THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE COVENANT OF GRACE FOR THE CHURCH'S IDENTITY AND MISSION

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Religious communities are widely defined by a complex of moral, social, political, ethical, cultic/ liturgical, philosophical, and other convictions. Common to the Christian community stemming from the Reformation tradition would be a concern to see itself as governed by the theology of grace. The concern of this paper is to consider what this might mean and how this might look. Our particular focus will be to consider the nature of the covenant of grace and the implications for the identity of the church and its socio-political mission in the contemporary world.

INTRODUCTION

The need for responsible theological engagement has been demonstrated by the increasing pluralism in contemporary society. In particular, there is a requirement in theological scholarship to examine an essential theological question: *What is it that makes the Christian community distinctive and how does this distinctiveness impact the church's socio-political mission in the world?* That fundamental question will be the focus of this paper.[1]

In articulating our theological method, we will formulate and defend a primary interpretive motif in our approach to the task of systematic theology. It is an approach that enables the demonstration of unity and coherence, which Colin Gunton points out is core to Christian theology: 'Being systematic in theology involves, first, responsibility for the overall consistency of what one says.'[2] Specifically, the central motif around which our theological analysis will be developed in this study is *the grace of God*, which is indeed central to the Reformation tradition. We find that

1 For a further discussion of the key theological questions facing the Christian, see Joseph H. Oldham, 'The Function of the Church in Society', in *The Church and its Function in Society*, ed. Willem A. Visser't Hooft and Joseph H. Oldham (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1937), p. 242.

2 Colin E. Gunton, 'Historical and Systematic Theology', in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, ed. Colin E. Gunton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 12. Cf. Robert W. Jenson, 'The Church and the Sacraments', in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, p. 207. Robert Jenson states: 'All loci of theology are interconnected as nodes of an intricate web.'

in the New Testament, grace is inextricably linked with each person of the Trinity: the Father (1 Peter 5:10); Son (Acts 15:11); and Holy Spirit (Hebrews 10:29).

In considering this theological motif we can offer an approximate working definition of the grace of God as: *the out-flowing of the eternal triune love of God in and through his free, reconciling self-disclosure and self-giving to his creatures, supremely demonstrated in the incarnation of Jesus Christ and through the presence of the Holy Spirit, bringing them into communion both with himself and with each other, such that they are given to share in his mission to the world.*

Yet although the doctrine of grace defines the Christian gospel, confused assumptions that have become prevalent within our Western culture have undermined the message of this doctrine and our perception of its significance. When we come to consider this central Christian doctrine we find there are two key identifiable challenges in particular for grasping the implications of God's grace for the identity and mission of the church in the contemporary world.

First, is the challenge presented by the influence of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, for one of the inclinations in the Enlightenment era is its desire to place humanity at the centre and not God. Gunton calls our attention to this tendency:

> Enlightenment is essentially an eschatological concept, referring to the state of those who have achieved complete vision. To arrogate to a person or era the claim of being enlightened is to assert that the present era is, or contains the seeds of, a perfect knowledge and understanding ... To put it crudely, to claim for ourselves enlightenment is to claim to be 'like God'.[3]

Second, is a subtle and yet profound misunderstanding of the nature of the covenant relationship established by God: God's relation to humanity is by means of a covenant and not a contract. Significantly, as James Torrance points out, the Reformers recognized that it was from an understanding of the covenant of grace that the church was informed and motivated to engage with issues of social and political concern.[4] Both of these challenges in theological scholarship must be confronted if we are to derive a theologically coherent and valid methodological approach

3 Colin E. Gunton, *Enlightenment and Alienation: An Essay towards a Trinitarian Theology* (Basingstoke, Hants: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1985), p. 150.

4 James B. Torrance, 'The Covenant Concept in Scottish Theology and Politics and its Legacy', in *Scottish Journal of Theology*, vol. 34/3 (June 1981), pp. 225-243.

for assessing how the church is to conceive of its distinctiveness in the contemporary world. In this paper, we are going to focus specifically on the second of these challenges. The covenant of grace reminds the people of God that in response to his gracious redeeming work, the church lives under his kingship, which has profound implications for its holistic mission in the world.

GRACE AND COVENANT RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

The covenant of grace and the kingdom of God

Unquestionably the covenant provides a major theological motif in Scripture. F.F. Bruce highlights the central importance of the covenant in the canonical Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and points out that the unity of the Bible is found in that it 'tells the story of salvation - the story of God's covenant-mercy.'[5] If we were to think of the Bible as comprising 'The Books of the Old Covenant', and 'The Books of the New Covenant', Bruce claims, 'we shall be well on our way to understanding what the Bible is and what it contains'.[6] Furthermore, as the covenant is the means by which God establishes a relationship with his people, it is intrinsic to soteriology, because it expresses the fact that God wishes humankind to live in communion with himself.[7]

The word *covenant* is the normal English translation of the Hebrew word *berit*.[8] The first biblical mention of the covenant is seen in the relationship confirmed by God with Noah (Genesis 6:17-18). William Dumbrell emphasizes that this first mention of the covenant in Scripture is of

5 Frederick F. Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1991), p. 73. Cf. Gary A. Herion, 'Covenant', in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. David N. Freedom (Grand Rapid: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 292. Although the covenant is the organizing principle that provides coherence to Scripture, and is mentioned in patristic and late medieval writings, it was not developed as a doctrine until the Reformation, of which particular influence was Heinrich Bullinger's *One and Eternal Testament or Covenant* (1534).

