Puritan Exegesis Supporting the Covenant of Redemption

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By Thomas Parr, ThM

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> My Son, here is a company of poor miserable souls, that have utterly undone themselves, and now lie open to my justice! Justice demands satisfaction for them, or will satisfy itself in the eternal ruin of them: What shall be done for these souls?
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> O my Father, such is my love to, and pity for them, that rather than they shall perish eternally, I will be responsible for them as their Surety; bring in all thy bills…. I will rather choose to suffer thy wrath than they should suffer it; upon me, my Father, upon me be all their debt.
>
> But, my Son, if thou undertake for them, thou must reckon to pay the last mite, expect no abatements; if I spare them, I will not spare thee.
>
> Father, let it be so.[1]

Abstract

This paper defines historically what is meant by the covenant of redemption, gives a brief account of the idea's origins and development, and reveals how two English Puritans used biblical exegesis to support it.

The doctrine is defined using various sources, ensuring that the definition has broad historical support and is not idiosyncratic. The history of the idea is derived from the work of church historians and theologians such as Geerhardus Vos, Andrew Woolsey, Joel Beeke, and J. V. Fesko. Puritan scriptural and exegetical support for the doctrine takes up the bulk of the paper; the paper utilizes the work of two Puritans primarily: William Strong (d. 1654) and John Flavel (1627-1691). Strong in particular is utilized, for his work was highly regarded in his day but has languished in 17th century editions ever since. Thus, the paper contributes to scholarship by recovering the work of a profound but neglected Puritan on this important theological topic, allowing his viewpoints to be compared with those of his better-known fellow.

[1] Adapted from John Flavel, *The Works of John Flavel* "The Fountain of Life" (1820 repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1982), 1:61.

Covenant of Redemption Defined

Whether one considers early sources or modern ones, there is broad unity about the meaning of the term "covenant of redemption." Consider the following four writers who represent a wide variety of backgrounds in post-Reformation history.

Independent theologian John Owen (1616–1683) articulated the doctrine in his commentary on Hebrews:

> There were eternal transactions between the Father and Son concerning the redemption of mankind by his interposition or mediation…. These were federal, or had in them the nature of a covenant.[2]

The London Baptist Confession of 1689, representing the views of many Particular Baptists, not only affirms the idea of a "covenant of grace," but it states that this covenant was "founded in that Eternal Covenant transaction, that was between the Father and the Son, about the Redemption of the Elect."[3]

Princeton Theologian Charles Hodge (1797–1878) taught the existence of a covenant of redemption, and his definition is in keeping with those already cited: It "is …the covenant between the Father and the Son in reference to the salvation of man …. clearly revealed in Scripture"[4] and "formed in eternity."[5]

Contemporary theologian J. V. Fesko says, "The covenant of redemption is the pre-temporal, intra-trinitarian agreement among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to plan and execute the redemption of the elect."[6]

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[2] John Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (1855 repr., Evansville, IN: Sovereign Grace, 1960), 2:76, 84.
[3] *Second London Baptist Confession*, 7, 3.
[4] Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (1872 repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 2:359
[5] Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 2:360.
[6] J. V. Fesko, *The Trinity and the Covenant of Redemption* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Great Britain: Mentor, 2016), 131. Another contemporary definition includes the Spirit: The Covenant of Redemption "is an agreement among the

Whether one looks at Puritans, Particular Baptists, Princetonians, or modern Reformed scholars, the covenant of redemption is present in their writings. Geerhardus Vos said that the doctrine "lies firmly in the principles of Reformed theology."[7] It has played a significant role in Reformed thought for centuries, and the above quotations are representative of many more that could be added.[8]

Four threads run through all the definitions above: *first*, the nature of the specified relations is covenantal; *second*, the parties of the covenant are the members of the Trinity; *third*, the subject, or matter, of the covenant is man's redemption; *fourth*, the timing of the covenant is pre-temporal or even supra-temporal, or eternal. Puritan John Flavel seems to capture these four elements in the most succinct form: "The business of [3] man's salvation was transacted upon [1] covenant terms, [2] betwixt the Father and the Son, [4] from all eternity."[9] Some formulations emphasize that the Spirit took part in this covenant whereas others focus solely upon the Father and the Son.[10]

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in which the Son agreed to become a man, be our representative, obey the demands of the covenant of works on our behalf, and pay the penalty for sin, which we deserved." Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 518.

[7] Geerhardus Vos, "The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology" in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1980), 252.

