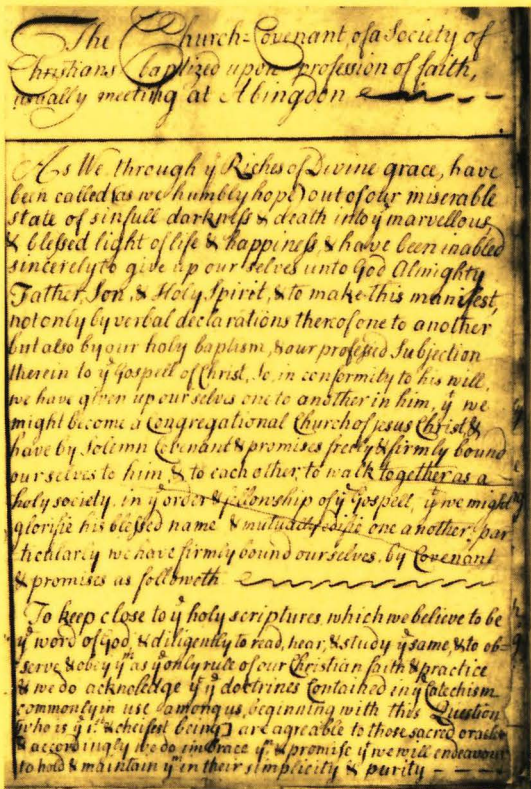


# Bound for Glory? God, Church and World in Covenant



Anthony Clarke (Editor),  
Marcus Bull, Tim Carter, Robert Ellis  
Stephen Finamore, Graham Sparkes

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# Contents

	<i>Preface</i>	5
	Introduction	
	Paul Fiddes	6
1)	The Covenantal Basis of God's Trinitarian Life	
	Anthony Clarke	9
2)	Covenant and Creation	
	Robert Ellis	20
3)	Removing the Label: Intertextuality in Romans 2:28-9	
	Tim Carter	34
4)	Divine Complexity and Human Community	
	Marcus Bull	45
5)	The Dark Side of Covenant	
	Graham Sparkes	59
6)	Baptists in Covenant	
	Stephen Finamore	73

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# Preface

These essays are the work of some of the members of a small group of Baptist ministers who agreed together to do some theology. In the summer of 1999 some 45 Baptist ministers gathered together for a week at Regent's Park College, Oxford. Various papers were offered by those participating and there was much theological discussion. The success of the event prompted a second gathering at Luther King House, Manchester, in the summer of 2001. In between this small group met as part of the continuing consultation of *Baptist Ministers doing theology in context*, for we all write from our perspectives as ministers, whether within churches, as officers of the Union or as tutors in our training colleges. Some attended one or both consultations, and some neither, but we all shared the desire to continue thinking and reflecting theologically.

Re-reading the book *Bound to Love*, written by a previous group of Baptist ministers, set us thinking on the theme of covenant, and, having discussed the many strands of this overall theme, we each agreed to write a short essay on one of them. At our next meeting we discussed each other's work and how it might be revised so that our work might have some overall coherence. We each then re-wrote our papers in the light of those comments. A number of the pieces were subsequently offered at the Manchester consultation in 2001. Where possible the suggestions of this wider group of our colleagues were incorporated into the final versions of our papers. In this regard we are especially grateful to the Revd Dr Paul Fiddes who read and commented on all the papers and who has kindly written an introduction for this collection and to the Revd Viv Lassetter who is a member of our group and who contributed to every stage of the process.

Initially our work was intended for our own benefit, but now this collection has been published, we hope that these essays will be of interest to others within our own denomination and beyond. Perhaps they have some value in themselves and perhaps they are an example of a distinctively Baptist, collective and co-operative way of doing theology in context.

Stephen Finamore, Bristol, January 2002

# Introduction

Paul Fiddes

With the title, *Bound for Glory?*, the writers of this collection of essays deliberately echo the title of an earlier volume on the theme of covenant, *Bound to Love*.<sup>1</sup> Twenty-seven years separate the two projects, and a good deal of theological and ecclesiological water has flowed under the bridge between them. But as one of the contributors to the previous volume, I am impressed by continuities between these two projects by two sets of Baptist ministers; themes persist such as the openness of covenant, the journeying nature of the covenant people and the rooting of covenant in the self-giving of God.

Both titles offer a pun on the word 'bound', which rightly awakens echoes of covenant obligation. But the angle of the present title does hint at a perspective on the subject which was perhaps underplayed in the first collection. *Bound to Love* was conceived at a time when the Baptist Union was debating the meaning of a 'Call to Commitment'<sup>2</sup>, and so the title points to the inner inevitability of love within the bonds of covenant. *Bound for Glory?* includes this aspect, but reflects new theological interests in the future of the whole of creation. This playful use of the word 'bound' brings an eschatological orientation to the new creation into the heart of covenant promises.

During the intervening years, Baptist writers on the theme of covenant have also become increasingly interested in the connections between communion in the eternal life of the triune God, and covenantal life as actualised in a local congregation in a particular time and place. Human covenant-making opens, in some mysterious and God-given way, a participation in God's own covenant commitments. The last two decades of Christian theology have, in fact, seen a widespread treatment of the link between relations in God and relationships in human community, often associated with a critique of models of domination. There has, then, been a potential for Baptists to give this theme a particular depth with the idea of 'covenant', and some have attempted to do so. The present collection of essays shows just how rich this seam of investigation is; the writers not only offer a fine account of what has been mined out already, but also bring new treasures to light themselves.

As Anthony Clarke demonstrates in his opening essay, in dialogue with Karl Barth, if we are to catch a vision of God we need to reflect carefully on the links between ideas of 'communion', 'covenant' and 'election' in what God has revealed of God's own self. Without simply collapsing these ideas into each other, we need to probe their overlap as well as their differences. Through such a wondering exploration into God, we shall find more clearly God's purpose for the fellowship of the church. We shall also find the theological basis for the provisional nature of all covenant documents, which the earlier collection of essays similarly highlighted.

This provisionality, the mark of a pilgrim people, brings us back to the eschatological perspective. The more that we place covenant in the context of the new creation in which peace and justice will prevail, the wider our view of covenant is likely to be. As Robert Ellis suggests in his paper, the worship of the local covenanted community is nothing other than a voicing of the Creator's praise on behalf of all creation, in anticipation of the end when all voices will be heard uplifted in doxology. This might well lead us to take the daring step of regarding the Noahic covenant with every living thing, as recounted in Genesis 9, as being the primary paradigm for covenantal relations. This is indeed what Robert Ellis does, and so puts a very different face on Karl Barth's theology of God's eternal covenant making. The covenant that shapes the very communion of God's own life is then not only with human beings in Christ, but with the whole of nature.

This rich and heady mixture of eschatology and relations in God, prompting an open and non-exclusive view of covenant, is drawn upon by all the writers in this volume. It leaves us with several issues to be pursued further by Baptists, and here I mention two that have been well marked out by the writers here. First, how can this understanding of covenant help to resolve issues that divide fellow Christians from each other? If covenant is to have an eschatological fulfilment, then the true identity of God's covenant partners is hidden until the final day, and until then all visible boundary markers between in-groups and out-groups must yield to the prior claims of love. This seems to be the argument of Paul in Romans 2:28-9, as carefully expounded by Tim Carter. Baptist Christians must then face the challenge as to whether, in being reluctant to accept other forms of baptism on the grounds of a covenant theology, they have made baptism itself a sign of division that undermines covenant. This would indeed be an irony – if not a tragedy.

A second question is this. If covenant is inclusive, how can we really



make space within our fellowship for people to belong? The making of space for others is deeply rooted in the relational life of God, as Marcus Bull makes clear. In the covenantal relationships of the Trinity, each Person gives self away to make space for another, and to seek the glory of another. The title 'bound for glory' certainly then does not imply that human partners in covenant should be concerned to reap the reward of their *own* glory in the future. Such a quest for privilege has, however, been the dark side of covenant theology, as Graham Sparkes shows in his disturbing essay; the concept of covenant has been appealed to by Jews and Christians alike in order to assume rights to occupy land and claim exclusive 'living-space'. The holocaust in Germany and the present-day Palestinian problem are, he suggests, defining moments which call Jews and Christians to 'new ways of thinking about covenant'. A true covenant theology fosters a 'risky inter-relatedness', in the spirit of a God 'with whom not everything is decided, and nor can everything be controlled.' If this is indeed the dissenting approach to covenant, we need always to be aware of those who are pushed to the edges of community.

For Baptists, this must mean a re-thinking of the hallowed concept of church membership, and the contributors to this volume do not hesitate to venture onto this path in the light of the open edges of a covenant with all creation. Covenant theology is at the base of the idea of a 'gathered church', demarcated from the world, and yet God's covenantal life provokes us, at the very same time, to break all boundaries down. The concluding essay by Steve Finamore, summing up the strands of discussion, points up the nature of the challenge. We may have to think imaginatively of different ways of belonging within the covenant community. While not losing a sense of commitment to each other and to God, we shall always be searching for new ways to make space for others within the capacious love of God. This, surely, is what it means to be both 'bound to love' *and* 'bound for glory'.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Paul S Fiddes, Roger Hayden, Richard L Kidd, Keith W Clements and Brian Haymes, *Bound to Love: The Covenant Basis of Baptist Life and Mission* (London: Baptist Union, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> For the context of the writing of *Bound to Love*, see Paul S Fiddes (ed.) *Doing Theology in a Baptist Way* (Oxford: Whitely Publications, 2000), pp. 6-9.

## The Covenantal Basis for God's Trinitarian life

Anthony Clarke

'Being bound together in communion by the work of the Holy Spirit has radical implications for our commitment to each other and to the nature of our sharing.' So begins the introduction to *Covenant 21*, the document intended to affirm the commitment within and between Baptist churches at the beginning of this 21<sup>st</sup> century. Such an insistence raises two important themes – communion and commitment – which reach out beyond the Church and are integral to the struggle of these post-modern times. 'Communion', that is the matrix of relationships out of which our very lives are formed and shaped, is at the heart of this evolving self-understanding; it is personal relationships, rather than our place in impersonal structures, which make us who we are. While the language of 'communion' may remain largely within the Church, the concept is much broader. 'Commitment', on the other hand, it is claimed, has lost its attraction, with a wide range of organisations suffering from a waning support-base. But further reflection suggests that commitment has undergone more subtle changes. While commitment to institutions, such as marriage, is much weaker, there seems to be a desire for a wider spectrum of deeper, and thereby committed relationships. What this suggests is a broader struggle for the uniting of communion and commitment, such as has been expressed recently in *Covenant 21*.

For us, of course, as Christians any notion of what such concepts might mean in and for our lives together must begin with the being of God. Drawing on Karl Barth's phrase we can affirm that 'the eternal will of God in the election of Jesus Christ is this will to give Himself for the sake of man as created and fallen from Him.'<sup>1</sup> (man here of course meaning humankind!) One significant aspect of this statement, which may not be immediately obvious, is that Barth adopts, but radically recasts, the staunch Calvinistic doc-

trine of double predestination. Instead of a fixed decision that separated out those for salvation from those destined for damnation, eternal divine predestination is reformed as God's dynamic electing of Godself to have communion with humankind and so for humankind to have communion with God. Deliberately taking up the Calvinistic language in such a way that serves only to accentuate the differences, God elects humankind for salvation because God elects Godself for reprobation! In other words the twofold content of predestination is, in Barth's oft quoted phrase, 'that God wills to lose in order that man may gain'<sup>2</sup>. We might paraphrase Barth by saying that our communion with God flows from God's commitment to us.

The import of such a position is that, for Barth, God's eternal being is *constituted* by a concrete and particular eternal act of turning towards the human race. This is who God is *essentially*, thereby ensuring that God's essence, constituted by this turning towards us, is knowable. God in Godself is God for us. Bruce McCormack, in the new *Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, also contrasts Barth's own work with the Christological grounding of Calvin's theology, and concludes that whereas Calvin espoused an 'essential ontology', Barth develops a 'covenant ontology'<sup>3</sup>. According to McCormack, Calvin understands the Son to be complete apart from and prior to the Son's relationship with and action for humankind. The Son, or Logos, has an essence independent of the Incarnation and so finally unknowable. Barth, on the other hand, considers the essence of the Son to be given and constituted by God's eternal election and so fully revealed in the Incarnation. Barth's understanding of covenant, therefore, leads us to the heart of God's *being* as well as to the heart of God's work.

This suggestion of a covenant at the heart of God has been explored by others. Baptist theologian John Gill, for example, develops a higher Calvinism in which the covenant of grace was 'a compact or agreement made from all eternity among the divine persons, more especially the Father and Son, concerning the salvation of the elect.'<sup>4</sup> Due to humankind's inability to re-stipulate anything to God, Gill was unable to conceive of a covenant as such between God and humankind. A covenant required two partners and Gill was unable to accept that humankind could be thought of in any way as a partner with God. Instead, it was the Son alone who could be considered a covenant

partner with God. The elect were only able to receive the benefit which arose out of this divine covenant between Father and Son. Leaving to one side concerns about the hierarchical nature of this divine covenant, Gill's theology continues the pattern within Calvinism that radically separates God and humankind.

In contrast to Gill, Paul Fiddes, in an article in *Pilgrim Pathways: Essays in Honour of Barrie White*, suggests that Barth offers a dynamic reinterpretation of Calvin which opens the way for a new and vital connection in the diverse use of covenant language and theology and which reconnects divine and human life.<sup>5</sup> In other words, Barth sees an intimate connection between the inner divine covenant and an outward covenant with, and then between humankind. Undoubtedly this has rich theological possibilities, providing a framework in which communion and commitment are held together. But it is uncertain that Barth uses this kind of *language* himself. Whereas McCormack is correct to summarise Barth's overall thinking in terms of 'covenant ontology', Barth himself consistently uses covenant language to describe the divine – human relationship. Barth, of course, does speak of the dynamic and relational nature of the divine life, but does so without specifically drawing on covenant language, even if such thinking may be implicit. We are used to describing God's relationship with humankind and our relationships together as Church in terms of covenant. But if we follow both Fiddes and McCormack, we should use covenant language also to describe the very life of God, and see what implications this will have for our own understandings of communion and covenant.

## The Nature of the Trinitarian Covenant

To describe God in terms of community is now a well-established theological principle, exemplified by John Zizioulas' book *Being as Communion*<sup>6</sup>. Although it might seem an alternative rendering of the same concept, we must think very carefully about describing the very being of God in terms of covenant. Miroslav Volf seems to be making this very point when he observes the difference between an essential aspect of divine life and an uncer-

tain element in human relationships: 'human beings, though determined by one another, *are* not simply communion, as is the Trinity, but rather must always be held together by an implicit or explicit covenant.'<sup>7</sup> There is, of course, a clear link between God in the divine communion and God's communion with us. Drawing on Barth's connection between the 'immanent' Trinity and the 'economic' Trinity, that God *pro se* must be *God pro nobis*, Fiddes insists that 'the God who *makes* communion in the world must already *be* communion'<sup>8</sup>. Should we, therefore, also say that the God who makes covenant in the world must also *be* in covenant, that is within the Trinity? Does the concept of covenant, which we know from our relationship with God and from our human relationships together, do justice to the eternal and complete communion of the Godhead and help our understanding of God?

A close examination of Barth suggests that such language can justifiably be applied to God, even if Barth himself does not, and at the heart of this reasoning stands the doctrine of double predestination already mentioned. If in the election of Jesus Christ, our election as created sons and daughters is intimately entwined with God's self-election, that is with God's decision to be who God is, then our relationship with God is not only based on God's action but is also inseparable from God's very nature. And a founding metaphor for this election of humankind is that of covenant. God, out of freedom and love, makes covenant with humankind in Jesus. Covenant-making is therefore at the heart of God's action towards us and so at the heart of God's self-determination. In other words, we can understand the relationship between Father and Son in the Spirit as a covenant relationship because this relationship is inseparable from the covenant between God and humankind that flows from it. To describe God's relationship in covenantal terms is obviously, as all theological language, metaphorical, but it is a metaphor with a high degree of reference. In all our thinking we draw language from our own human experience which we then carefully apply to God. In respect of covenant language our own experience itself is grounded in God's gracious reaching out to us, and our very experience of covenant derives from God making covenant with us in Jesus Christ.

Such thinking, which intimately links God's being and God's action to-

wards us, is also expressed through the relationship between the mission and procession of the Son. The mission of the Son in which God makes the new covenant is not a secondary addition to God's trinitarian life, but the historical expression of the eternal procession in which God determines who God is. The procession of the Son is therefore itself a covenant event in which God *pro se* and God *pro nobis* coincide. But what can we understand a trinitarian covenant to mean and involve? John Gill seems to have understood it in terms of the Son's consent to the Father's will to undertake the work of salvation, as if the result of some divine council. Paul Fiddes suggests, with a smile, this has at least the passing resemblance to a Baptist Church Meeting.<sup>9</sup> But if we are to follow Barth's thinking through to its conclusion, that God's being is constituted in the eternal act of turning towards us, then covenant language must be used in a more thoroughly trinitarian way. It is not only the mission of the Son that can be described in this way, as Gill does, but also the procession of the Son and the breathing out of the Spirit.

We noted earlier that Volf clearly distinguishes between communion and covenant. He suggests that communion in God simply 'is', whereas our communion in human relationships must be held together by some kind of covenant. This suggests the communion within the Trinity is at some higher level to human covenant relationships. For Volf, then, talking of covenant within God would take away from the sense of communion. But, on the other hand, if with Barth the trinitarian covenant is completely connected with God's covenant with humankind this can add to our depth of understanding of God. By freely making covenant with humankind in the election of Jesus Christ, God is revealed as the God who gives Godself away. Using covenant language in relation to the Trinity may help us to express this essential element in the relationships between Father, Son and Spirit, for they are relationships of eternal, unconditional and complete self-giving.