6 Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments*, p. 67. Cf. F. Charles Fensham, 'Covenant, Alliance', in *New Bible Dictionary*, ed. James D. Douglas and Norman Hillyer, 2nd edn (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1982), p. 243. Charles Fensham points out that the Davidic covenant with the promise of an eternal throne led to the expectation of the coming Messiah, which provides an important link between both testaments.

7 See Jean Giblet and Pierre Grelot, 'Covenant', in *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. Xavier León-Dufour (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1967), p. 75.

8 Moshe Weinfeld, 'berit', in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. 2, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, trans. John T. Willis (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), pp. 253-279.

significance, since here we find a definite link between the Noahic covenant and creation itself.[9] Also, it provides the biblical-theological framework within which all subsequent divine-human covenants operate. Paul Williamson comments on the importance of the 'universal scope' of this covenant, as it encompasses not just one people or nation, but the entire earth.[10] Dumbrell supports this claim by postulating a unity for biblical theology in covenant and persuasively argues that there can be only one divine covenant. Foundational to his thesis, he asserts that there is a unity between the testaments that is derived from the unfolding of God's purpose.[11] Although God confirmed his covenant with different people on different occasions, there is still essentially only one covenant of grace.

Where Dumbrell goes yet further is in presenting an exegetical case for a 'covenant with creation'. Arguing that the 'fact of creation itself' involved God's entering into relationships with the world in the form of a covenant, Dumbrell proclaims that this is an all-embracing covenant between God and creation. Any theology of covenant, he subsequently asserts, must thus begin with Genesis 1. Later biblical covenants, such as the covenant confirmed with Noah, are to be seen as subsets and a renewal of an already existing covenant.[12] For the presupposition behind covenant, Dumbrell argues, is the present kingship of God. And God will not allow his divine purposes to be frustrated, either in regard to man himself or his world. This all-embracing covenant, Dumbrell insists, means 'we cannot entertain the salvation of man in isolation from the world, which he has affected.'[13]

It is unclear, however, whether God actually entered into a covenant relationship with creation itself, as Dumbrell claims. Just because two things are related to one another in some way does not necessitate a cov-

9 William J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: A Theology of the Old Testament Covenants* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1997), pp. 11-46.

10 Paul R. Williamson, 'Covenant', in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2003), p. 141.

11 Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation*, p. 42.

12 Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation*, p. 43. Cf. John H. Stek, 'What Says the Scripture?' in *Portraits of Creation: Biblical and Scientific Perspectives on the World's Formation*, ed. Howard J. Van Til (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1990), pp. 203-265. John Stek explains that Genesis 1 is full of imagery presenting God as 'the Great King' in creating his visible kingdom: 'God's creative words are presented in form and function as royal decrees' (232).

13 Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation*, p. 41.

enant.[14] Despite this uncertainty, due to the sovereign reign of God over his created world, as Dumbrell highlights, this unified kingly rule indicates that the world and man should be viewed as 'part of one total divine construct'. This is supported by the fact that in Genesis 9:8-17, the covenant God makes with Noah after the flood is with all living creatures, and not only with Noah and his descendents. Consequently, as Dumbrell notes, a biblical doctrine of covenant 'cannot be merely anthropologically related'.[15] Rather, the biblical metanarrative is the story about the whole of God's creation.

So why is it significant to recognize the unity and continuity of the divine covenants for the church's identity and mission? And what is its bearing to this central integrative motif of theology, namely, the grace of God? In recognizing there can be essentially only one covenant of grace, this highlights a principal feature of the covenant in that it demonstrates a progression of purpose and promise in which God's purposes for his kingdom will prevail. Indeed the theme of the kingdom, which is inherently holistic in character, ties the covenant time lie together. Meredith Kline explains the nature and significance of this elemental link: 'To follow the course of the kingdom is to trace the series of covenants by which the Lord administers his kingdom.'[16]

Entering into a covenant with God, therefore, determines the goal of God's people which is to further the rule of God over his creation in opposition to all that alienates, disrupts and damages. If the church is to recognize this kingly reign, then this provides firm theological warrant for directing the church's mission in addressing contemporary issues of social and political concern. This theocentric foundational priority to God's kingdom, which is at the core of the doctrine of grace, is precisely the reason why the grace of God is a key interpretive motif for approaching the task of systematic theology, and around which theology will be developed in this paper.

14 Williamson notes that Dumbrell's argument leans heavily on his exegesis of Genesis 6:18. It is from this position he infers that the Noahic covenant is simply the confirmation of the covenant God had previously brought into existence, which uses a possessive pronoun 'my covenant'. Yet, Williamson asserts, prior to this there is no mention of any covenant being established – at least between God and humans. See Williamson, 'Covenant', p. 141.

