

PALEOPRESBYTERIANISM VERSUS NEOPRESBYTERIANISM

by **Michael Wagner**

(Copyright Michael Wagner 1996)

Since the late 1980s or early 1990s the American conservative movement has begun to break apart. The movement had been held together for many years by a common fear of Soviet expansionism. With the collapse of the Soviet empire, divergent elements within the conservative movement began to reassert their distinctive emphases. Broadly speaking, the movement has fractured into two groups, the "paleoconservatives" and the "neoconservatives" ("paleo" meaning "old" and "neo" meaning "new"). The "paleos" hold to the original position of the Old Right, namely, opposition to Big Government and support for conservative cultural morality. The "neos" are much more willing to compromise with Big Government, and have less enthusiasm for cultural conservative issues such as opposition to fetal murder (abortion) and "homosexual rights." The terms "paleoconservative" and "neoconservative" are therefore helpful in making distinctions between hard core conservatives who are committed to the original conservative position, and those who are willing to water down genuine conservatism for the sake of expediency or respectability (see Raimondo 1993).

Similarly, among the broad presbyterian movement, a type of fracture has also begun to emerge. Some presbyterians are returning to the original presbyterian position of full subscription to the Westminster Standards including obedience to the continuing moral obligations of the National Covenant of Scotland and the Solemn League and Covenant. This group could accurately be labelled "paleopresbyterians" since they hold to the original conceptions of what presbyterianism means. In contrast, those presbyterians unwilling to accept full subscription to the Standards or the binding nature of the Covenants could be called "neopresbyterians" since they have effectively watered-down the original presbyterian position. Using these terms will help to clarify the issues at stake in the emerging debate between Covenanters (paleopresbyterians) and all other presbyterians (neopresbyterians).

Oaths and covenants made by men that are agreeable to the Word of God are perpetually binding.

To covenants, the matter of which is so evidently agreeable to the unalterable precepts of the moral law, we may safely apply the inspired Apostle's language, "Though it be but a man's covenant, yet if it be confirmed, no man disannulleth or addeth thereto" [Gal. 3:15]. Indeed, if it can once be proved, as it has often been, in the most convincing manner, that the church, as such, as well as men in other capacities, may warrantably enter into public scriptural covenants at all, their obligation must necessarily be perpetual; inasmuch as the church, collectively considered, is still the same permanent society, which can never die; though the individuals, of whom she may have been composed, in any given period, should be no more. And, if even civil deeds amongst men, when they are legally executed, bind not only the persons presently entering into them, but them, their

heirs, and successors to all generations; much more must we consider these religious covenants, which are executed according to the revealed will of our heavenly Lawgiver, to be binding not only upon the generation of the church, more immediately entering into them, but also on their heirs and successors to the end of the world (Reformed Presbytery n.d., 184-185).

This is the clear teaching of Scripture. Every presbyterian recognizes the legitimacy and obligation of one generation to bind a subsequent generation in a covenant relationship with God. This is what infant baptism is all about. But Scripturally, this phenomenon extends beyond baptism.

It cannot be denied, that several obligations do bind to posterity; such as public promises with annexation of curses to breakers, Neh. v. 12,13. Thus Joshua's adjuration did oblige all posterity never to build Jericho, Josh. vi. 26. And the breach of it did bring the curse upon Hiel the Bethelite, in the days of Ahab. 2dly, Public vows: Jacob's vow, Gen. xxviii. 21, did oblige all his posterity, virtually comprehended in him, Hos. xii. 4. The Rechabites found themselves obliged to observe the vow of their forefather Jonadab, Jer. xxxv. 6,14, for which they were rewarded and commended. Public oaths do oblige posterity: Joseph took an oath of the children of Israel, to carry up his bones to Canaan, Gen. 1. 25, which did oblige posterity some hundred years after. Exod. xiii. 19. Josh. xxiv. 32. National covenants with men before God, do oblige posterity, as Israel's covenant with the Gibeonites, Josh. ix. 15, 19. The breach whereof was punished in the days of David, 2 Sam. xxi. 1. Especially National Covenants with God, before men, about things moral and objectively obliging, are perpetual; and yet more especially (as Grotius observes) when they are of an hereditary nature, i.e. when the subject is permanent, the matter moral, the end good, and in the form there is a clause expressing their perpetuity (Reformed Presbytery 1880, 49-50).

