

# COVENANT THEOLOGY IN THE THOUGHT OF JOHN CALVIN: FROM THE MOSAIC COVENANT TO THE NEW COVENANT

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## ABSTRACT

Covenant theology was not the central point in Calvin's teaching neither was it the "foundational stone" on which his theological system was built. However, it is undeniable that the Genevan reformer possessed a profound understanding of this subject and extracted from it theological convictions of high importance to his thought. Following from where a previous article has left, the present work investigates Calvin's views on three covenantal dealings: Mosaic, Davidic, and the new covenant. The conclusion is that for Calvin, after the fall, there is only one covenant: the covenant of grace. This, however, presents itself in the progressive unfolding of the Abrahamic covenant. The Mosaic, Davidic, and new covenants are but a progressive revelation of what Yahweh initiated with the patriarchs.

## KEYWORDS

John Calvin; Theology; Covenant; Mosaic covenant; Davidic covenant; New Covenant.

## INTRODUCTION

Although covenant theology was not the central dogma in Calvin's thought, it certainly occupied a prominent place in his theological system. In another

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article, it has been demonstrated that Calvin held to a matured view of three covenantal dealings which would acquire a more developed form at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century: the covenant of works, the Noachic covenant, and the Abrahamic covenant.<sup>1</sup> In spite of the further development in the understanding of those particular covenants in later years, the substance of those dealings did not change and, therefore, what later theologians added to covenant theology was in line with what was already present in Calvin's thought.<sup>2</sup>

In this article, the remaining dispensations of the Covenant of Grace will be analyzed in light of Calvin's thought. As it has already been stated, for Calvin, after the fall of man salvation and relationship with God is only possible through a different covenant, a new covenant made between Yahweh and man, the Covenant of Grace. Such covenant was not administered in the same manner through history and, having examined the first two dispensations of such covenant, the last three remain to be studied: the Mosaic covenant, the Davidic covenant, and the new covenant in Christ. As in the previous article, the goal is to systematize Calvin's thought in terms of the basic elements of a covenantal relationship: the existence of a covenant, its parties, characteristics, promises, and threats.

## 1. THE MOSAIC COVENANT IN THE THOUGHT OF JOHN CALVIN

The starting point in this investigation is Calvin's teaching on the dispensation of the covenant of grace during the time of Moses and under his ministry. In his comments on Exodus 19, Calvin expresses his recognition that the relationship which will be established between God and the people of Israel is that of a covenantal dealing. In fact, he affirms it to be a new covenant:

And this is the main and principal thing which the prophets celebrate in the redemption of the people; and in this, as in a mirror, propose for consideration the image of the renewed Church, that God made known His testimonies to His redeemed, and bound the people, who He had purchased, to Himself by a new covenant.<sup>3</sup>

In spite of considering this deal between God and Israel at Sinai a new covenant, Calvin establishes continuity between the Mosaic covenant and the

<sup>1</sup> See "Covenant Theology in the Thought of John Calvin: From the Covenant of Works to the Abrahamic Covenant". *Fides Reformata* XX-1 (2015): 89-105.

<sup>2</sup> For the continuity between Calvin's covenantal thought and that of his successors, see: WOOSEY, Andrew A. *Unity and Continuity in Covenantal Thought: A Study in the Reformed Tradition to the Westminster Assembly*. Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> CALVIN, John. *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony*, trans. Charles William Bingham, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2005), 313. It is interesting to note that here Calvin maintains his view that Old Testament Israel is the Church.

Abrahamic covenant. The reformer affirms that the unbreakable Abrahamic administration is completely functional in Moses' time, but it has fallen in the disregard of the people. God, then, does not annul the previous dealing, but restores it in the people's memory through its renewal. For Calvin, the Mosaic covenant is a renovation of the Abrahamic covenant.

He [God] had indeed made with Abraham an eternal, and inviolable covenant; but because it had grown into disregard from the lapse of time, and the carelessness of mankind, it became needful that it should be again renewed. To this end, then, it was engraved upon the tables of stone, and written in a book, that the marvelous grace, which God had conferred on the race of Abraham, should never sink into oblivion.<sup>4</sup>

This connection between the Mosaic and the Abrahamic covenant demonstrates more than the principle of the continuity of the plan of redemption in Calvin's thought. Because God's action towards Israel is a covenantal response, Calvin eliminates the idea of merit as a reward in relation to Israel's participation in the covenant. God's motivation for his special dealing with the Hebrews is not due to any special status they hold before the Lord, but his own covenantal obligation with the patriarchs with whom he had previously established his special relationship.

As to what is added, that "God remembered his covenant," it is the explanation of the cause why he heard their groaning, viz., that he might ratify his gratuitous promise made to Abraham and his descendants. He expressly mentions the three patriarchs, because God lodged his covenant with them, that it might continue firm for perpetual generations.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, James Veninga rightly concludes: "Since the time of Abraham, the covenant was handed down to each generation because God was faithful to this promise, not because of the merit on the part of the people. The deliverance from Egypt was a testimony to his grace."<sup>6</sup>

In the making of the covenant, Calvin identifies two parties participating in the dealing. The first one is, obviously, the Lord, dictating the blessings and conditions of the covenant. Still in his comments on Genesis 19, the reformer finds that it is the Lord himself promising to remain the same, ever blessing his chosen people.<sup>7</sup> The second party Calvin identifies is the people, giving the

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 1:313.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 1:58.

<sup>6</sup> VENINGA, James Frank. "Covenant Theology and Ethics in the Thought of John Calvin and John Preston" (PhD diss., Rice University, 1980), 53.

<sup>7</sup> CALVIN, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses*, 1:318-319.

positive assent in acceptance of the terms of the covenant. The Israelites here, as a whole nation, engage in a commitment, a promise “that they would be obedient in all things... declaring that they would do whatsoever God required.” This positive assent, adds Calvin, was not the fruit of deceitfulness in the hearts of people, in which they tried to manipulate the Lord, but “God inclined their minds to this docility, in order to establish the doctrine of His law.”<sup>8</sup> Therefore the active role of Yahweh is not limited to creating the covenant, establishing its parameters, and inviting the Israelites into such relationship, but he is also responsible for the transformation of the people (for their conversion) so they can positively accept their new status, thus reinforcing the unilateral character of the covenant in Calvin’s thought.

From this notion of a unilateral covenant flows Calvin’s understanding of the *inviolability* and *unconditionality* of the covenant. The Mosaic administration cannot be destroyed or nullified because it was originated by the divine initiative and in total disregard to human merit. Therefore, Veninga explains, “the covenant throughout its entire history remains inviolable, in spite of the sin of the people.”<sup>9</sup> Calvin clearly expresses this idea in his comments on Exodus 32, the golden calf episode. There, he speaks of a “temporary rupture” that would be suspended upon the people’s acknowledgment of sin and eventual repentance. This rupture, nevertheless, does not violate the covenantal relationship. In Calvin own words:

Meanwhile, it must be borne in mind, that the covenant of God was not altogether annulled, but only as it were interrupted, until the people had heartily repented. Still this temporary rupture, if I my so call it, did not prevent the covenant itself from remaining inviolable. In the same manner also afterward God put away His people, as if He had utterly renounced them, yet His grace and truth never fails; so that He at least had some hidden roots from the Church sprang up anew.<sup>10</sup>

Because of his people’s sin, God is forced to repudiate and to punish them. This reaction on the part of God results from the covenantal relationship with Israel and does not terminate Yahweh’s gracious dealing. On the contrary, it is the unilateral character of the covenant that secures its perpetual nature and invites, even motivates, the bonded people, into repentance. Calvin, again, affirms in his comments of Deuteronomy 4:

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 1:320.

<sup>9</sup> VENINGA, “Covenant Theology and Ethics in the Thought of John Calvin and John Preston,” 62-63.