15 Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation*, p. 41. Cf. Michael S. Northcott, *The Environment and Christian Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 164-198. In modernity, the word *dominion* has been misinterpreted to mean *domination* rather than *stewardship*.

16 Meredith G. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview* (Overland Park, Kansas: Two Age Press, 2000), p. 1.

The nature of the covenant

We have established that the covenant of grace is intrinsic to the kingdom of God, due to its intrinsic unity and continuity in which God's purposes for his kingly reign will always prevail; but what exactly is the nature of this covenant? In Scripture we find that the term *berit* is used to describe both interpersonal (Gen. 14:13; 21:27; 26:28; 31:44; Exod. 23:32; 34:12; Deut. 7:2) and also divine-human covenants. In concluding a covenant the most common Hebrew expression used is 'he cut a covenant' *(karat berit)*, which is the term used of God's covenant with humankind. It points to the ancient rite of cutting an animal with the forming of a treaty or covenant. For in order to communicate in a meaningful way with his people living in the ancient Near East (ANE), there were elements in God's revelation, which had similarities with concepts found in that particular historical and cultural period.[17] Indeed the idea of making a treaty, as Charles Fensham points out, pervades almost the whole history of the ANE.[18]

Several studies have identified both similarities and polemics between the biblical covenants and these ANE covenants and treaties.[19] Yet the key difference between the biblical covenants and the treaties found in the ANE is that the covenants demonstrate a commitment made by God, and accordingly differed sharply in function through being a means to a more comprehensive end rather than being an end in themselves. In contrast with covenants and treaties made between humans, stress is placed on the initiative of God in the covenant he makes with mankind, by the use of the verbs 'establish' (Gen. 6:18; 9:11; 17:7), 'grant' (Gen. 9:12; 17:2; Num. 25:12), 'set down' (2 Sam. 23:5), and 'command' (Josh. 7:11, 23:16; 1 Kngs 11:11). This cannot be said about a mutual agreement. Thus the covenant made by God differs crucially from these other covenants and treaties.[20]

Confusion has arisen, however, in the exact nature of this relationship between God and his creation. Its root cause can be traced to the translation of the Hebrew word *berit*. The word *berit* was subsequently

17 See John Bright, *Covenant and Promise* (London: SCM Press, 1977), pp. 15-48.

18 Fensham, 'Covenant, Alliance', p. 240.

19 For example, see Dennis J. McCarthy, *Treaty and Covenant: A Study in Form in the Ancient Oriental Documents and in the Old Testament* (Rome: Biblical Institute, 1978), pp. 86-94, and Piotr Michalowski, 'The Torch and the Censer', in *The Tablet and The Scroll*, ed. William W. Hallo (Maryland: CDL Press, 1993), pp. 152-160.

20 See Weinfeld, 'berit', p. 278. Weinfeld claims: 'The covenantal idea was a special feature of the religion of Israel, the only one to demand exclusive loyalty and to preclude the possibility of dual or multiple loyalties such as were permitted in other religions.'

translated into the Greek Septuagint as *diatheke*. Gleason Archer asserts that *diatheke* signifies 'an arrangement made by one party with plenary power, which the other party may accept or reject but cannot alter.'[21] Oswald Becker states that this term, which occurs from Democritus and Aristotle onwards in the sense of a will or testament, denotes an irrevocable decision that cannot be cancelled by anyone. Therefore *diatheke* must be clearly distinguished from *suntheke*, which is the classical and Hellenistic word for an agreement.[22] Bruce declares that the word *diatheke* is better suited to the biblical idea of covenant, 'which God initiates by his saving grace and freely bestows upon his people'.[23]

Misunderstandings were to follow when *diatheke* was translated into the Latin New Testament as *foedus* bringing with it not only the understanding of covenant, but also the notions of contract and agreement. As Latin was the dominant language of medieval government and intellectuals, Timothy Gorringe observes: 'The New Testament was inevitably read through the interpretive lens of the Latin genius, which was law.'[24] Subsequently, there arose the idea that God's relation to humanity is contractual rather than covenantal, a subtle, yet key misunderstanding of this relationship. Whereas a covenant 'is a promise binding two people or two parties to love one another unconditionally', as Torrance points out, a contract 'is a legal relationship in which two people or two parties bind themselves together on mutual conditions to effect some future result.'[25] Inherent in this misinterpretation is the danger of legalism due to turning the covenant of grace into a legal contract.

Differing from contractualism, the gospel declares that out of his love God made a covenant with humankind. What this demonstrates, as Torrance emphasizes, is that 'the God of the Bible is a covenant-God and not a contract-God'.[26] Although this covenant involved two parties, it was only made by one of them. It is a covenant of grace bringing with it promises and obligations. Yet these obligations are not conditions of grace, which was the heart of the Reformation rediscovery. The Pauline teaching about justification was crucial to the Reformers in that God accepts

21 Gleason L. Archer, 'Covenant', in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell, 2nd edn (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), p. 300.

