Calvin and the Covenant: Unity and Continuity

by Paul Helm

When the Historical Theology Study Group of the Tyndale Fellowship met in 1982 it took as its theme 'Calvin and Calvinism'. In this issue we present a number of papers which were either read at the group or are relevant to its theme. Dr Paul Helm's interest in this area has already been seen in various articles and in his recent book Calvin and the Calvinists *(Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth, 1982). His combination of philosophical ability and historical knowledge well qualifies him for tackling this subject.*

This paper is an attempt to argue that Calvin's theology and the developed Covenant Theology of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* are in essential doctrinal agreement in respect of one doctrine or cluster of doctrines, that are concerned with the covenant. In order that this attempt is not a vague and vapid affair it is necessary to say what is meant by 'essential doctrinal agreement'. Having done this, it will be argued that what we find in the *Institutes*, and in the *Commentaries* of Calvin on the one hand, and in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* on the other, is in fact a case of such agreement.

I. Preliminary Considerations

Two doctrinal propositions or sets of such propositions A and B will be said to be in essential doctrinal agreement if and only if the following four conditions are satisfied —

(1) Of those matters of which both A and B treat, and for which essential doctrinal agreement is claimed, little or nothing that A affirms is denied by B, or *vice versa*.

(2) Many of the propositions that the later (in time) set of propositions includes entail many of the propositions of the earlier set.

(3) The thesis that A and B are in essential doctrinal unity is the *simpler* hypothesis in the sense that it leaves fewer questions unanswered and requires fewer auxiliary hypotheses than the denial of that thesis.

(4) There is an explanation for the element of *dis*unity between A and B.

The first condition makes the point that A and B cannot be in essential doctrinal agreement if they do not deal with the same area of interest or concern. An accurate description of Newtonian physics is consistent with an accurate description of the U.N. Declaration on human rights, but this does not mean that there is essential doctrinal agreement between the two. The first condition makes the more important point, however, that a necessary condition for doctrinal agreement is the absence of disagreement. If Smith says that Jesus is the eternal Son

of God and Robinson denies this then they are not in essential doctrinal agreement about the sonship of Jesus.

The second condition makes the point, central to the overall thesis of this paper, that the relation of being in essential doctrinal unity is a relation of *meaning*, the meaning of two or more sets of doctrinal sentences. Our enquiry concerns whether or not certain sentences uttered by John Calvin, to which we attribute the meaning that the best scholarship makes reasonable, are entailed by certain sentences that occur in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, to which the most reasonable meaning is attributed. It will be noticed that the second condition emphasises that the entailment in question is from the later to the earlier set of propositions. The reason for this is that it is in general unreasonable ever to expect anticipatory entailment, a situation in which the earlier formulations are of such detail and explicitness as to entail the later formulation. The last thing to notice about the second condition is that it concerns essential, not absolute doctrinal agreement, stressing the fact that what matters is not all the implications of a set of propositions, but many of them.

The third condition requires that the view that A and B are in essential doctrinal agreement be the most reasonable explanation, while the fourth condition requires that the element of disunity also have an explanation. For if the differences between A and B are quite unaccountable then perhaps it would be more reasonable to take the element of disunity as evidence of essential disunity.

Equipped with these preliminaries let us turn our attention to Calvin.

II WHAT IS COVENANT THEOLOGY?

Do Calvin's views make it reasonable to hold, as countless people have held, that the covenant theology of the *Westminster Confession* and its sister confessions, represents a legitimate development of Calvin's theology? Holmes Rolston III has claimed that Calvin 'knew nothing' of covenant theology but that 'these theological innovations were the work of his successors,'[1] and others, such as T. F. Torrance[2] and R. T. Kendall[3] would on the whole agree with him.

There are two different ways in which the question could be approached, either in terms of the historical development of the concept of the covenant, or by means of a point-by-point comparison of Calvin's theology with that of representative statements of covenant

[1] *John Calvin versus the Westminster Confession* (1972), 23.
[2] Introduction to *The School of Faith* (1959).
[3] *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (1979), 38f. The present writer has examined some of Dr Kendall's views at greater length in *Calvin and the Calvinists* (1982).

theology. Most of this paper will be devoted to a theological comparison, with a glance at historical development towards the end. It is hoped tht each line of enquiry will bear out the other, and point to the conclusion that the seed-ideas, and in some cases the actual details, of the leading ideas of covenant theology are to be found in Calvin.

