

Theology

R. K. McGregor Wright

Seminar: **COMMENTARY ON R. SCOTT CLARK'S COVENANTALISM (7)**

17. With regard to justification and salvation, the Mosaic covenant was an administration of the covenant of grace.

This is just a standard expression of the traditional covenantalist theory that particular historic covenants are mere “administrations” (Berkhof’s “faint copy”) of a meta-covenant in some theological realm above and distinct from history. One is reminded of Schaeffer’s “upper story.” But if the meta-covenant did not exist, a particular historic covenant cannot be an “administration” (or dispensation) of it. New Covenant Theology would rather have the biblical covenants stand in their own integrity. The attempt to pick out “justification and salvation” from the many provisions of the Mosaic system is an example of the dilemma faced by all believers in the universal covenant of grace, as to how to define the similarities and differences between these covenants which they refer to as the “continuity-discontinuity” problem. This problem becomes most acute when their defenses of infant baptism and sabbatarianism come into view. The Theonomists “solve” it by carrying everything they possibly can from the Mosaic law-system over into the New Covenant, omitting only the sacrificial (or “ceremonial”) parts. Rushdoony uses both the Talmud and the Romanist Canon Law to illustrate how this might be done in the present era, with the hope of using both moral and civil categories of laws to “sanctify and redeem” modern culture as a whole. This in turn presupposes that the mediaeval tripartite division of the Mosaic laws into *moral*, *civil*, and *ceremonial* categories actually works. It doesn’t, being only an approximation for educational purposes only, many laws fitting into more than one category. Nobody can honestly claim that the weekly Sabbath was moral, but not ceremonial or civil. It clearly was all three, and this is so for many other laws. The attempt to select some Mosaic injunctions to enforce on British (or Massachusetts) society failed in the 15-1600s and was never intended for gentiles anyway, being Israel’s National Constitution in their Land. The determination of covenantal Theonomists to impose bits of the Law on the New Covenant believer is refuted energetically by the Apostles in the NT documents, starting with the Jerusalem council in Acts 15.

The Mosaic Covenant assumed the fact of justification by faith alone because it assumed the literal validity of that principle as expressed in the Abrahamic Covenant. It also assumed the literal validity of the Land *promises*, “which the Law did not disannul” (Gal 3:15-17). Each covenant has its own unity, and no part can be arbitrarily cut out by a later covenant (Gal 3:15). Only by totally and publicly replacing it by a new covenant can an earlier covenant be abolished. Nothing ever replaces the Abrahamic Covenant, and the Mosaic is replaced in its unified entirety by the New. No imaginable exegesis can show that the Abrahamic Covenant was ever abolished or replaced by the New. No imaginable exegesis has ever shown that the New Covenant only replaced bits and pieces of the Mosaic system. The Mosaic system is a unity and every part of it stands or falls together. As a law-system it was “added” (Gal 3:19) and then it was “taken away” again (Heb 10:9), having performed its three functions of identifying sin, pointing to Christ, and keeping the Nation separate from the Gentiles while preserving the Remnant, Paul’s “root” into which I was engrafted in 1953 (Rom 11:13-24, NASB). The Remnant are the “Jews indeed” (John 1:47, Rom 9:8), who have the faith of Abraham.

18. The Israelites were given the land and kept it by grace (2 Kings 13:23) but were expelled for failure to keep a temporary, typical, pedagogical, covenant of works (Genesis 12:7, Exodus 6:4, Deuteronomy 29:19-29, 2 Kings 17:6-7, Ezekiel 17).