## **The Significance of the Trinitarian Covenant**

If we are to conceive the trinitarian life of God in covenantal terms, then this will have profound implications for our understanding of the divine human

covenant and consequently of the nature and significance of our own Church covenants. Linking so clearly the concept of covenant to the being of God, rather than simply the action of God towards humankind, will also encourage us to think more broadly of the covenant of God with the whole of creation. But in all these trains of thought we will want to begin with God. We have spoken of the covenantal relationships within God in terms of eternal, unconditional and complete self-giving. It is necessary, now, to ponder how this might impact on our understanding of the divine-human covenant, that is we must think about salvation, and also upon our human covenants, and this means that we must think about the Church.

## 1. Salvation

We began with Barth's reformation of Calvin's doctrine of predestination. This suggests that integration of the covenant within God and the covenant offered to humankind must impinge upon our understanding of salvation. Instead of an election which accepts some and therefore rejects others, God wills that humankind in its entirety might win, that is have communion with God. Our ideas of salvation must draw on the understanding of covenant as eternal, unconditional and universal or complete. The differing concepts involved in the Biblical covenants can help to open up our thinking.

The Abrahamic covenant, with its emphasis on God's promise and the desire for this covenant to reach ever widening circles, clearly expresses the divine-human covenant as something eternal, universal and unconditional. The unconditional nature of the covenant made with Abraham clearly reflects the unconditionality of God's covenant established and expressed in Jesus Christ, that is, it is an act of sheer grace. It is an aspect of God's essential self-constituted nature to be 'for us', and so if this covenant was ever anything other than unconditional and universal on God's part, God would cease to be the God revealed in Jesus Christ. This is expressed biblically as God's will that all be saved.<sup>10</sup>

The Mosaic covenant, on the other hand, equally established on divine initiative, offers a complementary insight, expressing the demands that such a covenant makes. That the covenant makes these demands can never nullify

the covenant on God's part, for it is secured on God's very being, but expresses how a relationship with God cannot be imposed on some, in God's inscrutable will, but can only be entered into freely. In the same way that God initiates the covenant in freedom and love, so God's offer requires the free response of created human beings. If God's creation is to retain this freedom with which it was endowed then there must be space for both the acceptance and the rejection of the unconditional offer of God. Understanding salvation, therefore, in terms of covenant, not only demonstrates the breadth of salvation, it also expresses something of its essence. If to experience salvation is to enter the covenant, then salvation cannot be imposed but only accepted and embraced. This is expressed biblically by Jesus' call to 'follow me'.

A doctrine of election that limits salvation to only one part of God's creation, or equally a doctrine of universalism that insists on the salvation of all creation both overlook the essential nature of salvation as covenant-making. Salvation which is expressed as belonging to the eternal covenant of God must be a universal and unconditional invitation, but one which requires free acceptance. The frustration of God's desire by parts of God's creation which do not respond must be a real possibility, with all that means for God and for the new creation. But what limit can we put on this universal and unconditional invitation? Will the call of God to share in this divine covenant continue to be heard through eternity?

But these two covenants, expressing both unconditionality and free response, are made new through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. The newness of this covenant is not simply that it restores the relationship between humankind and God, but does so by reforming the Trinitarian covenant itself. In Jesus' death and resurrection the divine covenant in which we find our election is itself broken open and renewed. This is expressed most profoundly in Jesus' cry of dereliction. For in Jesus' Godforsakenness God experiences and shares in the fundamental human situation of estrangement, that is the brokenness of the covenant. That Jesus, in standing with humankind, experiences the silence of the Father is a profound indication of the very brokenness of this covenant. Yet in this brokenness the covenant is renewed.



First, by standing with Godforsaken humanity God affirms God's own commitment to creation, not leaving it in estrangement but sharing its predicament to the very depths. Secondly, in the midst of this brokenness Jesus still looks for God. Jesus' cry is not one of despair, in which the Son abandons the Father, but a cry for God, which protests against the brokenness and looks for restoration. Thirdly, God responds to the confession of Jesus from within the brokenness of sin by raising him from the dead and renewing the relationship. The cross and resurrection offer new experiences to God, of genuinely human suffering and of relating anew, and it is out of this new encounter of God with creation that the new covenant offers renewed communion between humankind and God. The Old Testament knows of covenant with God that is made, broken and restored. But uniquely in Jesus the whole of the eternal covenant is renewed and the whole of creation is included in it. In this new covenant God is changed as the divine relationships are broken open and renewed; the very context of our lives is changed, for the stage on which we play out our existence is different now; and we too are changed as we are drawn into the life of God that embraces suffering and death and affirms freedom and life.

## 2. Church

Covenant, we have seen, expresses salvation in terms of the grace of God that we willingly embrace. The freedom which is at the heart of this concept also shapes our understanding of Church. Baptist thinking has frequently stressed the covenantal nature of Church life, expressed in the written covenants formed by Churches both historically and in the resurgence of interest exemplified in *Covenant 21*. In this context a covenant is more than a contract which may exist between parties in business<sup>11</sup> and derives its meaning from the understanding of God we have been pursuing. For it is a response to the God who makes an eternal covenant with humankind in the very act of divine self-determination in covenant love and who renews that covenant in the midst of suffering and death. Paul Fiddes is right to see that such covenants not only imitate the image of the divine covenant, but are one way in which we participate in the very life of God.<sup>12</sup> Church covenants are not

therefore simply voluntary agreements, although as we have seen freedom is an essential element, but an outworking of divine grace and a participating in the eternal divine covenant of love. In making promises to each other to 'walk together' we celebrate God's promise to us and draw on God's love and grace. We should therefore expect the eternal, unconditional and universal nature of the trinitarian covenant to be reflected when we covenant together within and among our churches.

The eternal nature of God's covenant, that is there is continual self-giving within God, may be reflected in our understanding of our human covenants as process rather than as single event, mirroring our own decision to follow Jesus and embrace the offer of God. The initial writing and instituting of a covenant and covenant-renewal either on an annual or occasional basis must be viewed not as isolated incidents, but as high points within the ongoing process of walking together. We must look for creative acts of covenant renewal which help us to symbolise and engage in the process of being in covenant. Whenever we share bread and wine we are renewing this covenant, as part of this ongoing process in which making and doing the covenant are continually intertwined within our communal discipleship. We share in the broken body of Christ, through which our relationship with God is made whole, and offer our bodies to be broken for the continual renewing of the covenant with the whole of God's creation.

The universal nature of God's covenant, that is there is complete self-giving in God, may be reflected in establishing covenants which are *descriptive* of who we are rather than *prescriptive* of how we should act. A covenant should not be a narrow document which defines behaviour but a wide-ranging document which defines who we are as God's people. We are those in an ever-enfolding relationship with God through Jesus Christ. At the heart of any description of who we are must be the assertion that we are for others, both those in and out of the covenanted community, in the same way that God is for us, which naturally has important and necessary consequences for our actions. But our 'doing' as Christians is not the adherence to a set of rules or standards, but the lifestyle that flows out of our very 'being', those in covenant together with the triune God.

The unconditional nature of God's covenant, that is there is free and gra-

cious self-giving in God, may be reflected in who is included in the renewal of the covenant. How we as Baptists in this country have understood ourselves has changed and is still changing. The clearly defined boundaries of belonging which earlier persecution created are giving way to boundaries which are increasingly blurred. And if our covenants are in any way going to reflect the unconditionality of God's grace in Jesus Christ we must look for them to have these open edges. In a recent covenant service in our Church we felt it important that all were present and able to be involved. In our structures, it meant firstly the children's and young people's groups returning to the main service, so the children as well as the adult leaders could be present; and secondly having an act of covenant renewal in which all could participate in and in which all felt they were participating.

## Conclusion

Although I have suggested that Barth himself restricts the language of covenant to the eternal covenant God makes with humankind, implicit in his theology of election is an understanding of God's being inextricably linked with the making of this covenant. Fiddes and McCormack are therefore right in suggesting that the application of covenantal language to the life of the Trinity is the true import of Barth's deliberations, and moreover Barth's doctrine of election provides support and justification for the desire to entwine the trinitarian covenant with the vertical covenant between God and creation and consequently the horizontal covenant expressed by local churches. This trinitarian covenant is both the foundation of these other covenants, in as much as they are the consequences of God's desire to be God in the way God has chosen to be, but also the goal to which these covenants aspire, that both individually and corporately we are caught up in the dynamic life of God. For it is here that communion and commitment are one.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics II/2* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), p. 161.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce McCormack, 'God and Being: The Role of God's Gracious Election in Karl Barth's Theological Ontology', in J B Webster (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, (Cambridge: CUP, 2000), p. 99.

<sup>4</sup> John Gill, *Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), Vol. 1, Book 2, pp. 306-7.

<sup>5</sup> Paul S Fiddes, 'Walking Together: The place of Covenant Theology in Baptist Life Yesterday and Today' in William H Brackney and Paul S Fiddes (eds.) *Pilgrim Pathways: Essays in Baptist History in Honour of Barrie White*, (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1999), pp. 47-74.

<sup>6</sup> John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church*, (Crestwood: St Valdimir's Seminary Press, 1985).

<sup>7</sup> Miroslav Volf, *After our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> Paul S Fiddes, *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity* (London: DLT, 2000), p. 6.

<sup>9</sup> See Fiddes, 'Walking Together', p. 61.

<sup>10</sup> 1 Timothy 2:3-4.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness and Reconciliation*, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996).

<sup>12</sup> See Paul S Fiddes, 'Church, Trinity and Covenant: An ecclesiology of participation' in E Brandt (ed.) *Gemeinschaft am Evangelium: Festschrift für Wiard Popkes*, (Leipzig: Evangelisches Verlagsaustalt, 1996) pp. 51-3, further expanded in *Participating in God*.

## Covenant and Creation: A Prospectus

Robert Ellis

According to Colin Gunton, ‘suddenly we are all Trinitarians’<sup>1</sup>, and one might be forgiven for observing that (in Baptist circles nowadays) ‘suddenly we are once again a covenant people.’ But which covenant are we the people of? The Old Testament mentions several, and the New Testament inaugurates and witnesses to a ‘new covenant’. Probably most readily to mind from the Old Testament is the covenant made with or through Moses (Exodus 19:5f), but there is also a covenant with Abraham (Genesis 15:18), and the relationship between God and the Davidic dynasty is also described in covenantal terms (2 Samuel 23:5, Psalm 132:12). Regarding the Old Testament, R E Clements, writing in *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology*, is content to leave it there.<sup>2</sup> True, he mentions the looking forward to a new covenant in Jeremiah 31:31ff, and indeed the fact that ‘covenant theology’ seems to be a feature of a particular strand of Old Testament editing – the Deuteronomic. But there is no mention of the ‘other covenant’, the one upon which all others are grounded, and in this Clements shows himself part of an unfortunate but long-lived theological tradition. The covenant to which I refer is that given to Noah, and implied in the earlier chapters of Genesis. This is the covenant of creation, the covenant with creation. This contribution will argue that generally speaking we interpret ‘covenant’, and therefore our identity as ‘covenant people’ much too narrowly, much too anthropocentrically.<sup>3</sup> As a result of this we not only mistake our identity but also collude in the dishonouring of the Creator. The re-locating of ourselves within this creation covenant may have theological, liturgical, ethical, missiological and pastoral consequences (but we will not get to them all here!).

## ‘Nature’ and ‘Creation’

Hindsight is a wonderful thing. It now allows us to see, for instance, the damage done by the seismic shift we know as the Enlightenment. The sea change did bring benefits, of course, but at a price – and it is this price which we can quantify with the benefit of hindsight. In particular I am thinking now of the new model of epistemology which the enlightenment championed. Despite Kant's caution about the way our minds structure phenomena, an epistemology based upon subject/object distinctions and the objectification of the 'thing' known became the norm. While the challenging of authority and other enlightenment factors certainly have played their part in the steady decline of religious faith in the west through the ensuing centuries we would do well not to ignore the devastation wrought on faith by the adoption of a model of knowing based on objectification – for the reality we name ‘God’ never could be known in such a way. Though this objectification has allowed empirical method to flourish and the sciences to prosper, it is now generally acknowledged to have led to a certain sort of attitude to the natural world (as an object, outside the observer) which in turn has contributed in no small way to the current ecological crisis.

What is needed is a new epistemological and existential approach, based upon our participation in the world we seek to know and care for.<sup>4</sup> The creation covenant theme may prove well able to resource these approaches, because it yields a view of humanity and all creation together ‘in community’, ecologically part one of another. But this is not the way we currently relate to creation as humankind. The attitude to nature<sup>5</sup> which sees it as an object, ‘out there’, to be manipulated, controlled and subjugated has had catastrophic consequences, but it is also the attitude of much care for and about creation, secular and Christian. For often ecological care, or even ecological discipleship, expresses itself as caring for an object, an ‘other’. As such it ameliorates the problem but buys into the underlying problematic perception.

This is true even of the well-meant and generally worthy “Evangelical Declaration on the Care of Creation”.<sup>6</sup> The declaration began in ferment over Genesis 1:26 and the special status of humankind *vis-à-vis* the rest of creation. Perhaps then we should expect the language of objectification rather

than participation, the ‘us’ and ‘it’ (as opposed to ‘us’ and ‘them’) mentality. Throughout the collection of essays inspired by the Declaration ‘covenant’ is used of a relationship between humanity and God, and so in relation to ‘covenant people’ who are called to care for creation – but there is no conception here of a ‘covenanted creation’, of a covenant between Creator and creation. The only mentions of Genesis 9:9 are when skated over by the editor in a chapter on conclusions, and in another essay by Moltmann – which sits rather uncomfortably with the tone of the rest of the essays. But it is probably to Moltmann that we will have to turn for a more adequate theological handle on the creation covenant.

## **The ‘Community of Creation’ and Humanity’s Distinctive Role**

Perhaps it needs to be said that I am not suggesting that there is no distinctive role for humanity, covenanted humanity – a distinctive covenant between God and humanity or a discrete people. Given what we might call the history of the incarnation, the fact that God incarnate is a human being rather than any other creature, humanity does indeed seem to have a distinctive role. But I would want to use this more ‘egalitarian’ language rather than any more ‘hierarchical’ one. The *imago dei* also leads in this direction (though its precise meaning may be still open to debate). As we shall see when we come to look at the various covenants within Scripture, God covenants with the whole of creation, with humankind, and with a people and individuals. This may also suggest to us that while the ‘overarching’ covenant is with the community of creation, nevertheless the (covenanted) local church may also have a role within this web of relationships.

All these disclaimers issued, what I am seeking to establish is (a) that humanity is properly understood as part of creation, part of nature, and that (b) God has bound himself in covenant to all creation, not just humankind.

(a) Post-Darwin, though we may have quibbles over detail, surely we cannot seriously doubt that humankind has emerged from and is part of

nature. The recently publicised 'Human Genome Project' seems to confirm this insight. In an article beginning 'We are more like a mouse than we thought', the BBC web-site report says later, 'Our genetic similarity to other creatures is firm proof of Charles Darwin's theories on the unity of life.'<sup>7</sup> Well, it may be just a little sweeping – but just a tad. Theologically we have been slow to assimilate the implications of belief in 'continuing creation', of the impact of evolutionary theories. When we take its insights seriously we discover – with much of the shock of the realisation of the non-heliocentric universe – that we arise from within creation, we *are* creation, not something above and beyond it.

(b) 'God has bound himself in covenant'. By that I mean to suggest that divine covenant differs crucially from most human contracts which we may have in mind. For God does not line up a partner and negotiate, or for that matter, impose his conditions. Rather, God's covenants are firstly a sort of 'agreement within' God's own self in which God decides *to be for* God's creation. Then the covenant is given, as gift, as pure grace. God bestows God's covenant – we do not agree terms – and we are invited to live within its parameters, called to respond to love with love, summoned to become who God alone believes we can be. To be sure, we are here in the Barthian language not just of creation but also election. I am making a statement about who God in Jesus Christ shows God's self to be – the God who chooses to be the Creator and to be bound to Creation in love. It seems to me quite proper to suggest that the language of election and covenant may be extended to include the covenant with creation (Genesis 2, 6, 9 etc.). Barth speaks of God's eternal choice for humankind in explicating his doctrine of election,<sup>8</sup> but Barth's approach is also overly anthropocentric. I would prefer to speak of an eternal choice by God to be Creator, graciously to create and to be *for* God's creation. Fackré comes close: 'God *is* covenant, willing for and doing with the world what is commensurate with the divine being.'<sup>9</sup>

Barth speaks of covenant with humanity, and of creation as the 'road' to this covenant, its 'external basis'.<sup>10</sup> This anthropocentric view is mitigated somewhat by the way he speaks of creation as an outward manifestation of God's inner being,<sup>11</sup> and of God's willing to exist from eternity for his creature.<sup>12</sup> But latent within this approach is a hierarchical understanding that



threatens the abuse of creation by one of the creatures, humankind. Humankind will end up treating 'creation' as 'nature'.<sup>13</sup> Moltmann is ready to trace this hierarchical understanding to Barth's understanding of the Trinity, where the relationship between Father and Son is characterised by 'rule' and 'obedience' rather than *perichoresis* and community.<sup>14</sup> For Moltmann, perichoretic community is not just the key to understanding the Trinity, but also the way to elucidate the relationship of the Triune God to creation.