It is important to stress that the issue concerns the covenant *concept*. It would be incorrect to think that because Calvin does not give the word 'covenant' the prominence that it was later given he was not thinking in covenantal terms. It has been said of the Elizabethan Puritan John Knewstub that he 'took the covenant pattern so completely for granted that the word itself appears only now and then, quite casually'.[4] The same may turn out to be true of Knewstub's contemporary, John Calvin.

What are the leading ideas of covenant theology? To read some contemporary scholars, such as Perry Miller, one would think that the basic idea was sociological, an arrangement in which a human decision to contract or compact with God plays a vital part. Perry Miller wrote

> The covenant theory was an extremely subtle, possibly an over-subtle, device within the framework of predestination for arousing human activity; it permitted man to conceive of divine grace as an opportunity to strike a bargain, to do himself a good turn, to make a sure profit, on an occasion that comes at specific moments in time through the agency of natural means, through the ministry and the plain, demonstrative sermon.'[5]

But this is to misunderstand and to exaggerate, for covenant theology was, before anything else, theology.

According to covenant theology all God's dealings with men are of a covenantal, federal character. Mankind having fallen in Adam, their covenant head, and having thus broken the covenant of nature or works which God made with Adam, the elect are restored in Christ, the second Adam, according to the eternal covenant of redemption made between God the Father and God the Son. God's redemptive purposes through Christ find expression, historically, in the one covenant of grace revealed and enacted in two contrasting dispensations, the Old Testament and the New. This trinitarian-federal arrangement, the product of divine grace, by means of which God promises through Christ to be the Lord of his people, is personally appropriated by faith in Christ, the mediator of the covenant of grace.

Here are several connected ideas — the eternal covenant of redemption between God the Father and God the Son, the federal principle, the one covenant of grace, justification by faith alone — each of which is

[4] *Elizabethan Puritanism* (1971), 313.

[5] *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (1939), 394.

essential to developed covenant theology and which together express its doctrinal outlook in all essentials. It would be reasonable to hold that anyone whose theology was entailed by this position was himself a covenant theologian. How does Calvin fare?

To look simply at the structure of the *Institutes* one would think that the answer should be 'Not very well'. Students of Calvin have differed over what the exact structure of the *Institutes* is. Some say that it is modelled on the Apostles' Creed.[6] Others, perhaps more plausibly, say that the structure virtually follows Paul's *Romans*.[7] Whatever the truth about this it is clear at a glance that the *Institutes* is not a work of covenant theology like those produced by Witsius or Ball or Perkins. The doctrine of the covenants is certainly not the visible, controlling theological idea of the *Institutes* nor is it a less visible organisational key to the work. Yet it would be superficial to dismiss out of hand the idea that Calvin was a covenant theologian for this reason. In order to come to a proper verdict it is necessary to look at what he says about what we have called the dominant ideas of covenant theology. (For reasons of space more attention will be given to the covenant of redemption and
68 the federal principle than to the covenant of grace, and nothing will be said about justification by faith alone.)

III. The Covenant Between The Father and The Son

How does Calvin express and explain the relation between God the Father and God the Son in the work of human redemption? He says

> Our Lord came forth as true man and took the person and the name of Adam in order to take Adam's place in obeying the Father, to present our flesh as the price of satisfaction to God's righteous judgment, and, in the same flesh, to pay the penalty that we had deserved.[8]

Calvin refuses to speculate on the question of whether the eternal Son of God would have become incarnate had man not fallen. Rather

> We well know why Christ was promised from the beginning: to restore the fallen world and to succour lost men. Therefore, under the law, Christ's image was set forth in sacrifices . . . he was appointed by God's eternal plan to purge the unclean-ness of men . . . Christ himself was divinely appointed to help miserable sinners.[9]

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[6] *E.g.* Basil Hall and Pierre Benoit in *John Calvin* (ed. G. E. Duffield, 1966), 23 and 109.

[7] *E.g.* J. I. Packer in *John Calvin* (ed. G. E. Duffield), 157.

[8] *Inst.* II.XII.3.

[9] *Inst.* II.XII.4.