22 Oswald Becker, 'Covenant', in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, vol. 1, ed. Colin Brown (Exeter: Paternoster, 1975-1986), p. 365.

23 Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments*, pp. 65-6.

24 Timothy J. Gorringe, *God's Just Vengeance: Crime, Violence and the Rhetoric of Salvation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 224.

25 Torrance, 'The Covenant Concept in Scottish Theology', p. 228.

26 Ibid., 229-230, 239.

us through his grace received by faith (Eph. 2:8-9). This is also evident in the characteristic statement of God's relationship with his people: 'They will be my people, and I will be their God' (Jer. 11:4; 24:7; 30:22; 32:38; Ezek. 11:20; 14:11; 36:28; 37:23; Zech. 8:8). It indicates that God unreservedly gives himself to his people, and they in turn give themselves to him and belong to him. That is why it is mistaken to perceive God's relation to humanity as being contractual rather than covenantal.

Frequently misconstrued is the nature of the Sinai covenant as reflected in the work of Walther Eichrodt in *Theology of the Old Testament*, which proceeds from a strong covenant base. Before the parallels between the Israelite covenant and the ANE treaty had been brought to light, Eichrodt's work highlighted the importance of the covenant idea in the religion of Israel. Eichrodt stressed that basic phenomena in Israelite religion, such as the kingship of God, revelation, liberation from myth and personal attitudes to God are to be explained against the background of the covenant. Yet it would appear that Eichrodt may be mistaken in his analysis of the nature of the covenant made by God in his reference to 'two contracting parties'. Eichrodt states:

> The use of the covenant concept in secular life argues that the religious *berit* too was always regarded as a bilateral relationship; for even though the burden is most unequally distributed between the two contracting parties, this makes no difference to the fact that the relationship is still essentially two-sided.[27]

As Dumbrell points out, however, in focusing on the Sinai covenant almost to the exclusion of other Old Testament divine covenant material, Eichrodt has taken too little account of the entire biblical presentation that identifies a sequence in which there can be no question of two parties being involved.[28] Moreover, the Ten Commandments do not set out contractual conditions, nor do they indicate the establishment of a bilateral covenant. Rather, the giving of the Torah emphasized Yahweh's faithfulness and the unilateral covenant commitment of Yahweh. For before the Decalogue commences, there is the vital preface: 'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery' (Exod. 20:2). Discussing the laws given in the Sinaitic covenant which are set in the context of a gracious, divine initiative, Gordon Wenham states: 'Obedience to the law is not the source of blessing, but it augments a blessing already given.' With the promise to be God's own possession among all

27 Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, trans. John A. Baker (London: SCM Press, 1961), p. 37.

28 Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation*, p. 32.

peoples if they obey his covenant (Exod. 19:5), he notes, 'Israel thus finds herself in a virtuous circle. Obedience to the law issues in further experience of the initial grace of God, who brought them to himself.'[29]

The relationship between God's commands and his previous acts on behalf of Israel in bringing them out of Egypt is highlighted in Deuteronomy where the whole historical prologue (Deut. 1-4), precedes the Decalogue (Deut. 5). It is from this demonstration of divine grace that the obligations to the covenant stem. Israel's keeping of God's law was simply to be a response to what God had already done. It is this foundation, claims Christopher Wright, which runs through the moral teaching of the whole Bible. It is a motivation that derives 'from the facts of our redemption and our membership of God's people, consciously living under his kingship'.[30] Dumbrell gives a summary of this essential nature of the covenant:

> The initiative has lain entirely with God. Responses of course have been and would have been demanded, but they are responses, which would have brought with them the blessings, which attached to the covenant on the one hand, or the curses, which the rejection of the covenant would have invoked on the other. They are no part of the covenant itself, but rather results of attitudes taken to the covenant.[31]

What this underlines is that the obligations to the unilateral covenant commitment made by God are a response to God's prior grace and are not a condition of God's grace. It is sheer gratitude to God's grace that compels obedience. The warrant for this is that the indicatives of grace, as revealed in Scripture, are always prior to the imperatives of law and human obligation. Consequences arise whether one chooses to obey these obligations, which results either in blessing or disaster, the so-called descriptive ifs (Deut. 8:19-20; John 15:9-10).

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29 Gordon Wenham, 'Grace and Law in the Old Testament', in *Law, Morality and the Bible: A Symposium*, ed. Bruce Kaye and Gordon Wenham (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1978), p. 5. Cf. Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments*, 76. Bruce highlights the unilateral nature of this covenant: 'The covenant at Sinai might be a covenant of works so far as Israel's undertaking was concerned; but it was a covenant of grace so far as God's fulfilling it was concerned, for he continued to treat Israel as his people even when Israel forgot that he was their God.'

30 Christopher J.H. Wright, *Living as the People of God: The Relevance of Old Testament Ethics* (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1983), p. 141.

31 Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation*, p. 31.