<sup>10</sup> CALVIN, John. *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony*, trans. Charles William Bingham, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005), 348.

He [God] tells them that after they shall have been afflicted by the curses of God, if they sought after Him, they should find Him: and further, he gives them grounds for hope both in God's nature and in His covenant. He assures them that God will be willing to be appeased, because He is by nature merciful; but he adds another confirmation of this, which is more certain and familiar, viz., because God had adopted them by a perpetual covenant.<sup>11</sup>

However, one can also find *mutuality* in Calvin's idea of the Mosaic administration. In his comments on Exodus 24, he affirms: "Inasmuch as mutual consent is required in all compacts, so when God invites his people to receive grace, He stipulates that they should give Him the obedience of faith, so as to answer, Amen."<sup>12</sup> The embracement of the covenant is interpreted by Calvin as a deliberate act of the people in which they bind themselves to the stipulations and conditions of the covenant. In Calvin's words: "It is, therefore, unquestionable that the elect of God embraced by faith the substance and truth of the shadows when they voluntarily offered themselves to keep the covenant of God."<sup>13</sup> As the people accept the condition of obedience, God also commits himself to keep and fulfill his promises. Calvin then concludes:

As I observed elsewhere, there is always to be presupposed a *mutual relation* and correspondence between the covenant of God and our faith. In order that the unfeigned consent of the latter may answer to the faithfulness of the former.<sup>14</sup>

From the idea of mutuality flows the notion of *conditionality* of the covenant in the Mosaic administration. The law, according to Calvin in his comments on Exodus 19, was written upon tablets of stone and given to the people so that they would not forget it anymore, as they did with the Abrahamic covenant, and could keep it.

To this end, then, it was engraved upon tables of stone, and written in a book, that the marvelous grace, which God had conferred on the race of Abraham, should never sink into oblivion. But in the first place we must observe that, although the Law is a testimony of God's gratuitous adoption, and teaches that salvation is based upon His mercy, and invites men to call upon God with sure confidence, yet it has this peculiar property, that it *covenants conditionally*.<sup>15</sup>

Calvin further explains the necessity to distinguish between these two doctrines: Moses' exhortation to approach God by faith in his pardoning

<sup>11</sup> CALVIN, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses*, 3:271.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:321.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:321.

<sup>14</sup> Calvin's comment on Psalm 78:37 as cited in HOEKEMA, Anthony A., "Covenant of Grace in Calvin's Teaching," *Calvin Theological Journal* 2, no. 2 (November 1967): 145. Emphasis mine.

<sup>15</sup> CALVIN, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses*, 1:313. Emphasis mine.

nature and merciful character, which leads the Holy Lord to offer free pardon of sins; and Moses' imposition of righteousness according to the demands of the Law. Regarding this aspect of Calvin's thought, Antony Hoekema rightly concludes:

Once again we see the Scriptural balance of Calvin's thought: when the Bible speaks of covenant conditions, it does not mean that we merit any of God's blessings, least of all salvation, by keeping these conditions. We are saved by grace alone, through the work of Jesus Christ. But salvation by grace is no excuse for laxity.<sup>16</sup>

Out of this notion of the mutuality and conditionality of the covenant flow two doctrines that find their harmony in Calvin, in spite of the accusations of the reformer's critics: the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man. Hoekema explains that Calvin is frequently accused of "being a theologian completely dominated by the idea of predestination. He is frequently made out a fatalist who leaves no room whatever for significant and responsible human decision."<sup>17</sup> However, Calvin's understanding of the Mosaic covenant completely refutes such accusation. In a sermon on Deuteronomy 1:34-40, the reformer affirms:

There must be as it were an accord and melody between God and us, so that when he imparts his benefits to us, we must estimate them so highly that we endeavor to serve and honor him for them, considering that he calls us to him to pluck us back from our sins. If we do so, the good that he has done for us shall be confirmed more and more. Otherwise it must needs be that our malice shall cut off the course of his goodness.<sup>18</sup>

In Calvin, therefore, doctrines that for others are incompatible find harmony. Instead of nullifying God's sovereignty (as in Arminianism) or man's responsibility (as in Hypercalvinism), he sticks to the biblical-theological truth of those doctrines in spite of their apparent logical contradiction. Hoekema, once again, enlightens this aspect of Calvin's theology:

The covenant of grace of Calvin is a fruit of God's undeserved mercy, but at the same time it calls for a response of faith and obedience from man. Though God owes us nothing, and though we owe him full obedience by virtue of the fact that he is our Creator, yet God has voluntarily condescended to make with man his covenant, in which he promises to be God of his people and therefore to shower upon them every needful blessing for this life and the life to come, with the understanding that man, in turn, is obligated by this covenant to show

<sup>16</sup> HOEKEMA, "Covenant of Grace in Calvin's Teaching," 158.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in HOEKEMA, "Covenant of Grace in Calvin's Teaching," 145.

his thankfulness for God's grace by being faithful to his covenant obligations. The balance of Calvin's thought is evident: in the covenant of grace both God's sovereignty and man's responsibility meet.<sup>19</sup>

The conditionality and mutuality of the covenant in the Mosaic administration also leads to another important aspect in Calvin's theology that flows from his view of the covenant in Moses' time: the role of the law in that covenant. Calvin devotes a whole chapter in his *Institutes* to the explanation of his view of *the threefold use of the law* in the covenant of grace as a full organic dispensation.<sup>20</sup> The first use is that of revealing who man truly is. The law functions as a mirror in which man's sinfulness is pointed, his liability to condemnation is confirmed, and his conscience is convicted.

The first part is this: while it shows God's righteousness, that is, the righteousness alone acceptable to God, it warns, informs, convicts, and lastly condemns, every man of his own unrighteousness.<sup>21</sup>

The second use of the law is that of restraining evil in man. This controlling power of the law results from its threats. These threats are not apprehended by the fallen human minds as a path to that which is good and right, but afraid of its punishments they refrain from breaking them.

The second function of the law is this: at least by fear of punishment to restrain certain men who are untouched by any care for what is just and right unless compelled by hearing the dire threats in the law.<sup>22</sup>

The third and final use of the law is reserved to true believers, those in whom the Holy Spirit of God has made God's calling effectual. The law teaches them in the way they must behave as members of the covenant; it serves as a teacher to instruct and exhort them.

The third and principal use, which pertains more closely to the proper purpose of the law, finds its place among believers in who hearts the Spirit of God already lives and reigns. For even though they have the law written and engraved upon their hearts by the finger of God, that is, have been so moved and quickened through the directing of the Spirit that they long to obey God, they still profit by the law in two ways.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 144.

<sup>20</sup> CALVIN, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 1 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 348-366. Book II, 7.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 1:354; Book II, 7, 6.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 1:358; Book II, 7, 10.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 1:360; Book II, 7, 12.

When one looks to Calvin's view of the law in the Mosaic dispensation specifically, it is possible to find those same three functions already in function. The law in the time of Moses does reveal the sinful nature of the people:

If it is true that in the law we are taught the perfection of righteousness, this also follows: the complete observance of the law is perfect righteousness before God. By it man would evidently be deemed and reckoned righteous before the heavenly judgment seat. Therefore Moses, after he had published the law, did not hesitate to call heaven and earth to witness that he had "set before Israel life and death, good and evil."<sup>24</sup>

It also functions as a tool for the restriction of Israel's natural inclination to sin due to its condemnations, curses, and punishments. In the Israelite context this restriction was most important due to the promised blessings they would achieve. As they acquired material richness, the law continued to remind them of who they were and restrained them from unfaithfulness to the terms of the covenant:

For scarcely shall we find one person in a hundred in who satiety does not generate headiness...It was needful, then, that a restraint should be put on such refractory begins, nay, that they should have their wantonness still more tightly repressed in their prosperity. But we may, and it is well to, extend this doctrine to ourselves also, since prosperity intoxicates almost all of us, so that we intemperately grow wanton against God and forget ourselves and Him.<sup>25</sup>

And it also is a tool for the covenant members to guide their life, how they ought to act in their daily dealings within the community of Israel. This idea is clearly expressed in Calvin's comments on the preamble words of Exodus 19:

This chapter informs us by what means God rendered the people attentive and teachable when He would promulgate His laws. He had, indeed, previously delivered the rule of a just and pious life, but by writing the Law on tables, and by then adding its exposition, He not only embrace the perfect doctrine of piety and righteousness, but ratified it by solemn rite, so that the recognition of it might remain and flourish in future times.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 1:351; Book II, 7, 3.

