

Similarly, Dr. Smith has exercised a Chadderton-like role in the resurgence of the Reformed faith and the Southern Presbyterian tradition in the United States. He developed the Bible department at Belhaven for the training of men for the Southern Church (PCUS). He introduced us to the Southern Presbyterian Worthies. As Dr. Willborn avers later in this book: "With the publication of *Studies in Southern Presbyterian Theology* in 1962, Morton Howison Smith turned the attention of a new generation to the riches of Southern Presbyterian history and theology."<sup>14</sup> He was a major participant in the founding of two Reformed seminaries. He was one of the primary architects of the government, structure, and operation of the Presbyterian Church in America. Probably no other professor of Systematic Theology in the twentieth century has taught as many men as he has in the last forty years: hundreds of men have learned the Reformed faith from him. Directly and indirectly through his students he has been used to bring an untold number of Churches to a clearer understanding of the Reformed faith. Even many who do not share his convictions on confessional subscription are more reformed than they might otherwise have been because of his ministry. His students are ministers, missionaries, and professors. At least three of his former students are Presidents of Seminaries.

The final chapter is yet to be written. Our prayer is that he will live to see the Revival and Reformation of the Second Southern Presbyterian Church (the PCA), the conversion of his children, and the greater usefulness of his spiritual sons throughout the world.

We thank you, O God, for this man—a man You raised up for our times. Your sons and friends salute you, Morton Howison Smith. Soli Deo Gloria!

## The Covenant Idea in Irenaeus of Lyons: An Introduction and Survey

### Chapter 2

#### J. Ligon Duncan III

According to Irenaeus, there were several distinct covenants made by God. His estimate of their number varies. Sometimes he reckons four (Adam, Noah, [Abraham], Moses, Christ; more often only two. He regards the study of the differences between these as a legitimate subject for churchly (i.e., orthodox) Gnosis. There is both agreement and difference. Yet the difference is only relative, since the two are "of the same nature."

W. A. Brown, *The Essence of Christianity*, 64.

In the second half of the second century the theological concept of God's covenant with his people enjoyed renewed currency among Christians. The coming of Christ was now regarded as the establishment of the 'new covenant' prophesied in Jer. 31:31-34.

W. Kinzig, *Καὶνὴ διαθήκη: The Title of the New Testament*, 522.

ταῦτά σοι τὰ γράμματα προεπεψέμεθα τὸν ἀδελφὸν ἡμῶν καὶ κοινωνὸν Εἰρηναῖον διακομίσει καὶ παρακαλοῦμεν ἔχειν σε αὐτὸν ἐν παραθέσει ἡλιωτῆν ὄντα τῆς διαθήκης Χριστοῦ<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>"The Martyrs of Lyons," in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, 5.4.2

<sup>14</sup>"We have asked our brother and companion, Irenaeus, to bring this letter to you and we beg you to hold him in esteem, for he is zealous for the covenant of Christ."

<sup>1</sup>Trans. Kirsopp Lake, *The Loeb Classical Library*.

<sup>14</sup>See chapter 12.

Dr. Morton H. Smith, as an outstanding historical and systematic theologian in the line of the old Southern Presbyterian tradition, is of course a covenant theologian.<sup>2</sup> By that, we mean that he embraces and expounds the classic bi-covenantal theology of the *Westminster Confession*. To elaborate, this covenant or federal theology is the gospel set in the context of God's eternal plan of communion with his people, and its historical outworking in the covenants of works and grace (as well as in the various progressive stages of the covenant of grace). Covenant theology explains the meaning of the death of Christ in light of the fullness of the biblical teaching on the divine covenants, undergirds our understanding of the nature and use of the sacraments, and provides the fullest possible explanation of the grounds of our assurance.

To put it another way, Covenant theology is the Bible's way of explaining and deepening our understanding of: (1) the atonement [the meaning of the death of Christ]; (2) assurance [the basis of our confidence of communion with God and enjoyment of his promises]; (3) the sacraments [signs and seals of God's covenant promises—what they are and how they work]; and (4) the continuity of redemptive history [the unified plan of God's salvation]. Covenant theology is also an hermeneutic, an approach to understanding the Scripture—an approach that attempts to biblically explain the unity of biblical revelation.

Covenant Theology is a blending of both biblical and systematic theology. If biblical theology is the thematic survey of redemptive history, with an emphasis on the theological development—era to era—of whatever *loci* are being studied, then covenant theology could rightly be called "biblical biblical theology." That is, covenant theology recognizes that the Bible itself structures the progress of redemptive history through the succession of covenants.