'A perichoretic understanding of the relation of God to creation sees God's creating, forming, sustaining, enduring, receiving, accompanying, moving and suffering as an expression of the liveliness of his love. The coexistence of Creator and creature is also their mutual life, their cohabitation and influence on each other. The Creator finds space in the fellowship of creatures. The creatures find space in God. So creation also means that we are in God and God is in us. 'In him we live, move and have our being' (Acts 17:28) ... the mystery of creation is best grasped philosophically by pantheism'<sup>15</sup>

It is perhaps the 'rediscovery' of this strong sense of divine immanence which also makes it ridiculous to think of the created world as an object of mere manipulation, or just the 'stage' for some larger drama. Moltmann is fond of quoting the apocryphal *Gospel of Thomas*, logion 77:

'I am the light that is over all,  
I am the universe: the universe has gone out from me,  
And the universe has returned to me again.  
Cleave the wood and I am there.  
Lift up a stone and there you shall find me.'<sup>16</sup>

Moltmann's own words tend to talk of divine immanence by speaking about the Spirit, whose presence in creation creates the community of creation.<sup>17</sup> Creation is community through covenant, and through divine indwelling: Whereas the Word 'specifies and differentiates, the Spirit binds and forms the harmony.'<sup>18</sup> The indwelling of God's Spirit thus makes the disparate creation into a community, just as the Spirit gives unity to the Church. Furthermore, in reverencing creation we are honouring the Creator<sup>19</sup> and creation is God's indirect, mediated presence.<sup>20</sup>

## Diversion: Does God need creation?

We might allow ourselves momentary diversion here on a well-worn track: does God *need* creation? The tradition has answered 'no', and quoted God's aseity. However: if a supreme being existed, but did not create, instead remaining – as it were – in splendid isolation - what should we call such a being? Of course, *we*, nor anyone else, could call it anything. (Except we would not be 'here' – this conundrum seems rather like that old joke "What do you call a gorilla wearing ear plugs? – Anything you like, because he can't hear you".) But even if 'we' could - would we call it *God*? Would we say, here is the supreme being to whom is owed allegiance and worship and love?

In fact, the tradition has taught that God *chooses* to create, and that creation is an aspect of God's freedom. But it has also taught that God's very nature is to be creator, and to seek relationship. Does it make sense therefore to suggest that God would not create? Not only might God not be the sort of being to whom worship is due if God was content to enjoy God's self alone, but God's very nature of generous love suggests a natural will to create.

The element of choice and freedom was at stake in the insistence that God did not just 'overflow', in an emanationist way. But supposing if God had not created, such a 'God' would not be the God we know, recognise and celebrate. For our God to be God, God did indeed 'need' to create. (I feel better for that, now back to angels on pinheads...)

## The Covenants of Scripture

It is time to reflect further on the covenants of Scripture, and their inter-relationship. The New Covenant given in Jesus Christ does not negate or abolish those covenants which have gone before. God's covenants share a common irrevocability – 'God does not go back on his intention ... Covenants are for keeps.'<sup>21</sup> Rather, 'new' covenants enrich or expand previous divine promises, or they fulfil and gather them up. Such a phenomenon should be familiar to us from human relationships of love and care. New

promises in on-going relationships may not vitiate former ones, but gather them up, develop the relationship in new ways. The new covenant in Jesus Christ gathers up and fulfils those previously given, and it shares something of each of them.

The covenant with Moses is associated with the creating of a people, and with the ordering of that people's life. The Ten Commandments come to be seen as the 'conditions' of this covenant, though this 'ordering of life' has to be seen in the context of the liberating act of God (a liberation, incidentally, in which all of creation is a partner, not just humankind) and the gift of freedom from bondage. Ethics needs to be elaborated in the context of covenant, and it is helpful also to follow Barth in seeing ethics as part of the doctrine of creation (*Church Dogmatics*, IV/4.) In the new covenant a people is (re-) created, and again in the context of the gift of freedom, the life of the people is ordered in a way which reaches beyond the codifications of law into the self-giving of love which is the Covenant God's very nature.

The Davidic covenant is significant in the overall scheme because it introduces messianic themes. With the promise to David's line, and the promise at Jeremiah 31:31, covenant is given a decisive future orientation. If we follow Moltmann here too we acknowledge that even when divine promises are fulfilled they are fulfilled 'with remainder', and with more promises. The eschatological trajectory here is significant therefore, and we will find such a trajectory in the creation covenant too.

The covenant with Abram is more general in its promise than the Mosaic or Davidic. Through it a more generalised people is blessed. Though there is the promise of a land, through this covenant the whole world will find blessing (Genesis 12:3). The covenant is not formally given (ratified?) until 15:18, but this bears out the view of those who maintain that a covenant does not of itself initiate a completely new relationship but affirms relationships that already exist.<sup>22</sup> This insight also makes more sense of the Noahic covenant, and the creation covenant in general. In the act of creation itself – as I have already argued – a relationship is established irrevocably, in which God binds himself in the freedom of his grace to the universe he creates. The covenant implied in Genesis 1-2, and stated more clearly later, recognises what is already the case.

The reference at Genesis 6:18 to 'my covenant' confirms this, implying an existing set of relationships. After the flood Noah is called upon to take up again the place of responsibility within the community of creation which was first spelt out at 1:26-28. Genesis 1-11 gives narrative form to the assertion that 'nature' is in fact 'creation', but also that humankind and wider creation too has 'fallen' from its truest purpose. In various ways this 'fall' is illustrated – by the 'forbidden fruit' which confuses knowledge with wisdom, by the fratricide and its ensuing frustration of wandering lost and unforgiven, by the technology which imagines it can conquer all and build even to heaven only to be dashed by hubris and lack of community (communication) – and so on. In amongst these stories, that of the Flood both reinforces the gloom and promises something else. This 'fall' away from the divine purpose and relationship must have catastrophic consequences, it brings upon the world as we know it utter destruction. Furthermore, the world thus destroyed is not just the human world, rather the Flood seems to have almost cosmic dimensions (Genesis 7:23). 'Nature' is also washed away – but through this catastrophe there is the divine grace of preservation and then the divine promise to hold creation in God's care despite its self-imposed futility. God makes a promise to creation (9:12), and God keeps his promises.

Meanwhile, the renewal of the creation covenant with Noah shows God's willingness to entrust fallen humanity with creation. How foolish! Yet while I am arguing for a covenant which embraces all creation it would be impossible not to recognise that humankind has a particular place within that covenant. For humankind to live out its covenant relationships it must act in certain ways, this much is clear from Genesis 1, 6 and 9.<sup>23</sup> Within the community of creation, roles may be differentiated.

The New Covenant takes up the themes of the creation covenant in various ways, which space does not permit me to explore. A *Christian* doctrine of creation cannot simply work from the first chapters of Genesis, but must also work from the wider witness of Scripture.<sup>24</sup> Particularly, then, we must work on the doctrine of creation to which the New Testament contributes. John 1, Colossians 1, Romans 8, and other passages, have something to say. Romans 8 also suggests another important dimension: that is the 'eschatology of creation', its forward-looking aspect. This is a recognition

that the final pictures of ‘the end’ in Scripture do not speak of renewed humanity but of a ‘new creation’. Ephesians 1 echoes this. But Romans 8 speaks of the groaning and suffering of creation in the here and now, and while it is straightforward enough for us to apply this to the ecological crisis, something more must surely be meant. This theme needs further exploration.<sup>25</sup>

Have we established one covenant or many? Or one covenant with several diverse and distinct elements or strands? I suspect the latter may prove to be a useful way of conceiving the matter if only because it enables us to see humanity's obligations with regard to its fellow-creatures-in-covenant. The overarching covenant, seen from the perspective of the End, is that established and shown in Jesus Christ – it gathers up and fulfils all others, and clearly points to a further and final fulfilment in the new creation. But seen, as it were, from the beginning, it may be proper to call the Noahic covenant – or rather, the creation covenant confirmed and renewed for Noah – the overarching or grounding covenant, in which God states his irrevocable choice to be for all his creatures.

## **Relationships within the Covenant Community of Creation**

There is some important exegesis to be done on Genesis 9:2 (‘The fear and dread of you shall rest on every animal of the earth’), for it appears radically to undercut the theme of the community of creation. Here again we are back to differentiated roles within the community of creation. If we follow Moltmann's radical ‘communitarian’ line we seem to risk falling into something like the ‘speciesism’ of Peter Singer who argues that to make any differentiation of value between one species and another is rather much the same as racism.<sup>26</sup> There are, according to Singer and others, no grounds for favouring – say – the human person over the mouse in the research laboratory. We may be led to suggest, via Singer, that the animal rights activists are right. I would want to follow Moltmann in affirming that ‘all living beings are partners in God's covenant, *each in its own way*’,<sup>27</sup> but then go further than this statement in questioning the restrictive feel of ‘all *living* beings’!

There is also a clear danger that with special pleading such distinctions as 'each in its own way' could be a license to kill, exploit and despoil.

The gift of plant and animal life to humankind as food in Genesis' creation narratives (re-iterated at 9:3) seems to suggest this role differentiation within the creation community, but we might expect the lion to be more comfortable with this than the hapless wildebeest. Is the 'food chain' a sign of creation's 'community' or of its fallenness? I suppose that in this regard we might also need to be rather demanding of such texts. If Moltmann's agenda to address hierarchies<sup>28</sup> leads to an ideological reading of the texts themselves, then who knows where we might end up!

This subject requires further and careful exploration, and it is especially urgent to examine issues of animal rights and eco-ethics in this context. How do 'covenant people' in this creation-covenant-community follow Jesus Christ here? The implications of starting from the covenant with creation are not simply a new ecological consciousness. To affirm 'creation as covenant community' is another way of saying that 'in Christ there is neither...'. And such dubious hierarchies that exist *are* undermined – within and without humanity – in the name of the God who is a community of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

'The triune God not only stands over against his creation but also at the same time enters into it through his eternal spirit, permeates all things and through his indwelling brings about the community of creation. That gives rise to a new view of the interconnections of all things which is no longer mechanistic. The world no longer consists of basic building blocks, 'elementary particles', but of the harmony of their connections.'<sup>29</sup>

Another common mode of speech deserves critical examination in this context. We are wont to speak of human persons as 'co-creators' with God, as if we put ourselves in so speaking on God's side of a divide with the rest of creation on the other. In fact such language is very important, and has particular significance in the current debates about human cloning and other areas where human beings are sometimes accused of 'playing God'. I would want to argue here for a proper language of partnership between humankind and God in the 'on-going business of creation' – this is part of humankind's

'role' in the creation community. Bio-ethics, therefore, also needs further discussion in the light of covenant and creation.

## The End of Covenanted Creation

It is fitting to conclude by speaking of *the* End. 'Creation' is a past event, but also a present one. Creation goes on, though sometimes we prefer to speak of it as 'providence' or God's 'sustaining'. But 'Creation' is also a future reality, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the promise and pointer to this New Creation. In the meantime, our worship allows us to anticipate and imagine the end in which God will 'gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things in earth'.<sup>30</sup> More than this, a proper sense of membership of the community of creation may lead us to a positive evaluation of creation-spirituality, and so allow us to understand our worship in a new way.

'All God's gifts, all his creatures are fundamentally eucharistic beings also; but the human being is able – and designated – to express the praise of all created beings before God. In his own praise he acts as representative for the whole of creation. His thanksgiving, as it were, looses the dumb tongue of nature. It is here that the priestly dimension of his designation is to be found... through him the cosmos sings before its creator the eternal song of creation.'<sup>31</sup>

The covenant people voice the praise of the whole covenant community, all of creation. This is our 'special place', at least in part, and it is part of the task and self-understanding of the local church. Covenanted together, this people voices the praise of all people and all creation. Perhaps in the new heaven and the new earth all creation will find its own voice. Or maybe the transformations will not abolish the distinctions in the 'body' of creation's community. But in 'that day' God will make good on his covenant with all creation – 'the creation which is everywhere threatened by chaos and annihilation will be kept wholly safe and secure in God's eternal love'<sup>32</sup> – its (our) groaning for deliverance will be answered with the same 'yes' which has been spoken over creation from the first.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Colin Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997), p. xv.

<sup>2</sup> *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology*, Alan Richardson & John Bowden (eds.) (London: SCM, 1983), pp. 127-129.

<sup>3</sup> Claus Westermann writes: 'The simple fact that the first page of the Bible speaks about the heaven and earth, the sun, moon and stars, about plants and trees, about birds, fish and animals, is a certain sign that the God whom we acknowledge in the Creed as the Father of Jesus Christ, is concerned with all of these creatures, and not merely with humans. A God who is understood as the god of humankind is no longer the God of the Bible.' *Genesis*, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), p 12.

<sup>4</sup> See Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation*, (London: SCM, 1985), pp. 2ff. Moltmann also ties this in with the notion of the 'creation community' (see below): 'True knowing does not desire to dominate what is known in order to possess it. It wants to arrive at community with the object of its knowledge... In perceiving the world as creation, the human being enters into a community of creation. This community becomes a dialogue before the common Creator', *God in Creation*, pp. 69f. See also Paul S Fiddes, *Participating in God*, (London: DLT, 2000), pp. 12ff.

<sup>5</sup> There is a difference between the terms 'creation' and 'nature' of course. The former is laden with a qualitative judgement, that the world around (and within) has a Creator. To call this world 'nature' is to treat it more neutrally, and perhaps even to be ready to objectify, manipulate and despoil it. Creation and covenant have various thematic and doctrinal connections for Christian theology. We might say that it is only 'in covenant' that we know any 'creation' at all – that is to say, that we know that 'nature', or 'the world/etc.' is creation, i.e. has a Creator. In this sense Barth was surely right to say 'God is unknown as our Father, as the Creator, to the degree that he is not made known in Jesus.' [Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 1/1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1975, 2nd ed), pp 390f] This might lead us to the observation that the contemporary hymn has it the wrong way around, or begins at the wrong end, in having us sing 'Jesus is Lord! Creation's voice proclaims it'

<sup>6</sup> The Evangelical Declaration was issued in 1994, and the volume *The Care of Creation*, R J Berry (ed.), (Leicester: IVP, 2000), is a series of essays discussing it and its implications. This Declaration arose out of frustration with the WCC programme for 'Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation' The WCC programme responded to the



ecological crisis at its Seoul Assembly in 1990, but refused to word their declaration to indicate that human beings were 'alone' the *imago dei* in creation. (See Ronald Sider's 'Biblical Foundations for Creation Care' in *The Care of Creation*, pp. 43ff.)

<sup>7</sup> The piece is headed 'Genome Treasure Trove'. It states: 'the key differences between humans and worms lies in the functions of some human genes and the proteins they control. 'We know that as we move up the ladder of complexity from the single cell creatures, through small animals like worms and flies, and up to us, what we are adding on is control genes,' says Sir John Sulston.' A later summary bullet point rubs it in: 'The difference between humans and fruit flies or worms is that human genes work differently and we have more control genes.' To think that my late grandmother was offended at the suggestion that humans were related to apes – what would she have made of the fruit fly? The BBC article is posted at [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/sci/tech/newsid\\_1164000/1164839.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/english/sci/tech/newsid_1164000/1164839.stm)

<sup>8</sup> '... God's election of man is a predestination not merely of man but of Himself.' *Church Dogmatics*, II/2, (Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1957), p. 3. In another context he can say that God 'is free and immutable as the living God, as the God who wills to converse with the creatures, and to allow Himself to be determined by it in this relationship.' *Church Dogmatics*, III/3, (Edinburgh, T&T Clark 1960), p. 285.

<sup>9</sup> Gabriel Fackré, *The Doctrine of Revelation. A Narrative Interpretation*, (Edinburgh, EUP, 1997), p. 62.

<sup>10</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/1, pp. 230f.

<sup>11</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1, p. 330.

<sup>12</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/1, p. 95.

<sup>13</sup> See note 4.

<sup>14</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *History and the Triune God*, (London: SCM, 1991), p. 132.

<sup>15</sup> Moltmann, *History and the Triune God*, p. 133.

<sup>16</sup> For instance, Jürgen Moltmann, *The Source of Life*, (London: SCM, 1997), p. 116, and Berry (ed.), *The Care of Creation*, p. 109.

<sup>17</sup> Moltmann, *The Source of Life*, p. 114: 'Through his Spirit, the Creator is present in each of his creatures. Through the force of his Spirit, he forms the community of creation.'

<sup>18</sup> Moltmann, *The Source of Life*, p. 116.

<sup>19</sup> Moltmann, *The Source of Life*, p. 115.

<sup>20</sup> Moltmann, *The Source of Life*, p. 117.

<sup>21</sup> Fackré, *The Doctrine of Revelation*, p. 63.

<sup>22</sup> See W J Dumbrell, 'Covenant', in David J Atkinson & David H Field (eds.), *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology*, (Leicester: IVP, 1995).

<sup>23</sup> See also Jeremiah 31-35.

<sup>24</sup> Moltmann, *God in Creation*, p. 53.

<sup>25</sup> Passages like Romans 8 also raise questions about the 'subjectivity' of nature – another theme to be postponed for now.

<sup>26</sup> 'Racists of European descent typically have not accepted that pain matters as much when it is felt by Africans, for example, as when it is felt by Europeans. Similarly, those I would call 'speciesists' give greater weight to the interests of their own species when there is a clash between their interests and the interests of those of other species.' Peter Singer, *Practical Ethics*, (Oxford: OUP, 1993), p. 58.

<sup>27</sup> Berry, *The Care of Creation*, p. 111. Italics mine.

<sup>28</sup> See, Moltmann, *History and the Triune God*, pp. 135ff.

<sup>29</sup> Moltmann, *History and the Triune God*, pp. 181f.

<sup>30</sup> Ephesians 1:10.

<sup>31</sup> Moltmann, *God in Creation*, p. 71.

<sup>32</sup> Moltmann, *The Source of Life*, p. 122.