<sup>25</sup> CALVIN, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses*, 1:397. Note that Calvin here applies a principle extracted from the Mosaic Covenant to those who are under the New Covenant. The same idea is also present, and maybe even more evident, in Calvin, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses*, 3:203. "We now perceive how the authority of the Law was confirmed by the promises; but because we are not only indolent but also refractory, He added on the other side threats which might inspire terror, both to subdue the obstinacy of the flesh and to correct the security in which we are too apt to indulge."

Given that three functions of the law in view of the covenant of grace as a whole are found specifically in Calvin's view of the Mosaic covenant, it seems safe to conclude that to place a particular emphasis on Calvin's view of the law in Moses is a misapprehension of his theology. Mark Karlberg takes the position that "the ministration of law under the Mosaic Covenant serves to increase transgression in the economy of God's dealings with his Old Covenant people. The law is Israel's pedagogue until the coming of Christ."<sup>26</sup> While it is indeed true that Calvin perceives such function of the law in the Mosaic covenant, to reduce the reformer's perspective to it alone is to restrict too much Calvin's original thought.

It also seems safe to affirm that the functions of the law in Calvin's thought, even in the Mosaic administration, are only spiritual. The promises of prosperity, land inheritance, and richness, which are indeed present in the covenant, are not conditioned to Israel's faithfulness to the law. This seems even more obvious when Calvin's view of Leviticus 18:5 is considered. In that particular passage, Calvin affirms that the expression "which if a man do, he shall live in them" possess only a soteriological connotation. He affirms:

Consequently God voluntarily promises, in order to arouse them from their sloth, that if men obey His Law, He will repay them . . . For we must bear in mind the declaration of Christ, that when we have fulfilled the whole Law, we still deserve nothing; since God claims for Himself our entire services. (Luke 17:10.) However we may strive, therefore, even beyond our strength, and devote ourselves entirely to keep the Law, still God lies under no obligation to us, except in so far as He has Himself voluntarily agreed, and made Himself our spontaneous debtor. *And this has been pointed out even by the common theologians, that the reward of good works does not depend upon their dignity or merit, but upon His covenant.* Still, as we shall see soon see, such promises would not avail us the least if God rewarded every one according to its works; but, because this defect is adventitious, God's great mercy nevertheless shines forth in the fact that He has deigned to encourage us to obedience by setting before us *the hope of eternal life.* And hence He reproves the ingratitude of the Israelites by Ezekiel, (xx.21;) because they had despised his good commandments, of which it was said that "if a man do them, he should live in them"<sup>27</sup>

On the other hand, obedience to the Law should be the fruit of a grateful heart for both material and spiritual blessings. Because God would freely grant Israel what it did no merit, the land promised (also without merit) to Abraham, the covenanted people should be motivated to obedience and to covenantal

<sup>26</sup> KARLBERG, Mark W. "Reformed Interpretation of the Mosaic Covenant," *The Westminster Theological Journal* 43, no. 1 (September 1980): 14.

<sup>27</sup> CALVIN, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses*, 3:202-203. Emphasis mine.

faithfulness. Conformity to the law flowing out of a grateful heart permeates Calvin's thought.

Since, then they were appointed to inherit the land, Moses, when he invites them to this enjoyment, commands them gladly to embrace the doctrine, for the sake of which they were adopted; and to devote themselves on their side to obedience to God by whose gratuitous goodness they have been prevented.<sup>28</sup>

And again:

Therefore Moses not only commands the Israelites not to be ungrateful to God, but warns them to guard themselves (for he uses this word for to beware) from that impious ingratitude. He immediately after uses this same word for the keeping of the Law. But this is the sum, that they needed the utmost care and attention to beware lest forgetfulness of God should steal over them in happy circumstances, and thus they should shake off His fear, and cast away His yoke, and indulge themselves in the lusts of their flesh. For he shews that contempt of the Law would be a token of ingratitude; because it could not be but that they would submit themselves to God, and keep His Law, if they only reflected that it was to nothing but His blessing that they owed their prosperity.<sup>29</sup>

This principle of "*inheritance-work*" (keeping the law because of an already secured inheritance) seems to contradict Karlberg's reading of Calvin. He affirms that the reformer recognizes in the pre-fall Adamic administration a "*works-inheritance*" principle which was governed by Adam's original righteousness. According to this principle, "the reward for faithfulness, based upon man's obedience, was eternal life."<sup>30</sup> He, then, reads this "*works-inheritance*" principle into Calvin's interpretation of the Mosaic covenant. He affirms that, for Calvin,

the peculiarity of the Mosaic Covenant was seen in the emphasis on earthly and temporal benefits which served to direct the Israelites to the heavenly and eternal realities. This accounted for the status of childhood for the Old Covenant Church. The people of God were restricted under the tutelage of the law of Moses. Physical blessings and punishments were related to the principle of works-inheritance, appropriate to the typical picture of the Mosaic administration.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 1:395.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 1:397.

<sup>30</sup> KARLBERG, Mark W. "The Mosaic Covenant and the Concept of Works in Reformed Hermeneutics: A Historical-Critical Analysis with Particular Attention to Early Covenant Eschatology" (PhD diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1980), 76.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 80-81.

By reading the “works-principle” into the material blessings of the Mosaic covenant, Karlberg is affirming that, for Calvin, Israel needed to keep God’s law in order to receive those blessings while Calvin himself seems to be affirming that obedience stems out of a grateful heart for a blessing already received. It is true that Calvin may understand that Israel’s *maintenance* in the covenant may flow not only from God’s blessing but also from covenant keeping, but the idea of reward seems to be absent from Calvin’s thought.

Another evidence seems to point toward the validity of the “inheritance-works” principle, which is exactly the opposite to that proposed by Karlberg, and it flows from Calvin’s view of *the unity of the covenant*. Such unity was already evidenced by the harmonious threefold use of the law which is the same in the whole administration of the covenant of grace, even in the new covenant. Since it is true that the physical and material blessings of the Mosaic covenant represent higher spiritual blessings that would be unveiled with the inauguration of the New Covenant in Christ, and since the geographical land to be inherited by the people of Israel pointed to the spiritual land to be inherited by the Church of Christ, it seems very arbitrary to believe that as the people of Israel should keep the law in order to enter the land, the Church of Christ must keep the law to dwell in the new Jerusalem. In fact, because the Church is “already” in the land, out of a grateful heart, Christians are commanded to keep the Law of Moses even in the New Covenant.

