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Unity and Continuity in Covenantal Thought

Andrew A. Woolsey

Unity and Continuity in Covenantal Thought:

A Study in the Reformed Tradition
to the Westminster Assembly

Andrew A. Woolsey



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Unity and Continuity in Covenantal Thought
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Foreword

The appearance of Andrew Woolsey's *Unity and Continuity in Covenantal Thought* marks a significant juncture in the study of the development of early modern Reformed theology. Woolsey's dissertation, completed in 1988, is the first (and after more than two decades, remains the only) major attempt in English to present a view of the movement of Reformed thought on covenant from its Reformation origins to the more detailed formulations of the early to mid-seventeenth century. This fact alone identifies the importance of the publication of Woolsey's work.

Beyond this, Woolsey's work came at a time when the mid-twentieth-century analyses of covenant theology as either a positive strand of the Reformed development alternative to the Genevan line or as a problematic deviation from the supposed norm set by Calvin's *Institutes* seemed to dominate the field. From the perspective of the second decade of the twenty-first century, we can look back at both of these approaches to the history of covenant thought and recognize them as defective—the former having first created and then juxtaposed and compared entire “schools” of thought that never actually existed and the latter having rested its approach to the documents on a highly dogmatized attempt to set Calvin against the “Calvinists” and to claim his thought as a lonely early modern precursor of neo-orthodoxy. Writing in 1988, Woolsey clearly identified the problems in both of these approaches to covenant thought and produced a carefully wrought developmental study that has stood the test of time.

The importance of Woolsey's work can be seen from a brief glance at other extant narratives of the history of covenantal thought, including

two that were written more recently. Among the older works, Heinrich Heppe's *Geschichte des Pietismus und Mystik in der reformirten Kirche* (1879) recognized the importance of federal theology to the piety of the Reformed and included a chapter in which Heppe surveyed the covenant thought from Bullinger and Musculus via such thinkers as Polanus, Ursinus, Olevianus, and Cloppenburg to the Westminster Confession and Helvetic Formula Consensus, with a separate section devoted to Cocceius and the Dutch debates over Cocceian theology. Although he identified his survey as developmental, Heppe paid little attention to influences, interactions, and chronology. Heppe's deficits, together with his rather selective approach to the thinkers who influenced Reformed covenantal thought—notably omitting Calvin—is certainly in part responsible for some of the problematic bifurcations found in later accounts. Woolsey's account respects chronology and carefully places both Calvin and Beza into the narrative.

Gottlob Schrenk's *Gottesreich und Bund im älteren Protestantismus* (1928) surveyed the continental materials for the sake of providing a background to the work of Johannes Cocceius. There is an advance on Heppe's account inasmuch as Schrenk looked to Zwingli and Calvin in addition to Bullinger as sources of early covenantal thought—although he can certainly be faulted for what amounts to a cursory examination of the *Institutes*, without any inquiry into the covenantal materials found in Calvin's commentaries, a problem perpetuated in the more recent work of J. Wayne Baker. Schrenk also tended to perpetuate the view of Bullinger as the primary source of covenantal thought by stressing the path taken by Bullinger's followers—to the exclusion of followers of Calvin and, oddly, with the identification of Musculus as a follower of Bullinger! The only British thinker discussed by Schrenk is William Ames who, of course, spent his most productive years as a professor at Franeker in the Netherlands. Even Schrenk's discussion of the formalization of the two-covenant model, in which the British theologians were so instrumental, examines only continental writers (Gomarus, Polanus, Wollebius, Eglinus, and Wendelin). Schrenk's work also has the defect of preserving aspects of an older line of argument that understood covenant theology, in particular that of Cocceius, as offering a biblical, salvation-historical counter to the "scholastic" dogmatics of the era. Woolsey's study not only draws Calvin's and Beza's

work more fully into the picture, it draws out the history toward the Westminster Confession by way of the neglected British development.