## Removing the Label: Intertextuality in Romans 2:28-29

Tim Carter

In Rom. 2:25-27, Paul attacks Jewish confidence in their status before God by arguing that circumcision, the sign of God's covenant with them, is only effective for those who keep the law. For those who are law-breakers, their circumcision is counted as uncircumcision. Correspondingly, if the law is kept by those who have not had their foreskin removed, not only will their uncircumcision be counted as circumcision, but also they will judge those who are circumcised transgressors of the law. He concludes: 'For the true Jew is not one **visibly** marked as such, nor circumcision that which is performed **visibly** in the flesh, but one who is so **in a hidden way**, and circumcision is of the heart, in Spirit not in letter' (2:28-29a).<sup>1</sup>

In Greek, the passage reads: οὐ γὰρ ὁ ἐν τῷ φανερωῷ Ἰουδαῖος ἐστίν, οὐδὲ ἢ ἐν τῷ φανερωῷ ἐν σαρκὶ περιτομῇ· ἀλλ' ὁ ἐν τῷ κρυπτῷ Ἰουδαῖος καὶ περιτομῇ καρδίας ἐν πνεύματι οὐ γράμματι... The highlighted words reveal the reason for choosing Dunn's translation of these verses over that of any of the modern versions. The contrast between ἐν τῷ φανερωῷ and ἐν τῷ κρυπτῷ is clearly one between what is visible and what is hidden. Bauer, in the Greek-English Lexicon, translates φανερός as 'visible, clear, plainly to be seen, open, plain, evident, known' while κρυπτός is translated as 'hidden, secret'.<sup>2</sup> Yet, despite this, the modern translations all opt for a contrast between what is inward and outward, internal and external.<sup>3</sup> There is admittedly no denying that circumcision of the flesh is external, while circumcision of the heart is internal, but these words do not do justice to Paul's vocabulary. Paul contrasts here one who is openly a Jew with one who is a Jew in secret; similarly, the evident circumcision in

the flesh is contrasted with the circumcision of the heart which, it is implied, is also hidden or secret.

The modern translations are not alone in failing to do justice to Paul's meaning here: many commentators simply fail to note it at all. Among those who do note Paul's choice of words, Moo refers to the meaning of the Greek terms in a footnote, but initially points the reader in a different direction in the main body of his text: 'The basic contrast in these verses is an 'inner'/ 'outer' contrast; a contrast between what can be seen with the eye (physical circumcision, Jewish birth) and what only God ultimately sees (the changed heart; 'true' Jewishness).'<sup>4</sup> Käsemann explicitly states that the antithesis of ἐν τῷ φανερῷ - ἐν τῷ κρυπτῷ is not the same as that of outer and inner, and goes on to observe that, 'What Paul calls 'hidden' (cf. 1 Peter 3:4) is not just what is within but total existence in the mystery of its personality, which will be revealed only eschatologically. In contrast piety is part of what is visible.'<sup>5</sup> Käsemann promises to offer a further definition, but his ensuing discussion fails to engage significantly with the contrast between openness and concealment, and ends in the (somewhat mundane) observation that the true Jew is the Gentile Christian who fulfils the law, while the Jews as a whole do not.

Among the commentators, it is Dunn who offers the best discussion of Rom. 2:28-29. He argues that the φανερός/κρυπτός antithesis 'plays upon the importance of God's knowing the hidden truth of a person', and he draws parallels with Rom. 2:16, Mt. 6:4,6; 1 Peter 3:4.<sup>6</sup> This reading of the antithesis lends a strong ethical dimension to Paul's words. Physical circumcision and outward conformity to the law count for nothing in the sight of God, who judges the secret thoughts and intentions of the heart. It is only those whose hearts have been circumcised by the Spirit who meet with God's approval and receive praise from him.

Dunn's reading of the verse offers a plausible interpretation of Paul's meaning, but one cannot help wondering whether it is a legitimate exegetical move to elucidate this text by referring to other passages in the New Testament which were probably not known to Paul or his Roman readers. If Scripture is to be used to shed light on Paul's meaning here, the Old Testament must be consulted for this purpose, rather than the New.

T.W. Berkley has done this in his recent study, *From a Broken Covenant to Circumcision of the Heart*.<sup>7</sup> Berkley laments the way in which Old Testament allusions in Romans 2:17-29 have received little attention and have not been pursued to any great extent,<sup>8</sup> and sets himself the task of correcting this deficiency. Behind Romans 2:28-29, he detects a cluster of interconnected Old Testament references.

- Paul's contrast between Jews who are circumcised in the flesh and Gentiles who are circumcised in the heart is negatively prefigured in Jeremiah 9:25-26, in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament), which associates Gentiles who have not been circumcised in the flesh with Jews who have not been circumcised in the heart: 'Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, when I will visit upon all the circumcised their uncircumcision, on Egypt, and on Idumaea, and on Edom, and on the children of Ammon, and on the children of Moab, and on everyone that shaves his face round about, *even* them that dwell in the wilderness; for all the Gentiles are uncircumcised in flesh (Septuagint reading: ἀπερίτμητα σαρκί), and all the house of Israel are uncircumcised in their hearts.'<sup>9</sup>

- Rom. 2:28-29 shares a common cluster of references to the heart, flesh and spirit with Ezekiel 36:26: 'A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.'

- Genesis 17 is a passage that is 'foundational' to Rom. 2:28-29.<sup>10</sup> Referring to Rom. 2:25-27, Berkley observes that the noun ἀκροβυστία ('foreskin') is comparatively rare in the Septuagint, yet in Genesis 17 it occurs four times in conjunction with the verb 'circumcise' and the noun 'flesh' in such constructions as 'circumcise the flesh (of the foreskin)'. In addition, although not noted by Berkley, six out of nine references in the Hebrew Testament to circumcising the flesh are found in the account of God making the covenant of circumcision with Abraham and his descendants in Genesis 17: vv.11, 13, 14, 23,<sup>11</sup> 24, 25.<sup>12</sup> It is therefore likely that when Paul refers to 'circumcision in the flesh' in Rom. 2:28, that is intended to signal a reference to God's making of the covenant of circumcision with Abraham in Genesis 17.

- Berkley also argues that Rom. 2:28-29 echoes Deuteronomy 29:29, since this is the only OT verse that contains a contrast between κρυπτός and φανερός, between what is hidden and what is revealed: 'The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the revealed things belong to us and our children for ever, to observe all the words of this law.'

Berkley reconstructs Paul's train of thought as follows:<sup>13</sup> Paul's starting point is Genesis 17 which, with its clear account of the covenant of circumcision, presented an exegetical problem for the apostle of the law-free gospel to uncircumcised Gentiles. Rom. 2:28-29 forms part of Paul's strategy for reinterpreting the crucial passage from Genesis 17. Jeremiah 9:25-26 heralds God's judgment on those who are circumcised only in the foreskin, stating those who are uncircumcised in heart incur the same divine judgment as those who are uncircumcised in the flesh. These verses undergird Paul's claim that, 'circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law; but if you break the law, your circumcision has become uncircumcision' (Rom. 2:25). The issue of Israel's disobedience to the law and the possibility of renewal is addressed in Ezekiel 36:26-27, where the Lord's promise to give Israel a new spirit and to replace their heart of stone with a heart of flesh is followed by the promise, 'I will put my Spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.' It is the gift of God's Spirit that will enable Israel to obey the commands of the Lord from the heart, and in this way the uncircumcision of her heart will be removed. Furthermore, as Berkley points out, '...for those who experience Ezekiel's prophecy of spiritual renewal ('in spirit,' Rom 2:29), *hearts* become *hearts of flesh*. Therefore, in Jewish exegetical practice one could argue that circumcision of the heart *is* circumcision of the flesh.'<sup>14</sup> Lastly, Berkley argues that Paul takes the 'secret things' of Deuteronomy 29:29 to be the secrets of the inward heart, about which God is concerned and concludes:

'Jewish identity - as God's people, the people of the covenant, the circumcised, whom God will praise - now includes those who are so inwardly, in the hidden sense about which Deut 29:29 says God is concerned. There are in effect 'hidden' Jews, who also 'belong to the Lord' (Deut 29:29). They are those who are considered circumcised people of the covenant on the basis of a spiritual circumcision of the heart.'<sup>15</sup>

Berkley is to be commended for successfully unearthing the intertextual echoes behind Rom. 2:28-29, on the basis of which it is possible to see that Paul is engaged in the process of redefining Jewish identity in Rom. 2:28-29. Building on Berkley's case, it is worth considering the implications of Paul's claim that circumcision is a secret matter of the heart, which renders invisible this key Jewish identity marker. As Genesis 17:11 makes plain, circumcision was intended to be a sign of the covenant between God and his people.<sup>16</sup> As a sign of the covenant, circumcision was intended to be φανερός, 'visible, clear, plainly to be seen, open, plain, evident and known'.<sup>17</sup> One of the functions of circumcision was to identify who were Jews; circumcision served as a boundary marker, delineating the boundaries of the covenant and separating insiders from outsiders. The Book of Jubilees reinforced this point: 'And anyone who is born whose own flesh is not circumcised on the eighth day is not from the sons of the covenant which the Lord made for Abraham since he is from the children of destruction. And there is therefore no sign upon him so that he might belong to the Lord because (he is destined) to be destroyed and annihilated from the earth because he has broken the covenant of the Lord our God' (15:26). Here circumcision is clearly seen as a sign that marks out those who belong to the Lord, while those who are not marked with a sign of the eternal covenant in their flesh are destined for destruction.

By denying that circumcision is in the flesh in Rom. 2:28, Paul both refers to and subverts the making of the covenant of circumcision in Gen. 17. Paul draws a contrast between circumcision in the flesh as a visible and tangible sign of the covenant, with the inward circumcision of the heart, which Paul states is something secret and hidden, invisible and intangible. When Paul states that Jewish identity is something that is hidden, he in effect denies circumcision and Torah observance their accepted purpose as boundary markers distinguishing those who are members of the covenant from those who are not; he denies circumcision its essential function as a sign of the covenant.

The consequence is that the identity of the true Jew is not something that can be discerned by people at all; it is a hidden matter, known only to God. The boundaries of covenant membership can no longer be determined on the basis of observing who is circumcised and who is seen to keep the precepts of the law. Paul's secrecy motif is intended to remove the labels that separate

insiders from outsiders and to render them indistinguishable from each other; Paul in effect removes any externally definable means of telling who is and who is not a Jew.

The reference to secrecy in Rom. 2:29 points the reader back to Rom. 2:15-16, where Paul refers to God's judging the secrets of humankind. It is only on the day of judgment, when God judges the secrets of every person, that the secret of whose heart has been circumcised will be revealed (2:16). Paul states that on that day there will be Gentiles who reveal that they had God's law written on their hearts, even though they did not possess the Torah in written form. The visible boundary markers of circumcision and Torah observance are valueless. Before the day of judgment there are no evident ways of judging who is in and who is out, because only God knows the secret of each human heart. It is only on the last day, when God reveals the secrets of people's hearts, that it will become apparent who has and has not been a member of God's covenant. Before that day, it is entirely inappropriate to judge others (see Romans 2:1). Those Torah-observant Jewish believers in Rome, who were judging others on the basis of external indications of covenant membership, were too quick to arrogate to themselves the divine prerogative of passing judgment. In fact, Paul turns the tables on them by declaring that those who are physically uncircumcised but who keep the law will be the judges of those who have circumcision but who break the law (Rom. 2:27). Judgment is not to be exercised in the present on the basis of discernible shibboleths; eschatological judgment will be exercised by those who have been truly circumcised in heart.

Paul's purpose in 'removing the label' is to prepare the way for his claim in Rom. 4:16, that Abraham is the father of us all.<sup>18</sup> Circumcision served as a sign that effectively excluded uncircumcised Gentiles from membership in the family of Abraham, and that was why Paul took the step of stating that true circumcision was something known only to God. His decision to abolish circumcision as a boundary marker makes sense in the context of the letter as a whole, if Romans was written to address a pastoral situation in Rome. Jewish and Gentile believers were divided over the issue of law observance. Labels that drew distinctions between 'us' and 'them' were applied on both sides (14:3-4). Those believers who did not observe Torah labelled observant



believers 'weak' in faith on account of their ongoing, unnecessary adherence to Jewish food laws. On the other hand, observant believers judged and condemned those who did not observe the law, and circumcised believers may have applied the derogatory term 'foreskin' to uncircumcised Gentile believers (cf. Rom. 2:26-27; 3:30; 4:9).<sup>19</sup>

As God welcomed uncircumcised Gentiles into his covenant, circumcision ceased to function as a sign of belonging to God's people and became instead a sign of division within God's church, which is precisely why this particular label had to be removed. The outward observance of the law and the external mark of circumcision had become divisive boundary markers, separating Torah-observant believers from law-free believers within the family of God. It was to abolish this distinction that Paul made the defining mark of the Jew the secret, hidden circumcision of the heart. External, visible boundary markers could no longer be used to define who was in and who was out. Yet over the years, the church has persistently used other symbols of belonging as a means of excluding other members of God's covenant.

The Lord's Supper is an occasion when, in broken bread and poured out wine, Christians celebrate God's making of a new covenant with his people. A ritual symbolising inclusion within the covenant is turned into an aberration whenever the celebration of the Lord's Supper becomes an occasion for division within the body of Christ. Paul took the Corinthian church to task when their celebration of the Lord's Supper became a divisive occasion, as the poor were excluded from full participation in the meal (1 Corinthians 11:21). The sharing of a single loaf as a symbol of the body of Christ represents the participation of each individual in the corporate body of Christ, which is the church (10:17). Where believers are excluded from the table because of denominational differences or because they have not been baptised, one wonders whether Paul would respond by saying, '...it is not the Lord's Supper you eat' (11:20). The meal is a celebration of the new covenant, in which all those who have the Spirit are participants. If the presence of the Spirit in the heart of a believer is known only to God, it follows that the Lord's table should be open to all. When we come to the Lord's table, we are to judge ourselves (11:31), not one another.

Similar considerations apply to baptism. In an ecumenical age, we have

every reason to celebrate the way in which the presence and activity of the Spirit are accepted in every denomination. Yet Baptists' readiness to encourage those already initiated into another church tradition to be baptised by immersion entails an implicit reluctance to accept other forms of baptism and confirmation as valid rites of entry into the church. This practice uses baptism by immersion as a label that creates distinctions between those who share in the one Spirit. One legitimate way of avoiding this would be for Baptists to agree not to re-baptise those who had already been fully initiated (by baptism and confirmation) into other traditions, thereby ensuring that baptism functions only as a rite of entry into the church and not as a symbol of division within it.<sup>20</sup>

And what of those outside the church altogether? If the secret circumcision of the heart means that there are no externally identifiable signs of covenant membership, does that mean that the Spirit may be active in hidden ways in the lives of those outside the church? There can be no way of telling, and it is only on the day of judgment, when the secrets of every human heart will be revealed, that the identity of those who are saved will be known. It might be argued that this possibility is allowed in Paul's reference to Gentiles who instinctively do what the law requires because their own conscience bears witness to the requirements of the law which have been written on their hearts (Romans 2:14-15). However, these verses should probably not be taken as evidence that Paul accepted the possibility of salvation outside the church. They form part of a specific argument intended to undermine Jewish confidence in their exclusive possession of the law,<sup>21</sup> and it is likely that Paul had in mind those whom he will later identify as Gentile believers in 2:29. Yet even if Paul himself would probably not have been prepared to acknowledge the saving presence of the Spirit in the lives of those outside the church, it could be argued that in Romans 2:14-15 he at least allows the hypothetical possibility that such people may exist. In this case, it might be said that in Romans 2 Paul opens a door that he would not go through himself, and indeed would not have wanted others to go through either. Nevertheless, those who are uncomfortable with an exclusive Christianity may be able to go through this door themselves and be open to joining in covenant with those in whom the Spirit may be at work in hidden ways.<sup>22</sup> Many Jews in Paul's

pointing out that the true sign of the covenant is the invisible, secret presence of the Spirit. Paul's claim does not only undermine the exclusive Judaism of the first century: it may also challenge some exclusive forms of Christianity today.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> J D G Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, (Dallas: Word, 1988), p. 119.

<sup>2</sup> W Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, second edition revised and augmented by F Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W Danker from Walter Bauer's fifth edition, 1958, (London: University of Chicago, 1979), pp. 454, 852.

<sup>3</sup> GNB: 'It is not the man who is a Jew on the outside, whose circumcision is a physical thing. Rather, the Jew is the person who is a Jew on the inside, that is, whose heart has been circumcised, and this is the work of God's Spirit, not of the written law.'

<sup>4</sup> NIV: 'A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not the written code.'

NRSV: 'For a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. Rather, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart – it is spiritual and not literal.'

REB: 'It is not externals that make a Jew, nor an external mark in the flesh that makes circumcision. The real Jew is one who is inwardly a Jew, and his circumcision is of the heart, spiritual not literal.'

<sup>4</sup> D J Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 174; see note 40.

<sup>5</sup> E Käsemann, *Romans*, (London: SCM, 1980), p. 75.

<sup>6</sup> Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, p.123.

<sup>7</sup> T W Berkley, *From a Broken Covenant to Circumcision of the Heart: Pauline Intertextual Exegesis in Romans 2:17-29*, (Atlanta: SBL, 2000). I am grateful to Revd. Dr. C S Rodd for making this book available to me.

*Intertextual Exegesis in Romans 2:17-29*, (Atlanta: SBL, 2000). I am grateful to Revd. Dr. C S Rodd for making this book available to me.

<sup>8</sup> Many content themselves with listing references to circumcision of the heart in the Old Testament: God condemns Israel for the uncircumcision of their hearts (Leviticus 26:41; Jeremiah 9:25-26; Ezekiel 44:7) and either commands them to circumcise their hearts (Deuteronomy 10:16; Jeremiah 4:4) or promises that he will do it for them (Deuteronomy 30:6; cf. Jubilees 1:23).

<sup>9</sup> In Jeremiah's day, it seems that the nations surrounding Israel also practised circumcision; see R de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, (London: DLT, 1961), pp. 46-48. Whereas Israel was uncircumcised in heart, no explanation is given as to why the other nations who practised circumcision are described as 'uncircumcised in the flesh'. Presumably, in their case circumcision counted as uncircumcision, since it was not a sign of God's covenant with them – though cf. the alternative explanation in R C Steiner, 'Incomplete Circumcision in Egypt and Edom: Jeremiah 9:24-25 in the Light of Josephus and Jonckheere,' *JBL* 118 (1999), pp. 497-505. The NRSV provides a good translation of the Hebrew Masoretic Text: 'The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will attend to all those who are circumcised only in the foreskin: Egypt, Judah, Edom, the Ammonites, Moab, and those with shaven temples who live in the desert. For all these nations are uncircumcised, and all the house of Israel is uncircumcised in heart.'

<sup>10</sup> Berkley, *From a Broken Covenant*, p. 95.