God's grace is seen supremely in how he deals with his people leading up to the coming of Christ.[32] Despite the rebellion of the Israelites and their disobedience to his laws, the plan of the covenant remains unchanged. Since, as we have seen, the covenant of grace is inextricably linked with the sovereign rule of God over creation. In his monumental section on creation and covenant, Karl Barth underlines this relationship:

> Creation comes first in the series of works of the triune God, and is thus the beginning of all the things distinct from God himself. Since it contains in itself the beginning of time, its historical reality eludes all historical observation and account, and can be expressed in the biblical creation narratives only in the form of pure saga. But according to this witness the purpose and therefore the meaning of creation is to make possible the history of God's covenant with man which has its beginning, its centre and its culmination in Jesus Christ. The history of this covenant is as much the goal of creation as creation itself is the beginning of this history.[33]

There will be a 'New Covenant' (*kaine diatheke*) established with God's people in the messianic era (Jer. 31:31-34; 32:40; 50:5; Ezek. 16:60; 37:26; Hos. 2:18). It is a New Covenant realized in Christ (1 Cor. 11:25; Heb. 8:1-13). As it was God alone who determined that he should be Israel's God and that Israel should be his people, it is God alone who can restore the covenant when it is broken. T.F. Torrance comments on this supreme act of grace:

> Grace in the New Testament is the basic and the most characteristic element of the Christian gospel. It is the breaking into the world of the ineffable love of God in a deed of absolutely decisive significance, which cuts across the whole of human life and sets it on a new basis. That is actualized in the person of Jesus Christ, with which grace is inseparably associated, and supremely exhibited on the cross by which the believer is once and for all put in the right with God.[34]

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32 Whereas in the Hebrew Bible the concept of grace is expressed mainly by three groups of words: the noun *hesed* focusing on the faithful maintenance of a covenantal relationship; *hanan* expressing the gratuitous gift of affection; and *raham* denoting mercy and compassion, in the New Testament the definitive manifestation of grace is the revelation of God in Christ.

33 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 3/1, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1956-1975), p. 42.

34 Thomas F. Torrance, *The Doctrine of Grace in the Apostolic Fathers* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1948), p. 34.

Because of this supreme act of grace, the worship owed to God in response to God's unconditional covenant commitment to us is itself realized for us and on our behalf in the New Covenant.[35] This implies that the covenant theme is the background for the whole New Testament even where it is not explicitly noted. God prepares the way for another covenant that would replace the first and succeed where it had failed. Bruce points out that this means both the Old and the New Covenant alike speak of Christ: 'It is he who gives unity to each and to both together. The former collection looks forward with hope to his appearance and work; the latter tells how that hope was fulfilled.'[36] Yet because God's promises cannot fail, this New Covenant is not new in essence. Rather, it is new in fulfillment. God's law would be written on hearts of flesh, which allows his people to keep the covenant in a more effective way.

Grace and the dynamics of community

That God has graciously established a covenant with those he has created has profound implications for our perception of human existence and personal relations. What it reveals is that humankind was created to be in covenant relationship with God. This is captured by St. Augustine of Hippo, who became known as 'the doctor of grace' (*doctor gratiae*), at the start of his *Confessions*: 'You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.'[37] Pannenberg relates this internal yearning after God with not being bound to a particular environment.[38] Man's unlimited openness to the world results only from his destiny beyond the world. This unending movement into the open is directed toward God, who is beyond everything that confronts man in the world. It is a path towards man's destiny to be in 'community with God'.[39] Indeed the biblical theme of creation, as Alistair McFadyen notes, 'is not ultimately concerned with cosmogony or cosmology but with the relationship between God and God's creatures.'[40]

35 James B. Torrance, 'The Vicarious Humanity of Christ', in *The Incarnation: Ecumenical Studies in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed* AD381, ed. Thomas F. Torrance (Edinburgh: Handsel, 1981), pp. 128-129.

36 Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments*, pp. 68-69.

37 St. Augustine of Hippo, *Confessions*, vol. 1/1. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 3.

38 Wolfhart Pannenberg, *What is Man?: Contemporary Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, trans. Duane A. Priebe (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1970), pp. 1-13.

39 Ibid., 54-5.

40 Alistair I. McFadyen, *The Call to Personhood: A Christian Theory of the Individual in Social Relationships* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,

As we are created to be in relationship with God, Barth describes this as being created to be God's covenant-partner.[41] A genuine knowledge of humanity comes from realizing that to be a man is to be with God. In this covenantal relationship we see a unique feature, which is that among all God's creatures, it is the human being who has been chosen, fundamentally and ontologically, to be the object of God's personal election. Yet true selfhood is not something we can take for granted. On the contrary, it is a gift of divine grace. Thus, here we see the inextricable relationship between revelation and reconciliation. Our real humanity to be in covenantal relationship with God has only become visible and made possible in Jesus Christ. Starting from this point, which Barth calls the 'Archimedean point', enables us to discover the ontological determination of man.[42] For Christ does not merely show our true humanity, he enables the fulfillment of our destiny to be in fellowship with God (Romans 8:29). This priestly ministry of Christ, Gunton notes, means 'the representative bearer of the image becomes, as the channel of the Spirit, the vehicle of the renewal of the image in those who enter into relation with him.'[43]

