Against the Backdrop of Failure

Sadly, a distorted use of the rich, biblical term “covenant” has too often plagued the worst tendencies of Reformed Christianity, pointing to communities that are at once triumphalistic and exclusive or to theology that is both arid and insular. Novelist James Michener’s *The Covenant* exposes the triumphalistic and self-protective mode of Christian life that propped up apartheid. Sociologist Gladys Ganiels develops a typology of religious expression in Ireland that reserves the title “covenantal” for the most narrow-minded and violence-prone Protestants. Biblical scholar John Stek describes the imbalance that emerges from “covenant overload” when a biblical theology is so singularly focused on God’s covenantal relationship with the church that it neglects the larger kingdom purposes for which this covenantal relationship exists. Theologian James Torrance describes that ways in which covenantal imagery can evoke an impersonal, mechanistic, and coercive contract rather than a living, dynamic, redemptive promise-based relationship. Other evangelical Protestants frequently worry that Reformed Christians treat a covenantal theology of infant baptism as a kind of spiritual life-insurance policy that leads to laxity in calling children and youth to affirm faith in Jesus. Examples of such distortions leave no group of Reformed Christians—conservative or progressive, more doctrinally oriented, more pietistic, or more world-affirming—untouched. We are all implicated. Like the ancient people of...
Israel, we have needed many prophets to call us back to full covenantal faithfulness.

The proper response to these distortions is nothing less than repentance, the kind of dying and rising with Christ that are hallmarks of Christian sanctification. It was a desire for this kind of repentance and renewal that formed the subtext of the “Reformed Mission Worldwide” conference, as well as the subsequent World Communion of Reformed Churches Uniting General Conference. Though often unspoken, the subtext of many sessions was that we need to turn away from triumphalism, isolation, and insularity, and to turn toward Christ-centered compassion, hospitality, and justice. Many conference papers, hallway discussions, and question and answer periods were peppered with statements that began, “Over against our tendency as Reformed Christians toward _____ [fissiparousness, isolation, colonialism, intellectualism, anti-intellectualism, or any number of other ills].” Conversely, words like ecumenical, communal, anticolonial, intergenerational, intercultural, cooperative, transformational, excentric, other-regarding—all terms that draw at least implicitly upon a covenantal way of being—would have scored high in a word-frequency count of conference discussions. This concern for noncoercive, nontriumphalistic witness, mission, and service frequently felt like a fresh and reinvigorating breeze. It was good to be together.

Yet the sustainability of this vision depends in part on what we do with the biblical covenantal imagery that lies behind both the hopes and dreams we expressed and the distortions we lamented. Will Reformed Christians attempt to recover and renew this essential biblical image and mode of thought, purged from persistent distortions? Or will we quietly repress it and look elsewhere for theological resources to ground our vision for renewal?

“COVENANT” AS AN INispensABLE AND COMPPELLING BIBLICAL IMAGE

My own view is that biblical covenantal imagery is indispensable for faithful and vital Christian mission. Covenant is, after all, an ecumenically recognized central biblical image for depicting the divine-human relationship. The image stretches out from the grand promises to Noah (Gen. 9:8–11) and Abram (Gen. 12:1–2) and the covenants God established with Phinehas and David, to the exalted promises of God to establish a new covenant with the people (Isa. 11:6–9; Jer. 31:27–33; 32:40; Ezek. 34), from the covenantal imagery used by Jesus at the Last Supper (Matt. 26:28) to the echoes of covenantal imagery in Paul’s letters (2 Cor. 3:6; Rom. 9:4), and the book of Hebrews (chs. 8, 9, 12). Covenantal imagery is also central to some promise-based relationships established between people (Ruth 1:16–17; 3:11–13). While there is little point in naming it as “the central biblical image,” there is no reason not to celebrate it as one of the most prominent and generative biblical images. Consider a few of its excellencies.

First, “covenant” is an image of interpersonal relationality and belonging. It depicts the relationship between God and God’s people not in mechanical or impersonal terms, but rather in terms of interpersonal interaction. It depends upon and reinforces our understanding of God as living, dynamic, and responsive. It entails that God and God’s people communicate and commune with each other. In contrast to mere contracts, covenants establish relationships designed to be enjoyed, relationships of agreement, of concordance, of “seeing eye-to-eye”—even when a covenant is made between parties that are not equal. In this way, the image is an antidote to modes of thought that render the universe and divine life in rationalistic, abstract, or impersonal terms.

