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THE COVENANT OF GRACE
IN PURITAN THOUGHT
by
John von Rohr

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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

on the way of salvation. Nor was that employment simply for theological purpose. The covenant, in combining divine decree and human decision, also served pastoral purpose, and thus it will likewise be affirmed that the often anguished Puritan search for personal assurance of salvation found substantial assuagement in covenant certainty.

THE PURITAN PARADOX

Standing firmly in the continental Reformed tradition, Puritan thinkers spoke unhesitatingly of God's sovereignty, the eternal decrees, and divine predestination. In their study of the movement's early representatives, especially Huldreich Zwingli, Heinrich Bullinger, Martin Bucer, and John Calvin, and then on through their reading of its later interpreters, Theodore Beza, Peter Martyr Vermigli, Franciscus Junius, Jerome Zanchius, Caspar Olevianus, Zacharius Ursinus, and others, they found these themes to have assumed large, and even commanding, importance. Though the source of all religious knowledge was the biblical revelation, the Bible itself was tenaciously viewed as disclosing these doctrines and sustaining these convictions. So a common thread in Reformed thought was that of God's sovereign control of human life and history and thus God's eternal election for all time and eternity. God's wisdom and power are supreme, and therefore not only the progress of events, but also the ultimate disposition of destinies, is unqualifiedly in God's hands. Various means may be employed to accomplish these ends, but they are still ends planned, decreed, and executed by God.

Somewhat differing emphases, it is true, prevailed within this Reformed tradition, and variations in tone were known. One point of differentiation concerned the extent to which reprobation itself, along with election to eternal life, was affirmed to be a consequence of God's predestining selection and act. Earlier expressions tended in general to be more restrained on this matter and later expressions more explicit. Bullinger, for example, advanced a "single predestination" position, God's election of some to salvation, avoiding identification of rejection with God's sovereign choice, an emphasis likewise found, at least implicitly, in some of the early Reformed confessions.¹ With the passage of time, however, a doctrine specifically enunciating "double predestination" came to the fore. In it God's predestining act is identified as ultimate cause of both election and reprobation. On the whole it was this latter view that became dominant in sixteenth and seventeenth century Reformed theology.²

¹Wallace, "Doctrine of Predestination," p. 211, n. 54.

²In Lutheran thought, on the contrary, the opposite prevailed. The Formula of Concord, 1576, expressly rejected in Article XI the idea of predestination as the cause of reprobation, attributing this entirely to human sin, and defined predestination itself as solely election to eternal life. See *Formula of Concord*, 3:168-69.

Yet even within this prevailing pattern a further significant difference emerged, probably more important for the basic tone of predestinarian thought than the distinction between a predestination single or double. It had to do with the place of the doctrine of predestination itself within the larger whole of a theological system, and the nature of the difference may especially be seen by contrasting the thought of Calvin on this matter with that of those of his followers who over the succeeding decades developed a "Calvinist" scholasticism.

Although Calvin affirmed a doctrine of double predestination in the final edition of the *Institutes*, he nevertheless was reluctant to develop a theological system based on the decrees. Rather, his handling of the doctrine placed it within the framework of his discussion of justification, stressing it as ground for assurance that God's saving grace is truly sovereign and cannot ultimately be resisted by human will and sin. Such election, moreover, is in Christ, not simply in abstraction, and Calvin's whole theology was thus firmly tied to the Gospel proclamation, with its promises of mercy and its requirements for faith and obedience. For Calvin, therefore, the doctrine of predestination existed within a soteriological context, rather than a metaphysically speculative one; it was seen in connection with God's work of salvation. From the practical point of view this meant for Calvin avoidance of speculative probing of God's decree concerning one's destiny, for if anyone, he wrote, "breaks into this place, he will not succeed in satisfying his curiosity and will enter a labyrinth from which he can find no exit."³ Rather, he added, "If we seek God's fatherly mercy and kindly heart, we should turn our eyes to Christ, on whom alone God's Spirit rests. . . . Christ, then, is the mirror wherein we must, and without self-deception may, contemplate our own election."⁴ Thus even within a doctrine of double predestination Calvin spoke a language more reminiscent of that of his moderate predecessors than anticipatory of developments soon to come. It was only later that the major change in the Reformed doctrine of predestination took place. This occurred in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries when, as Dewey D. Wallace notes, "predestination was increasingly divorced from its original soteriological moorings in Reformed theology and made the organizing principle in scholastic theological systems built around the divine decrees."⁵

Hence Calvin himself was not a good "Calvinist," if the term be used to refer to that subsequent development in Reformed scholasticism that came also to bear his name. A truer representative of this Calvinism, for example, would be Zanchius of Heidelberg who along with Calvin was well studied by Puritan divines. Before his conversion to Protestant faith Zanchius had

³Calvin, *Institutes*, 2:922-23.

⁴*Ibid.*, 2:970.

⁵Wallace, "Doctrine of Predestination," p. 215.

developed scholastic theological interest under the influence of Thomism and the further Aristotelianism of the Italian school at Padua. This led, in his Reformed writing, to the presentation of a metaphysical system, the beginning point of which is the development of God's own being and the elaboration of which portrays God as both efficient and final cause of all events. Then predestination itself becomes an essential part of this divine activity and is placed with due logicity within the doctrine of God. The result is clearly a more speculative doctrine than that of Calvin, and one that also lacks his Christological emphasis. This is likewise seen in the treating of the order of the decrees, a matter on which Calvin did not speculate, for Zanchius affirmed explicitly a supralapsarianism, maintaining God's particular election of some to salvation and others to damnation as occurring not in consequence of the race's sinfulness, an infralapsarian view, but prior to the fall itself. In enunciating this pattern of thought Zanchius was probably the most thoroughgoing and influential of the Reformed scholastics. But he was also joined by many others in the exposition of this type of system in which double predestination became the centerpiece and indeed the organizing principle.