Writing of the mistaken idea that to speak of Christ's merit excludes the idea of God's free grace, Calvin says

> In discussing Christ's merit, we do not consider the beginning of merit to be in him, but we go back to God's ordinance, the first cause. For God solely of his own good pleasure appointed him Mediator to obtain salvation for us . . . Apart from God's good pleasure Christ could not merit anything; but did so because he had been appointed to appease God's wrath with his sacrifice, and to blot out our transgressions with his obedience.[10]

In discussing the fact that knowledge of election is to be sought in Christ Calvin says

> Accordingly, those whom God has adopted as his sons are said to have been chosen not in themselves but in his Christ (Eph. 1:4); for unless he could love them in him, he could not honour them with the inheritance of his Kingdom if they had not previously become partakers of him. But if we have been chosen in him, we shall not find assurance of our election in ourselves; and not even in God the Father, if we conceive of him as severed from his Son.[11]

From these quotations it is clear that Calvin held that there is the closest co-operation between the Father and the Son in the work of redemption. But before coming to conclusions about the significance of this there ought to be an examination of some of the standard biblical passages to which the later covenant theologians appealed, particularly John 17. Elsewhere in his *Commentary* on John's Gospel Calvin writes of the 'inseparable connection' between the work of the Father and the Son,[12] and of Christ's faithful execution of the commission which he has received from the Father.[13] In his comments on John 17 he expresses these ideas more fully.

> *Power over all flesh* means the authority which was given to Christ, when the Father appointed him to be King and Head; but we must observe the end, which is, *to give eternal life* to all his people. Christ receives authority, not so much for himself as for the sake of our salvation.[14]
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> Christ does not say that he has been made Governor over the whole world, in order to bestow *life* on all without distinction; but he limits this grace to those who *have been given to him.* But how were they *given to him*? For the Father has subjected to him the reprobate. I reply, it is only the elect who belong to his peculiar flock, which he has undertaken to guard as a Shepherd. So then,

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10 *Inst.* II.XVIII.1

11 *Inst.* III.XXIV.5

12 *Commentary* on John 6.45 (Calvin Translation Society edition. All references to Calvin's *Commentaries* are from that edition).

13 *Comm.* John 5.43.

14 *Comm.* John 17.2.

> the kingdom of Christ extends, no doubt, to all men; but it brings salvation to none but the elect, who with voluntary obedience follow the voice of the Shepherd.[15]
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> When he adds, *I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do*, he means that he has completed the whole course of his calling; for the full time was come when he ought to be received into the heavenly *glory*. Nor does he speak only of the office of teaching, but includes also the other parts of his ministry . . . The amount of his request, therefore, is, that the Father would put him in possession of the kingdom; since, having completed his course, nothing more remained for him to do, than to display, by the power of the Spirit, the fruit and efficacy of all that he had done on earth by the command of his Father.[16]
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> Christ ascribes the cause to the election of God; for he assigns no other difference as the reason why he *manifested the name* of the Father to some, passing by others, but because they were *given to him*.[17]
>
> He openly declares that he *does not pray for the world*, because he has no solicitude but about his own flock, which he received from the hand of the Father.[18]

What is Calvin saying here? That there is a close harmony between
70 the decree of God the Father in giving the elect to Christ, and the work of God the Son who at the command of the Father redeems them, 'He (Christ) affirms, therefore, that he has no disposition which is peculiar to himself, and separate from the command of the Father.'[19]

This is, in all essentials, the doctrine of the eternal covenant of redemption found in developed form in covenant theology. Both Calvin and covenant theology maintain that there is an eternal pact of salvation between Father and Son. While there is this essential unity, a number of further matters need to be noted about Calvin's treatment. For while he stresses the complete co-operation between the Father and the Son he often lays emphasis on the Son coming to redeem at the *command* of the Father rather than, as with developed Covenant Theology, the Father and the Son agreeing as co-equals. Secondly, Calvin emphasises the actual, historical obedience of the Son to the Father rather than the eternal plan of co-operation, though he does not deny the plan. Thirdly, Calvin is largely silent on many of the standard texts to which covenant theologians appealed, such as Isaiah 42, Isaiah 49, Hosea 2:23 and Zechariah 6:13. Finally, Calvin's treatment of the rela-

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15 *Comm.* John 17.2.
16 *Comm.* John 17.4.
17 *Comm.* John 17.6.
18 *Comm.* John 17.9. See also the remaining comments on John 17.9 and also on John 5.30.
19 *Comm.* John 5.30.

tion between the Father and the Son is restrained and sober in comparison to the sometimes extravagant language indulged in by later covenant theologians.[20]

Nevertheless, even allowing for such qualifications there is no avoiding the fact that there is nothing in what Calvin says about the relation between God the Father and God the Son in the work of redemption that is doctrinally inconsistent with later convenant theology, but, more important, what Calvin says makes sense only if the truth of covenant theology's account of the covenant of redemption is assumed. Thus what Calvin says about the eternal Son of God coming to redeem at the command of the Father can only be made sense of, and only held to be consistent with other areas of his theology, for example, his trinitarianism, if it is supposed that the Son agreed *voluntarily* to undertake the work of redemption, and if we further suppose that this agreement is something eternal, 'before time was'. What other theological model than that of an eternal covenant can do justice to all these elements? What are the alternatives? That the Son came grudgingly? That the agreement between the Father and the Son was *in time*? That there was no agreement? What is Calvin denying about the relation between the Father and the Son that the later covenant theologians affirmed? Does what they affirmed not logically presuppose the teaching of Calvin in all its essentials?