## 2. THE DAVIDIC COVENANT IN THE THOUGHT OF JOHN CALVIN

After considering Calvin’s thought on the Mosaic covenant, the next step in this investigation is to unveil the reformer’s view of the covenant with David. Calvin readily recognizes the existence of such covenant. In his introductory remarks on Psalm 89 he affirms that in that text the psalmist “again returns to the covenant made with David, in which God promised to continue his favor toward that people forever, for the sake of their king.”<sup>32</sup>

With these words, Calvin also expresses his view of the relationship between the Davidic covenant and the past covenants. In his promises to David, according to Calvin, God was continuing a gracious dealing he had already started in the past. He traces the origins of the promises of this covenant all the way back to the patriarchs, specifically to Jacob and the blessings pronounced on the house of Judah in Genesis 49:10:

For the prophecy of Jacob, which served them as an exposition of this promise, explained that this is how it would have to be. Long before the people were

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<sup>32</sup> CALVIN, John. *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, trans. James Anderson, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2005), 417. See also 3:421.

given possession of their heritage, and even before they had been brought out of captivity in Egypt, listen to Jacob, who declared that “the scepter would remain in the house of Judah, and the law-giver would be in his loins.”<sup>33</sup>

Therefore, for Calvin, the Davidic administration stands in continuity with the covenant as expressed in the time of the patriarchs, which are further expressions and developments of the Abrahamic covenant.

Calvin makes it even more clear that the promises to David were a further administration of the Abrahamic covenant when, in his comments on Psalm 89:4, he explains that choosing a particular man to be king over the descendants of Abraham did not represent a rupture with the promises made to that great patriarch. On the contrary, God’s selected one to rule over many for the good and profit of all and as a preparation for the coming of the Messiah. The Davidic covenant further unrolls the Abrahamic covenant in its immediate aspect to the nation of Israel and also in its eschatological aspect in the progress of the history of redemption.

In ordaining one man to be king, God assuredly did not have a respect to one house alone, while he forgot and neglected the people with who he had before made his covenant in the person of Abraham. But he conferred the sovereign power upon David and his children, that they might rule for the common good of all the rest, until the throne might the truly established by the advent of Christ.<sup>34</sup>

James Veninga affirms that in its most immediate context, the covenant with David, for Calvin, promoted “the fulfillment of the material promises made to Abraham and Moses.”<sup>35</sup> He came to this conclusion from comments the reformer made on Psalm 89:25, in which Calvin explained that the sinfulness of the people of Israel after the occupation of the land under the leadership of Joshua, as described in the book of Judges, “blocked” God’s promises from their total fulfillment and the land they had conquered so far was only a limited demonstration of the full potential of the promise. “But now God declares, that during the reign of David, it will be again enlarged, so that the people possess the whole country, from the sea even to the river Euphrates.” Calvin concludes his thoughts on this issue by making a complete connection between the Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic covenants. “From this we gather,”

<sup>33</sup> CALVIN, John. *Sermons on 2 Samuel: Chapters 1-13*, trans. Douglas F. Kelly (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1992), 325.

<sup>34</sup> CALVIN, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 2005, 3:422.

<sup>35</sup> VENINGA, “Covenant Theology and Ethics in the Thought of John Calvin and John Preston,” 66.

he explains, “that what God had promised by Moses was fulfilled only in the person of David, that is to say, from his time.”<sup>36</sup>

Concerning the parties of the covenant, Calvin points, first and foremost, to Jehovah God as the gracious maker of the covenant. He expresses God’s unique role in the administration of the divine promises in a sermon on 2 Samuel 7: 12-17 in which he explains that it is only because of Yahweh’s gratuitous election that he rejects Saul and chooses David to rule over his people. God’s choice of David is but a demonstration of the unilateral nature of the covenant and of how God deals with anyone whom he adopts.

Now here David is compared to Saul: both were kings and received the anointing by the hand of the prophet. Saul, indeed, was first and seemed to be well worthy of it. Still, one of them was cut off, and God removed his mercy from him, but it is said here that it would never be taken from David, nor from his successors. By this, therefore, God wanted to magnify this mercy which he bestows on us who are his children, for when we consider the unbelievers; we see that they are of the same mass as we. So why is our condition not the same?<sup>37</sup>

Calvin expresses the same idea of the unilateral nature of the covenant, independent from any human merit, in his comments on Psalm 132:11. Explaining the expression “Jehovah swore unto David” he affirms: “Here he brings out the ideal still more clearly, that the only thing he had respect to in David was the *free promise which God had made to him*.”<sup>38</sup>

From the unilateral nature of the Davidic covenant flow two further aspects: its *un-conditionality* and its *inviolability*. Because the choice of David to be the king of Israel was later transformed in a promise of eternal perpetuity of David’s house upon the throne, without any requisition on God’s part, the covenant becomes unconditional. On this regard, Veninga rightly remarks that “Calvin recognizes that the covenant is clearly unconditional in that it promises perpetuity of succession of the Davidic line; God would always have a descendant from David upon the throne, not merely for one age, but forever.”<sup>39</sup> The covenant is also inviolable for regardless of the infidelity of David or of the people to the covenant, God will sustain his promises. Calvin comments on Psalm 89:30 about this aspect of the covenant become very clear:

<sup>36</sup> CALVIN, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 2005, 3:436.

<sup>37</sup> CALVIN, *Sermons on 2 Samuel*, 342.

<sup>38</sup> CALVIN, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, vol. 5, 153. Calvin is even more emphatic in his comments on Psalm 78:70. He writes: “It serves in no small degree to magnify the grace of God, that a peasant was taken from his mean shepherd’s cot, and exalted to the dignity of a king. Nor is this grace limited to the person of David. We are taught that whatever worth there was in the children of Abraham, flowed from the fountain of God’s mercy.” CALVIN, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 3:280.

<sup>39</sup> VENINGA, “Covenant Theology and Ethics in the Thought of John Calvin and John Preston,” 74.

The prophet proceeds yet father, declaring that although the posterity of David should fall into sin, yet God had promised to show himself merciful towards them, and that he would not punish their transgression to the full extent of their desert. . . . God, therefore, seeing that it could not be otherwise, but that the posterity of David, in so far as it depended upon them-selves, would frequently fall from the covenant, by their own fault, has provided a remedy for such cases, in his pardoning grace.<sup>40</sup>

In the *Institutes*, Calvin attributes this inviolability to the final beneficiaries of the covenant. Not Israel as a nation, but Christ, and his Church with him.<sup>41</sup>

The second party of the covenant is king David. It has already been remarked above that Calvin does acknowledge God dealing directly with David. But it is important to consider the context in which the covenant was made. According to II Samuel 7, David proposes to build a house for God and God rejects it. David will not do it, but his descendant will. This descendant will also have a special status before God; he will be a son to him. David's descendant will enjoy the benefits of the covenant only because of David. This puts the king in a position similar to a *mediator*. David represents his son and his posterity after him.

Calvin notes this function of David as a mediator in his comments on Psalm 132:1. He explains that the psalmist can call upon Jehovah on the basis of David's name because the covenant God had made directly with him was not for him alone but for all the people of Israel and, ultimately, for the whole Church. The psalmist plea is grounded only on "the covenant which God had made with David, knowing well that though given to one man, it was with the understanding that it should be communicated to all."<sup>42</sup> But how can the New Testament church use the same claim of the citizens of the kingdom of Israel since many of them are not Israelites? Calvin explains:

...let us be aware that we are of the house of David. We are not part of it according to the flesh. We are not descendants of his race. But yet by faith we are united to him (Rom. 4:11, 16). We are to belong to the household of God in the same way.<sup>43</sup>

Calvin, thus, concludes from Psalm 132 that the role of David as a party in the covenant was typological. It pointed to the supreme King Jesus Christ.

<sup>40</sup> CALVIN, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 3:438-439.

<sup>41</sup> CALVIN, *Institutes*, 1:342-343; Book II, 6, 2.

<sup>42</sup> CALVIN, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 5:144. In his comment of verse 10 of this same Psalm, Calvin affirms: "The favor is asked for David's sake, only because God had made a covenant with him... The prayer, in short, is to the effect that God in remembrance of his promise would show favor to the posterity of David, for though this prayer for the Church must be considered as dictated to each of the kings, the foundation was in the person of David." *Ibid.*, 5:153.

<sup>43</sup> CALVIN, *Sermons on 2 Samuel*, 351.