The explication of such predestinarian views was sharpened by the early seventeenth century controversy in Holland with Jacob Arminius and his followers. Arminianism had likewise spoken of God's decrees, though in such manner as to include at a critical point the conditional element, the element of human responsibility. Four decrees were identified in Arminius' *Declaration of Sentiments* of 1608. First there is the decree of God to appoint Christ as Savior who would by his obedience obtain the salvation that had been lost and then become the agent of its communication. Here, as in Calvin, is a Christological starting point for an understanding of salvation and of predestination. The second decree extends this salvation more explicitly to those who repent and believe in Christ and who persevere in that faith. The third decree is for God's provision of sufficient grace to all so that they might believe. Finally the fourth decree turns to the election of particular individuals and appoints the salvation of those whom God foreknew to believe and persevere, and the reprobation of those foreseen as falling away.

The critical matter here is the basing of predestination upon foreknowledge, and therein lies the vast difference between the Arminian viewpoint and all forms of Calvinism. Although God predestines, and likewise gives grace sufficient for the achieving of faith, the final ground for Arminius was still the human choice. Some avail themselves of the grace and some do not, and God's eternal predestination rests upon a foreseeing of those human acts. Such a challenge to divine sovereignty was unacceptable to the majority of Reformed theologians, and at the Synod of Dort in 1619 Calvinism prevailed, with unconditional predestination being therefore declared a central dogma of Reformed faith. So here is one part of the Puritan

theological heritage. Although the mode of interpretation was not uniform, Arminianism was emphatically rejected and God's unconditional predestination steadfastly affirmed.

Puritan thought was also significantly shaped by a second characteristic and heritage. This was the emphasis upon personal religion and individual participation generated by the Protestant Reformation, as it reintensified the biblical Gospel's call for vital faith and active obedience. Although the Middle Ages had not been a complete stranger to the idea of justification by faith, the new religious movement of the sixteenth century lifted the tenet to a point of central importance with implications not only for theology but also for the personal participation of believers. And although the Middle Ages had been even less a stranger to the idea of good works, Protestantism from its beginning both deepened and broadened the understanding of their nature through its stress upon the inwardly sanctified and outwardly active life. Then in the interweaving of the two, Luther's "by faith alone" and Calvin's "covenant law," one finds joined together the elements that were to emerge in fuller integration in subsequent Protestant expressions, not the least of which was English and American Puritanism.

Exploring this matter, one can note that the Puritan movement, contrary to its classic stereotype as simply a rigid dogmatism or an oppressive legalism, is more and more being seen as embodying a "profound experientialism"⁶ and indeed as an early expression of what later came to be designated "pietism." In the nineteenth century Heinrich Heppe wrote about "the puritan pietism of England" and, with the later continental movement in mind, even named early Puritan theologian William Perkins the "father of pietism."⁷ Similarly, in more recent discussion of this matter, F. Ernest Stoeffler has affirmed that "essential differences between continental Pietism and what we have called Pietistic Puritanism cannot be established because they are non-existent," adding further that "the pressure toward a certain pattern of piety within the Calvinist tradition (regarded broadly), whether in England, the Low Countries, the Rhineland, or elsewhere was basically the same."⁸ Other modern scholars, likewise seeing this trend in the Puritan movement, have identified it as an "evangelical Calvinism."⁹

⁶Stoever, 'A Faire and Easie Way', p. 18.

⁷Heppe, *Geschichte des Pietismus*, p. 24.

⁸Stoeffler, *Rise of Evangelical Pietism*, p. 29. In the light of this broad Calvinist pattern, essentially the early sixteenth century Reformed tradition, Stoeffler questions Leonard Trinterud's finding a major source for English Puritan piety in a specifically English medieval mysticism, writing that this mystical piety was not limited to England and that "when the pietistic Puritans quoted older books of devotion they usually referred to continental authors" (*Ibid.*, p. 30). For the latter's view see Trinterud, "Origins of Puritanism," p. 50.

⁹Eusden, "Introduction" to Ames, *Marrow*, p. 19. See also Hall, "Understanding the Puritans," p. 34.

This Puritan piety urged a good deal of human effort and participation in the pursuit of the evangelical goals. William Haller has described the Puritan path as involving “wayfaring and warfaring,”¹⁰ and these characterizations reflect both the pilgrimage and the battle in which the soul must be engaged. The task of guiding such struggles was largely in the hands of the preachers, those “physicians of the soul” whose diagnoses and prescriptions were constantly relied upon in the search for spiritual health. As Haller put it, Puritan sermons “were chiefly concerned with charting in infinite detail and tireless reiteration the course of the godly soul out of hardness and indifference to the consciousness of its lost condition, and so out of despair and repentance to faith in God, to active perseverance and confident expectations of victory and glory.”¹¹

Although the Christian story was presented in full splendor as the cosmic drama of salvation, each Christian was called upon to participate in a personal “pilgrim’s progress” toward appropriation of that triumph. The saga must be made one’s own—and to that end the battle must be joined and the forces of evil overcome through faith and obedience. Urging the importance of the spiritual struggle, Perkins wrote, “As the beggar is alwaies mending and peeing his garment, where he finds a breech: so the penitent and beleeving heart must alwaies be exercised in repairing it selfe where it finds a want.”¹² Perkins’ successor, Paul Baynes, expressed it in these terms:

No Christian must stand in the state he is in, without laboring to further perfection. . . . The life of the Christian is the running of race, not a sitting or standing still. . . . Men in the world may come to such confirmed estates, that they may give over trading, and live commodiously on things already gotten; but it is not thus with the soule, which, where it ceaseth to profit, waxeth worse.¹³

In its inward dimension this struggle was primarily for such faith as could lay hold of and receive God’s promises of grace. The Gospel proclamation of forgiveness of sin and the gift of new life was ever central for these Puritan divines, and its communication by voice and pen laid heavy claim for a receptive trust on the part of those who would seek to know its benefits. Dogmatic treatises, as well as published sermons, reflected this mood, and the persistent evangelical appeal was for the forsaking of reliance on the self’s efforts toward righteousness in favor of a “pitching” of the self upon Christ and his reconciling righteousness before God. Without diminution or cessation the urgency of this act was stressed. The Christian believer must

¹⁰Haller, *Rise of Puritanism*, p. 142.