IV. The Federal Principle

For reasons of space discussion of the second element in covenant theology, the federal principle, must be restricted to two central questions. What was Calvin's conception of the relationship between Adam and the human race? And to what extent is the later treatment of the covenant of works fore-shadowed in Calvin?

On the relation between Adam and the human race Calvin in general followed Augustine and Anselm in conceiving of that relationship *realistically* rather than *representatively*. Augustine expressed his view in the following ways

> Thence, after his sin, he was driven into exile, and by his sin the whole race of which he was the root was corrupted in him, and thereby subjected to the penalty of death.[21]
>
> For all mankind was in the first man, to be derived from him by the woman, when this couple received their sentence of condemnation. And that which

[20] In Edward Fisher's *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* (1644) there is an imagined conversation between various of the divine attributes (Ch.II. Sect.1). It is hard to think of Calvin writing anything remotely similar.

[21] *Enchiridion* Ch.XXVI.

> man was made, not in his creation, but in his fall and condemnation, that he begot, in respect (I mean) of sin and death.[22]

Anselm, following Augustine, says

> So if Adam and Eve had kept their original justice, then those who were born of them would likewise have been originally just. For Adam and Eve were originally strong and uncorrupted, having the ability always to keep justice without any difficulty. But because they sinned personally, their whole being became weakened and corrupt . . . And because human nature as a whole was in Adam and Eve, and because there was no human nature outside them, the whole human nature was weakened and corrupted.[23]

Calvin takes this position. Adam is the 'root' of mankind. The human race exists seminally in him. Hence when he fell, mankind being 'in him' fell also.

> Adam, by sinning, not only took upon himself misfortune and ruin but also plunged our nature into like destruction. This was not due to the guilt of himself alone, which would not pertain to us all, but was because he infected all his posterity with that corruption into which he had fallen . . . With this we ought to be content: that the Lord entrusted to Adam those gifts which he willed to be conferred upon human nature. Hence Adam, when he lost the gifts received, lost them not only for himself but for all of us.[24]

But Calvin also says that the relationship between Adam and his posterity was a matter of divine sovereignty.

> The beginning of corruption in Adam was such that it was conveyed in a perpetual stream from the ancestors into their descendents. For the contagion does not take its origin from the substance of the flesh or soul, but because it had been so ordained that the first man should at one and the same time have and lose, both for himself and for his descendants, the gifts that God had bestowed upon him.[25]

Most later Reformed theologians developed this rather incidental side of Calvin's thought and held that the relationship between Adam and his posterity was representative. That is to say, Adam is considered as an individual human being who was appointed by God as a 'public person', the 'federal head' of the human race. Understood in this way the relationship between Adam and the race is thoroughly conventional, a matter of divine appointment, rather than (as with Augustine and

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[22] *The City of God,* Bk.XIII,Ch.III.

[23] *On the Virgin Conception and Original Sin* in *Trinity, Incarnation and Redemption* (eds. Jasper Hopkins and Herbert Richardson, 1970), 39.

[24] *Inst.* II.I.6-7.

[25] *Inst.* II.I.7. The whole of this section should be consulted as well as Calvin's comments on Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15 and such individual texts as John 3:6.

Anselm and one strand of Calvin) a natural and inevitable relationship. Both views have existed side by side in the history of Reformed theology. More to the point, as W. G. T. Shedd, himself an ardent nineteenth-century advocate of the Augustinian view, remarks, 'the doctrine of the covenant of works is consistent with either theory of the Adamic connection'.[26]

But does Calvin teach the covenant of works, or covenant of nature?[27] Both on historical grounds, the historical situation in which Calvin was writing, and also from an examination of his writings, there is reason to think that he does. First, the historical ground.