This was the unchallenged view of the presbyterians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Samuel Rutherford, for example, the well-known Scottish theologian, was clearly committed to this view (Rutherford 1649, 274-275). Incidentally, the main argument for covenanting is the same argument at the foundation of theonomy: "It was obviously a duty under the Old Testament dispensation, and being nowhere repealed, and being moral and not typical, it is of present obligation" (Roberts 1853, 137).

In 1638 the (presbyterian) people of Scotland took a National Covenant as a means of solidifying resistance against the imposition of "English Popish Ceremonies" as George Gillespie called them. Five years later, during this confusing period of British history, representatives of England, Scotland, and Ireland took the Solemn League and Covenant, binding their nations together to hold to Biblical truth and resist all error, particularly Roman Catholicism and Episcopalianism. The Westminster Assembly of Divines which had just begun meeting that year, 1643, enthusiastically took the Solemn League and Covenant (Hetherington [1856] 1991, 124-128).

Aside from its political aspects, the Solemn League and Covenant committed the three

nations to certain ecclesiastical goals. George Gillespie, one of the most prominent Scottish Commissioners at the Assembly, noted what these goals were:

Yet I must needs justify (as not only lawful, but laudable) what the solemn league and covenant of the three kingdoms obligeth us unto, namely, to endeavour to bring the churches of God in the three kingdoms to the nearest conjunction and uniformity in one confession of faith, one directory of worship, one form of church government and catechism ([1846] 1991, 82).

The Westminster Standards, created by the Assembly, were thus the documents produced in fulfillment of the Solemn League and Covenant; the civil governments as well as churches of all three nations were bound to the Westminster Standards.

That the Westminster Standards were seen as part of the fulfillment of the Solemn League and Covenant is clear. As the great presbyterian historian Thomas McCrie notes,

When the Confession of Faith and the Catechisms were agreed to, the Scottish commissioners took leave of the Westminster Assembly, and, after an absence of about four years, returned to Scotland, and gave an account of their proceedings to the General Assembly which met in August, 1647. This Assembly, of which Mr. Robert Douglas was moderator, is memorable in our history for having received the Westminster Confession of Faith as a part of the uniformity of religion to which the three kingdoms had become bound in the Solemn League ([1874] 1988, 205).

He emphasizes this further,

We may here state, once for all, that the Larger and Shorter Catechisms, Propositions for Church Government, and the Directory for Public Worship, which had been drawn up by the Westminster Assembly, in conjunction with the commissioners from the Church of Scotland, were also received, approved, and ratified by the General Assembly, in several acts relating to them, as "parts of the covenanted uniformity." These acts of approbation by the Church were afterwards ratified by the estates in parliament; and thus, so far as Scotland was concerned, the stipulations of the Solemn League were cordially and honourably fulfilled ([1874] 1988, 205-206).

This shows the inseparability of the Solemn League and Covenant and the Westminster Standards. Indeed, the Solemn League is really a part of the Westminster Standards. Anyone who would claim to strictly adhere to the Westminster Standards must also hold to the Solemn League and Covenant. This conclusion is clear from the Westminster Standards themselves. One of those standards is "The Form of Presbyterial Church-Government." Speaking of Ministers, this document states the following:

He that is to be ordained, being either nominated by the people, or otherwise commended to the presbytery, for any place, must address himself to the

presbytery, and bring with him a testimonial of his taking the Covenant of the three kingdoms; of his diligence and proficiency in his studies; what degrees he hath taken in the university, and what hath been the time of his abode there; and withal of his age, which is to be twenty-four years; but especially of his life and conversation [emphasis added] ([1648] 1983, 412-413).

"The Covenant of the three kingdoms" is the Solemn League and Covenant. According to the Westminster Standards, a man cannot be ordained unless he has taken the Solemn League and Covenant. This, by itself, is conclusive. It demonstrates that in the minds of the Westminster Divines, no one can truly adhere to the Standards without taking the Solemn League and Covenant. Indeed, taking the Covenant was a necessary prerequisite for receiving communion.

Act for taking the covenant at the first receiving of the sacrament of the Lord's supper, and for the receiving of it also by all students at their first entry to colleges.