¹¹Ibid., p. 141.

¹²Perkins, “Estate of Damnation,” *Works*, 1:419.

¹³Baynes, *Commentarie upon Colossians*, 2:202.

indeed believe—and belief in this context was most centrally the casting of oneself in faith upon God’s infinite mercy.

Of no less urgency for the Christian believer was the struggle in its somewhat more outward dimension, the struggle for that “godliness” which represented the ethical fruits of evangelical faith and experience. Affirming the immense scope of such moral obligation, Perkins wrote:

The outward token of adoption is New-obedience, whereby a man indeavours to obey God’s commandments in his life and conversation. . . . First of al, it must not be done unto some few of God’s commandments, but unto them all without exception. . . . Secondly, this obedience must extend itselfe to the whole course of a man’s life after his conversion and repentance. . . . Thirdly, in outward obedience is required that it proceed from the whole man, as the regeneration which is the cause of it, is through the whole man in body, soule and spirit.¹⁴

Samuel Bolton put it succinctly by saying, “It is no infringement to our Libertie in Christ to be tyed to the performance of dutie. . . . Christ redeemed us from sinne, but to service.”¹⁵ And John Downname, in a treatise entitled *Guide to Godlynesse*, urged emphatically, while offering practical instruction for Christian living, that the believer “must not be lazie and luskish, idle and slothfull; but exceeding industrious, painfull, and diligent.”¹⁶ So there are duties to be accepted, strictures to be observed, disciplines to be undertaken. John Preston noted that forgiveness of sin does not “open a doore of libertie to make men more loose.”¹⁷ Rather, he said, “a man lives by keeping the Commandements of God, that is, this spiritual life, this life of grace, it is maintained by doing the Commandements.”¹⁸ Thus throughout the Puritan literature, from its earliest to its latest, concern abounded for dedicated and disciplined Christian behavior. The Christian believer is called to assume personal responsibility and to participate in the process leading to salvation.

If Puritan emphasis upon God’s unconditional predestination was protested by Arminians, its stress upon the necessity of human involvement in the saving process was equally protested by those identified with the outlook of Antinomianism. Under the leadership of such men as John Saltmarsh, Tobias Crisp, and John Eaton, especially toward the middle of the seventeenth century, this movement came to emphasize primarily the role of God’s overwhelming grace and the working of the divine Spirit in life’s transformation from the old to the new. Salvation is entirely by God’s act, and

¹⁴Perkins, “Exposition of the Creed,” *Works*, 1:286.

¹⁵S. Bolton, *True Bounds of Christian Freedome*, p. 196.

¹⁶J. Downname, *Guide to Godlynesse*, p. 23.

¹⁷Preston, *New Covenant*, 1:115.

¹⁸Preston, *Sermons: New Life*, p. 53. Quoted in Kevan, *Grace of Law*, p. 61.

thus there is no place for human effort, or even for human participation. The Law and its demands have no proper part in all of this, either before or after the coming of God's captivating Spirit; even faith itself is solely a divine creation. Renewed by grace, the Christian is lifted above the sordidness of struggle with evil and indeed at times can further be transported into the sublime experience of ecstasy. But, facing this contention, Puritans continued to affirm that further part of their Reformation heritage. Although it is grace that saves, that grace must be received by one's faith and responded to by one's faithfulness. The Christian, as a human person and not a "block or stock," is called upon to act responsibly in trust and obedience.

Thus Puritan thought faced in two directions in response to the claims of predestination and of piety, the conjunction of the two providing Puritanism with its central paradox. Although it might appear that these differences were essentially between declarations of doctrine and proddings from the pulpit, they are not to be identified simply as tensions between the theologian and the preacher. Theologians were preachers, and preachers were theologians. Preaching, moreover, often urged one's confidence in predestination as a ground for assurance,¹⁹ and theology fully included the practical concerns crucial to the life of godliness.²⁰ Both were part of Puritan exhortation as well as belief. Indeed, even carrying in combination both emphases to the extreme was once at least half seriously recommended when, from a pastoral perspective, Thomas Blake declared, "Ministers should perswade, and people improve endeavours as though they were Pelagians, and no help of grace afforded. They should pray and believe, and rest on grace as though they were Antinomians, nothing of endeavour to be looked after." Then, he said, all will come out in neat balance, as "the injury that the Pelagian doth to grace, and the Antinomian to our endeavours, will be on both hands avoided."²¹ One must go beneath this level, however, to explore the more profound character of the differences posed by predestination and piety. In the deeper sense they constitute divergences within Puritan theology itself. Confronting one another in Puritanism's central paradox, these emphases represent differing theological perspectives on the nature of God's working and thus also on the manner of the relationship between the human and the divine.

The basic antinomy is that of divine sovereignty and human freedom. If predestination affirms the ultimacy and final efficiency of God's choice, piety urges at least some effective free participation on the part of the human subject. Richard Sibbes wrote, "Though God's grace do all, yet we must give

¹⁹Dewey D. Wallace writes, "The centrality of preaching the gospel included the preaching of the doctrine of predestination, a teaching that was important in establishing that salvation was entirely the gift of God's grace" (Wallace, *Puritans and Predestination*, p. 44).