If the church is to operate from this basis of divine grace for becoming God's covenant-partners, then it is important to understand the nature of the being of God as triune.[44] Before the world was made, the Trinity planned humankind's redemption. The Father purposed that the Lamb would be 'slain from the creation of the world' (Rev. 13:8). The Son entered the world as the Servant to fulfill this plan. The Spirit, who is the facilitator of the covenant community, would indwell those who accepted the Messiah as their Lord. In deriving significance from the doctrine of the Trinity for how we act, Stanley Grenz claims, the ethical life is 'the life-in-relationship'.[45] For when the Spirit indwells Christians we share in the love found at the heart of the triune God himself.[46] Thus, as we have

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1990), p. 18.

41 Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 3/2, p. 204.

42 Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 3/2, p. 132. This does raise the issue, however, of Barth's repeated insistence on the ontological determination of all people in God's covenant with humanity in Jesus Christ. It is this aspect of universal divine determination in Christ that is a controversial feature of Barth's view of humankind's covenant relationship with God.

43 Colin E. Gunton, *Christ and Creation* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1992), p. 101.

44 See Vladimir Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God* (London: Mowbrays, 1975), for a prime example of this recognition.

45 Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 76.

46 Ibid., 484. Cf. James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1996), p. 40.

argued, the theocentric and trinitarian nature of the covenant of grace not only reveals that we were created to be in relationship with God, but it also reveals that we were created to be in relationship with other people and with all of creation. We are rescued from our sin to enable us to participate in the new humanity in a redeemed world in the presence of the triune God (Eph. 2:14-19). This is in turn a foretaste, asserts Grenz, of the full fellowship God will bring to pass at the culmination of history:

> The corporate-cosmic dimension of God's program arises from a wider soteriology related to the fuller biblical picture of the nature of guilt and estrangement...The divine program leads not only toward establishing individual peace with God in isolation; it extends as well to the healing of all relationships – to ourselves, to one another, and to nature.[47]

We see this being for others supremely in the person of Jesus Christ. As well as being for God, as Barth states, Jesus is for men and is committed to meeting their needs.[48] It verifies the inextricable connection between being for others and being for God.[49] Stressing this juxtaposition and its attending ethical implications, Barth firmly refused to accept that true humanity can live in isolation.[50] In taking this stance, Barth's understanding of the relational self presents a strong parallel with the communal ontology espoused by John Zizioulas, who offers a theological dimension of the self as person. 'The highest form of capacity for man', Zizioulas claims, 'is to be found in the notion of the imago Dei.'[51] It is this relational aspect of the imago Dei, which 'is a condition for an ontology of personhood'.[52] Ontological identity, it follows, 'is to be found ultimately not in every "substance" as such, but only in a being which is free from

47 Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, p. 482. Cf. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, 'Human Being, Individual and Social', in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, 184. Kevin Vanhoozer states: 'To know oneself, as one whose individual and social being has been decisively shaped by Jesus Christ, is to accept gratefully one's vocation as a responsive and responsible communicative agent who exists in covenantal relation with oneself, with others and with God.'

48 Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 3/2, p. 223.

49 Ibid., 211-12.

50 Ibid., 229.

51 John D. Zizioulas, 'Human Capacity and Human Incapacity: A Theological Exploration of Personhood', in *Scottish Journal of Theology*, vol. 28/5 (October 1975), p. 446.

52 John D. Zizioulas, 'On Being a Person: Towards an Ontology of Personhood', in *Persons, Divine and Human*, ed. Christoph Schwöbel and Colin E. Gunton (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), p. 41.

the boundaries of the "self".[53] Freedom of this kind derives as the Spirit through Christ forms human beings in community.

Contributing to our understanding of what it means to live as a community is the work of John Macmurray, who describes the self as existing only in dynamic relation with the Other.[54] To be part of a community, Macmurray explains, is fundamentally different from being part of an impersonal society. A society is based on self-interested relationships that are contractual. In contrast, to be part of a community is to be part of a covenant, which constitutes a fellowship. Yet although Macmurray emphasizes the importance of community for human relationships, there is tension with the full implications of the covenant of grace. For Macmurray, a community is constituted and maintained by mutual affection. It is within the family, where a child experiences dependence on a personal Other, which is 'the basis as well as the origin of all subsequent communities'.[55] In its full development, 'the idea of a universal personal Other is the idea of God.'[56] This suggests a failure to recognize that we are to live in community due to being created by a covenant-keeping God.

Divine affirmation of human value

Finding our true personhood through being in communion with God and with others has significance for our conception of human nature on which so much depends. Leslie Stevenson and David Haberman claim that for individuals, this will relate to the meaning and purpose of their lives. For societies, this will relate to our vision of community.[57] Our answers to these basic questions of life will depend on the value we place on a human being. Yet, in recent years, the belief that the self is purely material has increased impacting upon our conception of human dignity.