[8] J. V. Fesko lists many theologians who taught the covenant of redemption: David Dickson, Jacob Arminius, Herman Witsius, Franciscus Gomarus, Gisbertus Voetius, Patrick Gillespie, Samuel Rutherford, John Owen, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Hodge, Geerhardus Vos, Louis Berkhof, and more. J. V. Fesko, *The Trinity and the Covenant of Redemption*, 129–130. The doctrine appears to be almost solely propounded by Reformed thinkers.

[9] John Flavel, "The Fountain of Life," in *The Works of John Flavel*, 1:53.

[10] Fesko labels these two approaches as a "trinitarian covenant" on the one hand and a "christological model" on the other. See J. V. Fesko, *The Trinity and the Covenant of Redemption*, 129–130. This assessment seems a bit drastic, since the Christological model makes the Father central to the covenant as well as the Son. It might be correct to say that one method is more fully Trinitarian, though it is difficult to find biblical material on the Holy Spirit's role in the covenant of redemption. There may be a reason that the earlier theologians limited discussion to the Father and the Son. They did not deny that the Spirit had a role, but they limited discussion to the information the text of Scripture provides.

Relation to Other Doctrines

The covenant of redemption appears to be an explicitly Trinitarian way to conceive of election. When God chose his people from before the foundation of the world, he did not do so as a monad, uttering decrees alone on his throne. The covenant of redemption insists that election be self-consciously understood in terms of Trinitarianism. Election was the result of the gracious hearts of the members of the Trinity as they communed together. The doctrine is committed to the Christian conception of deity, and it integrates that conception into its views of God's decree.

The theologians surveyed above sometimes explain the usefulness of the covenant of redemption, particularly how it ought to be integrated into other areas of theology. To select just one example, Flavel explains that it impinges upon our understanding of the effectiveness of Christ's intercession:

> That his blood shall obtain what it pleads in heaven for is undoubted, and that from the consideration of this covenant of redemption. For here you see that the things he now asks of his Father, are the very same which his Father promised him, and covenanted to give him, before this world was.[11]

Origins and Development of the Doctrine

There has been some confusion about the origins of the doctrine, but several recent investigations have cleared up its chronology and development. It appears that the rudimentary idea arose in the Reformation era, but full articulation occurred later in the Puritan era.[12]

Louis Berkhof claimed that the idea arose around the times of Johannes Cocceius (1603–1669),[13] but actually it was first articulated in the writings of Johannes Oecolampadius (1482–

[11] John Flavel, *The Works of John Flavel*, 1:60.

[12] Doctrines often form in a rudimentary way, then later are carefully defined and developed, as people have time to reflect. See Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines* (1937 repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1969, 1997), 20–24. Vos explains that "In tracing back the development of a doctrine, one should simply take care not to attach too much importance to the name…. Stock phrases usually do not appear at the beginning, but only at the end of a development." Geerhardus Vos, "The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology" in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*, 248.

1531). In his commentary on Isaiah published in 1525, Oecolampadius affirmed that God the Father made a covenant with his Son.[14] "He writes of the *pactum cum filio sua domino nostros Ihesu Christo* ('covenant with his Son our Lord Jesus Christ')."[15] Second generation reformer Caspar Olevianus (1536–1587) further developed "the interaction between the Father and the Son" in this covenant.[16]

The doctrine appears to have been first fully articulated by Scottish theologian David Dickson (1583–1663). He gave "the first explicit statement and exposition of the doctrine at the General Assembly of the Scottish Kirk in 1638."[17] By the mid-1600s the term was in widespread use. William Strong, preacher at Westminster Abbey, used an approximation—"the covenant of man's redemption"—in the early 1650s, and his writings contain a lengthy exposition of the doctrine.[18] Francis Roberts (1609–1675), perhaps the mightiest of all English covenant theologians, is said to have found the idea in the writings of Cocceius.[19] It is clear therefore that

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[13] Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1958, 1998), 265. Berkhof writes "Still others, since the days of Coccieus, distinguish two covenants, namely, the covenant of redemption (*pactum salutis*) between the Father and the Son, and, as based on this, the covenant of grace between the triune God and the elect." Vos refers to a theologian named Gass who ascribed the doctrine of the covenant to Coccieus. Geerhardus Vos, "The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology" in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*, 248.

[14] Andrew Woolsey, *Unity and Continuity in Covenantal Thought*, (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 211–212. Joel Beeke and Mark Jones give the date of Oecalampadius' commentary on Isaiah as "c. 1523." Joel Beeke and Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life* (Grand Rapids, Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 239.

[15] J. V. Fesko, *The Covenant of Redemption: Origins, Development, and Reception* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht Gmbh & Co KG, 2015), 37.