²⁰William Ames defined theology itself as "the doctrine of living to God" (Ames, *Marrow*, p. 1).

²¹Blake, *Vindiciae Foederis*, p. 115.

our consent."²² And, somewhat more formally stated, Robert Jenison declared, "The certainty of Gods decree doth not abolish the consent of man will. . . . Mans actions may bee free, though otherwise in respect of Gods will they be of unchangeable necessity."²³ Such statements presented the matter with all directness and exposed for Puritan reflection this issue which indeed, had long standing in the history of Christian thought. Yet such a central antinomy also took other forms in its application to the Christian message, or at least further types of theological tension came to light in the attendant discussion. If there is unconditional election, it is of particular persons, but the principle of free consent urges the Gospel be given to all. If only some are chosen, then Christ's atonement is limited, but if the offer is unlimited, then Christ's saving work must have universal application. If salvation is by sovereign election, then God's grace is irresistible, but does not human freedom necessitate a grace that can be rejected? If God saves only those secretly elected but sends Christ and creates the church for public proclamation of the Gospel promises, does not this suggest two wills in God, one hidden and one revealed? Still more, if God's revealed will is ultimately subordinate to that which is secret, does this not make decree more important than event and cause the acts of eternity to invalidate any real meaning for history? And, indeed, might not such a duality of wills point in the last analysis even to an ultimate irreconcilability of God's majesty and God's mercy?

THE ROLE OF COVENANT THEOLOGY

It is in the face of these questions and conflicting factors that covenant theology took hold and flourished in the Puritanism of England and America in the last years of the sixteenth century and the first half of the seventeenth. As earlier noted, covenant thought was not created by Puritan theologians as a novel construct to deal with these issues. It had its own antecedents, both biblical and more recent, and already as it touched the Puritan movement possessed a developed sixteenth century history.²⁴ But it was readily appropriated by Puritan theologians and then refined more fully for their own particular purposes, for basically it provided a pattern of thinking in which the concerns of predestination and piety could be advanced and at the same time the conflicts they created be in some measure contained. It commended itself as a tool for drawing together the doctrinal and the experiential, as well as an instrument for structuring more clearly the doctrinal questions themselves. And especially in its central concept, the covenant of grace, it served as a comprehensive connective bringing into

²²Sibbes, "Faithful Covenanter," *Works*, 6:8.

²³Jenison, *Concerning Gods Certaine Performance*, p. 58.

²⁴See the Appendix for a brief sketch of covenant theology's continental beginnings.

interrelationship the dualities, and even antinomies, which followed Puritan stress upon both the evangel and election.²⁵

The covenantal story in Puritan thought begins, however, with a failed covenant, the covenant of works. God's initial design for human life promised the granting of reward for human righteousness. But sin destroyed that covenantal relationship—and the covenant of grace, though actually planned in eternity in a covenant of redemption, constituted God's response to the historical event of the fall. It was an act of God's mercy in repair of human misery. When sin entered the world at history's beginning, it did so with such power that only God could redeem and renew. But this indeed God has covenanted to accomplish. Through Christ, God has undertaken to forgive and through the Spirit to refresh, thus dealing with sin to remove both its guilt and its grasp. Here, then, is the covenant of grace, where divine intention of saving mercy is both declared and revealed as bound by a promise. Thomas Shepard elucidated this matter by writing,

The Covenant is the midst between both God's purposes and performances. . . . For in God's Covenant we see with open face God's secret purposes for times past—God's purpose toward His people being, as it were, nothing else but promises concealed, and God's promises in the Covenant being nothing else but His purposes revealed. As also, in the same Covenant and promises we see performances for the future, as if they were accomplishments at present. Where then is a Christian's comfort but in that Covenant, wherein two eternities (as it were) meet together, and whereby he may see accomplishments (made sure to him) of eternal glory, arising from blessed purposes of eternal grace?²⁶

Thomas Goodwin waxed even more ecstatic as he noted particularly the covenant's comprehensiveness, for, he said, it "contains the whole design of God, both of creation, and the instauration of the creature in Christ, and redemption and whatever else."²⁷

One important part of this covenant is its mutuality. As covenant it is a compact involving two parties and requires not only divine promising but also human receiving. Peter Bulkeley wrote that it "is not properly a Covenant, where there is not mutual obligation and binding of the parties one to another by a condition."²⁸ So God's promises of redemption and renewal are to those who will receive them in faith and respond to them in obedience. The good news is proclaimed, but a requirement is exacted. The declarative and the imperative go together, and exhortation is thus a fully proper part of the covenant's elaboration. "Let us embrace Christ," said

²⁵See von Rohr, "Covenant and Assurance," pp. 195–203 for a prior discussion, by the author, of this interpretation of covenant in Puritan theology.

²⁶Shepard, "To the Reader" in Bulkeley, *Gospel-Covenant*.

²⁷T. Goodwin, *Works*, 1:175–76. Quoted in McKee, *Idea of Covenant*, p. 145.

Thomas Sutton, "that hee may embrace us; let us welcome Christ into our hearts, that hee may welcome us into his Father's kingdome; let us serve him, that hee may preserve us."²⁹ Here is the covenant of grace in its conditional form, and much was made of it in Puritan covenant theology.