In contrast to physicalist accounts, in entering into a covenant of grace with humankind, this indicates that God affirms the value of every person. We were created in God's image, which demonstrates that out of all creation humanity was made to be in a special relationship with God (Gen. 1:26; 9:5-6). This leads to the conclusion that man's life is sacred as the image marks man as God's possession. It denotes that humanity's nature and destiny are tightly interwoven.[58] John Calvin captured this when

53 Zizioulas, 'Human Capacity and Human Incapacity', p. 409.

54 John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation: Being the Gifford Lectures Delivered in the University of Glasgow in 1954* (London: Faber, 1961), p. 17.

55 Ibid., pp. 154-5.

56 Ibid., p. 164.

57 Leslie Stevenson and David L. Haberman, *Ten Theories of Human Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 3.

58 See David Cairns, *The Image of God in Man* (London: Collins, 1973), p. 29.

he claimed there is something intrinsic about the way God is that is like the way we are also: 'No one can look upon himself without immediately turning his thoughts to the contemplation of God, in whom he "lives and moves".'[59] Hence, Calvin argues 'we are not to consider that men merit of themselves but to look upon the image of God in all men, to which we owe all honour and love.'[60]

This understanding of our true nature and destiny highlights the differentiating feature that sets human beings apart from animals. We have been created to resemble God in certain important, though limited, ways. This includes the capacity to reason, to relate deeply on an interpersonal level, to be morally responsible, to make free choices, to be self-conscious, rationally reflective, and to be creative. Summarizing these features of what it is to be human, James Moreland declares: 'We have been made in the likeness of a supremely valuable, self-aware, good, creative, free being.'[61] Here we find the source of our personal identity. It is due to being created by God in his image, to be in a covenant relationship with God and with all creation, which gives persons tremendous intrinsic dignity and worth. In his examination of the *imago Dei*, John Webster highlights its inextricable relationship with the theocentric nature of the covenant of grace and God's plans for his creation:

> Theological teaching about the divine image ... is a central motif in ensuring the co-inherence of creation and redemption; it offers a means of emphasizing that salvation concerns the restoration of human fellowship; it roots a Christian understanding of human nature in language about God's relation to his creation; and it serves to underline that the saving work of God includes within it a moral and cultural imperative.[62]

Thus by highlighting the concept of the *imago Dei* through emphasizing the relational dimensions of human existence and life in community, the

59 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1/1, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford L. Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), p. 35.

60 Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 3/7, p. 696. The parable of the Good Samaritan, Calvin claimed, taught the word neighbour extends to every man, 'because the whole human race is united by a sacred bond of fellowship.' See John Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, vol. 3, trans. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), p. 61.

61 James P. Moreland, *What is the Soul?: Recovering Human Personhood in a Scientific Age* (Norcross, Georgia: RZIM, 2002), p. 41.

62 John Webster, 'What's Evangelical about Evangelical Soteriology?' in *What Does it Mean to be Saved?: Broadening Evangelical Horizons of Salvation*, ed. John G. Stackhouse (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), p. 180.

covenant of grace presents a concept of human value that stands in sharp contrast with a post-Enlightenment understanding of human worth based on principles of natural reason.

The will of God and the mission of the church

As the covenant of grace affirms the intrinsic worth of every person, this informs the church in how it responds to issues of social and political concern in the twenty-first century. Not only will our understanding of the self be changed when we recognize that human beings are made in God's image to be in relationship with God; our sense of morality will change also.[63] Indeed through the covenant of grace, we discover the will of God and his desire for justice to be manifest in the world. This reflects the divine attributes of God who is the ultimate standard of righteousness and justice. No idea, Wright points out, is more all-pervasive in the Old Testament.[64] Hence, Wright maintains: 'Knowledge of God is prior to the practice of justice.'[65]

With the goal being to reflect God's divine attributes, God calls his covenant people to righteousness, which means to live in accordance with his will and character (Deut. 32:4; Ps. 89:14; Isa. 61:8). The Hebrew word for righteousness is *tsedaqah*, which refers to the way things are supposed to be.[66] The way things are supposed to be is based on the inherent value God places on his creation. This is translated into Greek as *dikaiosune* and into Latin as *iustitia*, which means justice, fairness and equity. What we find in Scripture is that any form of injustice is in direct opposition to God's will. Biblical justice is a comprehensive term denoting God's desire for right relationships among all creation. For example, following the exodus from Egypt, God gave the Israelites laws of justice in order to protect the powerless of society (Exod. 23:1-9). Justice is to extend to the land itself and with all of creation (Exod. 23:10-12). We are to act justly and love mercy (Prov. 31:9; Isa. 10:1-2; Ezek. 16:49; Hos. 12:6; Mic. 6:8; Zech. 7:9-10). God's complaint against Israel is a warning to those who exploit the powerless: 'They trample on the heads of the poor as upon the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed' (Amos 2:7). Likewise, the New Testament teaches that God chooses the poor to correct the injustice done to them by the rich (Jas 2:5).

63 Charles Taylor argues convincingly in *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) that selfhood and morality turn out to be inextricably intertwined themes.