[16] J. V. Fesko, *The Covenant of Redemption: Origins, Development, and Reception*, 37. Vos, agreeing with Heinrich Heppe, traced the origins of the idea back to Olevianus in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*, 248–49.

[17] J. V. Fesko, *The Trinity and the Covenant of Redemption*, 8. The title of Dickson's address was "Arminianism Discussed" and is found in *Records of the Kirk of Scotland, containing the Acts and Proceedings of the General Assemblies, from the Year 1638 Downwards*, ed. Alexander Peterkin (Edinburgh: Peter Brown, 1845), 156.

[18] William Strong, *A Discourse of the Two Covenants*, (1678; repr., Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2011), 135. Strong's treatment of the covenant of redemption runs from pages 124–159 of his tome and contains roughly 35,000 words.

[19] Won Taek Lim "The Covenant Theology of Francis Roberts." (Ph.D. diss., Calvin Theological Seminary, 2000), 128. Roberts wrote *Mysterium & Medulla Bibliorum*, a 1721-page work of roughly a million words on the covenants. It is one of the greatest works ever produced by any Puritan writer on any subject.

the doctrine "is a characteristic of seventeenth-century Reformed covenant theology."[20] But its origins lie in first-generation Reformation thought.

The covenant of redemption has always had its detractors, most recently Karl Barth and Robert Letham.[21] Detractors claim that it undermines the Trinity and leans toward tritheism; they so emphasize the unity of the godhead and the indivisibility of the divine will that they do not permit the idea of agreements among the members of the Trinity.[22] John Owen was aware of this criticism in his own day and offered a reply: if the members of the Trinity are indeed distinct persons, he argued, they can enter into agreements with one another.[23] Geerhardus Vos and J. V. Fesko later articulated the identical defense of the doctrine.[24]

As interesting as the historical development of the doctrine is, it is a legitimate concern that around the time of the Reformation "the *pactum salutis* seems to appear *de novo* on the stage of church history."[25] An idea's origination in the 1500s does nothing to convince people of its truth who want to ground their theology in the explicit teaching of the Bible. This is in fact how the Puritans thought as well, and this is why listening to them becomes compelling, for they taught that the doctrine was not the result of theological creativity but had been discovered in the text of Scripture. Their exegesis for supporting it is illuminating and intriguing.

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[20] Won Taek Lim, "The Covenant Theology of Francis Roberts," 127.
[21] J. V. Fesko, *The Trinity and the Covenant of Redemption*, 46, 174.
[22] J. V. Fesko, *The Trinity and the Covenant of Redemption*, 174.
[23] Owen said "Although it should seem that because they are single acts of the same divine understanding and will, they cannot be properly federal, yet because those properties of the divine nature are acted distinctly in the distinct persons, they have in them the nature of a covenant…. Such is the distinction of the persons in the unity of the divine essence, as that they act in natural and essential acts reciprocally one towards another." John Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, 2:77, 87.
[24] "To push unity so strongly that the persons can no longer be related to one another judicially would lead to Sabellianism and would undermine the reality of the entire economy of redemption with its person-to-person relationships." Vos, *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*, 246. The triune unity does not eliminate dialogue and interaction, indeed communion, among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. To recognize the category of agreement (or covenant) simply entails acknowledging the unity of the triune will as it is manifest in the three unique persons of the trinity." J. V. Fesko, *The Trinity and the Covenant of Redemption*, 180.
[25] J. V. Fesko, *The Trinity and the Covenant of Redemption*, 4.

Puritan Exegesis Supporting the Covenant of Redemption

Two English Puritans, William Strong (d. 1654) and John Flavel (1627–1691), provide models for how Puritans more generally supported a "covenant of redemption" with biblical exegesis.

John Flavel on the Covenant of Redemption

Flavel's treatment of the covenant of redemption is found in his book *The Fountain of Life*. The book "offers a comprehensive Christology with a devotional accent. Chapter 3 alone, on the covenant between the Father and the Son, is worth the price of the book."[26]

The organization of Flavel's chapter is as follows: he first supports the doctrine exegetically. Then he proceeds to discuss its various motifs—the parties of the covenant, the matter over which they covenanted, the fact that their interaction was indeed covenantal, the stipulations on both sides, their faithful performance of the stipulations, and the timing of the covenant in eternity. At the end, Flavel draws six inferences from the doctrine. The entire discussion occupies roughly ten printed pages and is remarkably rich.[27]

Flavel derives his exegetical support from observations of Isaiah 53:10–12.