<sup>11</sup> See the NRSV; there is no reference to 'flesh' in Genesis 17:23 in the Septuagint.

<sup>12</sup> The remainder are: Genesis 34:24; Leviticus 12:3; Jeremiah 9:25-26.

<sup>13</sup> Berkley, *From a Broken Covenant*, pp. 144-155. My paragraph severely abbreviates and simplifies Berkley's argument.

<sup>14</sup> Berkley, *From a Broken Covenant*, p. 145.

<sup>15</sup> Berkley, *From a Broken Covenant*, pp. 153-4.

<sup>16</sup> Only male circumcision serves this function. Female circumcision, when it is practised, serves not as a sign of covenant membership, but is sheer mutilation.

<sup>17</sup> In the first-century Mediterranean culture, public baths and the practice of competing in games in the nude would have made circumcision far more of a public sign than it is today.

<sup>18</sup> See Berkley, *From a Broken Covenant*, pp. 185-6.

<sup>19</sup> This is the literal meaning of ἡ ἀκροβυστία, as opposed to the euphemistic 'uncircumcision' used in translations.

<sup>20</sup> I am grateful to Dr. Paul Fiddes for this suggestion.

<sup>21</sup> See Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, pp. 98-102.

<sup>22</sup> And there are many other Christians, who with Paul, would have no desire to go through the door at all.

## Divine Complexity and Human Community

Marcus Bull

### Divine ‘Being’ as Covenant

The doctrine of the Trinity has everything to do with real life.<sup>1</sup> Human theology ought to begin with our experience of God as Trinity, and then move on to consider the implications of this experience for humankind. Indeed, the ‘Being’ of God – the divine nature, and the relationships that exist within the Godhead – is fundamental to an understanding of how our Christian (and human) relationships should work. And, therefore, in any discussion concerning how we are to respond to God’s making covenant with God’s world, God’s people, and God’s church, we must begin by examining the triune covenant existing within the Godhead. The divine complexity has much to say to human models of community.

From the very beginning of the Old Testament, it can be seen that God’s being is complex. The Hebrew word *elohim* is used, throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, as a generic term for Israel’s God, and it is significant that the word takes a plural form. Some have argued that the use of the plural form functions as a superlative, with reference to ‘intensification’, ‘absolutisation’, ‘exclusivity’ or ‘majesty’.<sup>2</sup> However, the commentators Wenham and Leupold argue against reducing *elohim* to a superlative.<sup>3</sup> Leupold claims that *elohim* ‘is a potential plural ... indicating the wealth of the potentialities of the divine being’; while Wenham considers that the phrase involves the various “manifestations” of God.

It is clear, then, that the Old Testament witnesses to a richness and a complexity within the Godhead. And, while the divine richness revealed to us in the Old Testament is not explicitly Trinitarian, the words ascribed to God in Genesis 1:26 (‘Let us make humankind in our image ...’), along with the

voice of God asking the prophet Isaiah 'Who will go for us?' (Isaiah 6:8), suggest that the divine complexity is a relational one. In his introduction to *Being as Communion*, John Zizioulas states that 'the being of God is a relational being: without the concept of communion it would not be possible to speak of the being of God.'<sup>4</sup> He goes on to note: 'it is communion which makes things 'be': nothing exists without it, not even God.'<sup>5</sup> The Trinitarian language of Christianity flows naturally from such a relational complexity.

Miroslav Volf gives much space to an examination of the relationships (or communion, or covenant) that exist within the Godhead. He is concerned to ground 'the doctrine of the Trinity in the phenomenon of a *dialogue* within God',<sup>6</sup> and to define the persons within the Trinity as 'relation' or 'relatedness'. Regarding these divine relations Volf concludes that 'all persons are equal in power and equal in glory',<sup>7</sup> and he constructs a 'narrative Trinitology',<sup>8</sup> whereby the 'self-giving' of each member of the Godhead becomes the way in which 'each divine person seeks the 'glory' of the others and makes space in itself for the others.'<sup>9</sup> We could legitimately consider that such self-giving describes the way in which the members of the Godhead remain 'faithful' to the triune covenant.

This narrative (or history) of God cannot be separated from the history (or narrative) of God's world. Throughout history, as recorded for us in the pages of Scripture, God has not only lived in covenant within God's own self; God has also been entering into, and remaining faithful to, covenant agreements and relationships with God's creation.<sup>10</sup> This penchant of God for covenant-creating is an expression of God's own covenantal being. God's desire to live in a harmonious relationship with creation flows inevitably from God's own passion to share the love that is experienced by and within the triune Godhead. However, such covenant-creating is a painful and costly business. God's faithfulness to His covenants demands much of God because it demands much of the individual members and movements within the Godhead. We shall see this as we consider the self-giving nature of each member of the Trinity in turn.

## 1. God as Son

The Ephesian Christological hymn (2:14-16) outlines the purpose of God's 'passion'. The incarnation was not about sacrifice, nor did it concern the beginning or the building of a Church. Rather, God in Christ came into the world for the express purpose of *reconciliation*: the reparation of the covenants to which God has been faithful but God's creation has not. The Ephesian (narrative) hymn-fragment begins with an assumption that humanity is *disoriented*. Disorientation characterises the human population of the world. There exists enmity between people and God, and there exists enmity between people and people. Radical reconciliation is necessary for such a dire situation to be corrected. And that reconciliation comes in the form of Christ. Step by step, the Ephesian narrative shows how, because of Christ's work, and because of God's love, humanity is offered a *new orientation* involving new relationships (and the creation of a new covenant) with God and with one another.

But it is another Christological hymn (Philippians 2:6-11) that sets out a narrative in which God's 'faithfulness' is enacted: Christ humbled Himself and poured Himself out.<sup>11</sup> Throughout His earthly ministry, Christ pointed beyond Himself to the God who both Fathered and sent Him. In terms of the divine, triune covenant, Judas' betrayal of Jesus with a kiss was a particularly cruel parody on the love Christ had known in a pre-existent life. Christ died an unimaginably cruel and humiliating death. But, in His death, Christ continues to seek the glory of the other members of the Godhead. He makes space in His own being (or in His no-longer-being) for the revelation and expression of the other two. Using the 'Trinitology' explained by Miroslav Volf (and described above), such a picture of the incarnation demonstrates how the divine person of the Christ is self-giving.

## 2. God as Father

However, the first part of the Philippian hymn is written from a *Christological* perspective. And, as Richard Bauckham points out, we must affirm that the divine identity is 'revealed as intra-divine relationship'.<sup>12</sup> Moltmann, too,



claims that Trinitarian thought is 'necessary for the complete perception of the cross of Christ.'<sup>13</sup> Israel's God clearly transcends human categories of relationship. We must, therefore, recognise the limited viewpoint of this hymn, and we must struggle to acknowledge the complexity of a (holistically) divine perspective on the atonement. Nowhere is the divine relational complexity more complex than at the cross.

We have stated that God's being is defined in relational terms. Movements of perfect love flow between the three members of the Trinity. However, at the cross, one of the three persons was removed (albeit voluntarily) from the equation. Christ left behind Him the intimate love of the Godhead – the two others who had loved Him more than anything for longer than eternity – and became obedient to death. Thus God's family, God's fellowship, God's love, God's community, even God's covenant, was shattered. This is significant. In order to repair the covenants broken by humanity, our complex and relational God suffered a broken covenant within God's own being. At the cross the triune God experienced (and therefore was able to redeem) the brokenness that characterises all of human life.

But God does not simply *allow* Christ to suffer or to practise self-giving. Rather, God suffers in Christ on our behalf. Moltmann gives considerable space to a discussion of God's suffering<sup>14</sup>: 'divine suffering ... is the suffering of God, who bears the world by bearing its burdens. It is the suffering of the Father who in giving up his 'own Son' (Rom. 8.32) suffers the pain of redemption. It is the suffering of God's Son, who takes our sins and sicknesses upon himself.... The suffering of love does not only affect the redeeming acts of God outwards; it also affects the trinitarian fellowship in God himself.'<sup>15</sup>

In *The Crucified God* Moltmann argues the same point: while 'the Son suffers dying, the Father suffers the death of the Son ... Unless this were so, the doctrine of the Trinity would still have a monotheistic background.'<sup>16</sup> Moltmann is keen to show how the death of the Son is also the suffering of the Father, which means 'God is self-giving'<sup>17</sup>. However, the second part of the Philippian hymn gives us another perspective on God's self-giving character. The way Paul has quoted the hymn shows that Christ poured His life out in a series of stages, bit by bit, until He had literally no life left to give.

But, in verses 9 to 11, God acts to resolve the narrative's tension. To borrow the imaginative words of Trevor Dennis: 'God has come out of hiding, split the curtain of the holy of holies from top to bottom, and stepped out into the world'<sup>18</sup> – and beyond the world, into the darkness, into the void which is death. God has plucked Jesus out of the forces of chaos and lifted Him back to His rightful place. Christ is highly exalted.

Emphasising the 'height' of Christ's exaltation is Paul's use of an Old Testament quotation. In Isaiah 45:23 God Himself claims: '*By myself I have sworn, from my mouth has gone forth in righteousness a word that shall not return: 'To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear.'*' (NRSV). This clearly monotheistic text states that 'the one true God does not, cannot and will not share His glory with anyone else.'<sup>19</sup> However, in the Philippian narrative, we find Jesus receiving the glory due to God, and God sharing God's glory with Jesus!

Richard Bauckham points out that Christ's exaltation also contains an allusion to Psalm 110:1: '*The LORD says to my lord, "Sit at my right hand..."*' (NRSV). In the context of Jewish monotheism, the fact that Christ is exalted to a position of sovereignty over all things can mean only one thing: Jesus has been given the divine name, *kurios*, and he receives the worship of the whole of creation, precisely because He is included in the identity of the One True God.<sup>20</sup> To revert to Volf's Trinitology once more, then, it can be seen that the Father seeks the glory of the Son and makes space within Himself for the Son. The Father, as well as the Son, is characterised by self-giving.

It has been suggested that the final phrase of the Philippian hymn, '*to the glory of God the Father*' (v.11), brings into question the equality of Christ with the Father and indicates a hierarchy within the Godhead. However, surely, the phrase simply reinforces all we have been told concerning the divine nature. The members of the Godhead are characterised by mutual submission and dependence. As Karl Barth recognised: the 'drama of the saviour's progress [is] the unfolding of a paradox ... : Christ is at the same time divine and human, precisely in His 'humility'.'<sup>21</sup> Thus, the Son is not inferior to the Father, but rather expresses that the character of the Father also consists in 'self-giving'.

### 3. God as Spirit

In attempting to construct a narrative Trinitology, there is a danger that we will focus exclusively on the divine Father-Son relation and relegate the Spirit to the status of an impersonal 'glue' – the bond of love between Father and Son.<sup>22</sup> Such an approach is more *binatarian* than Trinitarian. And Jürgen Moltmann is one who falls into exactly this trap.<sup>23</sup> However, as Fiddes reminds us, it is difficult to talk about the Holy Spirit *precisely because* of the self-giving nature of the Spirit: 'the New Testament records the experience of the early Christians that the Holy Spirit points away from the Spirit's own self towards God as Father and Christ as Son.'<sup>24</sup> The Spirit glorifies Father and Son 'anonymously', and this glorifying action works by effectively 'suppressing the subject who glorifies'.<sup>25</sup>

Despite the Spirit's 'anonymity', though, Fiddes insists that 'there is suffering within all three movements of relationship.'<sup>26</sup> Moltmann has helped us to define the suffering of God as Son and as Father, but it is Fiddes who takes seriously the suffering of God as Spirit. Fiddes considers it is by transforming, unifying (and glorifying) God's creation that the Spirit brings glory and unity to God,<sup>27</sup> and that 'God as Spirit [suffers] *in* creatures, suffering at the depths of human life and nature, crying out in the birth-pains of creation (Romans 8:22-3).'<sup>28</sup> Thus, the Spirit not only suffers as the divine relational covenant is broken, but also suffers because of God's broken covenants with creation.

As we have noted, the Western tradition affirms the Spirit as the 'bond of love' between Father and Son. It follows, then, that in the suffering and separation of Father and Son the Spirit loses both function and identity. According to this vision of God, it may be that in the person of the Spirit we see most clearly how the divine covenant is shattered. Volf's model considers that the 'self-giving' of each member of the Godhead becomes the way in which each divine person seeks the 'glory' of the others and makes space in itself for the others, and this statement can now be seen to be as true of the divine Spirit as it is of Father or Son. Therefore our rudimentary 'narrative Trinitology' begins to find a shape.<sup>29</sup>

## Implications of the Divine Covenant

A narrative understanding of the Trinity, then, involves a description of community and covenant as it *should* be; the story of true, healthy and reconciled relationships. This vision of God functions as a model upon which all our human covenant relationships ought to be based. Zizioulas points out that our understanding of what it means to be the Church must be bound to our understanding of the being of God. This way of being is a way of relating to the world, to other people, and to God, which involves 'self-giving' and focuses upon 'communion' and mutual relationships: 'for the Church to present this way of existence, she must herself be an image of the way in which God exists.'<sup>30</sup> In the same way, Volf states that 'God came into the world so as to make human beings, created in the image of God, live with one another and with God in the kind of communion in which divine persons live with one another.'<sup>31</sup>

Paul Fiddes, however, notes that such an 'imitation' of God is not enough. Our human efforts to conform to God can 'lead to a loss of the sense of divine mystery and otherness.'<sup>32</sup> Fiddes, therefore, complements 'the *imitation* of God with a thoroughgoing attempt to speak of *participation* in God'<sup>33</sup>. Thus, our narrative understanding of the Godhead becomes more than a story and/or model upon which human covenants should be based. It becomes the fulfilment of covenant; the community in which all human relationships will participate at the end of time. Moltmann, too, speaks of a covenant community: 'in that God himself creates the conditions for communion with God through his self-humiliation in the death of the crucified Christ and through his exaltation of man in the resurrection of Christ, this community becomes a gracious, presuppositionless and universal community of God with all men ...'<sup>34</sup> Therefore, a narrative Trinitology invites us to an imitation of those covenant relationships existing within the Godhead, and to a participation in God's covenant community.

### 1. Covenant as personal responsibility

Miroslav Volf speaks of the need for reconciliation in human relationships:

'reconciliation with the other will succeed only if the self, guided by the narrative of the triune God, is ready to receive the other into itself and undertake a re-adjustment of its identity in the light of the other's alterity.'<sup>35</sup> Further, Volf notes that our understanding of 'covenant' is considerably enriched by reflection on a form of 'embrace'<sup>36</sup>, which is modelled on God's own mode of existence.<sup>37</sup> God invites us to live in 'covenant' with Godself and with one another, because that is the way God exists. Indeed, that is what defines God's very existence. Therefore, 'not only is the immanent Trinity relational, the triune God enters into relationship with the world [God] creates.'<sup>38</sup>

The world (and even the Church) has consistently approached issues of peace, reconciliation and community from the wrong perspective. 'Instead of reflecting on the kind of society we ought to create in order to accommodate individual or communal heterogeneity, [we should] explore *what kind of selves we need to be* in order to live in harmony with others.'<sup>39</sup> Rather than asking political questions about the nature of what the Church should be, the cross demands that I examine myself. What sort of person do I have to be? All questions regarding human covenants must begin with this personal ethic. What sort of person am I called to be?<sup>40</sup>

It is significant, however, that Volf leaves the question in the *plural* form: what kind of selves do *we* need to be? Each of us is shaped by her or his own community. We all find the answer to the '*I*' question as we engage with our own community; we all have a responsibility to help others in our community answer that question for themselves: how can *I* enable *you* to be the person you are called to be? It is precisely in the *self-giving* nature of the relationships within the Godhead that I am able to find the answer to this question.

I am called both to *imitate* and *participate* in the self-giving 'Being' of the Godhead. And this finds its fullest expression at the cross, where, as we have explored above, each member of the triune Godhead seeks the 'glory' of the others and makes space in itself for the others. Volf rightly suggests that it is only at the cross that I can begin to understand what the character of my Christian self should be in relation to the other.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, Moltmann considers that 'man develops his manhood always in relationship to the Godhead of his God. He experiences his existence in relationship to that which

illuminates him as the supreme being. He orients his life on the ultimate value. His fundamental decisions are made in accordance with what unconditionally concerns him. Thus the divine is the situation in which man experiences, develops and shapes himself. ... the theology of the 'crucified God' also leads to a corresponding anthropology.<sup>42</sup>

Therefore, just as the members of the Godhead give of Themselves to one another and to their creatures, so am I called to follow God and to practise self-giving love. The argument that our selves must be 'shaped by the cross of Christ and the life of the Triune God'<sup>43</sup> is not merely a New Testament concept. Such 'imitation has a place in the ethics of the Old Testament writers, who present God as demanding conformity to His own character ('You shall be holy *as I am holy*').<sup>44</sup> Each time God makes such a demand, it comes in the context either of God making an agreement with God's people, or of God speaking about an agreement which was made but which has since been broken. As such, it demonstrates that imitation of and participation in God is, indeed, crucial to our understanding of 'covenant'.

## 2. Covenant as corporate priority

Moltmann agrees that 'the Christian doctrine of the Trinity provides the intellectual means whereby to harmonise personality and sociality in the community of men and women, without sacrificing the one to the other.'<sup>45</sup> However, this argument does not merely apply to individuals seeking to live in covenant or community with others. We are, in fact, not in covenant as individuals but as a community. Therefore, churches involved in relationships with other churches also need to hear the call to imitate and participate in God. Whether churches seek to exist in a covenant relationship with other members of their own denomination or tradition, or whether there exists a covenant agreement between churches of a number of different denominations (as in a Local Ecumenical Partnership), we must take seriously this *corporate* call to self-denial and the affirmation of others in self-giving love.