Antinomians among these Puritans objected, holding that under such a conception grace could be rendered uncertain and salvation itself no longer be a free gift. Tobias Crisp criticized the conditional covenant as "but a meer bargain and sale,"³⁰ and John Saltmarsh alleged that it was in effect simply another form of a covenant of works. "Is this Free-Grace?" he asked—and then exclaimed, "Either place Salvation upon a free bottom, or else you make the New Covenant but an Old Covenant in new terms."³¹ But for the covenant theologians this was a new covenant, even as the biblical Gospel proclaimed. This was God's promise of great gifts to the undeserving, benefits never in any way to be earned, and God's covenant commitment to abide by that promise. And if the gifts are to be received in and through faith, still, said Peter Bulkeley, "Faith brings nothing to God of our owne, it offers nothing to stand in exchange for his mercy offered; it receives a gift, but giveth no price."³² Indeed, explained John Preston, "faith empties a man, it takes a man quite off his owne bottom,"³³ coming to God as an empty hand or an "empty Caske,"³⁴ seeking to be filled.

Such faith must also be active. The Puritans knew the Epistle of James as well as the letters of Paul and needed no persuasion that "faith without works is dead."³⁵ So the description of faith could be enlarged by Anthony Burgess to affirm that it "with one hand receiveth all from God, with the other hand sets all graces on work for God."³⁶ "Wilt thou then," asked Richard Greenham, "have the one part of the covenant, that is, that God should blesse thee in thy seed? Then remember thou also the other part, that thou walk before the Lord and be upright."³⁷ The covenant does have its conditions, both antecedent and consequent, and thus involves a mutuality of commitment. Peter Bulkeley noted that when God "makes with us a Covenant of Grace and mercy, he doth not then leave us at liberty to live as we list; . . . he doth not onely bind himselfe to us, but us to himselfe."³⁸

Such ideas spoke satisfyingly to Puritan piety, and preachers used the conditional covenant as an instrument for the proclaiming of the good news,

²⁹Sutton, *Lectures on Romans*, p. 72.

³⁰Crisp, *Christ Alone Exalted*, p. 34.

³¹Saltmarsh, *Shadows flying away*, p. 135. Quoted in Coolidge, *Pauline Renaissance*, p. 111.

³²Bulkeley, *Gospel-Covenant*, p. 337.

³³Preston, *Breast-Plate of Faith and Love*, 1:43.

³⁴Preston, *New Covenant*, 2:230.

³⁵James 2:17.

³⁶Burgess, *True Doctrine of Justification*, 2:261.

³⁷Greenham, *Works*, 5:279. Quoted in Møller, "Beginnings of Puritan Covenant Theology," p. 65.

³⁸Bulkeley, *Gospel-Covenant*, p. 315.

the calling for faith and obedience, and the providing of assurance to doubting and distressed spirits. The experiences of "wayfaring and warfaring" could readily be caught up in this idiom and the journey of the soul seen in terms of fulfillment of covenant responsibility. Norman Pettit, in dealing with the subject of Puritan thought on "preparation" for conversion, even makes the tentative suggestion that covenant theology may itself have "opened the way for experiential religion." But certainly, he adds, it "provided theological consistency for experiential notions; and in this respect it was an essential ingredient for the emergence of preparation."³⁹ There was clarity in the covenant's conditions as to the manner in which Christian pilgrims are bound.

Equally the covenant provided an instrument for assurance as it spoke of the binding of God, and the life of piety was also aided by this element of covenant certainty. Thomas Shepard asked, "What is a Christian's comfort, and where doth it chiefly lie, but in this, That the Lord hath made with him an everlasting Covenant, in all things established and sure?"⁴⁰ The Christian, in pilgrimage, stands amid many perils, symbolized graphically to Robert Harris by the perils facing Noah of old. When Noah looked outward into the flood he saw "nothing but feare, and death." And when he looked inward "there were no neighbours but Bears and Lyons, and other beasts." But Noah had his Ark, "a pledge of God's care." And so too "stands our case," for "looke wee inward into our selves, there's nothing but guilt, sin, death, rottenness, corruptions crawling in every roome in the soule; looke we outward . . . there's nothing before our eyes but confusion and destruction, every place is a sea." But we too have a pledge and, Harris added, "for such as are already enrolled within the covenant . . . there is not onely a possibility, but a certainty too of their blessedness."⁴¹ God's covenanted promises are truly ground for assurance for the troubled spirit.

Of course the contingent factor is there, the necessity of being in the conditional covenant through the meeting of its conditions, and this led to extended theological analysis and practical advice on the difficult matter of "evidences." But for those who know themselves "already enrolled" there is the immense comfort of the certainty of God's covenanted mercy. Preston marvelled that God "should come to a Compact and agreement with mee, that he should tye himselfe, and bind himselfe to become a debtor to me."⁴² But this indeed God had done and in so doing had accepted a bondage beyond compare. Harris told his hearers that they would not want greater binding on the part of their contract partner even if they were dealing with "the veriest sharker, or shifting fellow in a cuntry," that great is the

³⁹Pettit, *Heart Prepared*, p. 11.

⁴⁰Shepard, "To the Reader" in Bulkeley, *Gospel-Covenant*.

⁴¹Harris, *Way to True Happiness*, 1:23-24.

commitment in covenant which God provides.⁴³ So here is certainty of divine performance. Preston declared, "If thou art in covenant with God, . . . then thy election is sure; and be sure that God will never alter it, for he is unchangeable."⁴⁴ It is not inaccurate to affirm that, in part, the idea of the covenant of grace was employed in Puritan practice to diminish fear of the possible capriciousness of God's action. There is reliability in the covenanting God.