> It was the will of the LORD to crush him;
> he has put him to grief;
> when his soul makes an offering for guilt,
> he shall see his offspring; he shall prolong his days;
> the will of the LORD shall prosper in his hand.
> Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied;
> by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant,
> make many to be accounted righteous,
> and he shall bear their iniquities.
> Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many,
> and he shall divide the spoil with the strong,
> because he poured out his soul to death
> and was numbered with the transgressors;

[26] Joel Beeke and Randall Pederson, *Meet the Puritans* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2006), 253.
[27] John Flavel, *The Works of John Flavel*, 1:52–62.

yet he bore the sin of many,
and makes intercession for the transgressors. (Isaiah 53:10–12 ESV)

Flavel says that these clauses tell us how Christ "came to sustain th[e] capacity and relation of a Surety for us."[28] Referring to 53:12 in particular, Flavel observes three ideas: "In this verse we have, 1. His work. 2. His reward. 3. The respect or relation of each to the other."[29]

First, Flavel discusses Christ's redemptive work. Flavel points to four statements that describe Christ's ministry as both sacrifice and intercessor—"*To pour out his soul unto death …being numbered with transgressors* …'he bare the sins of many' …'he made intercession for the transgressors.' This was his work."[30]

Second, Flavel discusses Christ's reward for his work.[31] The verse provides "a plain allusion to conquerors in war, for whom are reserved the richest garments, and most honourable captives to follow the conqueror to his magnificence and triumph."[32] Flavel is referring to Isaiah's statement that God will "divide him a portion with the great, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong" (53:12). The verse shows the Father rewarding Christ with greatness and spoil, which he then divides with others.

Third, Flavel comments on the relation the work has to the reward. There is a causal connection between the work and the reward, which is reflected in the KJV translation: "because he hath poured out his soul." Christ receives the reward *because* he completes the work. Flavel notes that the Hebrew word לָכֵן which introduces the verse can refer to chronological order or causality, but either way, "it is plain … that the Father here agrees and promises to give him, if

[28] John Flavel, *The Works of John Flavel*, 1:52.
[29] John Flavel, *The Works of John Flavel*, 1:52.
[30] John Flavel, *The Works of John Flavel*, 1:52.
[31] John Flavel, *The Works of John Flavel*, 1:52.
[32] John Flavel, *The Works of John Flavel*, 1:52–53.

he will undertake the redemption of the elect, by pouring out his soul unto death."[33] Flavel is saying that the reward is gained on condition of completing the redemptive work. This is a helpful insight and one that shows the astute exegesis of which Flavel is capable.[34]

A covenant involves stipulations and rewards which flow from a solemn agreement.[35] According to Flavel, Isaiah 53 shows that there was indeed such a covenant between the Father and the Son—a covenant concerning redemption.

Later in his chapter, Flavel refers his reader to 2 Timothy 1:9 to support the idea that this covenant is eternal.

> Who saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and grace, which he gave us in Christ Jesus before the ages began. (2 Timothy 1:9 ESV)

Flavel asks, "What grace was that which was given us in Christ before the world began, but this grace of redemption?"[36] Thus Flavel has demonstrated that there was an agreement between the Father and the Son concerning both Christ's redemptive work and the reward the Father would give him upon his completion of it, and this agreement was decided in eternity.

It is worth noting that Flavel also discusses at length the Father's promises to Christ—promises to invest Christ with the threefold office of prophet, priest, and king; promises to

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[33] John Flavel, *The Works of John Flavel*, 1:53. Oswalt focuses on the causal nature of לָכֵן. Cf. John Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah Chapters 40-66* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 405.

[34] Flavel's observation of Isaiah 53:12 appears to have been a common means of supporting the covenant of redemption. Herman Witsius makes the identical point in his *Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man*, 1:190, alongside many other supports and proofs. Flavel published his book in 1671, and Witsius published his *Economy* originally in Latin in 1677, so they were roughly contemporary. See Joel Beeke and Randall Pederson, *Meet the Puritans*, 811. But neither Flavel nor Witsius originated the observation. Vos notes that William Ames (1576–1633), in his arguments against the Remonstrants, used Isaiah 53:12 to prove a covenant between the Father and the Son. Geerhardus Vos, *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*, 250. It is entirely possible that Ames did not originate it either but discovered it in a previous writer.

[35] This is how many English Puritans defined a covenant in general. For example, John Ball explained that a covenant proper occurred when two parties concur on reward and stipulation. See John Ball, *A Treatise of the Covenant of Grace*, (Published by Simeon Ash. London: G. Miller for Edward Brewster on Ludgate Hill near Fleet-bridge at the Sign of the Bible, 1645), 3–4.