One accusation often levelled at those churches involved in L.E.P.s is that the intricacies of denominational debate, the arguments about which traditions we may be willing to lay down, and all the other 'paraphernalia' that

necessarily goes with such interdenominational relationships actually distract the local church from the task of mission. That may, in fact, be a valid criticism of many L.E.P. situations. However, I would like to suggest that, in reality, these churches have already engaged with the 'brokenness' of the Christian community and struggled with the divisions and diversity that exists within the body of Christ. They have already come to understand the necessity of self-denial if those relationships are ever to work, and they have sought reconciliation (or embrace) above all else. Such engagement with the 'brokenness' of the Christian church is not a *distraction* but in fact a vital *preparation* for the task of mission.

It may be overstating the case to suggest that churches that find themselves in this type of covenant relationship automatically have a mission or ministry of reconciliation to those who are not yet Christians (although that is arguably a biblical bias). But it is certainly true that the struggles and the difficulties that will necessarily have been worked through if the covenant relationship is to be effective will give those churches a very real authority as they engage in and with God's own purposes of reconciliation for His creation. Perhaps it is in precisely this way that we are able to imitate and participate in the high-priestly work of Christ (Heb. 1:1-4), and to serve God on behalf of the world around us.

### 3. Covenant as cosmological goal

We have already referred to the Christological hymn in Paul's letter to the Ephesians. This liturgical fragment outlines God's Christological purpose, which is reconciliation. It could be argued that reconciliation is the theme of the entire book of Ephesians. Paul moves from the hymn-fragment to talk about unity in the body of Christ (4:2-4) and even relationships within families (5:21 - 6:9). But it is a much earlier passage in the book (1:9-10) that reveals to us that God's purposes are much wider than simply the reconciliation of human relationships. Paul writes: *'he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth'*. (NRSV)

While the church *is* called to be a covenanting people, that is not an end in itself. Rather, 'the church as a people-in-covenant is related to God's larger intention',<sup>46</sup> which is *cosmological!* God's 'larger intentions' are *not* only (contra Grenz) 'directed toward bringing His highest creation - human-kind - to reflect the eternal divine nature, that is, toward bringing us to be the image of God.'<sup>47</sup> Rather, at the heart of the identity of the church is the goal of modelling in the present what will occur at the consummation of all history, when all peoples will be gathered together and all creation will be reconciled to its Creator. This must be the object of, and the motivation for, any making of 'covenant' together.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, (London: SCM Press, 1998), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Willem A VanGemeren, (ed.), *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology & Exegesis* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1997), Vol. 1, p. 405.

<sup>3</sup> Gordon J Wenham, *Genesis 1-15 (Word Biblical Commentary)* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1987), p. 17; H C Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis (Vol. 1)* (Michigan: Baker Book House, 1942), p. 43.

<sup>4</sup> John D Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997), p. 17.

<sup>5</sup> Zizioulas. *Being as Communion*, p. 17.

<sup>6</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), p. 177.

<sup>7</sup> Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, p. 180.

<sup>8</sup> The phrase 'narrative Trinitology' is mine; Miroslav Volf speaks rather of 'the narrative of the triune God' (*Exclusion & Embrace*, p.110). A 'narrative Trinitology' involves the description of actions, choices and movements on the part of the members of the Godhead. God cannot be described in simply propositional terms. Along these same lines, Moltmann states: 'We cannot say of God who he is of himself and in himself; we can only say who he is for us in the history of Christ which



reaches us in our history. ... [We] have to find the relationship of God to God in the reality of the event of the cross and therefore in our reality and consider it there. In practice that would amount to a 'complete reshaping of the doctrine of the Trinity', because in that case the nature of God would have to be the human history of Christ and not a divine 'nature' separate from man.' See *The Crucified God*, (London: SCM Press, 1999), pp. 238-9.

<sup>9</sup> Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, p. 180.

<sup>10</sup> In the pages of the Old Testament, God made a number of covenants with God's people. Such agreements include those made with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Aaron, Phinehas and David. See Ferguson & Wright (eds.), *New Dictionary of Theology* (Leicester: IVP, 1994), p. 173f.)

<sup>11</sup> C F D Moule considers the opening phrases of the Philippian hymn show that Christ did not reckon equality with God consisted in snatching. Rather, 'He poured Himself out.' This translation avoids the difficulties associated with questioning what it was that Christ emptied Himself of. 'Further Reflexions on Philippians 2:5-11', in *Apostolic History and the Gospel*, Gasque & Martin (eds.) (Exeter: The Paternoster Press, 1970), pp. 264-76.)

<sup>12</sup> Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1998), p. 75.

<sup>13</sup> Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, p. 245.

<sup>14</sup> Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, pp. 21-60. This chapter is headed 'The Passion of God'.

<sup>15</sup> Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, p. 24.

<sup>16</sup> Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, p. 243.

<sup>17</sup> Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, p. 83.

<sup>18</sup> Trevor Dennis, 'The Darkness of the Cross', in *Imagining God* (London: SPCK, 1997), p. 75.

<sup>19</sup> Tom Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said* (Oxford: Lion Publishing plc, 1997), p. 68.

<sup>20</sup> Richard Bauckham, 'The Worship of Jesus in Philippians 2:9-11', in *Where Christology Began: Essays on Philippians 2*, Martin & Dodd (eds.) (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), pp. 129-30. See also Bauckham, *God Crucified*, p. 56-61.

<sup>21</sup> Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Ephesians* (London: SCM Press, 1962) [Translated by James W. Leitch from *Erklärung Des Philipperbriefes* (6<sup>th</sup> Edition, 1947) Evangelischer Verlag AG Zurich.], p. 65.

<sup>22</sup> This is a Western approach to the doctrine of the Trinity, and follows Augustine. The Eastern tradition pays more attention to the distinct identity of the person of the Spirit. However, the Eastern and Western traditions may not, actually, be as mutually exclusive as has been thought, and Fiddes suggests that a combination of the two traditions may be appropriate. See Paul S Fiddes, *Participating in God* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2000), pp. 266-7.

<sup>23</sup> For example, in a discussion on the form of the Trinity revealed at the cross, Moltmann states, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, p. 83: 'The common sacrifice of the Father and Son comes about through the Holy Spirit, who joins and unites the Son in his forsakenness with the Father.'

<sup>24</sup> Fiddes, *Participating in God*, p. 259.

<sup>25</sup> Fiddes, *Participating in God*, p. 259.

<sup>26</sup> Fiddes, *Participating in God*, p. 184.

<sup>27</sup> Fiddes, *Participating in God*, pp. 259-60.

<sup>28</sup> Fiddes, *Participating in God*, p. 186.

<sup>29</sup> Much more work needs to be done on this subject. Constructing such a narrative Trinitology is a huge task, but I have attempted to show how an understanding of the Trinity could be outlined along narrative lines.

<sup>30</sup> Zizioulas, *Being as Communion*, p. 15.

<sup>31</sup> Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, p. 181.

<sup>32</sup> Fiddes, *Participating in God*, p. 29.

<sup>33</sup> Fiddes, *Participating in God*, p. 29.

<sup>34</sup> Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, p. 275.

<sup>35</sup> Volf. *Exclusion and Embrace*, p.110. Volf uses the term 'narrative' in much the same way that Moltmann uses 'history: 'The Trinity ... means the *history* of God, which in human terms is the *history* of love and liberation.' See *The Crucified God*, p. 254. Emphasis added.

<sup>36</sup> 'Embrace' is Volf's own description of what God is seeking to do (and to facili-

tate in humankind) in His work of reconciliation. It goes far beyond forgiveness, and may have more in common with Fiddes' motif of 'participation'.

<sup>37</sup> Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, p. 148.

<sup>38</sup> Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1994), p. 102.

<sup>39</sup> Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, pp. 20f.

<sup>40</sup> When asking this question we must be aware of our cultural agenda. Answers will differ substantially according to race, gender, etc. Different people will face different choices.

<sup>41</sup> Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, p. 22.

<sup>42</sup> Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, p. 267.

<sup>43</sup> Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, p. 146. Of course, the cross does not simply imply suffering and self-denial. It must also be linked with resurrection and restoration. So Volf suggests, *Exclusion and Embrace*, p. 28, 'the promise of the cross [is] grounded in the resurrection of the Crucified.' Also Moltmann writes, *The Crucified God*, p. 252: 'the death of the Son is not the 'death of God', but the beginning of that God event in which the life-giving spirit of love emerges from the death of the Son and the grief of the Father.'

<sup>44</sup> Fiddes, *Participating in God*, p. 28.

<sup>45</sup> Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, p. 199.

<sup>46</sup> Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, p. 614.

<sup>47</sup> Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, p. 628.

## The Dark Side of Covenant

Graham Sparkes

If as Baptists we want to identify the distinctive theological theme that has shaped and formed our life and witness, it is suggested that we should look towards the idea of 'covenant'. From earliest days, local Baptist congregations covenanted together, seeing their commitment to one another as rooted in God's own eternal covenant commitment to them; and while something of the depth and meaning of our covenant theology may have been lost in the course of time, the preparation of the *Covenant 21* material by the Baptist Union of Great Britain has served to remind us of the central place it should have in our understanding of what it means to be God's people.<sup>1</sup>

Many of us would want to affirm this rich heritage, pointing to its deep roots in Scripture and calling attention to the ways it might contribute to our future life together. But in case this leads us to embrace covenant theology with unthinking pride and devotion, it is worth stopping to ask one or two awkward questions. Are there dangers in the way covenant is played out in the pages of Scripture? What kind of God is it who makes covenant commitments and can we believe in this God? Is there a dark side to covenant that results in conflict, discrimination and exclusion?

### Covenant Patterns and Perspectives

We have within the Old Testament a weaving together of several different perspectives on what it means for God to make a covenant agreement. If we turn to Genesis 9:1-17, there is an account of the covenant given to Noah that has at its heart a promise made to the whole of creation – to Noah, to his descendants, to every living creature, to the entire created order. It is the all-

embracing promise that there will never again be a flood to destroy the earth. The whole of nature is to know care and protection, and the nations of the earth are to be bound together under this life-giving covenant of God. It has a universal dimension bringing direct blessing to all.

In Genesis 12:1-9 and 17:1-14 the covenant is with Abram, and we begin to lose the inclusive, universal perspective that was there with Noah. The promise of God clearly comes to one person and to his descendents, who are to become a great nation occupying the land given them in the covenant agreement. It is true that as a result all the other families of the earth will be blessed, but such benevolence is clearly derivative and dependent on the primary relationship established between God and Israel. This is a particular covenant, affirming a deep intimacy between God and the descendents of Abram that is symbolised by the act of circumcision for all male babies, and it is only indirectly that anyone else is to receive blessing.

The same can be said with even greater force of both the Mosaic covenant and the Davidic covenant. The Sinai event recorded in Exodus 20 begins by establishing context, affirming that the delivery of a particular people from slavery in Egypt was an act of God who had thus marked them out as belonging to God. As a result, obligations are laid on the people that – if kept – will make them distinct from any other group, and God's promise is given that they will be blessed by land and security. A covenant is established that does not extend to the other inhabitants of the land. In due course, following the arrival of kingship in Israel, a new permanence begins to take shape around Jerusalem and the Temple, and in 2 Samuel 7:18-29 David becomes the focus of covenant promises and commitments. It is David who is chosen by God, who embodies messianic hopes, who will give birth to an everlasting kingdom, and who will bring to the people life and health. A 'royal ideology' emerges as David becomes the bearer of God's unqualified covenant grace to the people, and the rest of the earth, including its nations, becomes little more than Israel's possession. It is a theme rehearsed explicitly in Psalms 2 and 89.

As these various perspectives weave their way through the story of Scripture, we are certainly not presented with any uniform covenant theology. For

example, ambiguous attitudes to kingship existed from the beginning, and efforts were obviously made to curb royal power and make it subservient to the covenant demands of Torah, as witnessed by Deuteronomy 17:14-20. But there is a developing pattern that allows key convictions to emerge with increasing force. Covenant has given to Israel a status; the people are chosen and special, enjoying a measure of God's favour and protection; the space they occupy has been given to them and belongs to them by divine right; they experience the kind of blessing that assures their own continuity on into the future; and the people are called to live in a distinctive way, reflecting their unique relationship with God. Though there is a strand of covenant thinking that embraces the whole of creation, the covenant pattern that emerges with increasing force in the Old Testament is of an agreement between Israel and God characterised by exclusivity.

As we have noted, it is true to say that the covenant blessing given to the nation of Israel is sometimes perceived as the way by which God blesses the other nations as well. Israel is given a vocation and destiny in the world, both as intercessor for the well-being of other nations and as witness to the sovereignty of God, and it was hoped that God's actions towards Israel would be so compelling that other nations would want to join in praise and worship. The foundational covenant texts convey this belief, as do prophetic texts of the exile such as Isaiah 49:6. However, none of this contradicts the deep belief of the people that God's covenant had provided them with an exclusive position within the world order, and it is this exclusivity that begins to cast dark shadows over the use of covenant theology as a basis for faith and practice – both in the past and in the present.

## **Land and Identity**

Perhaps the shadows become deepest when God's covenant commitment is linked with the interrelated themes of the desire for living space and the development of national identity.

The arrival and occupation of the promised land was regarded by Israel as a glorious fulfilment of the covenant pledge made by God, but it can hardly have been good news for those who were there before them.<sup>2</sup> The Deuteronomic tradition is militant in maintaining the right of Israel to clear away the nations who occupy the land, to dispossess them, to destroy them completely, and then to take over the ownership and management of what had previously belonged to them. The ideology is one of a Holy War, and it appears that the gentle mandate given by God to Moses to love the stranger and care for the alien<sup>3</sup> could not be allowed to stand in the way of the quest for living space that was backed by a covenant agreement promising exclusive rights.

The word used to describe the original occupants of the land is 'Canaanite'. It has been suggested that this is not an ethnic term at all, but a code word for exploitative and oppressive social structures that had to be overturned if the promised land was to be a place reflecting the values of the covenant.<sup>4</sup> While that may be so, it is doubtful that the 'Canaanites' would have regarded their own elimination as a sign of a new order marked by justice and freedom. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the Torah, designed to help Israel model new forms of land management that would be nourished by covenant and marked by neighbourliness, did not hesitate to exclude those who stood in the way. This was a brutal takeover, consolidated over time, and rooted in an abiding conviction that the land was a God-given possession of one people. The rules for this act of conquest would, by modern standards, be described as 'war crimes' and 'crimes against humanity', but the controlling belief was that the occupation of the land had divine sanction.

Closely allied with the issue of land is that of national identity. For Israel, the covenant had a fundamental role in enabling the nation to understand itself and its role in the world, bringing to it a powerful belief in its own destiny. Israel was loved by God. It was this love that had singled the people out for rescue from slavery, and this love that gave them the deep conviction that, out of all the peoples on earth, they had been chosen and elected to fulfil God's purposes. There was something special about being a Jew.

With the advent of the monarchy in Israel, it is hard to resist the sense that

the God of the covenant had become inextricably entwined with the conventional power structures and political fortunes of a nation state - and compromised in the process. Whereas meetings with God had been dangerous and unpredictable, now God's presence in the Temple was comfortably assured and divine authority was safely mediated through a human king. The covenant with David served nationalist aspirations. It enabled a strong central authority to develop, and it could be used to explain the increased economic prosperity, to justify growing political ambitions, and to confirm the nation's special status. But even within Israel, not all shared in the fullness of this covenant relationship. As covenant practice became more rigid and institutionalised, those at the boundaries became increasingly excluded, and so we hear prophets such as Amos and Hosea begin to raise their voices in defence of the poor and oppressed, the afflicted and the vulnerable. These are people who are meant to belong, yet discover that when covenant is used as an instrument of control, the misfits and the marginalised rarely find a place around the table.

The use and abuse of the covenant agreement between God and Israel led to the exile, and the sense of trauma and dislocation was extreme. No doubt the land should have been recognised and received as a gift from God, offering a place of home to those who had experienced the wilderness condition of landlessness, but instead it had been grabbed and grasped at the expense of the 'Canaanites' and so now it was lost. No doubt the people's covenant identity should have enabled them to build a different kind of society, marked by fidelity towards God and care for the widow and orphan, but instead it became wedded to just another royal system intent on maintaining the power of the few and so now it had fallen.

Yet the lessons of the exile have not been well learned. Use of covenant theology to justify exclusion and oppression has continued, and many bear the scars and the wounds.



## Power and Politics

The tradition within Scripture linking covenant, land and national identity has had dark consequences for Palestinians during the last half-century. On the eve of war in June 1967, Cabinet Minister Yigal Allon insisted that Israel must hold as one of its central aims 'the territorial fulfilment of the Land of Israel', and the six days of fighting that followed brought together traditional Jewish longings for the land with an aggressive Zionism. Biblical texts were interpreted as no mere literary heritage but living title-deeds, and young rabbi graduates began the task of settling the land in the belief that this was a holy enterprise with redemptive and messianic meaning. Thus, victorious Zionism has been described as 'the high point of covenantal spirituality'.<sup>5</sup>

What of the Arab inhabitants of the land? It was proposed that they be treated with tolerance and respect in accordance with the Torah but in reality, like the 'Canaanites' before them, even this has not happened. They are regarded as an obstacle to the divine redemptive process, and any talk of human rights and national self-determination cannot match unyielding faith in the promise of the covenant that the land belongs to Israel. Once more, the command of God has been used to justify the dispersion and humiliation of a people. Racist and xenophobic attitudes have prospered on all sides, and a form of ethnic cleansing has taken place that has reduced vast numbers of Palestinians to refugee status.

But however disturbing this continuing act of Jewish oppression and discrimination may be, it can only be set in a much wider context that implicates the Christian faith in the abuse of covenant theology. We believe we are people of the new covenant established through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and at least part of that newness has to do with the removing of old boundary markers and the recreation of the relationship between God and humankind. It is a truth announced at the celebration of each Lord's Supper. In Galatians 3:15-29 Paul declares that the promise of the covenant, that was guarded and protected by the Sinai law, is finally fulfilled in Christ so that through faith we are now all heirs of Abraham - both Jew

and Gentile. Christ provides a universal focus as the mediator of God's covenant, gathering up in himself all things.<sup>6</sup> It is as we would expect from one who lived his life in a way that consistently included those who were excluded, whether they were women or men, sick or poor, lepers or prostitutes, tax collectors or foreigners. However, such a vision quickly begins to fade when it encounters the world of power and politics, not least in our own history as an imperial power.