The obvious point that needs to be made here, which seems frequently to have been overlooked, and occasionally denied,[28] is that Augustine, so often Calvin's theological mentor, explicitly taught it. Augustine wrote

> For there are many testaments or covenants of God, beside the Old and New, those two so great ones, that every one may read and know. The first covenant was this, unto Adam: 'Whensoever thou eatest thereof, thou shalt die the death' . . . And therefore seeing that little children (as the true faith teaches) be guilty of original sin, though not of actual, whereupon we confess that they must necessarily have the grace of the remission of their sins: then verily in this they are breakers of God's covenant made with Adam in paradise . . . This then we must conceive that God spake: 'He that is not regenerate, shall perish from amongst his people, because he has broken My covenant, in offending Me in Adam'.[29]

Perhaps Calvin rejected this Augustinian position, but he does not appear to have done so publicly and the presumption must be that he would have endorsed it.

When we examine his writings, what do we find? In the first place, Calvin explicitly teaches that God gave commands to Adam

> Adam was denied the tree of the knowledge of good and evil to test his obedience and prove that he was willingly under God's command. The very name of the tree shows the sole purpose of the precept was to keep him content with his lot and to prevent him from becoming puffed up with

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26 *Dogmatic Theology* (1888), II, 39.

27 Not all covenant theologians approve of the expression 'covenant of works'. 'The term is not felicitous, for the reason that the elements of grace entering into the administration are not properly provided for by the term 'works' . . . Scripture always uses the term covenant, when applied to God's administration to men, in reference to a provision that is redemptive or closely related to redemptive design'. John Murray *Collected Writings* II (1977), 49.

28 W. Adams Brown, article on 'Covenant Theology' in *Hastings Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*.

29 *The City of God* Bk.XVI, Ch.XXVII.

> wicked lust. But the promise by which he was bidden to hope for eternal life so long as he ate from the tree of life and, conversely, the terrible threat of death once he tasted of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, served to prove and exercise his faith.[30]

Those who say that Calvin did not have a legal view of the relationship between the Lord and Adam[31] are clearly mistaken. Adam's existence was bounded by threats and promises.

In the second place Calvin teaches that the relation of Adam to his creator was that of a probationer. Surrounded by the goodness and care of God Adam was put to the test. If he were to pass the test then the reward of felicity ('eternal life') would follow.

> The natural order was that the frame of the universe should be the school in which we were to learn piety, and from it pass over to eternal life and perfect felicity.[32]

However much the goodness of Adam's Father-Creator is stressed, it is apparent from such passages as this that Calvin held that Adam's obedience was being tested, and that the reward for that obedience would be eternal life. It is far from being the case, as Holmes Rolston III claims, that 'Adam's relationship to law was essentially that of a redeemed man',[33] as far as Calvin is concerned. Rather, Adam enjoyed the favour of his Creator for as long as he obeyed his command, and 'the commencement of the ruin by which the human race was overthrown was a defection from the command of God.'[34] 'Even if man had remained free from all stain, his condition would have been too lowly for him to reach God without a Mediator.'[35]

Man was originally

> endued with understanding and reason, that being distinguished from brute animals he might meditate on a better life, and might even tend directly towards God, whose image he bore engraven on his own person. Afterwards followed the fall of Adam, whereby he alienated himself from God; whence it came to pass that he was deprived of all rectitude.[36]

Furthermore Calvin underlines his understanding of Adam as a federal head in connection with his treatment of Christ as the second Adam in his comments on Romans 5 and 1 Corinthians 15.

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30 *Inst.* II.I.4.

31 Holmes Rolston III, *John Calvin versus the Westminster Confession*, Ch.3.

32 *Inst.* II.VI.1.

33 Holmes Rolston III, *op. cit.*, 42. *Cf.* R. T. Kendall *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649*, 27.

34 *Comm.* Genesis 3.6.

35 *Inst.* II.XII.1. *Cf. Westminster Confession of Faith* VII.1.

36 *Commentary on Genesis:* The Argument (65).

> For as Adam at his creation had received for us as well as for himself the gifts of God's favour, so by falling away from the Lord, he in himself corrupted, vitiated, depraved and ruined our nature. (Rom. 5:12)

In his treatment of Adam's probationary condition Calvin uses interchangeably the expression 'law', 'will of God' and 'command' to describe the Lord's words to unfallen Adam not to eat of the tree.

Commenting on Romans 5:14 Calvin says

> Hence they sinned not after the similitude of Adam's transgression; for they had not, like him, the will of God made known to them by a certain oracle: for the Lord had forbidden Adam to touch the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil; but to them he had given no command besides the testimony of conscience.

And on 1 Corinthians 15:46 Calvin comments

> He by his fall ruined himself and those that were his, because he drew them all, along with himself, into the same ruin: Christ came to restore our nature from ruin and raise it up to a better condition than ever. They are then, as it were, two sources or two roots of the human race. Hence it is not without good reason, that the one is called the *first man*, and the other the *last*.