Beyond these psychological benefits there were likewise theological values inherent in the idea of conditional covenant. Puritan divines seeking to be increasingly attentive to the theological implications derived from pulpit proclamation of the evangelical message easily gravitated to the use of the covenant concept, especially since it was also thoroughly biblical in character. In a writing of many decades ago Frank Hugh Foster made the interesting observation that the distinction between the secret and the revealed wills of God was introduced into the Calvinist system in order to save human responsibility.⁴⁵ That conclusion might now be shifted to give such privilege to the idea of conditional covenant. Within this structure, with God's offering the gifts of salvation to those who fulfill the covenant conditions, considerable importance is given to the human act. Richard Sibbes declared:

If you look to God the Father, we are Christ's by donation, if you regard Christ himself, we are his by purchase, . . . if we regard ourselves, we are his by voluntary acceptance of the covenant of grace and by contract passed between him and us.⁴⁶

For Richard Greenham this meant a "willing humbling of ourselves before the face of God,"⁴⁷ for "God is not pleased but with voluntary offering."⁴⁸ And William Perkins quoted approvingly the voluntarism of Augustine: "He that made thee without thee, doth not regenerate or save thee without thee."⁴⁹ There is a deep personalism in the covenant relationship, and God who has drawn near within it lays claim to a personal response. It is in free acceptance that this covenanting God becomes most truly one's own God. Thus faith is seen in personalist terms as a resting upon God or a trusting of God, with increased emphasis placed upon the act of the will, rather than merely the intellect, for self-giving response. And obedience, too, within the covenant takes on a similar character of free and

⁴³Harris, *New Covenant*, 1:32-33.

⁴⁴Preston, *Life Eternall*, 2:84-85.

⁴⁵Foster, *Genetic History*, p. 319.

⁴⁶Sibbes, "Christian's End," *Works*, 5:308.

⁴⁷Greenham, *Works* (1612), p. 271. Quoted in Pettit, *Heart Prepared*, p. 49.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, p. 448. Quoted in Pettit, *Heart Prepared*, p. 49.

⁴⁹Perkins, "Gods Free-grace and Mans free-will," *Works*, 1:737.

voluntary action. Peter Bulkeley's description is apt in relating this to God's own rule:

The Lords government is not a Pharoah-like tyranny . . . he rules them by love, as he first wins them by love. He conquers them indeed by a mighty strong hand, but withall he draws them by the cords of love. . . . Thus when the Lord is in Covenant with a people, they follow him not forcedly, but as farre as they are sanctified by grace, they submit willingly to his regiment.⁵⁰

Further theological implications of the conditional covenant relate to such matters as the significance of God's revealed, as over against secret, will, the broad scope of the atonement accomplished in Christ's death, and the validity of a universal offering of the Gospel promises in the hope of free accepting response. In fact, this pattern of thinking could easily lead in the direction of Arminianism, and Puritan divines were well aware of that threat.

The threat was resisted, however, and the resistance was in the name of the covenant itself. Robert Jenison pointed to two serious absurdities, from the perspective of his inherited Calvinist theology, which were to be found in an understanding of the covenant as merely conditional. The first was that then the benefit persons have by Christ would be as uncertain as that which they once had in Adam and which was "lost when it was left to his owne keeping."⁵¹ Here is a recognition of the fact of human weakness and of one's inability, simply by human will and strength, to turn oneself from sin to faith. In this same regard Thomas Blake noted that if we are in the covenant simply by free will, then Christ "might have been a Saviour, and not one man in the world have been saved."⁵²

A second absurdity, said Jenison, would be that the difference "between the Children of God and of this World, as suppose between Peter and Judas, should be wholly made from nature, not from grace."⁵³ Here is a recognition of the divine sovereignty in election and an affirmation that the chosen are really God's chosen and not simply those who choose themselves. Thomas Sutton affirmed that faith itself is a fruit of election and explained, "Therefore did God chuse us, not because wee were about to beleeve, but that we might beleeve."⁵⁴ So the conditional covenant, biblical and beneficial though it may be, was rendered uncertain by the two realities of human weakness and divine sovereignty and needed to be supplemented by another biblical and beneficial affirmation, namely, that God's covenant of grace is also absolute.

⁵⁰Bulkeley, *Gospel-Covenant*, p. 219.

⁵¹Jenison, *Concerning Gods Certaine Performance*, p. 117.

⁵²Blake, *Vindiciae Foederis*, p. 111.

⁵³Jenison, *Concerning Gods Certaine Performance*, p. 120.

⁵⁴Sutton, *Lectures on Romans*, p. 60.

Thus time and again there appears in this Puritan covenant theology the emphasis upon God's final, and decisive, efficiency in covenant action. Ezekiel Culverwell noted that the condition of faith to which divine promises of mercy are made was really "an impossible condition to be performed by ourselves," and that therefore it is itself "part of the thing promised," for in the covenant of grace God "freely promised, not onely life, but to give grace to receive this life."⁵⁵ Moreover, he added, to think otherwise would really be to take away a chief difference between the covenant of grace and the covenant of works. In various ways this theme of ultimate divine efficiency is then reiterated throughout these Puritan discussions. Robert Bacon held that faith itself, as "infinitely too hard for man," was a branch of the New Covenant, that is, one of its gifts, and thus he could write, "We are not required to bring faith to God, but the Covenant is to give us faith to bring us to God."⁵⁶ And many others spoke similarly of God fulfilling the conditions, not only of subsequent sanctification and new life, but also of the prior faith which the conditional covenant requires. Paul Baynes supplied the analogy:

The same power which raised up Jesus from the dead, is it which bringeth us to beleeve. If one were borne without an hand, none could set a naturall hand on such a body, but the power which createth and maketh a body; so much lesse can any power but the Lords, create this grace in the soule which is as an hand that reacheth into heaven.⁵⁷

Saving grace is thus prevenient, as well as concurring, and the very initiation of the covenant relationship with God is dependent upon it—or, as Preston noted, "till God come and draw a man and change his will the worke is not done."⁵⁸

So the covenant of grace is likewise an absolute covenant, dependent upon the final sovereignty of God's action, and the centrality of that conviction must likewise be recognized in the interpretation of covenant theology. The use of the idea of covenant did not lead Puritan theologians to abandon their Calvinism or to diminish their belief in the reality of God's free election. William Adams Brown once suggested that the covenant concept appealed to federal theologians because it "expresses an obligation voluntarily assumed on either side, and hence not properly to be brought under the sphere of necessity."⁵⁹ But whether done "properly" or not, these Puritan theologians did combine their views of the voluntary and their affirmations of the necessary, and the covenant was the connecting bond.

