Title: The Covenant Theology of Francis Roberts

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ABSTRACT

The object of this study is to show how the covenant theology of Francis Roberts (1609-1675), an English Puritan, stands in the mainline of the Reformed tradition and assists in defining the seventeenth-century development of “covenant” or “federal” theology. In particular Roberts’ covenant theology not only reflects the development and refinement of English covenant thought after the Westminster Assembly but also evidences the ongoing dialogue between the English Reformed writers, the Scottish Reformed writers, and the Reformed thinkers in Europe, particularly in the Netherlands. To judge the place of Roberts’ covenant theology in relation to Reformed orthodoxy, the present study mainly concerns itself with the comparison of Roberts’ theology with that of his Puritan predecessors, and the ways in which it stands in continuity with earlier Reformed covenant thought.

Roberts divides God’s covenants into the covenant of works and the covenant of faith instead of separating them into the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. For he thinks that all covenants are the covenants of grace, yet the covenant of faith was made after the fall. Roberts is confident of the conditionality of the covenant of faith. While he firmly confesses the precedence of divine grace, he sees unfeigned faith in Jesus Christ as the requirement of man in the covenant of faith. Like his contemporaries in the latter half of the seventeenth century Roberts argues an initial, now abrogated, covenant of works.

Roberts divides the covenant of faith into the covenant of promise and the covenant of performance, that is, the new covenant. And he distinguishes the covenant of promise into six periods: (1) from Adam (after the fall) till Noah, (2) from Noah till Abraham, (3) from Abraham till Moses, (4) from Moses till David, (5) from David till the Babylonian captivity, and (6) from the Babylonian captivity till the death of Jesus Christ.

The thesis shows that Roberts’ version of “covenant theology” defies the simple analysis of covenant theology found in much earlier scholarship as falling into legalism and as discontinuous with the Reformation orthodoxy of its age. Similarly the thesis shows that dichotomization of the covenant tradition into unilateral and bilateral approaches is unhelpful in the analysis of seventeenth-century English developments. Finally, the thesis offers Roberts’ covenant theology as a significant evidence of the continuities and contacts between British and continental Reformed theology.