64 Wright, *Living as the People of God*, p. 133.

65 Ibid., 146.

66 The root meaning of *tsedaqah* is rightness and that which matches up to a standard (Lev. 19:36; Deut. 25:15; Ps. 23:3).

The poor receive God's special attention not because they are of greater value than the rich, but rather because God desires justice to be displayed for all humankind, which includes this group in society who are on the 'wronged' side of a situation of injustice. For God's righteous will to be done, Wright notes, there must be the execution of justice to have this situation redressed.[67] Jesus' desire to affirm the dignity of the marginalized of society was therefore not a neglect of others. Rather, as Richard Bauckham highlights, it was Jesus' mission to reach all with God's loving solidarity. In order to achieve this aim, Jesus placed a particular emphasis on serving those who were excluded from human solidarity. Bauckham asserts,

> Jesus' vision of the kingdom of God, provisionally present in a fragmentary way through his ministry, was of a society without the privilege and status, which favour some and exclude others. Thus those who had no status in society as it was then constituted were given a conspicuous place in society as God's rule was reconstituting it through Jesus.[68]

If the Christian community is to see itself charged with continuing Christ's mission on earth, then to be true to the founder, God's desire for universal justice has profound implications for the holistic mission of the church. This is a hallmark of Reformational theology in that the indicatives of grace carry the imperatives of obligation. Central throughout Scripture is the conviction that the divine initiative in redeeming the world calls forth a response of faith from God's people commensurate with his revealed will.[69] Indeed as God's covenant people, whether this is Israel in the Old Testament or the New Testament church, it follows that the ethical life is a dimension of the response to God's grace. Elaborating on the nature of these imperatives, David Field claims: 'If knowledge of right and wrong is not so much an object of philosophical enquiry as an acceptance of divine revelation, it is only to be expected that imperatives will be prominent among the indicatives in the Bible.'[70]

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67 Wright, *Living as the People of God*, p. 147.

68 Richard J. Bauckham, *The Bible in Politics: How to Read the Bible Politically* (London: SPCK, 1989), p. 146.

69 For example, see Charles H. Dodd, *Gospel and Law: The Relation of Faith and Ethics in Early Christianity* (Cambridge: University Press, 1951), pp. 8-12. Charles Dodd notes that the *kerygma* (proclamation) always came before *didache* (ethical instructions).

70 David H. Field, 'Ethics', in *New Dictionary of Theology*, p. 233. Cf. Grenz, *The Moral Quest*, pp. 97-8. Elaborating on how the doctrine of grace under-

In his discussion of social morality, Richard Longenecker draws attention to this human response to God's grace arguing that the final measure for human conduct 'stems from the nature of God, from the quality of his love for mankind, and from the character of his redemptive activity.'[71] Thus Longenecker notes that obligation stems not only from the covenant in isolation, but due to God's graciously revealed nature in its entirety. Moreover, due to the moral teaching of the Bible always being presented in closest relation to the Bible's message as a whole, ethics for a Christian can never be considered as a trivial matter.

In summary we can say that due to God's desire for universal justice, in response to the divine work, the church is not to be passive. As Barth explains, the effect of grace is that it becomes the altered world-context into which our lives are inserted: 'Grace is knowledge of the will of God, and as such it is the willing of the will of God.'[72] Describing heaven as 'the ultimate reality of God's sovereign rule', Howard Peskett and Vinoth Ramachandra illustrate how this vision of God's future embraces and informs human actions in the present.[73] The church, in being a sign of this eschatological kingdom, undertakes its mission through the empowering of the Spirit and is motivated and free to do so in response to God's grace. It is a response that has arisen from a life-changing encounter with the triune God, which leads to living in accordance with God's design and will for human existence.

CONCLUSION

As we have sought to demonstrate in this essay, a central interpretive motif in approaching systematic theology as a whole is the grace of God. Few doctrines more effectively sum up the Reformation position as this doctrine. Specifically, that in his grace God has spoken is the starting point for the theological enterprise. It is here that we derive knowledge of God and his purposes for the world. Inextricably linked with the self-communication of God is the redemption of his chosen people, which derives from the unilateral covenant of grace. Thus, in exploring our fundamental theological question of what it is that makes the Christian community

pins Christian ethics, Grenz argues: 'What we might call the ethical life is the theme of covenant.'

71 Richard N. Longenecker, *New Testament Social Ethics for Today* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), p. 9.

72 Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), p. 207.

73 Howard Peskett and Vinoth Ramachandra, *The Message of Mission: The Glory of Christ in All Time and Space* (Leicester: InterVarsity, 2003), p. 276.

distinctive and the implications for its mission in the world, we have discovered that the church is defined by grace in every facet of its being. As the covenant community, it is the indicatives of grace that provide the impetus for the church to respond to the imperatives of law. If the church is to operate from this theological basis, then in responding to the divine work, the church as an eschatological community of grace will seek to further the kingdom of God on earth, of which God's righteousness and justice are such essential constituents of his unified kingdom reign.