It is clear from this that Calvin presents all the elements of the later-developed covenant of nature, and that he denies nothing that the later, more elaborate doctrine affirms: the probation of the federal head, Adam, by being given a divine command or law; the threat of punishment for disobedience and the promise of reward for obedience. The covenant theologians may be said to go beyond Calvin in the way in which they formalise and systematise their position, but there is no evidence to suggest that they contradict what Calvin says in any respect.

Is there anything in Calvin that ought to lead us to think that he denies that the arrangement with Adam was a covenant of works? Is there anything in what he says that is inconsistent with Questions 20-23 of the *Westminster Larger Catechism*? It is true that Calvin does not use the phrases 'covenant of works' and 'covenant of nature', but the significance of this is small. Finally, does it not seem plausible to affirm that the teaching of the covenant theologians on these matters actually entails Calvin's views?

It is sometimes said[37] that the later Calvinistic theology was led to formulate the doctrine of the covenant of works out of a desire to universalise the law-grace manner of preaching the gospel. It is not totally clear what this charge amounts to, but it probably means that the Westminster Divines (for example) unwarrantably projected onto unfallen

[37] James B. Torrance in *The Westminster Confession in the Church Today* (ed. Alasdair I. C. Heron, 1982), 49.

Adam the position of the 'natural man' who attempts to justify himself by his own works. Is this accurate? Does not the reference in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (IV.II) and the *Larger Catechism* (Q.17) to the claim that the unfallen Adam had the law of God written on his heart, with its echoes of the 'new covenant' of Jeremiah 31, show that the covenant theologians in fact saw the position of unfallen Adam very differently from that of a sinner attempting to achieve justification by his own works? The perfect and personal obedience to which Adam was called was achievable. This is the *posse non peccare* of Augustine. In view of this, the idea that Calvin, in contrast to covenant theology, proposed an essentially Irenaean view of Adam's fall cannot be seriously entertained.[38]

Irenaeus took the view, or more properly *sometimes* took the view, that mankind was created immature, with a potential for moral excellence and fellowship with God. The fall was not a lapse from original righteousness, but a dawning awareness of imperfection, due to ignorance and moral adolescence. The fallen race is not under divine judgement, but is receiving fatherly correction. The fallen pair, and all
 mankind, are undergoing a process of moral development in which process human sin plays a disciplinary and monitory role.

But according to Calvin the fall engendered the 'fearful vengeance' of God.[39] Adam was an apostate who vilely reproached God,[40] whose estrangement from God through disobedience led, as a punishment, to spiritual death, not only the spiritual death of Adam but also his posterity.[41]

This is pretty unremittingly Augustinian. Those who would impose on Calvin an Irenaean outlook would be forced to resort to already-quoted phrases in Calvin such as 'Even if man had remained free from all stain, his condition would have been too lowly for him to reach God without a mediator.'[42] This is just about susceptible of an Irenaean interpretation, for it might be said that Calvin was here implying some imperfection or inadequacy in mankind even as created by God.

But even if this Irenaean interpretation of Calvin is allowed, and on this ground Calvin is opposed to covenant theology, the argument rather backfires, for almost the same thought is to be found in the *Westminster Confession*

> The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reason-

38 Torrance *op. cit.* 51.
39 *Inst.* II.I.4.
40 *Inst.* II.I.4.
41 *Inst.* II.I.8.
42 *Inst.* II.XII.1

> able creatures do owe obedience unto him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God's part, which he hath been pleased to express by way of covenant.'[43]

In Calvin, unfallen man would have needed a mediator. In the *Westminster Confession,* unfallen man needed God's voluntary condescension. Not the same thought, but a very similar one.

V. The Covenant of Grace

So far two central, crucial aspects of covenant theology have been examined, the covenant of redemption, and the concept of Adam as a federal head. The final theological topic to which we shall devote attention in comparing Calvin and covenant theology is the covenant of grace. If it can be shown that on this matter as well Calvin and the Westminster divines were in essential doctrinal agreement this will strengthen the presumption that they are in *overall* doctrinal agreement. For reasons of space the matter can be given only brief treatment.