Second, a covenant describes a relationship that is promise based and other regarding. Covenant relationships are established on the grounds of gratitude and nourished through relational moves of accountability, transparency, and hope. Covenant relationships depend upon sincerity, trust, faithfulness. They begin with a vow, are affirmed by the renewal of vows, and are sustained by countless acts of faithful communication and service. In a covenantal world, keeping commitments is a sign of what is beautiful, not dull. In this way, the image is an antidote to self-centeredness, coercion, and possessiveness.

Third, the image is corporate, rather than private or individualistic. While the first biblical covenants were established with individual patriarchs, later covenants were established with an entire people. Even the individual covenants with Abram, Phinehas, and David are recognized publicly and become emblematic of God’s relationship with the entire nation. This communal orientation is felt today when references to “covenantal community” are used to defend intercultural and intergenerational relationships, learning, and tasks. In this way, the image is an antidote to individualistic, privatistic, and celebrity-driven tendencies in religious life.

Fourth, covenant relationships are strengthened by a deep awareness of unfolding time. Their meaning and significance is celebrated by rehearsing their history and dreaming of their future. Covenantal relationships rejoice at past seasons of faithfulness, learn from past mistakes, and give thanks for past occasions of redemption. This is why so many Psalms—the covenantal speech of God’s covenant people—are like
future-oriented history lessons. They lean toward the future in their petitions and laments, but do so with vivid memories of past episodes of both divine faithfulness and human foibles. In this way, the image is an antidote to the kind of amnesia and presentist disregard of future consequences of particular actions that can undermine human flourishing.

Fifth, covenants exist for a larger purpose. They are designed to be a source of blessing beyond themselves. They are exocentric. God’s covenant with Abram was designed so that “all the nations of the world shall be blessed” (Gen. 22:18). God’s covenant with Israel was designed to create a context in which hospitality could be extended to the orphan, the widow, the poor, the oppressed. God covenanted with Israel to “be a light to the nations.” This means that covenantal relationships are comprised of not only internal communion, but also externally oriented action. They are “on a mission.” They are salt and light. Just as divine election was for the purpose of calling a people to service (see Richard Mouw’s plenary address in this volume), so too God’s covenantal relationship with the people and covenantal communities of believers exists for service. In this way, the term is an antidote for any approach to religious life that ignores, downplays, or fails to invest itself in transformative mission.

“Covenant” is such a generative and cherished scriptural metaphor, in part, because it at once memorably evokes each of these subthemes. It conveys a compelling picture which addresses so many points of brokenness in human experience. To invoke ‘covenant’ is to lament, protest, and propose a way to overcome loneliness, isolation, self-centeredness, coercion, triumphalism, racism, inhospitality, injustice. As Michael Horton phrases it, “‘covenant’ . . . is the culture of the people of God.”

All of this reminds us that what racism, apartheid, sectarian violence, and insularity have done in the name of covenant theology is the result of a profound distortion of covenant imagery, not its essential meaning. What needs to be excised from our habitual ways of being are these distortions, not the image itself. Indeed, this biblical covenant imagery offers one of the surest ways to correct all of these distortions. In fact, in a variety of settings across the Christian ecumenical spectrum, covenantal imagery is at the center of several calls to justice, hospitality, and renewal.

**Commitment to a Renewed, Exocentric Covenantal Way of Life**

Overall, our conference featured deep commitment to this positive vision. The work outlined in one conference paper after another pointed to the high calling of addressing some form of loneliness, isolation, self-centeredness, coercion, triumphalism, racism, inhospitality, and injustice.

So many of the problems that we must address on a global scale are relational problems. Even problems that are often discussed in very abstract terms (global economic injustice, “empire,” issues of faith and science) are fundamentally relational, affecting how we see and live out relationships with God and others.

Specifically, the conference highlighted both the need for and promising models of engaging in confessionally grounded interfaith conversations, fighting economic oppression, discerning best uses of technology, discerning how faith and science intersect, resisting racism, discerning wise modes of political engagement, promoting faithful engagement with the arts, and discerning how to educate and disciple people of all ages and areas of expertise in Jesus’s name. Every one of these conversations simply assumes that faith in Jesus should lead naturally to lives of service.