[36] John Flavel, *The Works of John Flavel*, 1:59.

"assist and strengthen him" (Isa. 52:5–7), to "crown his work with success" (Isa. 53:10), to "accept him in his work" (Isa. 49:4), and to "reward him highly for his work" (Psa. 2:7; Acts 13:32–33).[37] Flavel is less rigorous in analyzing these other Scriptures. Nevertheless, his handling of Isaiah 53:12 lays the exegetical groundwork for interpreting these others passages, and his exegesis shows an aptness for analytical engagement with—and an impulse to root doctrine in—the text of Scripture.

William Strong on the Covenant of Redemption

Puritan William Strong (d. 1654) was a preacher at Westminster Abbey during the era of Oliver Cromwell. He was a member of the Westminster Assembly and was highly regarded in his day as one of the most astute theologians among the Puritans. His magnum opus, *A Discourse of the Two Covenants*, is a massive tome of roughly 500,000 words. It contains a lengthy discussion of the covenant of redemption.

Two phases of Strong's thought are relevant here. First, he examines Galatians 3:16 and from it argues that the covenant of grace was made primarily with Christ. Second, he marshals an array of passages to prove that the covenant of grace is rooted in the covenant of redemption.[38]

The Covenant of Grace Made Primarily with Christ: Galatians 3:16

The Westminster Larger Catechism, on which Strong labored, says that "the covenant of grace was made with Christ as the second Adam, and in him with all the elect as his seed," and it uses Galatians 3:16 as its first proof-text for this.[39]

> Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, "And to offsprings," referring to many, but referring to one, "And to your offspring," who is Christ. (Galatians 3:16 ESV)

[37] John Flavel, *The Works of John Flavel*, 1:55–57.
[38] William Strong, *A Discourse of the Two Covenants*, 124–160.
[39] WLC, Q31.

Strong says that in Galatians 3:1–17 Paul is doing two things: supporting justification by faith alone and asserting that the Mosaic covenant did not and does not annul that way of faith.[40]

Strong wants to prove that salvation by faith was arranged with Christ first, so he directs attention to Galatians 3:16. Strong analyzes the verse by asking questions—what are the "promises" it mentions? And who is the "seed" mentioned?[41]

Strong's *first question* is "what is meant by the promises?"[42] He aims to prove that Galatians 3:16 does indeed refer to the covenant of grace, and not to any narrow or "this-world-only" understanding of the Abrahamic covenant. Paul's understanding of "promises" is broad—the promises are called "the covenant" in verse 15 and "the promise" in verse 17.[43] Furthermore, Paul has in mind the promise of justification by faith alone, since that is the particular promise he dwells upon in verses 1–17. Thus, Paul is discussing the Abrahamic covenant and the wide-variety of promises contained in it: The promises include "promises of this life and of the life to come."[44] In short, the covenant of which Paul writes involves many promises but includes spiritual salvation by faith.

To a Puritan, the complexity of these promises sounds like the covenant of grace,[45] which God began promulgating in rudimentary form at Genesis 3:15 and of which the Abrahamic

[40] William Strong, *A Discourse of the Two Covenants*, 124.
[41] William Strong, *A Discourse of the Two Covenants*, 125–26.
[42] William Strong, *A Discourse of the Two Covenants*, 125.
[43] William Strong, *A Discourse of the Two Covenants*, 125.
[44] William Strong, *A Discourse of the Two Covenants*, 125.
[45] It was commonly accepted among Reformed and Puritan exegetes that the "promises" and "covenant" mentioned in Galatians 3:16–17 refer to the covenant of grace. Calvin, commenting on verse 16, said "If Christ be the foundation of the bargain, it follows that it is of free grace." Calvin, *Commentaries*, (repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), XXI, 1, 94. James Fergusson commented on Galatians 3:16—"after the covenant of works …was broken …he was graciously pleased to enter a covenant of grace with fallen man, to deliver him from the estate of sin and misery, and to bring him into a state of salvation by a Redeemer, Rom. iii. 21, 22. This is that covenant here spoken of: 'the covenant that was before confirmed of God in Christ.'" James Fergusson, *A Brief Exposition of the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians* (1659–74 repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1978), 57. Francis Roberts says that "the Covenant of Faith [grace] and Promises are made unto Christ, as

covenant is a progression or expansion.[46] Strong's key point is that *Paul is referring to salvation, among other things, when he mentions "promises."*

Strong's *second question* is "what is meant by Christ here the seed of Abraham, not seeds as of many?"[47] Strong's primary point is that Christ is the receiver of the promises, but in a different way than Abraham received them. Abraham believed the promises, but Christ confirms them (Gal. 3:17).