⁵⁵Culverwell, *Treatise of Faith*, pp. 151, 149.

⁵⁶Bacon, *Spirit of Prelacie*, p. 18.

⁵⁷Baynes, *Upon the sixe Principles*, p. 246.

⁵⁸Preston, *Breast-Plate of Faith and Love*, 1:58.

⁵⁹Brown, "Covenant Theology," *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, 4:216-24.

Perkins defined the covenant as God's "contract with man, concerning the obtaining of life eternall upon a certen condition" and then portrayed it in his theology as God's outward means for executing the decree of election.⁶⁰ William Ames went even farther in his statement on this matter, saying, "in this God onely doth covenant. . . . But if two parties after the manner of a covenant are to be appointed, yet then God only is the party assuming, and constituting, but man is the party assumed."⁶¹

Indeed, at this point, there was some question as to the adequacy of the covenant terminology, for the implication of the covenant idea could be simply a bilateral *quid pro quo*. When Sibbes once explored this matter, he suggested that the word "testament" might be more adequate for portraying God's actions in Christ, for "a covenant requireth something to be done," whereas "in a testament there is nothing but receiving the legacies given." And yet he could not give up the terminology even at this point, for here is the covenant of grace in its most decisive dimension. It is a "free covenant" which "cometh from God merely of grace" and into which we are brought because "he giveth us hearts to take him for our God."⁶²

Puritan covenant theology, therefore, even as the Puritans themselves, lived in "two worlds." These two worlds of the eternal and the historical each laid claim upon the Puritan consciousness, and their separate outgrowths in Puritan awareness can be clustered broadly around the poles of predestination and piety. Yet the worlds were also joined, and the covenant of grace, the central form of the covenant conception, served as a comprehensive connective between the two. But then major questions follow, especially those concerning the theological form taken by the connective as it both reflected and drew together the antinomies emerging from these realms of decree and decision, and these matters we shall need to explore. Involved here also is the issue as to whether ultimately the demand for coherent theological system led to a decisive dominance of either perspective over the other, or whether, on the contrary, there was a living with the paradox. Norman Pettit, seeing the dilemma faced by this covenant theology, reaches the conclusion that "its real significance was its conscious ambivalence"⁶³ in dealing on the one hand with God's omnipotence and on the other hand with human freedom. But underlying these issues is the primary fact that this thinking affirmed two forms of the covenant of grace. A document of the late seventeenth century, reflecting both the Arminian and the Antinomian controversies, commented on the problem caused by the exclusive taking of one side or another on this matter. It said, somewhat plaintively, "Whether the Covenant of Grace be conditional or absolute is

⁶⁰Perkins, "Golden Chaine," *Works*, 1:32.

⁶¹Ames, *Marrow*, p. 102.

⁶²Sibbes, "Faithful Covenantant," *Works*, 6:4, 19.

⁶³Pettit *Heart Prepared*, p. 219.

. . . a very troublesome question. . . . It troubles the Faith of some, the Lives of others, and the Peace of very many."⁶⁴ But the Puritans we are examining did not take sides on this issue. They affirmed both sides. The covenant of grace was both conditional and absolute.

INTERPRETATIONS OF COVENANT THEOLOGY

The issue of the roles of divine domination and human participation as interrelated in federal theology has not lain dormant throughout the last century of historians' interest in covenant thought. And one conclusion reiterated in their study has been that of a mitigating influence by the idea of covenant upon Reformed affirmation of the rigors of predestination. This was the claim, in general terms, of J. A. Domer⁶⁵ in 1871, of George P. Fisher⁶⁶ in 1896 and of William Adams Brown⁶⁷ in 1911. However, the most far-reaching and influential advancing of this thesis came through the work of Perry Miller in the late 1930s and was focused directly on the Puritans themselves.⁶⁸ Because of its enormous importance in both scholarly and popular interpretation of Puritan thought over the last five decades, it is useful to explore that view in some detail.

Miller's fundamental thesis is that the covenant concept was developed by Puritan theologians as a "device" for rectifying certain deficiencies in the theological system of John Calvin which they had inherited and for gaining the psychological sense of assurance which these changes could bring. Mainly the deficiencies were in Calvin's views of the nature of God and the grounds for morality. On the one hand, Calvin's God, comprehended as bare sovereignty, was a terror producing reality for the human consciousness. This God was "an unchained force, an incalculable essence," who as far as "personal character" is concerned was an "utter blank to human comprehension," an "inscrutable Divinity." Here was a God to be feared more than loved, a "capricious tyrant" who acts without discernible reason and the possibility of whose favor, therefore, can be a "torturing uncertainty." Then, second, this theological understanding provided no inducement for responsible human behavior, no ground for morality. In Calvin "morality could exist only as a series of divine commands." It was reduced "to an arbitrary fiat," with no inducement "other than the whip and lash of an angry God."

So reads Miller's portrayal of key elements in the theology of John Calvin, to which is then added the clear conclusion that this theology can in

⁶⁴*Covenant of Grace Modestly Asserted*, p. 1.

⁶⁵Domer, *History of Protestant Theology*, 2:41-42.

⁶⁶Fisher, *History of Christian Doctrine*, p. 348.

⁶⁷Brown, "Covenant Theology," *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, 4:224.