It is systematic theology in that it recognizes the covenants as a fundamental architectonic or organizing principle for the Bible's theology.

<sup>2</sup>I am personally indebted to Dr. Smith as my teacher. While a student at Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis, I had the opportunity to study "The Theology of the Westminster Standards" with him, as well as his introductory course on "Apologetics." As a family friend, I had the privilege of spending many hours in delightful fellowship and conversation with Dr. Smith from my seminary years well into my late twenties. His knowledge of the Southern Presbyterian tradition is, of course, magisterial. His ecclesial involvement, commitment and influence make him one of the key figures in late twentieth century North American Presbyterianism. I wish here to express to him thanks for his kind and wise tutelage and friendship. It is an honor to participate in a volume recognizing his ecclesiastical and academic accomplishments.

Thus it proceeds to integrate the biblical teaching about the federal headships of Adam and Christ, the covenantal nature of the incarnation and atonement, the continuities and discontinuities in the progress of redemptive history, the relation of the Jewish and Christian scriptures, law and gospel, into a coherent theological system.

Covenant theology is central, not peripheral, to the biblical story. When Jesus wanted to explain the significance of his death to his disciples, he went to the doctrine of the covenants (Matthew 26, Mark 14, Luke 22, 1 Corinthians 11). When God wanted to assure Abraham of the certainty of his word of promise, he went to the covenant (Genesis 12, 15, and 17). When God wanted to set apart his people, ingrain his work in their minds, tangibly reveal himself in love and mercy, and confirm their future inheritance, he gave the covenant signs (Genesis 17, Exodus 12, 17, and 31, Matthew 28, Acts 2, Luke 22). When Luke wanted to show early Christians that Jesus' life and ministry were the fulfillment of God's ancient purposes for his chosen people, he went to the covenant of grace and quoted Zacharias' prophecy which shows that believers in the very earliest days of 'the Jesus movement' understood Jesus and his messianic work as a fulfillment (not a 'Plan B') of God's covenant with Abraham (Luke 1:72-73). When the Psalmist and the author of Hebrews wanted to show how God's redemptive plan is ordered and on what basis it unfolds in history, they went to the covenants (Psalms 78 and 89, Hebrews 6-10).

Covenant theology is not a response to dispensationalism. It existed long before the rudiments of classical dispensationalism were brought together in the nineteenth century. Covenant theology is not an excuse for baptizing children, nor merely a convention to justify a particular approach to the sacraments (e.g., modern paedocommunionism and baptismal regenerationism). Covenant theology is not sectarian, but an ecumenical Reformed approach to understanding the Bible, developed in the wake of the magisterial Reformation, but with roots stretching back to the earliest days of catholic Christianity and historically appreciated in all the various branches of the Reformed community (Baptist, Congregationalist, Independent, Presbyterian, Anglican, and Reformed). Covenant theology cannot be reduced to serving merely as the justification for some particular view of children in the covenant (covenant successionism), or for a certain kind of eschatology (preterism), or for a specific philosophy of education (whether it be homeschooling or Christian schools or classical schools). Covenant theology is bigger than that. It is

more important than that. As the great English Baptist preacher C. H. Spurgeon once said:

The doctrine of the covenant lies at the root of all true theology. It has been said that he who well understands the distinction between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace, is a master of divinity. I am persuaded that most of the mistakes which men make concerning the doctrines of Scripture, are based upon fundamental errors with regard to the covenant of law and of grace.<sup>3</sup>

Covenant theology flows from the trinitarian life and work of God. God's covenant communion with us is modeled on and a reflection of the intra-Trinitarian relationships. The shared life, the fellowship of the persons of the Holy Trinity, what theologians call *perichoresis* or *circumincessio*, is the archetype of the relationship the gracious covenant God shares with his elect and redeemed people. God's commitments in the eternal covenant of redemption find space-time realization in the covenant of grace.

#### COVENANT THOUGHT AND THEOLOGY IN THE PATRISTIC ERA

The covenant idea was more significant in the writings of particular early ante-Nicene theologians than has generally been admitted in patristic research or general surveys of the history of the covenant idea in the Christian tradition. Indeed, even a brief survey of the covenant vocabulary in the theological writings of the early ante-Nicene period demonstrates a significant usage and development, and modification of the covenant concept as it is found in the OT and NT writings and in early Judaism. Investigation reveals that the covenant idea functions in several arenas of early Christian thought. It is employed (1) to stress moral obligations incumbent upon Christians; (2) to show God's grace in including the Gentiles in the Abrahamic blessings; (3) to deny the reception of these promises to the Israel of the flesh, that is, Israel considered merely as an ethnic entity; (4) to demonstrate continuity in the divine economy; and (5) to explain discontinuity in the divine economy.