Strong refers to two common Christian interpretations of "seed, which is Christ"— either Christ the person or Christ's body, the church. Strong incorporates both options into his own view —"it is to be understood both of Christ *Personal* primarily and principally, and afterward Christ *Mystical*."[48] Strong emphasizes its reference to Christ the person.

Strong gives two reasons for understanding "seed, which is Christ" as referring to Christ the person. *First,* "the person to whom the promise is made is the same in whom all the Nations of the Earth should be blessed" (Gen. 22:18).[49] Strong is interpreting things in light of the broader context of Scripture. The seed spoken of throughout Genesis must be understood as the personal Messiah, who was first promised in Genesis 3:15 and was referred to again in 12:3 and 22:18, not to mention 49:10. Strong's *second* reason that the seed must refer to Christ the person

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well as to his Seed," and then he proceeds to exegete Galatians 3:16 to prove it. Francis Roberts, *Mysterium & Medulla Bibliorum; The Mystery and Marrow of the Bible, viz God's Covenants with Man* (London, 1657), 77. Poole concurs in Matthew Poole, *Commentary on the Whole Bible,* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010), 3:650.

[46] As another Puritan put it—"The promises made to Abraham, were but the exhibition of the eternal covenant of grace, made between the Father and his Son Christ … which covenant was promulgated, as to Adam and Noah, so to Abraham." See Matthew Poole, *Commentary on the Whole Bible,* 3:650.

[47] William Strong, *A Discourse of the Two Covenants,* 125.

[48] William Strong, *A Discourse of the Two Covenants*, 126. Calvin reveals no acquaintance with the "Christ mystical" interpretation and simply asserted that Paul meant that the "seed" referred to Christ the person. See Calvin, *Commentaries*, vol. XXI, 1, 94–96. James Fergusson prefers interpreting the "seed" as referring to Christ mystical, or the church; Fergusson, *A Brief Exposition of the Epistles of Paul,* 55, 57. Francis Roberts held a view similar to Strong's—that it refers both to Christ personal and mystical. See Roberts, *Mysterium & Medulla Bibliorum*, 851. Poole and Henry both show awareness of the two views but put a priority on Christ personal. See Matthew Poole, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 3:650 and Matthew Henry, *Commentary*, (repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991, 2006), 6:532.

[49] William Strong, *A Discourse of the Two Covenants,* 126.

stems from an observation of the immediate context. Galatians 3:17 adds that the covenant was "confirmed before of God in Christ" (KJV).[50] This cannot be understood collectively and must be understood as the person of Christ, since it is in Christ that "all the promises of God are Yea and Amen."[51] Christ is the one who confirms God's promises, not the people of God.[52] Therefore, in light of both the broader and immediate contexts, the seed must be interpreted as Christ the person.[53]

Strong's discussion provides clarity—the context of Galatians 3:16 indicates that the promises to which Paul refers include salvation by faith, that is, the covenant of grace. Furthermore the seed is Christ the person as the confirmer of the covenant. The covenant of grace is therefore made primarily with Christ as the confirmer of it.

The Reality of the Covenant of Redemption

If the Father made the gracious Abrahamic covenant of faith with Christ, it raises the question of when covenantal dealings between the Father and the Son began. The doctrine of the covenant of redemption answers—in eternity. Strong supports the eternal covenant in five interrelated points.

First, Strong proves the reality of an inter-trinitarian covenant. In Isaiah 49:8, the Father assures Christ that "in an acceptable time have I heard thee, and in a day of salvation have I

[50] William Strong, *A Discourse of the Two Covenants*, 126.
[51] William Strong, *A Discourse of the Two Covenants*, 126. Strong alludes to 2 Corinthians 1:20—"all the promises of God in him are yea, and in him Amen, unto the glory of God by us."
[52] Francis Roberts comments on the phrase "confirmed before of God in Christ" (Gal. 3:17). He says that this means that the covenant of grace was "fore-ratifyed" in Christ as the covenant head through whom would come all the blessings of the covenant. See Roberts, *Mysterium & Medulla Bibliorum*, 533. It was ratified before the Mosaic covenant, and therefore it cannot have been nullified by the Mosaic covenant.
[53] Ever the exhaustive exegete, Strong interacts with two common reasons that people saw the "seed" of Galatians 3:16 as the church, but this will be, perhaps mercifully, left out for the sake of space. Sufficient to say that Strong doesn't accept that the seed refers only to, or even primarily to, the church. Nevertheless, he does admit that it is not possible to view Christ the person in a way that fully separates him from his body. Strong shows how both views should be combined: "from hence we do learn that the Covenant of Grace is made with Christ Personal the Mediator, and …there [are] none in the Covenant but they that are one with him." Strong, *Discourse*, 126.