For 500 years the movement of conquest and colonisation was 'always accompanied by language and religion.'<sup>7</sup> On the one hand, political and military actions would deprive native peoples of their land and their self-governance, giving control and ownership to the invader. On the other hand, the Christian narrative would be employed to impose a new culture of interests and values, usurping the indigenous worldview in favour of a Christian view of history.<sup>8</sup> Conquest proceeded on both these fronts, the latter being used to legitimate the former. The process of expansion was about conversion and salvation for those living in darkness and ignorance, whether they were Jews, Muslims, or adherents of a local religion.

What is of particular significance is the growing use of covenant language to explain and justify what was taking place. It was Scripture, notably texts relating to the entry and conquest of the promised land by a people elect of God, that guided and inspired the process of colonisation often in the face of hostility from indigenous peoples, and David Gunn illustrates this well in his study of the documents relating to the conquest of New Zealand in the 1860s. These reveal the attitudes and actions of the settlers towards the Maoris during the course of the land wars,<sup>9</sup> and they enable Gunn to identify the main ways in which Scripture is implicated. Not surprisingly these have to do with both land and identity. To begin with, he notes that during the nineteenth century the idea of being 'chosen people' is 'ubiquitous in British (especially English) thought.'<sup>10</sup> There is frequent reference to Britain's chosen destiny as the bringer of progress and civilisation, with the nation described as fulfilling a divine mission to spread Christianity. So Gunn concludes that election 'is one of the essential doctrines of British colonialism.'<sup>11</sup>

Gunn goes on to look at attitudes to land itself and the images of both wil-

derness and promised land. The colonisers expressed the unquestioning conviction that they have a fundamental right to occupy the land and so to 'improve' it. By European norms it is no more than empty wilderness because it has none of the expected industrial and agricultural usage, and this emptiness enables conquest and occupation to be seen as the will of God, fulfilling the promise to make the land fruitful. Perhaps most chilling of all is the way the fate of the indigenous population, crushed and subdued, is explained by reference to the 'Canaanites'.<sup>12</sup>

There is no doubt that in New Zealand as elsewhere, missionaries were often a moderating influence on colonial settlers. However, their power and influence was limited, and they were far from immune from the general belief that their nation had been entrusted by God with the highest possible responsibility for the development of the whole human race. The export of British civilisation and Christianity extended to all parts of the globe, sustained by a sense of having been chosen and blessed by God for the task. It was not simply greed that drove Victorian colonialism - it was racial and national attitudes that were part of the Victorian ethos, fuelled by a covenant theology adapted from another time and place.

In terms of power of politics, Britain was a winner! It was a victory shared by much of European Christendom, and successful conquest and expansion offered clear vindication of the religion of the conqueror. But of the many who suffered as a result, surely no people experienced exclusion and rejection more than the Jews, and though it is no doubt a complex and nuanced historical picture, the lines linking colonialism and Auschwitz are there to be drawn. Europe's Christian heritage meant that Jews were 'at best regarded as outsiders, at worst as enemies,' and even their acknowledged contributions to culture were too often 'seen as threats to Christian identity.'<sup>13</sup> There could not be two elect and chosen peoples, each claiming a divine right to superiority; there could only be one exclusive claim to faith in the true Messiah. So when the rise of Nazism led to the horrors of the Holocaust, the response of the Christian churches was too often one of silence.

The Holocaust asks fundamental questions of both Christians and Jews, challenging us to rethink covenant theology. While there are strong voices

within both faith communities that argue for the continuing covenant rights of Israel to the violent exclusion of Palestinians, there are other voices that see the Holocaust as a defining moment that demands of us new ways of thinking about and being in covenant. And for Baptists committed to covenant as the continuing basis for our life and mission, it is vital we grasp such an opportunity.

## **The Nature of God**

If it is true that the dark side of covenant has been its use to fuel conflict and discrimination, then we must expect this to have serious consequences for the way we understand the nature and purpose of the God who makes covenant. How is it possible to make sense of a God who forms an exclusive covenant agreement with such tragic implications for those on the outside? How is it possible to make sense of a God who then appears to break that covenant agreement with those on the inside? In summary: what kind of covenant God can we believe in?

For the 'Canaanites', the Palestinians, or indeed anyone else who is left out of a covenant agreement, the question hardly matters. Such a God can be easily dismissed as tribal, racist, militaristic, and vindictive, and alternative pictures for the divine relationship with creation and humankind can be sought. For the Jew it is a different matter, and it has been suggested that during the course of their history there have been three occasions when the question has been posed with real force - the defeat of Judea in 586 BCE, the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans in 70 CE, and the extermination of six million Jews during the Second World War.<sup>14</sup> These three major communal disasters irrevocably altered the Jewish world, and the doctrine of covenant made it impossible to ignore the religious implications of such catastrophes.

One answer has been to interpret each major disaster as divine punishment. Though God had chosen Israel as the object of special love and concern and given a promise of protection, this was conditional upon obedience to the Torah. To ignore the commandments would inevitably lead to punish-

ment. Thus, the prophets continually reminded the people that divine election brought with it responsibilities, and pronounced warnings of the way in which God would use Nebuchadrezzar as an instrument of wrath. A similar kind of answer was given by both the Christian church and the Jewish community to the fall of Jerusalem, but when we turn to the Holocaust the issue becomes more painful. The sin that led to the Holocaust was centuries of Christian anti-Semitism, so why should God have visited such evil on the Jews? How is it possible to see Hitler as an instrument of God's purposes? Why did God remain silent and manifestly fail to fulfil covenant obligations?

The response of Ignaz Maybaum, who served as a rabbi in Germany until 1939, has been to emphasise the mission of Israel to the world as at the heart of covenant. This mission is to bring knowledge of the true God, and God intervenes to help the chosen people continue this task. Thus, using Jesus the innocent victim as his model in order that other nations can understand, he interprets the Holocaust as a divine act of creative destruction - God uses the Jewish people as innocent victims in order to bring the world into the modern age with all its opportunities to know truth, freedom and enlightenment.

Maybaum's argument has enormous problems. It asks us to believe in a God who subjects millions to death for a so-called 'higher purpose', to accept the validity of some kind of sacrificial system, and to express unrestrained enthusiasm for modernity. However, rather than simply gloss over the Holocaust, at least he has sought to give a logical account of the involvement of the biblical God of covenant and election at Auschwitz.

Richard Rubenstein has had the courage to go in the opposite direction. Writing in 1966, he described the idea that the Holocaust could have divine purpose as 'obscene' and suggested that it was no longer possible to believe in the God of the covenant.<sup>15</sup> Auschwitz had convinced him that his religious tradition was bankrupt, that the doctrine of being a chosen people no longer made sense, and that there is a void where once the presence of God was experienced. Rubenstein was unable to accept either a God of limited power who could not save the Jews or an omnipotent God who chose not to end the slaughter, and suggested that we live in the time of the 'death of God'. The God-who-acts-in-history is dead. It is only possible to speak of God as the

‘Holy Nothingness’ and so the roots of faith must be found in the mystical tradition. Clearly for this Jew, the biblical God who made exclusive covenant with Israel is no longer believable.

Although deeply opposed to Rubenstein in many respects, Elie Wiesel has also broken with tradition.<sup>16</sup> He wants to hold on to the God of history, but it seems that for him history is all there is. Death is now the central experience and for Wiesel the power of God manifest in covenant is a memory to be recalled rather than a present reality. His anger at a God who can allow the innocent to die at Auschwitz is starkly portrayed in his autobiography, *Night*, and we are left searching in vain for a way forward into the future.

Those of us who stand within the Christian tradition will need to listen carefully to these voices because we both share the guilt of the Holocaust and share faith in a covenant God. But in the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ we may want to reach for a different kind of answer – one that does not see God as fulfilling the covenant by inflicting suffering on the innocent, nor one that sees no future for any kind of faith in the God of covenant. We will want to picture God as one whose covenant making is inclusive, bearing the marks of openness and vulnerability.

## A Way Forward

In his exploration of the themes of identity, otherness and reconciliation, Miroslav Volf writes that

‘on the cross God renews the covenant by *making space* for humanity in God’s self. The open arms of Christ on the cross are a sign that God does not want to be a God without the other – humanity – and suffers humanity’s violence in order to embrace it.’<sup>17</sup>

An exclusive covenant made with one particular group makes space but only in a way that is limited and confined. It sets up boundaries; it forms rites that determine who is in and who is out; and it maintains these boundaries against

the 'other' by force if necessary. But, as Volf suggests, the God we encounter on the cross refuses to establish boundaries but offers open arms in order to establish relationship – a way of relating that embraces all humanity with a depth and a vulnerability that shares the suffering of humanity. God's gift of open space allows for the building of an inclusive community where relationship is allowed to form identity. Of course, it is highly risky. Covenant becomes a dynamic way of being rather than a set of rules determining what we do, and God limits God's own freedom by becoming open to the possibility of change and rejection. Yet 'every breach of the covenant still takes place *within* the covenant'<sup>18</sup>, for nothing can remove humanity and indeed all of creation from the embrace of God. It is a vision that takes us back to the inclusive covenant made with Noah.

In many ways those of us who belong within the Baptist tradition are well placed to contribute to the recovery of faith in a covenant God who includes rather than excludes. For much of our history we have maintained a healthy distance from authority structures that have involved land ownership and the exercise of political power. We have been a dissenting voice speaking from the margins and so not subject to some of the temptations that have led others to work out covenant theology in dark and dangerous ways.

Yet there are shadows over our own life together as Baptists that should disturb and challenge us to engage in inclusive covenant making. We must be aware, firstly, of those who are pushed to the edges of our church communities. Just as there were those within Israel who did not share the fullness of the covenant relationship, particularly as practice became more institutionalised, so we must note the fact that as our own denomination became more structured in the eighteenth century, the role of women became more restricted.<sup>19</sup> And though formal recognition of women ministers has existed within the Baptist Union since the early years of the last century, the truth is that they continue to experience discrimination and exclusion, pushed to the margins by structures that are predominantly patriarchal. While our commitment to the priesthood of all believers should affirm the gifts of all and allow shared participation in the life of a worshipping community, it is clear that some are more included than others.

We must note, secondly, those who are kept on the outside of our church communities. Our model of membership has tended to move from one rooted in covenant relationship to one that is institutional, having more to do with the right to vote than the responsibility to care, and this results in the exclusion of those who for one reason or another refuse to join. This must make us question current practice, not least because we believe our fundamental calling is to engage in mission, creating spaces of belonging in order that people may make the journey towards believing. Instead of producing communities intent on drawing lines that exclude, we need to be engaged in the task of breaking down barriers that enable and encourage all to find faith. There is, of course, the issue of identity: how do we know who we are and protect who we are when there are no boundaries? Maybe for those communities who believe in the God of covenant, the answer lies not in boundaries that try to exclude but in establishing a strong centre of faith that seeks to attract. It will not be as neat or convenient and will certainly make us more vulnerable and exposed. But perhaps this is living under the sign of the cross.

There is a dark and violent side of covenant that has been there from the beginning and continues to haunt us today. It is a reality that needs to be faced, and the warnings and dangers must be heeded. To do so will require continuing theological vigilance. We will need to picture a vulnerable God who makes inclusive covenant and in doing so models faithful yet risky inter-relatedness. With this God not everything is decided, and nor can everything be controlled. We will need to live in ways that refuse to exercise power in a way that oppresses and excludes. Our core values must include a commitment to justice and equality, resisting all forms of discrimination. If we are led in these directions, then covenant commitment will offer light and hope to the whole of creation.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Covenant 21* (The Baptist Union of Great Britain). This material seeks to help Baptists renew their covenant calling at the beginning of a new century.



<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Deuteronomy 7:1ff and 20:16f.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Exodus 22:21.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Covenanted Self* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), chapter 8.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Prior (ed.) *They Came and They Saw* (London: Melisende, 2000), p. 119.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Ephesians 1:10.

<sup>7</sup> Marc Ellis, *Unholy Alliance* (London: SCM, 1997), p. 59.

<sup>8</sup> Ellis, *Unholy Alliance*, pp. 60-2.

<sup>9</sup> Tod Linafelt, and Timothy Beal (eds.), *God in the Fray* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), chapter 9.

<sup>10</sup> Linafelt and Beal, *God in the Fray*, p. 129.

<sup>11</sup> Linafelt, and Beal, *God in the Fray*, p. 129.

<sup>12</sup> Linafelt and Beal, *God in the Fray*, p. 131.

<sup>13</sup> Ellis, *Unholy Alliance*, p. 44.

<sup>14</sup> Richard Rubenstein and John Roth, *Approaches to Auschwitz* (London: SCM, 1987), p. 303. The section entitled 'Covenant and Election' pp. 300-316 explores various Jewish responses to the Holocaust.

<sup>15</sup> Cited by Rubenstein and Roth, *Approaches to Auschwitz*, p. 311.

<sup>16</sup> For a discussion of the dialogue that has taken place between Rubenstein and Wiesel, see Ellis, *Unholy Alliance*, pp. 12ff.

<sup>17</sup> Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996) p. 154.

<sup>18</sup> Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, p. 156.

<sup>19</sup> Ruth Gouldbourne, *Reinventing the Wheel* (Oxford: Whitley Publications, 1997), p. 17.

## Baptists in Covenant

Steve Finamore

### Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to offer some reflections on the ecclesiological implications of the theological idea of covenant. In some ways these amount to an apology for certain existing and traditional baptistic models of church. Many current practices which seem to be based on habit or pragmatism may be reinvigorated when they are understood in the light of covenant. It may be that they are not currently presented in covenantal terms. It may be that attitudes towards membership and church meeting within Baptist churches could be renewed were covenant taken seriously. Furthermore, some of the structures adopted by Baptist churches anxious to escape what appeared to be the dead hand of tradition may be seen as manifesting an inadequate understanding of covenant.

As other contributions to this collection have demonstrated, the God of the Bible is the God who makes covenant. The covenant within God's own life is the foundation for all other covenants and the goal to which other covenants aspire.<sup>1</sup> God makes covenant with all that God has made and makes particular covenant with particular parts of that creation.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps, as Robert Ellis suggests, the responsibility of humans is to voice the praise of all creation as its steward and representative.<sup>3</sup> The church understands itself as that part of humanity which recognises the call to fulfil this responsibility in a regular and conscious way. The Church is the priesthood of and for creation. The Church is the community which exists, among other things, for the praise of God.

It is of great importance that the covenants made by God are often such

that they constitute a limitation on God's own freedom; God freely chooses to restrict God's own freedom by entering into covenants which help define God's relationship with the created order, or parts of it. God's freedom and the voluntary constraints upon that freedom are the guiding ideas in this paper.<sup>4</sup> It is based on the conviction that this pattern should inform the way in which we form intentional relationships and therefore the way in which we found and organise our churches.

## **The covenantal nature of Baptist churches**

Nearly all churches make some reference to the idea of covenant in their self-understanding. The English (and some other) Baptist Churches belong to that group of churches which see covenant as fundamental to their very existence.<sup>5</sup> Some other churches understand themselves to exist because a bishop has appointed a priest to minister in a particular neighbourhood; others because an evangelist or an appointed elder gathers a congregation around him or herself. Our Baptist Churches exist because a group of people within a town or neighbourhood freely agree to commit themselves to one another before God promising that they will be the church. The words and the rite which they use for the making of these vows is their covenant.<sup>6</sup> It is a shorthand way of referring to mutual public promises made before God by which people respond to the grace of God by promising that they will be God's church. Doing this, as Anthony Clarke shows, is not simply to imitate the image of the divine covenant, it is one of the ways in which humans can participate in the very life of God.<sup>7</sup> Church covenants are not simply an institutional or administrative matter, nor a pragmatic option; they are a manifestation of divine life graciously finding expression in the life of God's people. Our churches are not primarily institutions, they are communities. The covenant gives a framework for understanding what people can expect from one another. It offers a way of expressing, in ways appropriate to the given context, the network of relationships which God has graciously called into being.

It is to do with people and their shared response to God. It is not a means of imposing rigid structures or formal institutional duties on people but a way of promising to be, and to participate in, a community.<sup>8</sup> To be a member of a Baptist church is to be in relationship with God and with other members; that is to say, it is to be in covenant.

The terms of the covenant vary from place to place and from church to church. In that sense they are different covenants. However, they are all derived from the covenant which God has made with humankind through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. They may be understood as culturally conditioned local manifestations of the one new covenant.<sup>9</sup> And the churches which are founded upon them are likewise local manifestations of the one catholic Church.<sup>10</sup>

One important aspect of God's covenant is that God enters it freely. There are no external constraints which oblige God to make covenant. God is constrained only by the love which is the essence of God's own self. In our baptistic view of the church, the local covenant can be made, and therefore local church membership can be entered, only by those who freely choose to do so. In this respect we differ from other ways of understanding the nature of the church. In these constraint is regarded as legitimate. For example, some churches are established by law and there is a presumption of commitment. Others believe that the magistrate has authority to act in matters affecting the internal life of the church.<sup>11</sup> Some claim, following Augustine and Aquinas, that the civil powers may legitimately compel the reluctant to become members of the church.<sup>12</sup> While some of these positions are rarely advocated today, the position of these churches can be seen in the attitude which they take to baptism where covenant vows are taken on behalf of others, usually infants, who are in no position to speak for themselves.<sup>13</sup>

Each Baptist Church therefore consists of those people gathering in a given place who have freely chosen to be baptised (or having been baptised within a different tradition choose to confirm their baptismal vows before the church) and to make covenant with one another.<sup>14</sup> Its essence depends on the mutual promises freely given and trusted. Of course, the promises are made in dependence on the greater promises of God. The church does not depend

for its existence on the covenant promises of its members. It depends on God and God alone. It understands itself as having been called into being by God, gathered by Christ. A church's covenant simply acknowledges, articulates and offers a flexible framework for understanding, what God has done and is doing.