<sup>3</sup>Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *Sermons on the Covenant* (Wilmington, DE: Cross Publishing, 1980), 5.

In reviewing the role of early Christian covenant thought in these areas, one will find that (1) the pre-Nicene theologians usually take OT covenant passages (not NT passages) as the starting point in their applications of the covenant concept to Christian living; (2) the early Christian use of the covenant idea evidences that they understood the covenant to be both unilateral and bilateral, promissory and obligatory, to bring divine blessings and entail human obedience; (3) these writings also show that, from the very earliest times, Christian authors (following OT and NT examples) have employed the covenant concept as a key structural idea in their presentations of redemptive history; (4) contrary to the suggestions of previous studies, there is no evidence of a gap in the usage of the covenant idea after the era of the NT writings; (5) the covenant idea was closely linked to the early Christian self-understanding as the people of God; (6) the covenant idea is not monolithic in the thought of the authors surveyed. It is employed with differing emphases and takes on varying shades of meaning in their respective writings; (7) genetic connections in specific usages of the covenant idea can be found in different pre-Nicene authors (e.g., the idea of an Adamic universal moral law, from Justin to Irenaeus to Tertullian).

If one reviews the role of the covenant idea in the writings of the NT, the Apostolic Fathers, and Justin Martyr, as well as in Josephus and Philo, in order to provide background for comparison and contrast with subsequent theological reflection on the covenants in Christian theology (thus helping to insure that later categories and ideas are not being intruded or imposed upon the patristic material), and then considers, in turn, the covenant idea in Melito, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Cyprian, Origen, Clement of Alexandria, Hippolytus, and Novatian, inventorying in each the specific employments of the covenant idea, one gains a bird's-eye view of the covenant idea in ante-Nicene theology. Such a view also reveals the significance of this theological locus for their overall systems.

The study of this subject is significant for at least these following reasons: (1) It confirms current research on the Jewish matrix of early Christianity, from a vantage point not yet exploited. (2) It provides greater detail of the early Christian covenant thought which is now being acknowledged to have been influential on the sixteenth-century Reformers (such as Bullinger and Calvin) and their seventeenth-century successors (such as the Westminster divines). (3) It fills a significant lacuna in the history of ideas. (4) It challenges the viability of the interpretive schema of what is being called "the new perspective(s)" on Paul, by giv-

ing a fuller account of the earliest pre-Nicene and post-NT covenant thought in relation to soteriology and spheragistics.

#### AN INTRODUCTION TO IRENAEUS AS COVENANT THEOLOGIAN

In his seminal article "The Covenant Idea in the Second Century," Everett Ferguson suggests that "Irenaeus was a 'covenant' theologian." He makes clear what he intends by that designation when he says: "the covenant scheme of the interpretation of holy history became the foundation of Irenaeus' theological method."<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, the Irenaean contribution to second-century covenant theology remains a generally unrecognized and relatively neglected subject, in spite of the recent work of Baqç,<sup>5</sup> Ferguson, Kinzig<sup>6</sup> and others,<sup>7</sup> in spite of Irenaeus' significance as a second-century Christian theologian,<sup>8</sup> and in spite of the on-

<sup>4</sup> Ferguson, "The Covenant Idea in the Second Century," *Texts and Testaments: Critical Essays on the Bible and Early Church Fathers*, ed. W. E. March (San Antonio, Trinity University Press, 1980), 144.

<sup>5</sup> Baqç has made a splendid contribution to the discussion of Irenaeus' theology with his *de lancienne à la nouvelle Alliance selon S. Irenée*. His work counters the opinions of earlier source critics of Irenaeus (in particular Hamack) and argues for the literary and theological unity of *Adversus Haereses*. The theological unity of the work, according to Baqç, is built upon the concept of the unity of God and the consequent unity of the covenants in salvation history; see P. Baqç, *de Lancienne à la nouvelle Alliance selon S. Irenée* (Paris: Lethielleux, 1978), pp. 41-46, 153-161, 235-240 and especially 290-293.

While Baqç's work concentrates on book four of *Adversus Haereses* and is not intended to oppose the importance of the idea of "recapitulation" (or any other theme for that matter) in Irenaeus' thought, it does serve to make clear the significance of "covenant" in his argument for the unity of God and salvation history. This aspect of Irenaeus' thought had been virtually overlooked in most of the work on his writings before Baqç.