It was ultimately with him that God was making a covenant. “The Church was thus taught figuratively that Christ, as Mediator, would make intercession for all his people.”<sup>44</sup>

Now that both the existence of the covenant and its parties has been examined, it is time to consider the terms of the covenant, its promises and threats. The promises of the covenant, according to II Samuel 7, are three: *kingdom*, *seed*, and *temple*. As already mentioned above, Calvin sees an interruption of God’s blessings upon the expansion of Israel’s dominion in the Promised Land. The sins of the people during the time of the Judges hindered them from enjoying complete freedom from their enemies and from the total bounty of the land. It is not that God’s promise had failed. In light of Psalms 44:3 and 80:9, Calvin firmly affirms: “God had brought back his people out of Egypt, and they did not gain the land by their arms nor by their swords, but by the favor which he gave them.”<sup>45</sup>

However, one element is missing. Calvin understands the emphasis of the promise to be not on the possession of the land but on having peace in the land. Calvin sees a concept of *rest* in the covenant that was yet to be fulfilled.<sup>46</sup> It would begin with David, find a certain maturity in Solomon, but its full manifestation will appear in the kingdom of Christ.

David spoke in this way (Psalm 60:8) to show that fulfillment of what he had been promised, namely, that God would give a permanent place to all his people. That began in the time of Solomon, *who did not even have wars with foreigners*, for in fact they all paid him tribute, and were his subjects. . . . Moreover, in order to understand this, we must remember that the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ is spiritual. Under the guidance of David, it was necessary for the people to have a visible rest in human terms, especially because they had not reached this perfection to which the Son of God has brought us.<sup>47</sup>

The kingdom, therefore, becomes a type of the Messiah’s kingdom, where peace abounds and the enemies of the people of God are destroyed.

Calvin connects the peacefulness of the kingdom with its special king and here he articulates the second promise of the covenant: the *seed*. He understands the seed as a typological term. It points primarily to king Solomon

<sup>44</sup> CALVIN, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 5:153.

<sup>45</sup> CALVIN, *Sermons on 2 Samuel*, 318.

<sup>46</sup> The concept of rest Calvin develops from his sermons on II Samuel is different from that present in his commentary on the letter to the Hebrews. In the former, Calvin places the emphasis on absence of war and conflict; in the later, on the entering of Canaan under Joshua.

<sup>47</sup> CALVIN, *Sermons on 2 Samuel*, 318–319. See also CALVIN, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 3:440. Emphasis mine.

and finds its immediate fulfillment in him. In commenting verses 11 and 12 of II Samuel 7, Calvin explains that

where it says that would build a house for David, it is using a figure of speech which is fairly frequently found in Scripture. 'To build a house' is to give an estate to someone. That, therefore, does not mean person or multitudes of goods, but it means that God will make David prosper not only in his person, but in his offspring, as we see by the flow of the text.<sup>48</sup>

Solomon, the immediate offspring of David, takes part in the fulfillment of the covenant promises for it is in him that the rest concept is experienced on earth by the Israelites. The peace of the kingdom is achieved because the king himself is incredibly peaceable.

For what happened to the line of David in the time of Solomon? Now here, first, was a king of Israel who was so peaceable that none could have been more so. All the foreign princes paid him tribute. There were no Philistines, or Moabites, or Idumeans, or any others (indeed, even including the Sidonians and Ziphites) who did not have to give home to Solomon and to pay him tribute. Thus, we clearly see that God so magnified his kingdom that this promise was indeed fulfilled in it; that he was the first-born king whom God established in excellence.<sup>49</sup>

Nevertheless, the peacefulness of the kingdom of Solomon does not last long. The king dies and with him the peace which the people experienced. It is here that Calvin brings the idea of a peaceful kingdom associated with an eternal kingdom. A temporal kingdom can never fulfill the promise of the Davidic covenant. Kings come and go, and no matter how great they are, the characteristics of their kingdom disappear with them. Calvin concludes: "The temporal kingdom, therefore, which involved the house of David, was only *a type*, so that the substance and ultimate reality of what is contained in this prophecy cannot be found in it."<sup>50</sup>

As hinted in the last citation, Calvin rightly appeals to typology to solve this dilemma. Only an eternal king will establish a forever peaceable kingdom. Thus, Calvin takes the last step in his interpretation of the covenantal promises and applies their fulfillment ultimately to Christ.

But when we see that there was no-one but Solomon and his son – who was supposed to succeed him, but who in fact lost the greatest part of his subjects and of his country, was rejected by the majority – then we realize that God did not have Solomon in mind nor those who came after him, except insofar as the

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 320.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 349-350.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 325. Emphasis mine.

Redeemer should finally be raised up from the tribe of David, whose kingdom is perpetual.<sup>51</sup>

From the eternality of the kingdom also flows Calvin's view of the *spirituality of the kingdom*. The reigns of David and Solomon as types functioned as shadows and pointed to the kingdom of the Son of God which is the true promised reality. Christ reigns eternally in heaven and nothing can destroy his dominion. From there he subdues his enemies and will finally destroy them in the eschaton.

It says, however, that the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ 'will be for ever' (2 Sam. 7:16). Let us note that his throne is not here below today. Under the moon, there is nothing but what is changeable, but the seat of our Lord Jesus Christ is above the heavens.<sup>52</sup>

The use of the kingdom as type is justified in man's limitation to aspire to a heavenly kingdom. It is part of God's condescension with man in his progressive revelation. Solomon's peaceful kingdom worked as a symbol that, once experienced and removed, would draw the eyes of the people to the Messiah's kingdom. It has a revelatory-soteriological function towards the people of Israel.

Since men cannot aspire to the heavenly kingdom of God, it was necessary for the type of the kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ to be removed, in order to draw upward those whose hearts are here below. Nevertheless, there had to be some figure in the absence of our Lord Jesus Christ, that is, in the time before he was made manifest. For if the Jews had not had some previous taste of this promise, they would have been unable to draw the definite conclusion that they should hope for the coming of the Redeemer to receive full salvation.<sup>53</sup>

The third and last promise of the covenant is the building of the temple and Calvin, again, appeals to typology for its complete fulfillment. He does not hesitate to associate the building promised in 2 Samuel 7 with the one Solomon built. That magnificent work of engineering, nevertheless, was only part of the promise. Like the kingdom and the king, it was a symbol, a shadow of true reality that is found in Jesus, the Christ.

Well, finally it says that 'Solomon will build a temple for God' (2 Sam. 7:13). We have already mentioned how Solomon had built a material temple, yet this was

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 225. See also CALVIN, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 3:422, 434, 437. See Veninga's assessment of Calvin's use of typology in: VENINGA, "Covenant Theology and Ethics in the Thought of John Calvin and John Preston," 71-74.

<sup>52</sup> CALVIN, *Sermons on 2 Samuel*, 352.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 339-340.

not the main thing noted here but only a small illustration which God uses – a mere shadow of the reality. Therefore, we must come to our Lord Jesus Christ. For in fact, this temple which Solomon built would have been nothing in itself if it had not been founded on the person of the Redeemer, and if it had not been a type of this spiritual temple of which we have spoken, and thus it was that the temple of Solomon was totally ruined.<sup>54</sup>

The destruction of Solomon’s temple and the inferiority of all the other buildings later constructed upon its site were further indications of its symbolic and transitional nature, raising the expectation of Old Testament believers for a permanent temple. Calvin sees the complete fulfillment of the temple promises in Christ: “...God has chosen our Lord Jesus Christ, not to build him a house but that he is the very temple of his divinity.”<sup>55</sup>

The temple, however, does not only typify Christ. It also represents all the elect who are in Christ. Calvin extends his interpretation of the typology of the temple and applies it to each individual believer. He sees this particular promise of the Davidic administration fulfilled in the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit which transforms man, body and soul, into the place of habitation of God.<sup>56</sup> In this manner, Christ and the Church constitute a much superior temple than that built by Solomon.