A related common refrain that emerged in nearly every conference session is that we are utterly mistaken if we think we can approach any of these challenging topics without cooperation that is anything less than fully global. Isolation, individualism, and insularity must not be tolerated. Cross-cultural partnerships, practiced with accountability and transparency, offer us the surest route away from cultural, spiritual, and ecclesial triumphalism, racism, and the misuse of wealth. We may disagree about which profound need is most important to address first, but we will agree that self-centered inaction must be resisted. This is why Rich Mouw challenged us in this way: “Given the ‘one Lord, one faith, one baptism’ that we have long professed, how should we be covenanting with one another together today to pursue obedience to God’s will in our increasingly challenging cultural contexts?” and “The God who elects individuals by sovereign grace also intends that those individuals be incorporated into a covenant community that in its collective life will actively show forth Christ’s sovereign authority over all of created reality.” The covenantal imagery is potent!

**Continuing Ambivalence about the Institutional Church**

The overwhelming consensus expressed on this basic vision creates space for two crucial topics that, in general, we did not have time and space to address together. First, Reformed Christians intent upon broad exocentric engagement need to strengthen and sharpen, and not weaken and obfuscate, the crucial role of the institutional church as an essential context out of which we work, pray, and live. For many of us, this will require rethinking our ambivalence about the institutional church. Richard Mouw describes this ambivalence in his keynote paper as follows:
We need an emphasis in the Reformed community on the importance of the worshiping life of the church as the central arena in which Christ makes the reality of his “holding together” ministry known to us. It is unfortunate that many of us as Reformed Christians have found ways of underplaying the importance of being nurtured by the preaching of the Word and the sacramental life of the body of Christ. Sometimes our academic communities have cultivated a sense of distance from the church’s worshiping life. In other segments of the Reformed community we have tended toward an understanding of a “sphere sovereignty” scenario in a way that has resulted in the marginalization of the institutional church. And, of course, we have often so emphasized the activist strands of our perspective that we occasionally have dislodged the way of discipleship from the church’s crucial role in forming us as disciples by calling us into the communal encounter with the living God.

This ambivalence could be felt by how few conference sessions amplified this analysis (or challenged it). It could be felt in discussions of missional service that unwittingly treated evangelism and social justice as two independent spheres of action.

This ambivalence is understandable: suspicion about ecclesial outreach is deep in our Protestant bones. We are heirs to a long tradition of those with expertise in keeping the institutional church in its place. It is a tradition shaped by Augustine’s dealings with the Donatists, Calvin’s dealings with late medieval Catholicism, and Kuyper’s dealings with a culturally captive Dutch national church. We have a set of powerful conceptual tools to help us do this: the distinction between the “invisible” and the “visible” church, the distinction between the “organic” and the “institutional” church, and the theory of sphere sovereignty. All of this is important.

But this tendency has some blind spots. When overdone, it can unwittingly undermine our perception of the miracle of the church. Like Christologies that calmly affirm Christ’s divinity but can’t stomach his humanity, this approach can end up denying the local, embodied nature of the body of Christ. In order to deal with our cognitive dissonance about the quirkiness of the institutional church, we fret dismissively about the workings of congregations and denominations, while still speaking of “the church” as a haloed abstraction that floats several feet above reality. We like the disembodied ideal of “the church, the body of Christ,” but are nervous about holding up any individual congregation or denomination. We like the term ecclesiastical. We can be more excited about “embodiment” than we are about the actual bodies that gather around the Lord’s Table.

Yet it is important to remember that “covenantal” is not just a free-floating metaphor that we can receive from Scripture and claim when useful. It is a description of the reality in which we live, move, and have our being. We live today under the gracious promise of the new covenant proclaimed by the God of Israel. This is not just any covenant. This covenant is bound to Jesus. It is a covenant that God not only invites us into but also empowers us to participate in. It is a covenant enacted through physical, tangible signs by ordinary people whom God calls together as part of Christ’s body, the church.

What is significant for Reformed believers is not only a small-c covenantal way of life, marked by collaboration, mutual accountability, and transparency, but also a capital-C Covenantal way of life, marked by participation in the New Covenant community called together and empowered by the triune God. While the church is not ultimate, the church is indispensable. The church, after all, is the body of Christ. Like the incarnation, the other miracle having to do with the body of Christ, the church is a bearer of God’s grace in all kinds of local, embodied ways. And the activities of the church—its preaching, sacramental celebrations, teaching, evangelism and pastoral care—are indispensable elements in God’s redemptive work in the world.

Why is it important that we work together not only in small-c covenantal way, but also in a large-C New Covenantal way? For one, only in a Covenantal body of Christ are we nourished for the journey. Apart from the body of Christ, our activism is destined for burn-out. It is ultimately the New Covenant community in which we are not only invited, but empowered to live the gospel. It is in the New Covenant community that we are invited to commune with each other and with the triune God. For another, only in the Covenantal body of Christ are we given an identity specific enough to sustain our transforming work. We are engaged not merely in the pursuit of a generic, amorphous “faith” or “faith-based initiatives” but in the pursuit of faith in a specific person, Jesus Christ, a person with a specific story that comforts and challenges us, and a person capacious enough to sustain the entire universe.

