

JOHN KNOX'S COVENANT VIEWS (I)

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Introduction

Those who know anything of the history of the Reformation in Scotland know that the doctrine of the covenant and the practice of covenanting played a significant part in Scottish theology and church history. It is well worth inquiring, therefore, into the views of the covenant held by the father of Scottish Presbyterianism, John Knox, as we hope to do in this brief article.

Determining exactly what Knox taught about the covenant is somewhat difficult in that Knox, at least as far as is discernable from his writings, had no developed or systematic doctrine of the covenant. He writes of the covenant in a number of his works, but always in connection with other matters. Only some tendencies and trends can be identified, therefore. These are nonetheless valuable, however, since in some cases we can see that the seeds of later developments in Scottish theology are to be found in Knox, and in other cases that Scottish theology turned in a different direction from Knox.

His teachings on the covenant, insofar as they can be gleaned from his writings, are found primarily in his work on baptism,¹ in his monumental treatise on predestination,² and in *A Godly Letter of Warning or Admonition to the Faithful in London, Newcastle, and Berwick*,³ though various statements are found also in his other writings. That these views are found in his writings on baptism is not surprising. That they are also found in his treatise on predestination is somewhat more unexpected and has some important consequences.

Knox's Theology of the Covenant

As we have already noted, Knox never treats the doctrine of the covenant in any kind of systematic fashion, yet several tendencies are immediately discernable in his writings. Such tendencies are found first of all in the words Knox uses as synonyms of the word "covenant." Among them are the words "league," "fellowship," "oath," and "band." Surprisingly, the most common is the word "league." That word is, in fact, found more frequently than the word "covenant," and there can be little doubt that the later references to *leagues* and covenants in Scottish church history derive from Knox.

It is somewhat difficult to determine exactly what Knox meant by using the word "league." The word usually has the very precise meaning of formally arranged compact, alliance or confederacy, especially for defense. The use of word "league" suggests, therefore, that Knox held to a contractual view of the covenant, seeing the covenant as some sort of formal compact or contract either between God and men or between men themselves. Yet his use in some places of the words "covenant" and "league" as synonymous with "fellowship" indicates, we believe, that Knox by no means thought of the covenant exclusively in terms of a contract. Especially in the greatest of his writings, his treatise on predestination, and in his work on baptism he seems to hold a more Biblical and less contractual view of the covenant, thinking of the covenant more in terms of a bond or fellowship that exists between God and His people.

¹*Answers to Some Questions Concerning Baptism, etc.*, 1556 (Laing, vol. IV, pp. 115-128). All references to Knox's writings are taken from the six volume David Laing edition of Knox's works (Edinburgh, James Thin, 1895), but the spelling have been modernized.

²*An Answer to the Cavillations of an Adversary Respecting the Doctrine of Predestination*, 1560 (Laing, vol. V, pp. 7-469).

³1553 or 1554 (Laing, vol. III, pp. 157-216).

In several other of his writings there are also examples of this tendency:

But, as before is said, God hath naturally engrafted and planted in man this love of life, tranquillity, and rest, and the most spiritual man oftentimes desireth them, because they are seals and witnesses of the league and fellowship that is between God and his elect. And albeit trouble most commonly doth follow the friends of God, yet is he nothing offended that earnestly we ask our quietness; neither is that our desire any declaration of carnality or of inordinate love that we have to the world, considering that the final cause wherefore we desire to live, is not for enjoying of worldly pleasures, for many times, in the midst of these, we grant and confess, that it is better to be absent from the body. But the chief cause why God's elect do desire life, or to have rest in earth, is for the maintenance of God's glory, and that others may see that God takes care over his elect (*An Exposition Upon the Sixth Psalm of David*, 1553; vol. III, p. 143).

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This is the league betwixt God and us, that He alone shall be our God, and we shall be his people: He shall communicate with us of his graces and goodness; We shall serve him in body and in spirit: He shall be our safeguard from death and damnation; We shall seek to him, and shall flee from all strange Gods" (*A Godly Letter of Warning or Admonition to the Faithful in London, Newcastle, and Berwick*; vol. III, pp. 190, 191)

In harmony with this tendency to define the covenant in terms of fellowship, Knox speaks of only one covenant, and that an unbreakable covenant. There is no hint in Knox's works of later covenant-of-works theology, with its strong emphasis on two covenants, at least one of them breakable, and both defined in terms of a contract. He insists, too, that the covenant is only between God and the elect, and roots all this in his doctrine of sovereign, double, unconditional predestination:

I doubt not but that the godly reader doth clearly see the mind of the Prophet to be to rebuke the vanity of the Jews, believing that God's counsels, covenant, and love, were subject to such mutability as they themselves were in their counsels, love, and promises. But the prophet maketh so much difference betwixt the one and the other as is betwixt the heaven and the earth; and doth further affirm, that as the dew and rain do not fall and come down in vain, so shall not the word which God speaketh (which is of more excellency than all creatures) lack his effect; but it shall work the will of God, and shall prosper as he hath appointed it, and that because it is God who hath spoken that which was purposed in his eternal and immutable counsel before all times (*An Answer to a Great Number of Blasphemous Cavillations Written by an Anabaptist, and Adversary to God's Eternal Predestination*⁴; vol. V, pp. 46, 47).