There are, in addition, several works on the history of covenant theology more recent than Woolsey's study that need to be mentioned if only to indicate that, despite its date, Woolsey's work remains crucial in its detail, balanced analysis, and above all in its conclusions. The first of these is Cornelis Graafland's three volume *Van Calvijn tot Comrie: oorsprong en ontwikkeling van de leer van het verbond in het Gereformeerd Protestantisme* (1992–1994). Even taking into account his omission of many writers associated with British covenantal thought, Graafland's work is certainly the most detailed and encompassing study of the history of Reformed covenant theology to date and, taken simply as such, offers a detailed presentation of the history the dimensions of which are broader than Woolsey's work, whether in the number of writers examined or in chronological scope. This being said, Graafland's work, at its foundation, is a dogmatic monograph working out perceived tensions and oppositions between the doctrine of predestination understood as a speculative central dogma and a form of determinism and the doctrine of covenant understood as an account of the historical relationship between God and human beings. Graafland sees the beginnings of the problem in Calvin's thought and then traces out an intensification of the opposition between the two doctrines by focusing on Beza's purported distortion of Reformed thought in a predestinarian direction and what Graafland takes to be the ongoing antagonism between the predestinarian and covenantal trajectories of Reformed theology—despite the fact, we might add, that in an age of doctrinal polemics like the seventeenth century, when antagonisms over relatively minor points of doctrine often developed into heated controversies, there was no major debate such as Graafland's thesis would require between Reformed proponents of predestination and their federal counterparts. Graafland, in other words, does not take the discussion beyond the "Calvin against the Calvinists" and bifurcated Reformed tradition theories of the mid-twentieth century, whereas Woolsey's work achieves precisely that result.

Another more recent work, Peter Golding's *Covenant Theology: The Key of Theology in Reformed Thought and Tradition* (2004), although different in scope and therefore offering discussions of figures and of doctrinal questions not touched on in Woolsey's study, fails to address

the scholarly issues in a convincing manner. Golding's work lacks careful, detailed examination of the works of sixteenth-century theologians and, albeit recent, is not at all up-to-date in its grasp of the scholarship, omitting reference to the works of Bierma, McGiffert, and van Asselt and relying largely on older secondary sources—even seeming to accept the claims of Trinterud concerning a distinct “Zwingli-Bullinger-Tyndale” tradition. Golding does dispute the problematic reading of covenant theology by J. B. Torrance but given the lack of detailed examination of sources and the absence of reference to recent scholarship, the rebuttal is weak.

Woolsey's work fits into this developing scholarship on the history of covenant thought in several ways: it provides a lucid examination and critique of the scholarship up to its time, it fills a gap in the examination of the primary sources, and it offers a substantial alternative to the problematic lines of argument that we have noted other approaches to the history have taken, whether in the earlier works with which he was acquainted or in the more recent works. The study begins by setting the stage for Woolsey's thesis in an introductory examination of historiographical problems related to the interpretation of the Westminster standards and then delves into the issue of covenantal thought in the Westminster Standards (chaps. 1–2), followed by an exhaustive two-chapter analysis of nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholarship on covenant (chaps. 3–4).

After surveying patristic and medieval backgrounds (chaps. 5–6), his study looks in detail at a representative list of the British and continental writers who contributed to the early development of federal thought: Luther, Oecolampadius, Zwingli, and Bullinger (chap. 7), followed by detailed chapters on Calvin and Beza (chaps. 8–13). The addition of Luther and Oecolampadius to the list of early Reformers involved in the development of covenantal thought both anchors covenantal thinking more fully in the early Reformation and serves to illustrate a broader early sourcing of covenantal thinking than the Zürich Reformation. Woolsey's careful examination of Calvin and Beza not only helps to dispel those aspects of the “Calvin against the Calvinists” and “central dogma” mythologies that have attached to the examination of covenantal thought, showing Beza to be in substantial agreement with Calvin; it also clearly and fully sets aside the claims of massive difference between Calvin and Bullinger. Woolsey is attentive

to differences in nuance, but he is also clear that there is agreement on the basic issues of grace and works, law and gospel, covenant and predestination—recognizing with Bierma and against Baker that there is no clear distinction between unilateral and bilateral approaches to covenant and that Bullinger’s covenantal interest did not produce a more anthropocentric approach to salvation.