True. But there is no way of effectively separating the “works” part of the Mosaic system from the “grace” parts. They are so interwoven that they are effectively interdependent, because the Mosaic

Covenant is *conditional*; only by keeping the whole lot could anyone under it be justified by it, and only one Man did that. In practice, “by the Law can no flesh be justified,” for “the Law made nothing perfect (sanctified)” (Heb 7:19, 10:1), and any Christian who returns to place himself under it places himself under its *curse* (Gal 3:10-14). It was only by the grace implied in the sacrifices that any Jew could be forgiven under the Law, and that forgiveness only lasted one year, when all had to be repeated, as long as the People were in the Land. They were there in their Land when Jesus died “outside the gate” of the capital city (Heb 13:12), and they will be there again when he returns (Zech 14). Then they will accept the New Covenant which is permanent, substantial, unconditional, and no longer “pedagogical,” being a covenant [wholly] of grace (Jer 31:31-37, Rom 11:25-29).

19. The covenant of grace, initiated in history after the fall, was in its antepenultimate state under Adam, Noah, and Abraham, its penultimate state under the New Covenant administration and shall reach its ultimate state (eschatological) state in the consummation.

This expresses the theory that the “one and eternal” covenant is “administered” in successive dispensations. This meta-covenant is of course, purely imaginary and is really just an abstract construct. It would be more biblical to let each historic covenant speak for itself in its own context, which is what NCT does. The traditional covenantalist model blurs the differences between the biblical covenants and assumes continuities that do not exist, especially legalisms borrowed from the Mosaic and foisted on the New in order to justify a state-church reformation, and “sanctify” a whole city-state community. Naturally, there was a strong “antinomian” reaction against this process in the Puritan period, when Grace was supplemented by Law in a theonomically-enforced *social* covenant.

20. The term “Old Covenant” is used in Scripture to refer to the Mosaic epoch, not every epoch before the incarnation, nor to all of the Hebrew and Aramaic scriptures indiscriminately.

This is correct. In fact, the term “old covenant” refers *solely to the Mosaic system* and never to the OT text at all. It especially does not refer to the elaborate system of worship in Ezekiel 40-48 which has never existed in history to be “abolished.” Nor is the OT text replaced by the NT text in the way the New Covenant replaces and abolishes the Mosaic. Both texts are together the inerrant and eternal Words of God, and express the revelation of the Logos (2 Tim 3:14-17) who united them in his own incarnate consciousness (Jn 14:25-26, 2 Pet 3:15-16). If God wants to reopen the Canon in the Millennium he can, but right now the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures are the sufficient, inerrant, unified, necessary, authoritative and perspicuously effective Words of God (these are the “perfections of Scripture” of post-Reformation thought). It is necessary to say all this only because some Christians neglect the OT text and may even mistakenly denigrate “the God of the Old Testament” as if he were not in fact “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Eph 1:3).

21. The New Covenant is new relative to Moses, not Abraham. 22. The Old Covenant was temporary and typical of the New Covenant.

The first of these two theses is true enough, but the second is ambiguous because the term “typical” needs to be qualified by saying that there were “typical features” in the Mosaic Covenant (such as sacrifices and feasts) that were literally fulfilled in the person and work of Christ. Specifically, there are no grounds for thinking that the Land promises of the Abrahamic Covenant referred to in the Mosaic legislation were only “typical,” or ever abolished, or fulfilled in the present state of the Church. No statement can be found in the NT text to warrant such a notion. The Abrahamic Covenant is still in force as the historic condition and foundation of the later covenants.

AQUILA AND PRISCILLA STUDY CENTER



R. K. McGregor Wright is the author of ["No Place For Sovereignty" published by IVP](#). His interests are Historical Theology, Apologetics, cultural critique, /etc/., and he has enjoyed a longstanding interest in eschatology. His academic credentials are an Associate diploma in Arts and Education from Adelaide University (he is an Aussie), a London University BD, a ThM in Apologetics and Systematic Theology from TEDS (IL) and a PhD from the University of Denver in Historical Theology (Dissertation on

John Owen).

R. K. McGregor Wright retains the copyright to all of his articles and they are published with his permission. Additional information about the ministry of Dr. Wright can be found at the [AQUILA AND PRISCILLA STUDY CENTER](#).