Therefore, we see how our Lord Jesus Christ built the spiritual temple in a manner much more worthy and more noble than Solomon did. There was stone and wood in that temple. It was exquisitely sumptuous. Its workmanship was very great and excellent. But here is a kind of house which is far more perfect than the build which was on the mountain of Zion. It is a temple in which so many men and women who have been converted to the faith of the Gospel are like numerous stones which have been assembled so that God might dwell throughout all the earth, so that his name might be honored and worshipped by all, and so that everyone might offer him a free-will sacrifice.<sup>57</sup>

One more aspect deserves attention in Calvin’s view of the Davidic covenant; it is that of discipline in the covenant. In spite of all the beautiful and powerful promises that God proclaimed to his people, the reformer also accounts for the “curses” of the covenant. In the text of 2 Samuel 7, Yahweh

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 321-322.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 314.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 328.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 328. In the remainder of this sermon Calvin will use the temple promises as a motivation to grateful obedience to God. It is significant to consider how Calvin, not only as a theologian but as a pastor of souls, worries to connect the dots and to move his hearers from theology to application. In his own words: “We are bound to glorify God, because his promise has finally been fulfilled in us, who only deserved to be built into a pigsty, since we were so full of infection and rot!”

promises to correct his son when he commits iniquity. Calvin readily dissociates the holy person of Jesus from this part of the covenant. He explains that Christ, being the “fountain of all purity”, the “mirror of all obedience”, the “living image of God”, the fulfiller of the Law, and having nothing but “total perfection and justice” in his being, could not be directly the recipient of this threat. Calvin concludes that the threat is directed to all believers who truly are in a covenantal relationship with God. The reason why Christ is included in the threat is because the Church is his body.

Well, let us come to the second part of the promise where it says that ‘when he behaves badly, I will visit his iniquities with the stripes of men (2 Sam. 7:14). We have already shown that since this does not refer to the person of our Lord Jesus Christ, it must refer to us who are members of him; and it is spoken in common of him and of us, because it pleases him for us to be his body.<sup>58</sup>

Discipline in the covenant does not mean exclusion from it. As it has already been stated above, for Calvin, the Davidic covenant is unconditional and inviolable. However, because of the nature that constitutes a covenantal relationship, that of adoption, God binds himself to the role of father, and as such he promises to guide his children, even via punishment, all the way until the full enjoyment of the covenant promises. Discipline in the context of the covenant is a reflection of God’s true love and mercy and he encourages believers promising that his “lovingkindness shall never depart from” them.

For even after God has claimed us as his children, still we do not fail to be subjects to many vices, so that we offend him every day, and hence the covenant which God made with us would be broken from morning to evening and every minutes, unless we rested on his goodness. Therefore, God certainly had to add this grace that ‘he would not remove his mercy’ from us, although we are poor sinners...Hence, we must have these two sentences joined together; that is, that God will never fail to be gracious to us while we are poor sinners, and yet that he will chastise us with stripes.<sup>59</sup>

And it is exactly in this context of discipline in the covenant that Calvin finds the *conditionality* of the Davidic administration. The kingdom of Christ and the adoption of believers, Calvin affirms, were promises made “on the

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<sup>58</sup> CALVIN, *Sermons on 2 Samuel*, 333. See also *Ibid.*, 329. Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, 3:439.

<sup>59</sup> CALVIN, *Sermons on 2 Samuel*, 334. In the *Institutes* Calvin makes a clear distinction between God’s judgment in vengeance and God’s judgment in chastisement. The former is used to punish unbelievers and to give them a foretaste of hell, the later is used to correct believers and to improve their behavior aiming ultimately at their salvation. Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:658-664; Book III, 4, 31-34.

*condition* that when we are made children of God, we must be subjected to his chastisements.”<sup>60</sup>

### 3. THE NEW COVENANT IN CALVIN'S THOUGHT

After considering Calvin's thought on the Old Testament covenant dispensations, the last part of this investigation is the reformer's view of the New Testament covenant, named in sacred Scripture as the New Covenant. Ironically, a study of the new covenant necessitates a return to the Old Testament, where it was first prophesied. In Calvin's comments on Jeremiah 31:31 he promptly recognizes the existence of such a new dealing in the context of a discouraged nation in the midst of the Babylonian captivity.

Here then he sets before them a new covenant, as though he had said, that they ought not to look farther or higher, not to measure the benefit of God, of which he had spoken, by the appearance of the state of things at that time, for God would make a *new covenant*.<sup>61</sup>

Calvin explains that the promise of a new covenant in the context of the captivity functioned as a source of hope and encouragement for the Israelites who had become a divided nation, expelled from the land of promise and who had not experienced the rest concept of the covenant.<sup>62</sup>

The parties of this new covenant, different from the Davidic covenant, in which the promises were directed to one person representing the people, are God and the whole Church. Calvin affirms that the new covenant is made between Jehovah and the believers. Nevertheless, he also acknowledges the presence of a mediator. The true mediator of whom Abraham, Moses, and David were only shadows. The new covenant is made in the person of Christ. In his comments on Hebrews 8:7, Calvin writes:

He confirms what he had said of the Excellency of the covenant which God hath made with us through Christ; and he confirms it on this ground, because the covenant of the Law was neither valid nor permanent; for if nothing was wanting in it, why was another substituted for it?<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> CALVIN, *Sermons on 2 Samuel*, 335. In this development of Calvin's idea of the conditionality of the covenant it is important to note that he maintains the "inheritance-works" principle already present in the Mosaic administration. David, as the representative and mediator of the Israelite nation, receives the promises of an eternal kingdom, temple and seed on the basis of God's grace alone. Obedience is required from both David and the people not *to* receive the promises but *because of* the promises.

<sup>61</sup> CALVIN, John. *Commentaries on the Prophet Jeremiah and the Lamentations*, trans. John Owen, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2005), 125.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 4:126.

<sup>63</sup> CALVIN, John. *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews*, trans. John Owen (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2005), 186.

But, for Calvin, what is new about the new covenant? The quotation above seems to imply that in Calvin's thought there was a complete rupture between old and new covenant. The former was obsolete and wanting; the latter was perfect and completely replaced the old. However, in light of Calvin's comments on Jeremiah 31 it is possible to affirm that the reformer did not put the old and new administrations in complete antithesis. In fact, there is no opposition at all between both covenants.

Now, as to the *new* covenant, it is not so called, because it is contrary to the first covenant; for God is never inconsistent with himself, nor is he unlike himself. He, then, who once made a covenant with his chosen people, had not changed his purpose, as though he had forgotten his faithfulness.<sup>64</sup>

On this basis, Calvin goes on to explain two fundamental points on his idea of the covenant that have already been mentioned above: the continuity and the inviolability of the covenant. The continuity of the covenant is based on its foundational first dispensation, the Abrahamic covenant. Calvin argues that this covenant was renewed in Moses, that every blessing and promise of salvation flows from the descendent promised to Abraham, that believers are called children of Abraham on the basis of the same faith of the Old Testament patriarch. In other words, there is no other covenant than that made with Abraham, which was ratified in Moses and carried on through the history of redemption until Christ. And because the new covenant is, in fact, the covenant with Abraham, it derives its inviolability from it.