The final part of Woolsey’s study explores the early orthodox approach to covenant and the rise of emphasis on the two covenants, works and grace, in the thought of Ursinus and Olevianus (chaps. 14–15), Cartwright, Fenner, and Perkins (chaps. 16–17), and Knox, Rollock, and Howie (chaps. 18–19). Here, Woolsey demonstrates definitively that the covenantal emphasis of Ursinus cannot be characterized as reactions against the supralapsarian tendencies or nominally scholastic accents in Beza’s thought and more than Olevianus’s approach to covenant can rightly be described as giving impetus toward a Calvinistic or Bezan theology of unilateral testament—largely because the neat dichotomies of much of the earlier scholarship concerning unilateral vs. bilateral covenant or federalism vs. predestinarianism have been shown to be inoperative. This basic point carries over into Woolsey’s treatment of Cartwright, Fenner, and Perkins, where attempts to place the British writers into one or another stream of covenantal thought (unilateral or bilateral) or to claim “tensions” between these two concepts of covenant are seen only to confuse the materials. The inclusion of Scottish thinkers is also of considerable significance both inasmuch as they have typically been left out of the picture in discussions of covenant thought and inasmuch as Knox, Rollock, and Howie all illustrate the continental connections of British Reformed theology and, in the case of the latter two thinkers, further document the broad continuities of covenantal development from the era of the Reformation into the era in which the so-called two-covenant model of works or nature and grace came to be a central theme in Reformed thought. Woolsey well reveals the diversity of formulations found among the writers analyzed but he also just as clearly indicates how this diversity belongs to a fairly broad Reformed confessional tradition.

—Richard A. Muller
Calvin Theological Seminary
September 2012

Acknowledgments

Shortly after the presentation of this work as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Glasgow University, September 1988, a contract was signed to prepare an edition for publication. This was moving steadily towards a deadline when a reader appointed by the publisher took the manuscript overseas. By the time it came back the deadline had passed, other pressing activities in church life had taken precedence; and like Ezra's rebuilding of the temple, "the work ceased," and the idea of publication was abandoned.

Then came Dr. Beeke. He was convinced that the work still had some contribution to make in the current debate in the field of covenant theology. During successive visits to Northern Ireland his friendship and gracious persuasive powers eventually secured a consent which led to the preparation of the present volume.

So, while my gratitude to all those mentioned in the acknowledgments page of the original thesis has not diminished, I must here add my sincere thanks to Reformation Heritage Books for including this volume in their Reformed Historical-Theological Series. One can have nothing but admiration and appreciation of the diligence and efficiency shown by the staff, especially Ann Dykema for her patient typing of the manuscript; Jonathon Beeke for his editorial skills; Gary and Linda den Hollander for typesetting work; and Irene VandenBerg for proofreading.

Last, but by no means least, to Dr. Joel Beeke, the Editorial Director of RHB, my wife, Joan, and I owe a great debt for his unfailing enthusiasm, encouragement, and friendship, not only in this project, but since the first time we were privileged to have him, and later, his

dear wife, Mary, in our home. Finally, it is our prayer that all these labors will be blessed by God in furthering his covenanted purposes for his glory in the church and in the world.

—Andrew A. Woolsey
September 2012

List of Abbreviations

<i>APS</i>	<i>Acts of the Parliaments of Scotland</i>
<i>AHR</i>	<i>American Historical Review</i>
<i>ANCL</i>	<i>Ante-Nicene Christian Library</i>
<i>ANQ</i>	<i>Andover-Newton Quarterly</i>
<i>ARG</i>	<i>Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte</i>
<i>BOT</i>	<i>Banner of Truth</i>
<i>BA</i>	<i>Biblical Archeologist</i>
<i>BUK</i>	<i>Booke of the Universall Kirk</i>
<i>BASOR</i>	<i>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</i>
<i>BFER</i>	<i>British and Foreign Evangelical Review</i>
<i>CTJ</i>	<i>Calvin Theological Journal</i>
<i>CTS</i>	<i>Calvin Translation Society</i>
<i>CJT</i>	<i>Canadian Journal of Theology</i>
<i>CP</i>	<i>Catholic Presbyterian</i>
<i>CH</i>	<i>Church History</i>
<i>CQR</i>	<i>Church Quarterly Review</i>
<i>CHP</i>	<i>Confessio Helvetica Posterior</i>
<i>CR</i>	<i>Corpus Reformatorum</i>
<i>ENCT</i>	<i>Elizabethan Non-Conformist Texts</i>
<i>ERE</i>	<i>Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics</i>
<i>HER</i>	<i>English Historical Review</i>
<i>EQ</i>	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
<i>ET</i>	<i>Expository Times</i>
<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
<i>JAOS</i>	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
<i>JBS</i>	<i>Journal of British Studies</i>
<i>JEH</i>	<i>Journal of Ecclesiastical History</i>