The General Assembly, according to former recommendations, doth ordain, that all young students take the covenant at their first entry to colleges; and that hereafter all persons whosoever take the covenant at their first receiving the sacrament of the Lord's supper; requiring hereby provincial assemblies, presbyteries and universities to be careful that this act be observed, and account thereof taken in the visitation of universities, and particular Kirks, and Presbyteries. -- General Assembly, Church of Scotland (1648) (cited in *The Original Covenanter* 1996, 110).

Lest anyone question the relevance of the National Covenant of Scotland at this point, it is important to note that the Solemn League "comprehends the substance of the National Covenant of Scotland" (M'Crie [1821] 1989, 194). Since that time there has always been a body of presbyterians that have recognized this truth. For obvious reasons they have commonly been referred to as "Covenanters." They did not accept the "Revolution Settlement" that resulted from the "Glorious Revolution" of 1689 because it violated the terms of the Solemn League and Covenant. They took very seriously the binding nature of the Solemn League and Covenant. As a result, they hold as a term of communion an acknowledgement

That public, social covenanting, is an ordinance of God, obligatory on churches and nations under the New Testament; that the National Covenant and the Solemn League are an exemplification of this divine institution; and that these Deeds are of continued obligation upon the moral person; and in consistency with this -- that the Renovation of these Covenants at Auchensaugh, 1712, was agreeable to the word of God (Reformed Presbytery 1876, 216).

The "Renovation" of which this speaks was a re-commitment to the Covenants in the face of widespread defection from them. Most presbyterians did defect from the Covenants in accepting the Revolution Settlement, and these are the spiritual forefathers of the

neopresbyterians. The Auchensaugh Renovation simply reflects the theological position of the Westminster Divines.

The Westminster Divines are the true definers of original presbyterianism. They have never been surpassed in doctrinal knowledge. "Paleopresbyterians" are those who acknowledge that no one has ever been able to show any error in the Standards they produced. The Westminster Standards, including the Covenants, are completely agreeable to the Word of God. As such they are binding on all who profess the name of Christ.

There are those who are generally favourable to the Westminster Standards but who wrongly perceive weaknesses in them or are not willing to accept the binding nature of the Covenants. It is these people that deserve the name "neopresbyterians." They are "new" in the sense of being more recent historically and in the sense of having turned away from the original presbyterian position. Paleopresbyterians see it as their task to win their neopresbyterian brethren back to the complete, unadulterated truth. The truth will ultimately prevail.

May the light of God's truth shine brightly in the hearts of all of His children.

References

Gillespie, George. [1846] 1991. *The Works of George Gillespie*, Vol. 2. Edmonton: Still Waters Revival Books.

Hetherington, William M. [1856] 1991. *History of the Westminster Assembly of Divines*. Edmonton: Still Waters Revival Books.

McCrie, Thomas. [1874] 1988. *The Story of the Scottish Church*. Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications.

M'Crie, Thomas. [1821] 1989. *Unity of the Church*. Dallas: Presbyterian Heritage Publications.

Raimondo, Justin. 1993. *Reclaiming the American Right*. Burlingame, CA: Center for Libertarian Studies.

Reformed Presbytery. 1876. *Act, Declaration, and Testimony, for the Whole of Our Covenanted Reformation*. Philadelphia: Rue & Jones.

Reformed Presbytery. 1880. *The Auchensaugh Renovation of the National Covenant and Solemn League and Covenant*. Philadelphia: William Syckelmoore.

Reformed Presbytery. n.d. *An Explanation and Defence of the Terms of Communion Adopted by the Community of Dissenters*. (Bound photocopy from Still Waters Revival

Books).

Roberts, William L. 1853. *The Reformed Presbyterian Catechism*. New York: R. Craighead.

Rutherford, Samuel. 1649. *A Free Disputation Against pretended Liberty of Conscience*. London: Andrew Crock.

"The Form of Presbyterial Church-Government." [1648] 1983. *Westminster Confession of Faith*. Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications.

The Original Covenanter and Contending Witness Vol. 4, No. 5, March 1, 1996.
(Published by: Covenanted Reformed Presbyterian Church, P.O. Box 131, Pottstown, PA 19464 USA).