These things no doubt sufficiently shew that God has never made any other covenant than that which he made formerly with Abraham, and at length confirmed by the hand of Moses. This subject might be more fully handled; but it is enough briefly to shew, that the covenant which God made at first is perpetual.<sup>65</sup>

However, there might be something "new" about the new covenant. Calvin explains that the covenant is the same in terms of substance, or of doctrine, "for God in the Gospel brings forward nothing but what the Law contains." But in reference to the *form* (the manner) of administration, everything is new. The new form of the covenant is found in three elements: "first Christ,

<sup>64</sup> CALVIN, *Commentaries on the Prophet Jeremiah and the Lamentations*, 4:126.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 4:127. "The new covenant is not new, then, in an absolute sense, but in the sense that the old one is renewed. Moses and Christ must not be separated, for by itself the law kills; joined to the Gospel, it makes alive." EENIGENBURG, Elton M. "The Place of the Covenant in Calvin's Thinking," *Reformed Review* 10, no. 4 (June 1957): 17.

then the grace of the Holy Spirit, and the whole external way of teaching.”<sup>66</sup> Christ, as one of the new elements of the covenant, replaces the Old Testament sacrificial system. This is what Calvin means by the word “Law” in the present context. The Law is composed by “the rule of a perfect life” and also by those “types and figures that led the people to Christ.” It is to this latter element of the Law that Calvin refers when he talks about the newness of the covenant. “God made a new covenant, when he accomplished through his Son whatever had been shadowed forth under the Law.” It is in the incarnation of Jesus that all those ceremonies, which were instituted “so that the faith might have some taste of salvation”, find their fulfillment and become obsolete.<sup>67</sup> Calvin concludes from the letter to the Hebrews: “All the sacrifices were destined for this end, that they might lead men to Christ; as the eternal salvation of the soul through Christ, so these were true witnesses of this salvation.”<sup>68</sup>

Christ’s incarnation also discontinues the priestly office for he is its fulfillment; he is the supreme high priest. Calvin argues that no mere mortal can achieve reconciliation between man and God. The insufficiency of the earthly priesthood becomes even more evident when one considers the corruption of the office, “that for the most part the priests not only became degenerate, but altogether sacrilegious.”<sup>69</sup> The deficiencies of the human priests are totally overcome by the divine Jesus. In his comments on Hebrew 9:11, Calvin explains the similarities between Christ and the high priest, yet emphasizing his superiority. The high priest brought temporal blessings which did not secure the perpetuity of his ministry; Christ brought eternal blessings which secured his office forever. The high priest entered the Holy of Holies through a physical sanctuary once every year; Christ entered heaven through the sanctuary of his body once and for all! The high priest offered blood of animals and this sacrifice was efficacious for expiation for the period of only one year. Christ offered his own blood and performed a sacrifice whose efficacy is eternal.<sup>70</sup> In the *Institutes*, Calvin summarizes it in this way: “The priestly office belongs to

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<sup>66</sup> CALVIN, *Commentaries on the Prophet Jeremiah and the Lamentations*, 4:127. These threefold division of what is new about the new covenant must not be confused, in spite of its similarities and overlappings with the five differences between the Old and New Testaments the reformer points out in his *Institutes*, Book II, 11. The three differences considered here, according to Calvin, are only those considered in the context of the prophet Jeremiah and his prophecy. He points the same three characteristics in his comments on Hebrews 8:10 : “There are two main parts in this covenant; the first regards the gratuitous remission of sins; and the other, the inward renovation of the heart; there is a third which depends on the second, and that is the illumination of the mind as to the knowledge of God.” CALVIN, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews*, 188.

<sup>67</sup> CALVIN, *Commentaries on the Prophet Jeremiah and the Lamentations*, 4:127.

<sup>68</sup> CALVIN, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews*, 204.

<sup>69</sup> CALVIN, *Commentaries on the Prophet Jeremiah and the Lamentations*, 4:260.

<sup>70</sup> CALVIN, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews*, 201.

Christ alone because by the sacrifice of his death he blotted out our own guilt and made satisfaction for our sins (Heb. 9:22).<sup>71</sup>

The grace of the Holy Spirit, the second element which characterizes the form of the new covenant, is related to the regeneration of the believer and the inscription of the law in his heart. Calvin affirms:

But the coming of Christ would not have been sufficient had not regeneration by the Holy Spirit been added. It was, then, in some respects, a new thing, that God regenerated the faithful by his Spirit, so that it become not only a doctrine as to the letter, but also efficacious, which not only strikes the ear, but penetrates into the heart, and really forms us for the service of God.<sup>72</sup>

In his comments on Jeremiah 31:31, Calvin explains the relationship between Law and Spirit. The Law in itself is an instrument that only quickens the eyes and ears. But in face of the disobedience of his people that leads them to expulsion from the land and captivity under a pagan nation, Yahweh promises that he will make his people to obey his law in a supernatural way. He will soften their hearts in such a way that the law will command their lives and thoughts with zeal, love, and desire. This is the work of regeneration done by the Holy Spirit.<sup>73</sup>

Is Calvin affirming then that the Holy Spirit was absent from the Old Covenant? That the ancient Israelites did not experience the ministry of the Spirit? He discusses this issue more clearly in his comments on Hebrews 8:11 by affirming that the difference between the Holy Spirit's regenerative work and ministry in the old and in the new dispensation is one of degree and not of existence. Calvin acknowledges that the patriarchs did

worshipped God with a sincere heart and a pure conscience, and that they walked in his commandments, and this could not have been the case except they had been inwardly taught by the Spirit.<sup>74</sup>

But when God promises to Jeremiah that he will write his law on the hearts of the people in the new covenant, he is making "a comparison between the less and the greater."<sup>75</sup> The inclusion of all nations, the massive entrance of the gentiles into the kingdom of Christ thought the action of the same Spirit that converted the fathers, renders the old dispensation inferior and grants a new aspect to the covenant.

<sup>71</sup> CALVIN, *Institutes*, 1:502. Book II, 15, 6.

<sup>72</sup> CALVIN, *Commentaries on the Prophet Jeremiah and the Lamentations*, 4:127.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 4:133.

<sup>74</sup> CALVIN, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews*, 190-191.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

As then the Father hath put forth more fully the power of his Spirit under the kingdom of Christ, and has poured for the more abundantly his mercy on mankind, this exuberance renders insignificant the small portion of grace which he had been pleased to bestow on the fathers.<sup>76</sup>

The third and last element that characterizes the differences between the two covenants is the clarity in teaching. Calvin here uses Paul's metaphor of Moses' veil and affirms that in the new covenant God openly speaks to the believer, face to face, through Christ, the fulfillment of the law, unlike with the old covenant believers, through the shadows of the law.<sup>77</sup> In his comments on 2 Corinthians 3:12-18, he explains this point in more detail. The giving of the Law by Moses was accompanied by a veil which covered the face of the great prophet so that fear would not assail the hearts of the Israelites. That same veil, nevertheless, hindered the people from seeing all the glory of the Law and it, then, functioned as a prediction of the Israelites' blindness to the coming of Christ, the end of the law.

This kind of scruple the Apostle removes, by instructing them, that their blindness had been prefigured even from the beginning, inasmuch as they could not behold the face of Moses, except through the medium of a veil. As, therefore, he had stated previously, that the law was rendered glorious by the luster of Moses' countenance, so now he teaches, that the veil was an emblem of the blindness that was to come upon the people of Israel, for the person of Moses represents the law.<sup>78</sup>

Calvin, thus, protects the importance of the law and its beauty as long as it shines forth the splendor of Christ. In the new covenant, however, this veil, which became a type of the people's unbelief, is removed by Christ, through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Alone, the letter of the Law brings only death. But when Christ animates the law in the mind and soul of the believers, making them understand and believe, than what David says of it in Psalm 19:7,8 becomes reality: "The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid. Veninga explains that, for Calvin, "the extraordinary gift of the Spirit, which was experienced only in limited ways during the Hebraic period, means that God's doctrine not only sounds in the ear, but also penetrates into the heart. The Spirit works effectively in the believer, forming anew the affection, so that the Christian will not depart from God." VENINGA, "Covenant Theology and Ethics in the Thought of John Calvin and John Preston," 81. See also EENIGENBURG, "The Place of the Covenant in Calvin's Thinking," 16. For an excellent discussion on Calvin's view of the law/gospel and letter/spirit distinction see HESSELINK, John I. *Calvin's Concept of the Law* (Allison Park, PA: Wipf & Stock Pub, 1992), 155-202.