It cannot seriously be doubted that Calvin taught that there is one covenant of grace, one mediator of that covenant, Jesus Christ, and two main dispensations under which grace is given. This cannot be doubted because Book Two of the *Institutes* is entitled 'The Knowledge of God the Redeemer in Christ, First Disclosed to the Fathers under the Law, and then to Us in the Gospel'. Chapters VI to XI are a rich treatment of the essential unity of the two testaments, the rationale behind their diversity, the centrality of Christ, and the place and function of the law. What follow are some brief representative quotations.

> Now we can clearly see from what has already been said that all men adopted by God into the company of his people since the beginning of the world were covenanted to him by the same law and by the bond of the same doctrine as obtains among us. It is very important to make this point.[44]
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> The covenant made with all the patriarchs is so much like ours in substance and reality that the two are actually one and the same. Yet they differ in the mode of dispensation.[45]
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> The Old Testament was established upon the free mercy of God, and was confirmed by Christ's intercession. For the gospel preaching, too, declares nothing else than that sinners are justified apart from their own merit by God's fatherly kindness; and the whole of it is summed up in Christ. Who, then dares to separate the Jews from Christ, since with them, we hear, was made the covenant of the gospel, the sole foundation of which is Christ? Who

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[43] *Westminster Confession of Faith* VII.1.

[44] *Inst.* II.X.1.

[45] *Inst.* II.X.2.

> dares to estrange from the gift of free salvation those to whom we hear the doctrine of the righteousness by faith was imparted?[46]
> The Old Testament fathers (1) had Christ as pledge of their covenant, and (2) put in him all trust of future blessedness. These I shall not labour to prove because they are less controversial and clearer. Let us, therefore, boldly establish a principle unassailable by any strategems of the devil: the Old Testament or Covenant that the Lord had made with the Israelites had not been limited to earthly things, but contained a promise of spiritual and eternal life.[47]

Matters could scarcely be put more clearly. It is true that Calvin does not favour the subdivision of the two testaments into various epochs, as some covenant theologians did, but like the Westminster divines who followed him Calvin taught that there is one covenant of grace under two dispensations, 'differently administered in the time of the law, and in the time of the gospel'.[48]

VI. From Calvin to the Covenant Theologians

At the beginning it was stressed that granted that two sets of propositions are in essential agreement it should be possible to provide an explanation of the disparity between them. In this final section an attempt will be made at such an explanation of why it was that though Calvin and the covenant theologians are in essential agreement there is a degree of explicitness found in the covenant theologians that is not found in Calvin.

In considering the exact course followed by Reformed theology after Calvin it is necessary to bear in mind a number of different factors. To begin with, besides the prominence of the idea of the covenant in Scripture, that idea is also already present in pre-Reformation theology. An example from Augustine has already been given. Another can be taken from the Augustinian Johann Von Staupitz writing in 1517 on the subject of eternal predestination and its execution in time.

> The contract between Christ and the Church is consummated thus: 'I accept you as Mine, I accept you as My concern, I accept you into Myself'. And conversely the Church, or the soul, says to Christ, 'I accept You as mine, You are my concern, I accept You into myself'. In other words Christ says, 'The Christian is My possession, the Christian is My concern, the Christian is I'; so the spouse responds, 'Christ is my possession, Christ is my concern, Christ is I.'[49]

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46 *Inst.* II.X.4.

47 *Inst.* II.X.23.

48 *Westminster Confession of Faith* VII.5.

49 The extract is taken from *Forerunners of the Reformation* (ed. H. A. Obermann, 1966), 36.

Such evidence shows that covenant ideas were 'in the air' and in certain sections of the Church at least they were part of the accepted theological tradition. Covenant theology was not an invention of Calvinists, though in Calvinism the covenant came to be an overriding theological category.

Further, while attention has so far been focused upon Calvin and what followed, Calvin's contemporaries and near contemporaries must not be forgotten. The developed Reformed faith both on the Continent and also in the British Isles emanated not only from Calvin but also from other leading figures such as Bucer and Zwingli. Zwingli and Bullinger seem to be particularly significant, for it was at Zurich that the conflict with Anabaptism was intense and the covenantal character of divine revelation, and of the sacraments, was developed. Bullinger's *Decades*, a series of sermons published first on the Continent and then translated into English, are developed in explicitly covenantal terms, and in 1534 he published *De Testamento sive foedere Dei Unico et Aeterno*.

From such beginnings the development of covenant theology in Europe follows rapidly. Olevianus, besides spending 1558-9 in Geneva also went to Zurich (as did Ursinus) before both of them, having been invited to Heidelberg in 1560 and 1561 respectively, developed the covenant theology, notably in Olevianus' *The Substance of the Covenant of Grace between God and the Elect* (1585).