helped thee: and I will preserve thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people" (KJV). Just as Flavel observed on Isaiah 53, *this statement involves promises and stipulations*—the Father promises the Son to help and preserve him, and he commissions the Son to be "a covenant of the people." Once again we see a Puritan showing us that Isaiah's servant songs reveal agreements between members of the Trinity, and therefore the covenant in fact exists.[54]

Second, Strong shows that the covenant is eternal, and he does so by an array of texts.

> He is said to be our Covenant, as he is our peace; for he is … the Head of the Confederates, not only by purpose in himself, but by promise; there was Grace given us before the world began (Tit. 1:2; 2 Tim. 1:9), it could not be unto us in our own Persons before we were, and therefore it must be unto another as one that undertook for us: and therefore we read, Rev. 13:8, there was the Lambs book from the foundation of the world.[55]

Strong makes explicit this covenant's eternality by correlating Isaiah 49:8's reference to the Son being "a covenant of the people" with Titus 1:2 and 2 Timothy 1:9, similar to Flavel on Isaiah 53. Both 2 Timothy and Titus speak of grace for believers in eternity past—"there was Grace given us before the world began."[56] Strong adds a further layer by noting that that the book of Revelation speaks of Christ's having a book of life in which are written the names of his people from the beginning of the world (cf. Rev. 13:8; 17:8; cf. Phil. 4:3).[57] Strong's point is that, when correlated with these verses, it is apparent that the arrangements of Father and Son revealed in Isaiah 49:8 occurred in eternity past.

One might protest that it is illegitimate to combine the Pastoral's statements about eternity with Isaiah 49:8, since the Isaianic passage reveals Trinitarian discussion that occurred

[54] William Strong, *A Discourse of the Two Covenants*, 126. The view that Isaiah 49:8 records God's words to Christ has broad Reformed and Puritan support. Calvin said—"What the Prophet adds, *I will give thee to be a covenant*, is applicable to no other than Christ." Calvin, *Commentaries*, vol.8, Isaiah 55–66 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), II, 22. Francis Roberts agreed in *Mysterium & Medulla Bibliorum*, 1105–06. Poole and Henry agree in Matthew Poole, *Commentary on the Holy Bible*, 2:438 and Matthew Henry, *Commentary* 4:217. John Owen agreed in *Works of John Owen* (1850–53. repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965), 10:170.
[55] William Strong, *A Discourse of the Two Covenants*, 126–27.
[56] William Strong, *A Discourse of the Two Covenants*, 127.
[57] William Strong, *A Discourse of the Two Covenants*, 127.

in history, not eternity. Strong's correlation however relies on an important idea—that God's plans about salvation did not spring into his mind at a certain point in time. Nothing ever "occurs" to God, for he is omniscient and eternal; he knows all, and he always has. Trinitarian dealings are revealed in Isaiah 49:8 (and elsewhere) because they had already existed in eternity past. God's gracious thoughts "are no new thoughts, but such as God took up from eternity, and such transactions as past [sic] between God and Christ before his coming into the World."[58] The Bible's revelations of inter-trinitarian dealings are wondrous bursts of light from everlasting counsels in the heavenlies. They are "vast thoughts of Glory that the Lord … laid up there."[59] Thus these statements from Isaiah do indeed reveal eternal transactions between the Father and the Son.

Third, Strong further supports the covenant of redemption by alluding to various statements in John in which Jesus says that the Father gave believers to him (cf. John 6:37; 17:2, 6, 8–9, 11, 24). "The Lord gave the souls unto Christ that he should save."[60] Naturally, in light of his previous point, the divine gift-giving that John refers to must also be part of the inter-trinitarian dealings that occurred before the world began. The thoughts of divine gift-giving can be "no new thoughts" either.

In a stroke of theological synthesis, Strong combines the statements about God's gift-giving with the idea of the book of life that he mentioned earlier. "Christ did write them down in his book as the persons that God the Father had given him, and he had engaged to save."[61] This provides a remarkably clear picture of eternity, which might conceivably be to us a forbidding plane of being. But God in eternity is shown to be busy about plans of mercy; the Father gives

[58] William Strong, *A Discourse of the Two Covenants*, 130.
[59] William Strong, *A Discourse of the Two Covenants*, 130.
[60] William Strong, *A Discourse of the Two Covenants*, 127.
[61] William Strong, *A Discourse of the Two Covenants*, 127.

the elect to the Son; the Son affectionately records each gift's name and commits to saving each. Heaven is revealed to be a world of love.