⁶⁸See "The Marrow of Puritan Divinity" in Miller, *Errand Into the Wilderness*, pp. 1-15. The essay was first published in 1935. See also Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century*, chap. 13. All quotations in the presentation of Miller's views are from these two sources.

no way provide ground for human assurance of salvation. If there is to be that confidence, then "the transcendent God had to be chained, made less inscrutable, less mysterious, less unpredictable." There must be a "caging and confining" of "the inexpressible and unfathomable Being by the laws of ethics." Hence the moral law must likewise be restored to human life in such manner as to enable it to contribute to a sense of salvation's certainty. Its role in the assurance of God's favor must be subject to conditions that are clear and will not be overruled by arbitrariness. Still more, in Miller's view, the task these Puritans faced was to develop such a theology "without losing the sense of the hidden God, without reducing the Divinity to a mechanism, without depriving Him of unpredictability, absolute power, fearfulness, and mystery."

Puritan theologians were, however, equal to this task, and the result was their "covenant of grace." Here Miller chiefly has reference to the conditional covenant, though as a pact which has been brought into being by God's own initiating action. By this instrument, then, these theologians were able to do several necessary things. One was to present a God whose freedom for arbitrary action was limited. By entering into binding covenant commitment to humanity God "has become a chained God—by His own covenant, it is true, but nevertheless a God restricted and circumscribed—a God who can be counted upon, a God who can be lived with." Then further, the covenant is constructed so as to give a prominent place to moral obligation. As covenant it is a contract, thus binding as well upon the human party, and here the basis of moral responsibility is introduced. Works are established as both an indication of faith and an obligation of continuing covenant faithfulness. Morality is therefore mandated as a part of the covenant itself. And still further, since the covenant is essentially a matter of "legal status," a *quid pro quo*, one can "strike a bargain" with God within it and gain assurance of God's favor.

Altogether, then, the covenant was "an extremely strategic device" for stimulating human activity and for providing a sense of security. It was the Puritan "revision of Calvinism" for the obtaining of these ends, in which indeed "a juridical relationship is slyly substituted for the divine decree." And yet all the while there continues in Puritan thought a recognition of the predestining sovereignty of God. It is God, not humanity, by whom the covenant was created; God's "secret counsels" remain; and "the grace which enables us to fulfill the covenant" is itself of God's giving. But "covenant thought kept this divine liberty at several removes, placed it on a theoretical plane, robbed it of much of its terror." Thus, in the last analysis, "the covenant made it possible to argue that while God elects whom He pleases, He is pleased to elect those who catch Him in His plighted word, and that it is up to fallen man to do so." This is Miller's portrayal of Puritan covenant theology.

Assessment of Miller's analysis may be developed in two areas.⁶⁹ Initially, there is his portrayal of the thought of Calvin as background for Puritan covenant thinking, and here, it must be said, Miller's account is seriously in error. The teaching of Calvin does not fit into Miller's mold, and Calvin therefore becomes, as David Hall put it, a "stage figure" or "false stereotype" against which Miller "played off the ideas of the New England Puritans, . . . thereby producing a divergence of views."⁷⁰ Actually, Calvin's theology was not unmindful of the covenant of grace and made it a prominent, though not central, feature. Calvin never wrote a treatise on the covenant, nor did he devote a separate chapter to it in the *Institutes*, but he read biblical history as the story of God's covenant relationship with a chosen people and then further saw that relationship as one in which there is a mutual binding. God's mercy is a committed mercy and calls for a committed response. All this is disclosed, of course, in the revealed will of God, which for Calvin, as for the later Puritans, was held in close tension with the idea of God's hidden will. Although God has undisclosed secret counsels, there is revelation of the divine nature, intention, and covenantal commitment in Scripture and particularly in Christ. Here are disclosed the mercy and the saving plan of God. Thus it is at least a caricature to speak of Calvin's God as "an unchained force," "an utter blank to human comprehension," "a capricious tyrant."

It is equally fallacious to allege that because of the doctrine of predestination there was no ground for morality in Calvin's theological system. On the contrary, the law in Calvin's understanding is basically "covenant law," that is, law to be used for guidance in moral living by those in covenant relationship. This is the so-called "third use" of the law, the others being law used as an instrument leading to repentance and law as a means of political governance. Actually, Calvin emphasized all three, but particularly is Scriptural law to be understood and followed in relationship to covenant moral responsibility. In the *Institutes* he wrote:

In all covenants of his mercy the Lord requires of his servants in return uprightness and sanctity of life, lest his goodness be mocked. . . .

⁶⁹Though the scope and brilliance of Miller's portrayal of the Puritan mind make his contributions to be of truly continuing significance in the study of early American intellectual history, several scholars have raised questions over the years concerning the case he pressed for the origin and early use of the covenant idea. See particularly Bogue, *Edwards and the Covenant of Grace*, pp. 4-17; Breward, *Work of William Perkins*, pp. 92-93; Cherry, "Covenant in Jonathan Edwards' Doctrine of Faith," pp. 328-33; Cherry, *Theology of Jonathan Edwards*, pp. 113-16; Emerson, "Calvin and Covenant Theology," pp. 138-42; Hall, "Understanding the Puritans," pp. 37-50; Marsden, "Perry Miller's Rehabilitation of the Puritans," pp. 91-105; McGiffert, "American Puritan Studies," pp. 36-67; Møller, "Beginnings of Puritan Covenant Theology," p. 46; Pettit, *Heart Prepared*, pp. 40, 120, 219-21; Stoever, "A Faire and Easie Way," pp. 13-14, 192-96; Toon, *God's Statesman*, pp. 170-71.

⁷⁰Hall, "Understanding the Puritans," p. 40, n. 20.