The foundational place of the covenant in baptistic understandings of the church has implications for Baptist understandings of ordained ministry. If covenant is the essence of the local church, then the presence of ordained ministry is not. Churches can and do exist without ordained ministers. The ordained ministry is not of the *esse (being)* of the church.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, God gives certain gifts and callings to the church for its *bene esse (well being)*, to help it be more true to its calling and the ordained ministry comes into this category. While ministers and others may exercise a degree of authority by virtue of their particular callings, since the church can exist without them it follows that authority in the church cannot rest with them.

## Authority

Our churches consist of those who have publicly vowed, in baptism and covenant making, to follow Christ. While they will heed the advice of those with particular ministries among the churches, in the final analysis, humanly speaking, the covenanted members have nothing and nobody else to rely on in their commitment to be the church, other than their mutual promises. Seeking the mind of Christ for their shared life is therefore a matter of some urgency and is the responsibility of all. The church meeting is the name we give to the gathering of members for this purpose. It may appoint people to carry out certain pastoral, administrative and other tasks and to give it advice on discerning the leading of God,<sup>16</sup> but the responsibilities freely undertaken in covenant making cannot be delegated. Sadly, in many places our church meetings have become institutionalised as business meetings. They are run on the adversarial lines of debating chambers with people speaking for or

against particular positions. In fact, the real purpose of spoken contributions to church meeting is not to win arguments but to enable the meeting as a whole to listen for the mind of Christ. The form of the meeting may therefore vary from one occasion to the next for it is an expression of relationship, not a legal obligation. Since Christ is Lord of the church and the church meeting is charged with discerning his mind, it can rightly be said that authority rests with the church meeting; the covenanted people of God discern God's will together.

### **Covenanted membership and belonging**

Given the argument pursued so far, it may appear that the church is understood as a committed and narrowly defined group. Only those who are members, only those who have made covenant, are the church. In some ways such an understanding is regrettable, but it is a consequence of basing our understanding of church on our convictions about the freedom of God. It is not, however, the whole picture.

One of the issues this view of the church raises for us concerns the many Christians who are active in our churches but who do not take membership. The church needs to make it clear that as far as it is concerned, these people are members; they are fulfilling the terms of the covenant even if they have never formally made it. Nevertheless, the church cannot compel anyone to make vows and so cannot treat these people as members until they freely choose to do so. They may be encouraged to become what they are, but they have the freedom to belong to the church in the way they see fit.<sup>17</sup> In other words, there are different ways in which one can belong to a church. The covenanted members are the ones who have accepted that they are called to share the divine life to the extent of freely making covenant to be the church. Others may exercise their freedom to belong in other ways.

## **Belonging and the place of children**

Baptists believe that God is loving, open to the world and working to embrace everything that God has made. This affects our self-understanding. It means that we accept that covenanted membership is only one of the ways in which people belong to the church. The active non-members also belong as do those who simply attend once in a while, as do all those who have some active or passive link with a church organisation or activity and regard the church as in some sense theirs. Everyone is free to choose their own way of belonging.

For these reasons, everyone is welcome to attend services and other activities and attempts are made to encourage people to freely choose to become more and more committed to Christ and his church. This applies to children within the life of the church. They belong to the church in ways which are appropriate for their stage of development. The fact that they have not reached the age at which they could understand the implications and responsibilities of baptism, covenant making and membership, does not mean that they do not belong. It means we are constantly searching for ways to give appropriate expression to the manner in which they do belong and these will necessarily change as children mature (and as the church's understanding develops).

## **The church's purpose**

One of the things which the church does is to guard and to pass on the stories of God's covenant making, in particular the story of the covenant God makes or re-makes through Jesus. The stories are found in the Bible and the church therefore uses this book as the means by which it hears what God has done, what God has said, and what God is like. The Bible's contents were determined by Church representatives and so it is to that extent the creation of the Church. However, the story of the making of the new covenant, the story

which we call the gospel, was told by the apostles in order to summon the first churches into being. While the Church may (in some sense, anyway) be prior to the Bible, it is not prior to the gospel.

The churches maintain themselves and reproduce themselves through the telling of the gospel. This is done in a number of different ways. Passages from the canonical gospels are read. The story of the initial impact of the gospel is read.<sup>18</sup> Canonised interpretations of the story and its implications for the world are read.<sup>19</sup> The teachers of the church re-tell the story, suggest analogies and illustrations, engage in rhetoric to persuade congregations of its truth, undertake in apologetics in respect of it and so on.<sup>20</sup> Drama and dance offer bodily enactments to interpret the story. Songs which tell and interpret the story are sung. Pieces of music inspired by the story are performed. Most importantly, perhaps, there are two formal re-enactments of the story which are integral to the church's life. These are baptism and the Lord's supper. In the former the candidate is physically and spiritually identified with Christ in his death and resurrection. In the latter the participants bring to mind the announcement of the new covenant (the last supper) and the acts which made it effective (the death, resurrection and exaltation of Jesus).

## **Covenant renewal**

The Lord's supper is the meal which celebrates the achievements and the promises of God's new covenant. It mediates God's grace and summons a response in faith from those who participate. There is therefore a sense in which the local church renews its covenant with God every time that it celebrates the Lord's supper. The enactment of the story, the remembrance of God's acts in Jesus, the promise of Jesus' presence, and the anticipation of the story's future culmination, mediate a fresh infusion of God's grace, a reminder that the story and its effects are a gift, a manifestation of the deep, extravagant and undeserved love of God. The initiative is God's but once the



bread and wine have mediated God's grace, a human response of commitment is appropriate; a renewal of covenant promises.<sup>21</sup>

In addition, some Baptist churches find it appropriate to have an annual service in which their local covenant is explicitly renewed. This differs from the annual Methodist covenant service because the focus of the Methodist service is on the renewal of the covenant of the individual Christian with God.<sup>22</sup> Covenant renewal among Baptists usually takes the form of promises by those gathered that they will be, and will support one another in being, the church in a particular place. The vows are preceded by a summary of the covenant acts of God and the local church's covenant is understood as something made in response to the divine initiative, and a local manifestation of the one great covenant.<sup>23</sup> There is no reason why non-members, including visitors, in the congregation may not be invited to read the terms of the covenant with the members. This may be understood as an act of solidarity on their part. It might also provide an opportunity for encouraging the consideration of covenanted membership.

## **The interdependency of Baptist churches**

Baptist churches regard themselves as being derived from God's new covenant. They are a local manifestation of the catholic Church called into being by that covenant. Some expression must be given to this belief. The local church is not independent of the wider Church. This understanding is given expression by the forming of associations of churches in a wider geographical area, of unions of churches and associations in a nation<sup>24</sup>, and of alliances of unions across continents<sup>25</sup> and across the world.<sup>26</sup>

It also finds expression in relationships with other churches. We are *a* (not *the*) local manifestation of the catholic church. Even if we differ from others in our understanding of the best way to be the church, we recognise others as true and legitimate churches. We relate to them through local ecumenical organisations, through Churches Together in England, through Churches To-

gether in Britain and Ireland, the European ecumenical groupings, and the World Council of Churches.

## **Baptist churches and mission**

The churches are aware that they do not know the gospel or the story of God's covenant making for their own benefit alone. These are things which God has entrusted to them for the sake of the world. The church therefore tries to find ways to re-present the story to others. The new covenant shows that God in his love is open to the world. Our churches seek to be the same. The very nature of the covenant inspires the church to engagement with others. This is the mission of God in which the churches seek to share.

As Graham Sparkes makes clear, communities which understand themselves in covenant terms run certain risks.<sup>27</sup> They easily become exclusive. The claim to be modelling in the present, albeit provisionally, what will occur at the consummation of all history<sup>28</sup> at least opens the door to the possibility of claiming superiority or possession of a higher truth which might legitimately be imposed on others. Tim Carter's thorough exegesis of Romans 2.28-29 makes it clear that Paul taught that the true people of God will be revealed as part of the eschaton. In the mean time we do well to remember the provisional nature of our signs of belonging and to be wary of using them to exclude others. For membership of the universal church is invisible.<sup>29</sup> The task of Baptist churches is to engage with the world in such a way that people freely choose to enter covenant with us. And this invitation is open to all without distinction but can never be imposed on anyone without contradicting its own nature.

Churches may group together for the sake of mission in other parts of the country<sup>30</sup> or the world<sup>31</sup>. However, each church's primary place of mission is the village, town or neighbourhood of which its members are a part. Potentially at least, the church is for all the inhabitants of its wider community. The ways of being church which a local church adopts in its worship, fellow-

ship and mission will inevitably reflect the culture of its members. However, the church will try to be church in such a way that all sections of the local population can be included and begin the process of being drawn to Christ. Thus our churches will often be, or will at least aspire to be, communities of people of all-ages, including single people and those living in families, and drawn from different ethnic groups and with backgrounds in different classes, education systems, cultures, etc. This will often cause some tensions but in doing this the church offers a better account of the gospel which calls it into being and which is for all of humankind without distinction.

### **Re-forming covenant**

The gospel (although not necessarily its interpretation) is a given but the local covenant is a culturally conditioned expression of it. Therefore the form of the covenant may vary not only from place to place but also from time to time. A church may occasionally decide to review and to amend its covenant. It remains the same church. However, a church which discarded its covenant and adopted a wholly different one in its place might be best understood as re-founding itself or as closing down and re-opening. This may well be an appropriate response to changing circumstances. The gospel is permanent and the catholic church is permanent but local manifestations of them may be provisional and temporary.

### **The place of church trusts**

In addition to its covenant a church may have one or more subsidiary documents whose purpose is to facilitate the performance of its covenant undertakings. For example, there may be a trust deed and a set of church rules. In legal terms these documents might well have a high status and one or other of them may even be regarded as the founding document of the church. They

are therefore important and need to be taken seriously. Nevertheless, in terms of the ecclesiology being outlined, they exist to help churches to perform their covenant promises and so are secondary rather than primary documents in the life of the church.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, our churches are called into being by the new covenant made by a free God acting purely out of love. All our covenant making is a way of responding to divine grace and seeking to participate in the divine life. In response to God we covenant together to be God's people in particular places. People may choose to belong in different ways to these churches but what grounds the local church is a covenant of mutual promises made before God. This gives expression to a series of relationships; those sought with God, those among the covenanted members, those with people who belong to the church in other ways, relationships with others and with the world. The grace of God is expressed in covenant making and it is appropriate that human response to divine grace, in accepting his gathering of us into the communities we call churches, be made in the same terms.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Anthony Clarke, *The Covenantal Basis for God's Trinitarian Life* shows that God has freely willed that relationship and community expressed in covenant be at God's own heart. See above p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Ellis in *Covenant and Creation: A Prospectus* argues that God's covenants with humans are part of a network which are embraced by God's covenant with the whole of creation.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Ellis, *Covenant and Creation: A Prospectus*. See above, p. 30.

<sup>4</sup> As Ernest Payne in *The Fellowship of Believers: Baptist Thought and Practice*

*Yesterday and Today*, (London: Carey Kingsgate Press, 1952) implies, freedom has long been a Baptist watchword. In discussing the Gainsborough covenant of 1606, drawn up by those who described themselves as ‘the Lord’s free people’, he writes, p. 36, ‘Baptists have claimed freedom from the authority of any sacerdotal hierarchy, freedom from the State, freedom of conscience, freedom of private judgement.’

<sup>5</sup> This is becoming increasingly accepted as evidenced by Paul Fiddes’ contribution to *Bound to Love, Covenant 21*, and initiatives like this collection of essays. However, leading Baptists have not always granted it the same significance. Payne, *The Fellowship of Believers*, p. 36, writes of those who ‘constitute themselves churches by the election of officers, the observance of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and Christian discipline, and who find an extension and expression of their life in free association...This, in outline, is the Baptist doctrine of the Church as visible.’ He does not mention covenant in this context. Although the Baptist confession of faith of 1689 in its section on the church says of members that ‘such saints willingly consent to walk together according to the appointment of Christ, giving themselves up to the Lord and to one another’, it does not specifically use the word *covenant*.

<sup>6</sup> Some Baptist churches possess a written covenant document. In others the covenant is implied in the ways in which the church is organised.

<sup>7</sup> Anthony Clarke, *The Covenantal Basis for God’s Trinitarian life*. See above, pp. 16-17. A point also made by Marcus Bull, *Divine Complexity and Human Community*. See above, p. 51.

<sup>8</sup> See the argument in Graham Sparkes’ *The Dark Side of Covenant*. See above, pp. 69-70.

<sup>9</sup> Or, taking Robert Ellis’s point in *Covenant and Creation: A Prospectus* it might be better to say the eternal covenant between God and creation which was renewed in Jesus. See above, p. 28.

<sup>10</sup> Or visible manifestations of the one invisible church.

<sup>11</sup> E.g. The Westminster Confession of Faith 23, *Of the civil magistrate*

<sup>12</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 2.2.11.3 (see <http://www.newadvent.org/summa/301103.htm>) argues that heretics should not be tolerated and may be killed. Augustine’s *Letter to Donatus – Letter 173* (see <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1102173.htm>) allows the use of force to compel heretics such as the Donatists to enter the Catholic Church.

<sup>13</sup> *Common Worship* provides that at holy baptism the president may address the candidates directly *or through their parents, godparents and sponsors*. The candidates promise *inter alia* that they turn to Christ as Saviour and submit to him as Lord.

<sup>14</sup> This is the position of those Baptist churches which practice 'open' membership. Churches with closed membership also exist.

<sup>15</sup> They may be of the esse of the Church Universal...

<sup>16</sup> Ministers, officers, elders and deacons have these roles within our churches. Individuals speaking within church meeting, and who are heard as speaking prophetically, are heeded as guides to the mind of Christ.

<sup>17</sup> This is different from the category of 'adherents' found in some of the reformed churches.

<sup>18</sup> The Book of the Acts of the Apostles.

<sup>19</sup> The New Testament letters and the Book of Revelation.

<sup>20</sup> Preaching and teaching.

<sup>21</sup> As Anthony Clarke argues in *The Covenantal Basis of God's Trinitarian Life*, covenant making is a process which expresses relationship. See above, p. 17. The high points of the relationship include the Lord's supper as well as specific occasions of covenant affirmation.

<sup>22</sup> The covenant prayer begins 'I am no longer my own, but yours. Put me to what you will...' It ends with the words 'And the covenant which I have made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven.'

<sup>23</sup> The covenant of the Baptist Church in Westbury-on-Trym in Bristol was drafted by G. Henton Davies in 1947. It contains many of these elements. The original text reads:

WE, the Foundation Members of the Westbury Baptist Church,  
REMEMBERING that when God had redeemed His people Israel from the bondage of the Egyptians, He made a Covenant with them, whereby He became their God and they His people:

AND RECALLING that, when this same people had broken this Covenant, God promised that He would make a new Covenant with them, written in their hearts with forgiveness of sins, and knowledge of Him:

AND BELIEVING that the promise of this new Covenant was fulfilled in the Person and Work of our Lord Jesus Christ, in His Death on the Cross, and in His glorious

Resurrection:

DO SOLEMNLY COVENANT TOGETHER that we will respond to this, His great love toward us, “in repentance toward God, and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ”, by Maintaining in this place the ministry of the Word and the observance of Ordinances;

Walking in obedience to Christ, as His Will is made known to us by the Holy Spirit; And setting ourselves to extend His Kingdom throughout the world, in fellowship with the whole Church, and over the whole range of life, personal, social, economic and international;

IN TOKEN WHEREOF WE PLEDGE OURSELVES

To faithful attendance at Divine Worship, whereby we give to God the glory that is His due, and receive His gifts of Grace;

To the regular practice of prayer and meditation, whereby we gain an understanding of God’s Will, and strength to perform the same;

To loyal support of the work and witness of His Church, by personal service and conscientious giving.

<sup>24</sup> Such as the Baptist Union of Great Britain.

<sup>25</sup> E.g. the European Baptist Federation.

<sup>26</sup> Such as the Baptist World Alliance.

<sup>27</sup> Graham Sparkes, *The Dark Side of Covenant*.

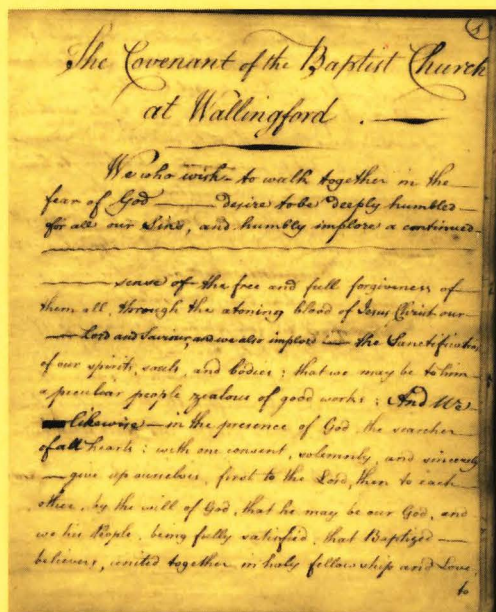
<sup>28</sup> See Marcus Bull, *Divine Complexity and Human Community*.

<sup>29</sup> Tim Carter, *Removing the Label*. See above, pp. 40-41.

<sup>30</sup> As in Home Mission.

<sup>31</sup> As in BMS World Mission.

In the 1980s a group of Baptist Ministers produced a book entitled *Bound to Love*, in which they explored the relevance for Baptist life of the concept of covenant. Now, in 2002, a new group of Baptist Ministers have taken up this same theme, and have produced a booklet that continues to reflect on how an understanding of covenant expands our understanding not only of Church, but also the world and the very being of God.



The cover shows two historic covenant documents in which gatherings of Baptist Christians expressed their thankfulness to God and their commitment both to God and to each other. The front cover shows the first page of the Church book of the Baptist Church at Abingdon, from 1728, and the back cover shows the first page of the Church Book of the Baptist Church at Wallingford, from 1794. Both of these are held by the Angus Library, Regent's Park College, Oxford to whom we are grateful for being able to reproduce them here.