In the British Isles the course of events seems to have been rather different. To begin with, one important influence that was missing on the continent was the impact of Tyndale's translation of the Bible, which he treated as a covenant document. As he puts it in his introduction to his translation of the Pentateuch in 1534

> Seek therefore in the scripture, as thou readest it, chiefly and above all, the covenants made between God and us; that is to say the law and commandments which God commanded us to do; and then mercy promised unto all them that submit themselves unto the law. For all the promises throughout the whole scripture do include a covenant; that is, God bindeth himself to fulfil that mercy unto thee only if thou wilt endeavour thyself to keep his laws; so that no man hath his part in the mercy of God, save he only that loveth his law, and consenteth that it is righteous and good, and fain would do it, and ever mourneth because he now and then breaketh it through infirmity, or doth it not so perfectly as his heart would.[50]

In Scotland covenant theology was first developed explicitly by Robert Rollock in his *Treatise on Effectual Calling*, published first in

50 William Tyndale, *Doctrinal Treatises* (1848), 403.

Latin in 1579 and translated in 1603, and it is not clear what influences affected him.[51] Craig's Catechism (1581), in the section on the creation and first state of mankind, teaches the covenant of works in all its essentials.

A second influence on Reformed thought in England at this time was undoubtedly the visits of continental theologians such as Peter Martyr, Bucer and especially Bullinger. They held influential positions in theological teaching, became friendly with many of the English Reformers such as Hooper and Bradford; and their influence was undoubtedly further strengthened by the return to England of (on one estimate) 119 theological students and 67 ministers from the continent, who had been exiled there, in centres such as Zurich and Strasbourg, during Mary's reign.

When it is borne in mind that all these developments took place within a very few years of each other it becomes a nice question how realistic it is to speak of 'development' at all. May not the differences be put down to individual changes in style, training and situation, the sort of differences that can be found within any group of thinkers of a
80 generally agreed position?

Finally one has to take account of the impact of external events upon Reformed theology. The influence of Anabaptism has already been mentioned. Of immeasurably greater importance for our theme was the onset of Arminianism at the beginning of the seventeenth century. The Reformed response came in the form of a sharpened polemic, greater theological self-awareness, and in the drawing up of more detailed and exact confessional positions, notably at the Synod of Dordt and the Westminster Assembly. It is in this Arminian and immediate post-Arminian period that the classic writings of covenant theologians such as Perkins, Ames and Ball were published. Why was Arminianism such a stimulus? Its characteristic position was to distinguish between the accomplishment and the application of redemption in such a way that the application may be caused to fail or may be frustrated by human free will. But if God the Father has made an eternal covenant with

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51 The Latin original of Rollock's treatise on effectual calling contains as a Preface a letter from Beza to John Johnston, which includes the following: 'For why should I not esteem as a treasure, and that most precious, the Commentaries of my honourable brother, Robert Rollocke, upon the Epistle to the Romans and Ephesians . . . I never read or met with anything in this kind of interpretation more pithily, elegantly and judiciously written' (Rollock's *Works* (Wodrow Society edition, 1849) I,10). This sort of comment reflects the international character of Reformed theology at this period, and the affinity of Beza and Rollock, but not necessarily the influence of Beza upon Rollock.

Christ to redeem the elect, how could that fail? How could what happened in time threaten what was settled in eternity? To suppose that it could would be not simply to raise doubts about the nature of Christ's atonement but also to question the power of God. Christ has procured salvation in accordance with the eternal *pactum salutis*, and he infallibly brings the elect to salvation in time.

From this brief discussion it can be seen that the development of covenant theology was not a leisurely, academic development of thought within Reformed theology, nor a speculative side-track, but an intense, practical, concentrated affair, the product of many factors occurring within a couple of generations. It was the outworking, in theological detail, of the basic Reformed principle: the glory of God in the salvation of sinners.

Recently J. I. Packer has written

> On the basis of a sharp insistence on the full co-equality of the three Persons in the Godhead — an insistence which Warfield thought epoch-making in itself — Calvin displays the saving of sinners as a single complex divine work in which all three Persons share, the Father choosing men to save and His Son to save them, the Son doing the Father's will in redeeming them, and the Spirit executing the will of both Father and Son in renewing them. This organic character of God's saving work was stressed more strongly and polemically by Calvin's successors in the Arminian controversy, but it is already explicit in Calvin's soteriology in *Institutio* II and III, which inspired the later development.[52]

This verdict seems essentially correct.

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[52] J. I Packer in *John Calvin* (ed. G. E. Duffield), 169.