum and the Dr. Williams's Library in London, as well as writing time in other places. I also wish to thank my wife, Helen, for patience over a long period that has surely been an expression, if not actually a covenant, of grace.

Chapter I COVENANT THEOLOGY IN PURITANISM

Puritan thought in the last years of the sixteenth century and the early half of the seventeenth, first in England and then in New England, utilized increasingly the concept of "covenant" as a means of comprehending the human relationship with God. Although this idea, with its characteristic stress upon the bonding of parties in shared commitment, was likewise employed in some church and political circles for the structuring of social relationships, its broader usage appeared in the theological realm. God's dealing with humanity, so it was affirmed, is by way of covenant.

For Puritan divines to make this observation was not, however, to introduce something novel. Biblical thought itself had utilized the covenant theme in both the Old and New Testaments. And though the idea largely disappeared from active usage in the long succeeding period extending through the Middle Ages, it experienced significant revival in the early sixteenth century, especially in the Swiss-German Reformed outlook at the beginning of Protestant history. So Puritan theologians drew upon both an ancient and a much more recent past in developing their covenant theology.

They also drew, however, upon matters deep within the emerging nature of Puritanism itself for the larger elaboration and employment of covenant thought. Theologically Puritanism faced essentially in two directions. On the one hand, as heir of the implicit, if not always explicit, voluntarism inherent in Protestantism's call for faith and obedience as the believer's response to God's proclaimed Word, it affirmed boldly the role of human responsibility and the element of contingency in the divine-human relationship. And on the other hand, as heir of early Protestantism's somewhat more fully explicit emphasis upon God's sovereignty in relation to human affairs, it saw ultimate human destiny as divinely and unconditionally determined by God's eternal decree. This tension, of course, had been present intermittently throughout the long stretch of Christian history and indeed had been prefigured in the biblical record itself. But in the Puritanism of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it came somewhat more pronouncedly and self-consciously to the fore. Puritan divines resolutely affirmed this duality of understanding. And it will be a thesis of this study that their theological employment of the covenant theme, especially in its central figure, the covenant of grace, became a means of drawing together into fruitful and structured interrelationship these conflicting perspectives