Does this call for reembracing the institutional church present challenges and problems? Absolutely. It challenges all of us to engage with and seek the renewal and reform of real congregations and churchly institutions. It calls for all of us to resist zero-sum ways of thinking about church life and the unique mission of Christian institutions of higher education, societal renewal, artistic engagement, economic and social justice, and
scientific inquiry. It calls us to fresh and clear thinking about the best possible relationship and mutual interdependence of church and parachurch organizations, and the nature of the institutional church most strategic contributions to societal problems (see Roland Hoksbergen’s essay for helpful reflections on this theme).

COVENANTAL ANTITHESIS TO MODERN AND POST-MODERN VIEWS OF HUMAN FREEDOM AND JUSTICE

A second theme that was understated in our time together is the way that a covenantal way of life challenges regnant cultural assumptions about the kind of justice, mission, hospitality we are set to pursue. Faithful exo-centric covenantal participation in transformative mission will require winsome ways of articulating how our union with Christ changes—sometimes radically—the kind of justice, freedom, and human flourishing that we are eager to promote. A “covenantal” view of the divine-human relationship and a “covenantal” view of justice, ethics, and societal engagement is not only a yes to certain ways of construing the world, it is also a resounding no to others.

This resounding no can be heard, for example, in Eberhard Busch’s recent book, *Drawn to Freedom: Christian Faith Today in Conversation with the Heidelberg Catechism*. Busch argues forcefully that the only road to true fulfillment and human flourishing is in the context of living as people who “in life and in death belong to God” (Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 1). To live as covenantal people—with God and with each other—is to finally be freed from the debilitating promises of personal autonomy. For Busch, this vision must be set in opposition to many of the ways that terms like freedom and justice are used in the public square, approaches that ultimately leave us curved in on ourselves, bound to self-regard, and closed off from the self-giving orientation of a Trinity-shaped universe. This covenantal or Trinitarian view of freedom and justice is certainly not less concerned with human flourishing than other views; it remains passionate about the just distribution of food, access to education, and the repudiation of systems which perpetuate poverty and racism. In fact, it provides the strongest possible foundation for this concern, providing not only a response to conditions of unjust resource distribution, but an antidote to the underlying causes of these problems, an antidote strong enough to break cycles of retaliation, hatred, and self-protection.

Our time together featured splendid and admirable concern for justice and freedom. The question before us is whether we will unwittingly adopt and reinforce a vision of justice that is ultimately grounded in human independence and autonomy, or whether we will adopt a view of justice and freedom that is grounded in a necessary dependence on God and each other, a covenantal dependence that should be celebrated.

As Reformed Christians look forward, fleeing from ethnic and ecclesiastical triumphalism is essential. Making common cause with others who, in common grace, promote human rights, freedom, and justice is good. But even as we address our own past and present tendencies to narrow insularity, we must also address another threat, the powerful tendency toward assimilation to a functional worldview that is naturalistic, rationalistic, and ultimately concerned with personal autonomy.

There are reasons why we may want to shy away from this prophetic challenge. Our memories may be haunted by the argumentative spirit of antithetical Calvinism. We tend to be better at naming problems in the Christian community than in the larger culture. And we may pull back from this task in part because we have not imagined a way that we can “engage the world” in a way that offers both a discerning yes and no. We have work to do in learning about a contextually appropriate tone and ethos for this important work.

A generation from now, I suspect (and pray) that we will not need to lament our continued insularity and triumphalism. But we may lament our own accommodation to an ultimately destructive set of assumptions about human liberty and personal autonomy. We may lament that we did not draw deeply enough on covenant imagery as a central theological resource.

In sum, there is nothing more compelling than a Christ-centered vision of committed, transformational mission in the world—in every sphere of cultural engagement and in every square inch of creation—provided that our life is sustained by participation in vital, healthy churches and sharpened by profound gratitude for the deliverance from cultural captivity to personal autonomy which God provides us and offers the entire world. May God’s Spirit lead us to be faithful covenantal people as we participate in God’s redemptive work in the world.

**Notes**

2Michael Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology: The Divine Drama* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2002), p. 13. Horton also adds this crucial qualifier: it is “not the idea in general, but the specific praxis developed throughout redemptive history” that makes this possible. See also Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), pp. 413ff.