<i>JES</i>	<i>Journal of Ecumenical Studies</i>
<i>JHI</i>	<i>Journal of the History of Ideas</i>
<i>JR</i>	<i>Journal of Religion</i>
<i>JRH</i>	<i>Journal of Religious History</i>
<i>JPH</i>	<i>Journal of Presbyterian History</i>
<i>JPHS</i>	<i>Journal of the Presbyterian Historical Society</i>
<i>LFK</i>	<i>Lexicon für Theologie und Kirche</i>
<i>LCC</i>	Library of Christian Classics
<i>LCL</i>	Loeb Classical Library
<i>MQR</i>	<i>Mennonite Quarterly Review</i>
<i>NIDCC</i>	<i>New International Dictionary of the Christian Church</i>
<i>NIDNTT</i>	<i>New International Dictionary of the New Testament Theology</i>
<i>NSHE</i>	<i>New Schaff–Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge</i>
<i>OXDCC</i>	<i>Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church</i>
<i>PSoc</i>	Parker Society
<i>PRR</i>	<i>Presbyterian and Reformed Review</i>
<i>PR</i>	<i>Presbyterian Review</i>
<i>PrinR</i>	<i>Princeton Review</i>
<i>PTR</i>	<i>Princeton Theological Review</i>
<i>PHSL</i>	<i>Proceedings of the Huguenot Society of London</i>
<i>PSAS</i>	<i>Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland</i>
<i>RE</i>	<i>Realencyklopädie für protestantische Theologie und Kirche</i>
<i>RSCHS</i>	<i>Records of the Scottish Church History Society</i>
<i>RR</i>	<i>Reformed Review</i>
<i>RHPR</i>	<i>Revue d'Histoire et de Philosophie Religieuses</i>
<i>SBET</i>	<i>Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology</i>
<i>SHR</i>	<i>Scottish Historical Review</i>
<i>SJT</i>	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
<i>STS</i>	<i>Scottish Text Society</i>
<i>STC</i>	<i>Short-Title Catalogue</i>
<i>SCJ</i>	<i>Sixteenth Century Journal</i>
<i>TDOT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i>
<i>TDNT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i>
<i>TT</i>	<i>Tracts and Treatises (Calvin)</i>
<i>TRHS</i>	<i>Transactions of the Royal Historical Society</i>
<i>TCERK</i>	<i>Twentieth Century Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge</i>
<i>TB</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
<i>VC</i>	<i>Vigiliae Christianae</i>
<i>WA</i>	<i>Werke</i> , Weimar ed. (Luther)

List of Abbreviations

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<i>WCF</i>	<i>Westminster Confession of Faith</i>
<i>WDCH</i>	<i>Westminster Dictionary of Church History</i>
<i>WTJ</i>	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>
WSoc	Woodrow Society
<i>ZAW</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
<i>ZKG</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte</i>

Introduction

The Westminster Assembly is a useful starting point for detailed discussion of the development of covenantal thought, particularly in view of the direction taken by recent studies which place a strong dichotomy between the early Reformers and their seventeenth-century successors, notably between John Calvin and those who have traditionally been designated “Calvinists.” The most extreme, or virulent, of these is an unsparing attack upon the *Westminster Confession* as one of the principal reservoirs of “a plague that had long infected the Reformed churches.” In seeking to overthrow what he described as “the treasured confession of my mother church,” this author made the astonishing claim, which puts this basic issue in a curious nutshell: “It was Calvin who rescued me from the Calvinists.” And the deadly virus identified as the cause of the plague was the *Confession’s* covenantal statements, of which it was said, “Calvin knew nothing, for these theological innovations were the work of his successors.”¹

In order to set the scene, therefore, Part One of the thesis has been devoted to a consideration of the background to the Westminster Assembly and its documents, an examination of the sources and content of the theology of the covenant expressed in the standards, and also a critical survey of the historiography of the covenant from around the middle of the last century to the present time. The historical background to the Assembly as it relates to both the English and Scottish churches is designed to get the feel of the general ecclesiastical climate

1. Holmes Rolston III, *John Calvin versus The Westminster Confession* (Richmond, 1972), 5–6, 23.

and theological orientation in which the divines and their immediate predecessors lived and moved, while the examination of sources and content more particularly identifies the direction from which the doctrine of the covenant came to be embodied in the *Confession* and *Catechisms*, and also the issues which are emphasized in, and immediately related to, the chapters dealing specifically with the covenant.