Fourth, Strong demonstrates that the covenant of redemption correlates well with other doctrines, for example prolepsis. God forgave Old Testament saints (cf. Rom. 3:25; Heb. 9:15) based on the eternal covenant.[62] The Father planned to send the Son to save the elect, including those who lived before Christ. God passed over their sins, knowing that Christ would come to make satisfaction for them. If God saved people in the Old Testament era based on an "advance" of Christ's earned blessings, then clearly there were eternal plans between Father and Son (cf. Eph. 3:11).

Fifth, Strong clears up a difficulty in Old Testament interpretation. This fifth point seems to go beyond simply proving the doctrine; Strong is demonstrating its potency in untying difficult interpretive knots. Strong draws the reader's attention to Proverbs—"The Lord possessed me in the beginning of his way, before his works of old. *I was set up* from everlasting, from the beginning, or ever the earth was" (Prov. 8:22–23).[63] The words "I was set up" translate the Hebrew term נָסַךְ. A survey of the term's use in the Old Testament reveals that it mostly refers to the pouring out of drink offerings.[64] But in Psalm 2:6, where the Father sets up his king on Zion, it refers to the installation of the Messiah.[65] Strong says that Psalm 2:6 refers to "the transactions between the Father and the Son before the World was."[66] He therefore thinks that the reference to wisdom being "set up" must refer to the same thing, the covenant of redemption, for it cannot mean that the Second Person of the Trinity is a created being as Arians presume. "I

[62] William Strong, *A Discourse of the Two Covenants*, 127. "By vertue [of this covenant] God pardoned all the sins of the ancient Saints."
[63] William Strong, *A Discourse of the Two Covenants*, 127.
[64] William Holladay, ed., *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 239.
[65] William Strong, *A Discourse of the Two Covenants*, 127. Few Christian interpreters argue with Strong on this point.
[66] William Strong, *A Discourse of the Two Covenants*, 127.

know not what else could be the meaning of" it, Strong says, a point coincidentally on which John Owen concurred.[67] Strong points out that the immediate context supports his view, for Proverbs 8:31 reveals that the delight of wisdom is "with the sons of men," in "the habitable part of his earth"—a clear reference to God's grace, since people dwelling throughout the earth are all fallen.[68] Therefore, Strong reasons, Proverbs 8 refers to Christ being "set up" as savior in the covenant of redemption.

In these five points Strong has demonstrated that the covenant between the Father and the Son exists; it was made for the benefit of Christ's people in every era, and it was transacted before the foundation of the world.

Just as Flavel observed that the doctrine illumines our understanding of Christ's intercession, Strong notes that it influences our understanding of prayer. It transforms prayer from a one-on-one communication into a group communication. With the covenant of redemption firmly in mind, God's invitations to prayer become encouragements to enter a conversation that has been carried on between the members of the Trinity since eternity, a conversation that flows from their eternal thoughts of redemption.

> Pray unto God that he would perform his Covenant to his Son…. A man should seek unto God for the accomplishment of all things concerning his Son; and there are no Prayers that come up unto the Lord with so much acceptation as those do…. Press God with his engagement to his Son, and he can deny thee nothing.[69]

Conclusion

This sampling of Puritan exegesis demonstrates that the Puritans believed wholeheartedly that the covenant of redemption was not a theological concoction, but that it had been discovered

[67] William Strong, *A Discourse of the Two Covenants*, 127. John Owen harmonizes well with Strong on Proverbs 8. See Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews, 2:61–68*.
[68] William Strong, *A Discourse of the Two Covenants*, 130.
[69] William Strong, *A Discourse of the Two Covenants,* 137.

in the text of Scripture itself. Whether or not they were indeed exegeting Scripture or committing eisegesis is up to each reader to decide.

It might be best to leave off by referring to a final inference. Flavel wants Christians to not merely know the doctrine but to be assured by it.

> We are often stumbled at the grand defects on our parts. But when we look to the covenant of redemption there is nothing to stagger our faith, both the federates being infinitely able and faithful to perform their parts; so that there is no possibility of a failure there. Happy were it, if puzzled and perplexed Christians would turn their eyes from the defects that are in their obedience, to the fullness and completeness of Christ's obedience; and see themselves complete in him, when most lame and defective in themselves.[70]

[70] John Flavel, *The Works of John Flavel*, 1:59.

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