<sup>6</sup> See W. Kinzig, *Novitas Christiana*, and also *Erbin Kirche* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag, 1990), 78-96.

<sup>7</sup> Among them, W. C. van Unnik, see "H κατινὸν διαθήκη—A Problem in the early history of the Canon," in *Studia Patristica* 4 (1959): 225.

<sup>8</sup> Irenaeus has been described as the "most considerable Christian theologian" of his time [F. L. Cross, *The Early Christian Fathers* (London: Gerald Duckworth, 1960), 110]; see also, A. Cunningham, "Saint Irenaeus" in *AAE* (online), and J. Quasten, *Patrology*, 4 vols. (Utrecht: Spectrum, 1950), 1:287. B. Altaner says, "Irenaeus is the most important of the second century theologians and in a certain sense the Father of Catholic dogmatics," in *Patrology*, trans. H. C. Graef (Edinburgh-London: Nelson, 1960), 150.

going interest in Irenaean theology.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, W. C. van Unnik complains that it is "remarkable that so little attention is given to this theme [covenant] in the descriptions of Irenaeus' theology."<sup>10</sup> It will be our purpose to survey the covenant thought of Irenaeus in this chapter. We will review his use of covenant terminology and his covenantal program of salvation history, as well as certain passages concerning the covenants in his writings. First, we will deal with a few preliminary issues.

#### IRENAEUS AND THE TITLE OF THE NT

J. N. D. Kelly has argued that "the first writer to speak unequivocally of a 'New' Testament parallel to the Old was Irenaeus" and "after Irenaeus's time... the fully scriptural character of the specifically Christian writings was universally acknowledged, and the description of them as the 'New Testament' (a title harking back to St. Paul's designation of the Jewish Scriptures as 'the old covenant') came into vogue."<sup>11</sup> W. C. van Unnik, while questioning the conclusiveness of Kelly's claim that

<sup>9</sup> Irenaeus' theology has been the subject of a number of major works in the last century. Early this century, Aulén, in his famous *Christus Victor*, put Irenaeus in the theological spotlight by suggesting that Irenaeus' presentation of the central ideas of the Christian faith provided the basis for a *via media* (between "objective" and "subjective" views) in the construction of a theology of the atonement. Aulén saw Irenaeus' theology of the atonement as revolving around the idea of Christ's triumph over the forces of sin, death and Satan, which in turn was part of the larger idea of "recapitulation." Aulén's work assured that *recapitulatio* would be considered by subsequent students to be Irenaeus' "most comprehensive theological idea" [see *Christus Victor*, trans. A. G. Hebert (New York: Macmillan, 1969), 37 (orig. ET 1931)], and consequently Irenaeus' covenant thought has been ignored. J. Lawson reviewed Irenaean theology in his *The Biblical Theology of St. Irenaeus* (London: Epworth Press, 1948), see esp. 140ff. all but ignoring Irenaeus' contribution to second-century covenant theology. G. W. Wengert continued the focus on recapitulation in his book *Man and the Incarnation*, trans. R. Maekenzie (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1959). A. Benoit, in *Saint Irenée: Introduction à l'étude de sa théologie* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1960) discusses Irenaeus' relation to the OT, but neglects the covenant idea. Only F. R. M. Hitchcock, in *Irenaeus of Lugdunum: A Study of His Teaching* (Cambridge: CUP, 1914), and Auguste Luneau, *L'Histoire de salut chez les Pères de l'Église* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1964) give much attention to the significant role of the covenants in Irenaeus' history of salvation.

<sup>10</sup> van Unnik, "H κατινὸν διαθήκη," 225.

<sup>11</sup> J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), 56.

Irenaeus was the first writer to speak unequivocally of a "New" Testament, generally confirms Kelly's assessment of Irenaeus' importance in the development of this terminology.<sup>12</sup> Significantly, however, he expands on and modifies Kelly's view<sup>13</sup> of the origin of the use of the term *καὶνὴ διαθήκη* for the Christian Scriptures, linking this terminology to Irenaeus' covenant theology and insisting the NT idea of *διαθήκη* is not Hellenistic ("testament") but rather "covenant."<sup>14</sup> The background of *καὶνὴ διαθήκη* for Irenaeus, according to van Unnik, is the Old Testament prophetic promise of a "New Covenant."<sup>15</sup> With Irenaeus, says van Unnik, "it is remarkable that *διαθήκη* has here always the biblical notion of 'covenant' and never any relation to 'testament.'"<sup>16</sup> He concludes:

In this climate were the Gospels and Apostolic writings first styled "books of the *καὶνὴ διαθήκη*".... This rich title was generally accepted. But soon afterwards it lost its dynamic weight and became nothing more than just a title.... In the West the translation *testamentum* and not *foedus* for *διαθήκη* had, as far as I can see, very serious consequences. In the Greek speaking world *διαθήκη* was soon misunderstood as "testament" and a change in outlook robbed it of its influence.<sup>17</sup>

This view has been recently challenged by W. Kinzig who gives some evidence of a testamentary usage of *διαθήκη* by Irenaeus (cf. *Adversus Haereses* [AH] 5.9.4).<sup>18</sup> Whatever are the precise origins of *διαθήκη* becoming employed as a scriptural title, even Kinzig (as we have already seen) does not deny that the development and prevalence of covenant thought in the second century are necessary preconditions for its eventual service as a designation for the Scriptures. In this foundational work, Irenaeus played an undoubted role.

<sup>12</sup> van Unnik, "H *καὶνὴ διαθήκη*," 217; see also H. von Campenhausen, *Formation of the Christian Bible*, trans. J. A. Baker (London: A. & C. Black, 1972), 264-265.

<sup>13</sup> He points out that it is improbable that Irenaeus took the term from Paul because Irenaeus never quotes from 2 Corinthians 3:14, "H *καὶνὴ διαθήκη*," 220-221.

<sup>14</sup> van Unnik, "H *καὶνὴ διαθήκη*," 225.

<sup>15</sup> van Unnik, "H *καὶνὴ διαθήκη*," 222-225.

<sup>16</sup> van Unnik, "H *καὶνὴ διαθήκη*," 225.

<sup>17</sup> van Unnik, "H *καὶνὴ διαθήκη*," 226-227.

<sup>18</sup> Kinzig, *Καὶνὴ διαθήκη: Title of the NT*, 519-544, esp. 524-525; and D. van Damme, *Pseudo Cyprian, Adversus Iudaeos. Gegen die Judenchristen. Die älteste lateinische Predigt* (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag, 1969), 46-50.

Furthermore, it has been argued that Irenaeus' stress on the essential unity of salvation history paved the way for the consolidation of the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Writings into the Christian Bible. Greer says, "In this way [by speaking of the differing economies of the same God], Irenaeus offers a Christian transformation of the Hebrew Scriptures that makes them wholly integral to a Christian Bible."<sup>19</sup> Irenaeus argued against Marcion's rejection of the Hebrew Scriptures, as will be seen later, by stressing the unity of the old and new covenants. Hence it can be argued that the church's bipartite Bible is, at least in part, a legacy of Irenaeus' covenant theology.<sup>20</sup>

#### THE PASTORAL CONTEXTS OF IRENAEAN COVENANT THEOLOGY

Of Irenaeus' many works, we have but two: *AH* and *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* [DAP]. They were written for different pastoral purposes, yet display a unified picture of Irenaeus' covenant thought. DAP was only recently re-discovered in an Armenian manuscript retrieved in 1904.<sup>21</sup> It is a shorter, non-polemical, catechetical work<sup>22</sup> that was written to Irenaeus' "beloved Marcianus" and largely confirms the positive teaching contained in *AH*. In it, Irenaeus "explains Christian doctrine and then proves it from Old Testament prophecies."<sup>23</sup> DAP was divided into a hundred chapters in Harnack's translation. The following outline follows that scheme of division. The first three chapters form an introduction which, among other things, commends the rule of faith. Chapters 4-42 constitute the first of two major divisions of the work, setting forth essential content of the Christian faith. This section may be subdivided into two parts: chapters 4-16 which treat of God, creation and the fall, and chapters 17-42 which recount the history of redemption. The second major division, which is made up of chapters 42-100, is con-

<sup>19</sup> R. A. Greer, *Early Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1986), 154.

<sup>20</sup> Campenhausen, *Formation of the Christian Bible*, 209.

<sup>21</sup> s.v., "Irenaeus," *EEC*, 1:413.

<sup>22</sup> J. P. Smith, while acknowledging its catechetical use, has drawn attention to the apologetic function of the work. See Irenaeus, *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, trans. J. P. Smith (New York: Newman Press, 1952), 20-21.

<sup>23</sup> M. T. Clark, s.v., "Irenaeus," *EEChr*, 472.