The scriptural origin of the Reformed doctrine of the covenant is indisputable, so that serious research in this area has never been considered necessary. The temptation to include a section on Scripture in this study has likewise been resisted, but its importance has been kept in mind throughout. In order to demonstrate that the idea of the covenant as held by the Reformed church, even in many of its particular aspects, was no new thing, Part Two picks up some of the threads offered by forerunners in the field. These include several of the church fathers, notably Augustine. The survival and use of the idea in both its political and theological applications during the medieval period has not been overlooked. It was found that the idea of the covenant had specific governmental, hermeneutical, and soteriological functions in medieval thought which were by no means despised or abandoned in the reaction of the Reformation against medieval scholasticism.

Among the early Reformers, Luther's theology held firmly to the basic concepts underlying covenantal theology, but it was in the Reformed camp that the importance of the doctrine was chiefly recognized and utilized in the controversies of the time, first by Oecolampadius and Zwingli, and then more distinctly by Bullinger, whose little monograph *De Testamento seu foedere Dei unico et aeterno* was the first to appear on the subject. The findings of this research into Bullinger's work oppose those studies which regard Bullinger's view of the covenant as strictly bilateral and consequently portray him as the founder of a separate reformed tradition, distinct from that which emanated from Calvin and the Genevan school.²

Part Three is devoted entirely to Geneva, showing the seminal influence of Calvin's work in the development and transmission of covenantal thought. In demonstrating that the covenant in both its unilateral and bilateral aspects was an essential part of Calvin's overall

2. As held by J. W. Baker, *Heinrich Bullinger and the Covenant: The Other Reformed Tradition* (Athens, Ohio, 1980).

theological structure, the disputed questions as to whether Calvin was a “covenant theologian,” and whether he taught a covenant of works is carefully considered in its proper theological context and not merely with respect to the use of terms.

For the first time in any study of covenantal thought, detailed attention has been given in this research to the work of Theodore Beza. Beza has been consistently singled out by those who uphold the Calvin vs. the Calvinists thesis as the guilty party in initiating a rigid, theocentric, supralapsarian, scholastic orthodoxy which diverged manifestly from Calvin’s warm, Christocentric, humanistic, biblical theology. Beza has furthermore been denied any part in the theology of the covenant, with the result that “covenant theology” has been interpreted as a reaction against Bezan orthodoxy in an effort to recover a place for the responsibility of man in the economy of salvation. The evidence, however, supplied by a wider consultation of Beza’s works than his merely controversial writings, supports a contrary argument. Beza’s basic fidelity to Calvin becomes apparent in controverted areas and the warm heart of a concerned pastor is heard to beat in his sermonic material. More importantly for this research, Beza is found to have a keen interest in the covenant both unilaterally and bilaterally, particularly in relation to the doctrine of the union between Christ and his church, just as Calvin had before him and the Calvinists after him.

In the final part of the thesis the issues and arguments already raised are followed through in representative writers from three main interrelated locations of post-reformation development in Reformed theology. One is the influence of the Heidelberg theologians, Ursinus and Olevianus, in the Palatinate Church of Germany. The others are the English Puritan movement, dominated mainly by the influence of William Perkins, and the Scottish connection in the writings of Knox, Rollock, and Howie.

It is the conclusion of this research that while covenantal theology inevitably underwent a process of refining and expansion, and was given fuller definition and varying emphases by later writers, it nevertheless remained true to the central idea or ideas of the covenant as taught by the Reformers. Such a process cannot be construed as constituting a fundamental shift or departure from the theology of the early Reformers. Rather there is a general agreement, a unity and continuity in the Reformed theology of the covenant which makes the Westminster divines in this respect the worthy successors of Calvin and his colleagues.