Yet, when it comes to his practical applications of the doctrine of the covenant to civil and political life, there appears to be a tension in Knox's writings, for he speaks of nations, cities, etc. being received into the covenant and of the possibility of their breaking that covenant:

Such is the infinite goodness of God, and that such be also the bright beams of his most just judgments, that whensoever he taketh into his protection, by the covenant of his Word, any realm, nation, province, or city, so that of mercy he becometh to them conductor, teacher, protector, and father; that he never casteth off the same care and fatherly affection, which in his Word he does once pronounce, until they do utterly declare themselves unworthy of his presence (*A Brief Exhortation to England, for the Speedy Embracing of the Gospel Heretofore by the Tyranny of Mary Suppressed and*

⁴This treatise is one of the great writings of the Reformation and deserves reprinting. It compares well with Calvin's similar treatise and with Zanchius' *Absolute Predestination*.

Banished, 1559; vol. V, pp. 503, 504).

Passages such as these suggest that the covenant is established in some sense with others than the elect, and is in fact not immutable and unbreakable. There appears, then, to be a certain tension in Knox's covenant views between the traditional view of the covenant as a contract and a more Biblical view of the covenant as a bond or relationship. This tension becomes most evident in a comparison of his work on baptism with his other comments on the duties of the magistrate as they are to be understood in the context of God's covenant with men.

The Covenant and Baptism

In his use of the doctrine of the covenant as part of his apologetic for infant baptism, there is very little that can be criticised. Indeed, Knox has remarkable insights into the relationship between the covenant of God and baptism. As the following quote shows, it was in connection with the covenant that he saw clearly the difference between the two sacraments, something that is not well understood today, even by many Reformed people. The promotion of paedocommunion by many is a good example of this lack of understanding.

As the same quote shows, he also drew from the doctrine of the covenant the reason why baptism ought not be repeated:

Hereof I suppose that it be proved, That Baptism once received suffices in this life, but that the use of the Lord's Table is oftentimes necessary: for the one, to wit, baptism, is the sign of our first entrance; but the other is the declaration of our covenant, that by Christ Jesus we be nourished, maintained, and continued in the league with God our Father. The sign of our first entrance needeth not to be iterate (repeated, R.H.), because the league is constant and sure; but the sign of our nourishment and continuance, by reason of our dullness, infirmity, and oblivion, ought oft to be used (*Answers to Some Questions Concerning Baptism, etc.*; vol. IV, pp. 124, 125).

Likewise, he saw clearly that baptism symbolises and seals a covenant which is unconditional and unbreakable. His strong views on predestination are the reason for this, for it is impossible to reconcile a general conditional covenant established with all who are baptised and the doctrine of sovereign double predestination. Thus Knox, writing on baptism, understand it to be not only permanent and unchangeable, but established with the elect only:

Now, evident it is, that the justice of Christ Jesus is permanent and cannot be defiled; that the league of God is of that firmity and assurance, that rather shall the covenant made with the sun and moon, with the day and night, perish and be changed, than that the promise of his mercy made to his elect shall be frustrated and vain. Now, if Christ's justice be inviolable, and the league of God be constant and sure, it is not necessary that the sign, which representeth unto me, and in some manner sealet in my conscience that I am received in the league with God, and so, clad with Christ's justice) be oftener than once received: for the iteration of it should declare, that before I was a stranger from God, who never had publicly been received in his household (*Answers to Some Questions Concerning Baptism, etc.*; vol. IV, p. 123).

We might note here also that Knox correctly sees the Anabaptist position (that rebaptism is permissible or required) as at bottom a denial of grace and if salvation by grace alone. This, too, can be traced to his strong predestinarian views. In his writings on baptism, then, his views of predestination, with his consequent emphasis on *sola gratia*, force him to put aside any inclination to see the covenant as a contact or agreement between God and man, and the tendency of that view towards synergism and free-willism.

Conclusion

Nevertheless, when Knox begins to speak of the covenant in connection with the calling

of the civil magistrate and the Christian citizen's relation to the magistrate this emphasis is largely lost and a somewhat different view of the covenant comes to the fore. His doctrine of the covenant is an important part of his writings the magistrate and the citizen, but it is here that the idea of the covenant as a "league" takes over and he begins to speak of the covenant more in terms of a contract. This, however, we will look at in a following article.