<sup>77</sup> CALVIN, *Commentaries on the Prophet Jeremiah and the Lamentations*, 4:128.

<sup>78</sup> CALVIN, John. *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, trans. John Pringle, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2005), 181.

LORD is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes.”<sup>79</sup>

As in the previous covenantal dealings, Calvin also finds the place for conditions in the new covenant. In his sermon on Deuteronomy 32:44-47, he explains that the newness of the new covenant implies the sovereign rule of God in the heart of the believer, making him fulfill the conditions of the covenant because of its blessings and promises.

God also binds himself to his people, on condition that he will govern them by his Holy Spirit, and write his word in their hearts; moreover, when he has so touched them, he will also be favorable to them in bearing with their infirmities and in forgiving their sins.<sup>80</sup>

The condition of the new covenant, therefore, remains the same: obedience to the law. However, the promise of the new covenant is that God himself, through the inscription of the law in the hearts of the believers will make them obedient to his precepts. This understanding of obligation in the covenantal dealing completely obstructs the way for any idea of works-righteousness. As Elton Eenigenburg explains:

Calvin puts constant emphasis upon the creative power of God’s Spirit in the believer’s life, whether he was talking about faith, the person and work of the Holy Spirit, the Scriptures, the sacraments, or any of the other great biblical themes... The first duty of the believer, then, is with the help of God to keep the covenant. He is not forced to do so by any external compulsion, but he is constantly exhorted to do so, both by the external admonitions of the biblical revelation, and by the internal persuasions of the Holy Spirit.<sup>81</sup>

One last aspect of Calvin’s idea of the new covenant must be examined: the sacraments. In Book 4 of the *Institutes*, the reformer offers a lengthy discussion on this specific topic. Peter Lillback explains that “the greatest frequency of his words for covenant occurs here. In chapter XVI in his discussion of infant baptism, his covenantal words are used 53 times!”<sup>82</sup> That the sacraments are strictly related to the covenant in the mind of Calvin is also confirmed by his approval of Chrysostom’s nomenclature on the signs and seals of the new covenant. The father of the church “called them ‘covenants,’ by which God leagues himself with us, and we pledge ourselves to

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 2:181-183.

<sup>80</sup> Cited from HOEKEMA, “Covenant of Grace in Calvin’s Teaching,” 146.

<sup>81</sup> EENIGENBURG, “The Place of the Covenant in Calvin’s Thinking,” 10-11.

<sup>82</sup> LILLBACK, Peter A. *The Binding of God: Calvin’s Role in the Development of Covenant Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001, 242.

purity and holiness of life, since there is interposed here a mutual agreement between God and ourselves.”<sup>83</sup>

For Calvin, “a sacrament is a seal by which God’s covenant, or promise, is sealed.”<sup>84</sup> Examples of sacraments in the old covenant are: the tree of life for Adam,<sup>85</sup> the rainbow for Noah,<sup>86</sup> and circumcision for Abraham.<sup>87</sup> A sacrament is also a sign which grants the believer assurance on the fulfillment of God’s covenantal promises. The sacraments “are exercises which make us more certain of the trustworthiness of God’s Word.”<sup>88</sup> And because the sacraments are signs and seals they only hold a declaratory function: “they do not bestow any grace of themselves, but announce and tell us, and (as they are guarantees and tokens) ratify among us, those things given us by divine bounty.”<sup>89</sup> In other words, they are not to be confused as the grace of God and are not to be identified as channels of salvation.

In the new covenant, the sacraments Jesus instituted are baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Each of them has specific functions in the church: “Baptism should be, as it were, an entry into the church, and an initiation into faith; but the Supper should be a sort of continual food on which Christ spiritually feeds the household of his believers.”<sup>90</sup> In baptism, the believer vows allegiance to the law of God and commits to its obedience. Here is the summary of the vow: “that, renouncing Satan, we yield ourselves to God’s service to obey his holy commandments but not to follow the wicked desires of our flesh.”<sup>91</sup> Along with the vow, the believer is certified that God has delivered him from the bondage of sin. This assurance of cleansing, according to Calvin, has an old covenant bearing: “for as the Lord covered them with a cloud and gave them coolness, that they might not weaken and pine away in the merciless heat of the sun, so do we recognize that in baptism we are covered and protected by Christ’s blood.”<sup>92</sup>

Calvin’s view of the Lord’s Supper also held covenantal roots. He associates both baptism and the supper with the Old Testament circumcision and Passover and thus articulates the continuity of the covenant between the old

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<sup>83</sup> CALVIN, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 2, 1296; Book IV, 14, 19.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:1450; Book IV, 19, 2.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:1296; Book IV, 14, 18.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:1296; Book IV, 14, 18.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:1280; Book IV, 14, 5.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:1281; Book IV, 14, 6.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:954. Book IV, 14, 17.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:1446. Book IV, 18, 19.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:1259. Book IV, 13, 6.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:1310. Book IV, 15, 9.

and new dispensations in both sacraments, maintaining the consistency of his argumentation even in relation to the participants.

Circumcision, which is known to corresponds to our baptism, had been appointed for infants [Genesis 17:12]. But the Passover, the place of which has been taken by the Supper, did not admit all guests indiscriminately, but was eaten only by those who were old enough to be able to inquire into its meaning [Exodus 12:26].<sup>93</sup>

Participation in the supper signifies the covenantal bond of the believer with Christ. This bond is the Holy Spirit himself, who unites Christ in body, spirit, and soul with the believers and bestows upon them all the blessings and benefits of the covenant.<sup>94</sup> It also signifies the bond among the members of the bride of Christ.

For as often as we partake of the symbol of the Lord's body, as a token given and received, we reciprocally bind ourselves to all the duties of love in order that none of us may permit anything that can harm our brother, or overlook anything that can help him, where necessity demands and ability suffices.<sup>95</sup>

Thus, the new covenant in the mind of Calvin forms a unity, in diversity, with all the previous covenants, being the climax of God's redemptive plan, and the fulfillment of all prophecies and types of the old dispensation.

## CONCLUSION

Calvin in fact did not write a treatise on covenant theology like Witsius, nor did he use the covenant as the central ideal of his theological system like Bullinger or Olevianus, but it is obvious that the covenant occupied a very prominent place in his thought. It was such an influential concept that it permeates all his writings and specific doctrinal subjects.

In the theological production of the reformer, it is possible to find all distinctive covenantal dealings, detailed information about them, their relationship with each other, and their importance for the church. Calvin's covenantal thought shows how the French theologian viewed Scripture as a full story in which the central plot is the redemption of the elect back to their original relationship to their Creator lost in Adam.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 2:1353. Book IV, 16, 30.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 2:1373. Book IV, 17, 12.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 2:1046. Book IV, 17, 44.

## **RESUMO**

A teologia do pacto não foi o ponto central do pensamento de Calvino nem a “pedra fundamental” para a construção do seu sistema teológico. Entretanto, é inegável que o reformador de Genebra possuía um profundo entendimento do assunto e extraia dele convicções teológicas de extrema importância. Dando sequência ao estudo iniciado em um artigo passado, este artigo visa investigar o pensamento de Calvino em três administrações pactuais: mosaica, davídica e a nova aliança. A conclusão é que, para Calvino, após a queda existe apenas um pacto: o pacto da graça. Este, entretanto, é o desdobramento consecutivo do pacto abraâmico. Os pactos mosaico, davídico e a nova aliança constituem a progressiva revelação divina iniciada com os patriarcas.

## **PALAVRAS-CHAVE**

João Calvino; Teologia; Pacto; Pacto mosaico; Pacto davídico; Nova Aliança.