

**DIVINE COVENANTS,
ABSOLUTE AND CONDITIONAL:
JOHN CAMERON AND THE EARLY ORTHODOX
DEVELOPMENT OF
REFORMED COVENANT THEOLOGY**

by Richard A. Muller

I. John Cameron and the Development of Early Reformed
Orthodoxy

John Cameron and Early Reformed Orthodoxy

IT IS GENERALLY agreed that John Cameron (ca. 1579-1625) occupies a significant position in the early development of Reformed covenant theology. Although there are a series of fairly extensive older biographical studies,¹ his thought has been examined primarily as a prelude to the theology of his student and successor in the Academy of Saumur, Moyses Amyraut, with little attention to its antecedents and its context.

¹ On Cameron's life, see Robert Wodrow, "Collections on the Life of Mr. John Cameron, Minister at Bordeaux, Professor of Divinity at Saumur, Principall of the College of Glasgow, and Professor of Divinity at Montauban," in *Collections upon the Lives of the Reformers and most eminent Ministers of the Church of Scotland*, 2 vols. (Glasgow, 1848), II/2, pp. 81-229; Gaston Bonet-Maury, "Jean Cameron, pasteur de l'église de Bordeaux et professeur de théologie à Saumur et à Montauban, 1579-1625," in *Études de théologie et d'histoire* (Paris: 1901), pp. 77-117; idem, "John Cameron: A Scottish Protestant Theologian in France," in *The Scottish Historical Review*, 7 (1910), pp. 325-345; and H. M. B. Reid, *The Divinity Principals in the University of Glasgow, 1545-1654* (Glasgow, 1917), pp. 170-251.

This somewhat retrospective reading of Cameron had led to characterizations of his thought as tending toward Arminianism,² or, in Stephen Strehle's somewhat more nuanced form of the claim, as proposing a "system of universal grace and unlimited atonement" that stood in a dissonant relationship to "continental Calvinism" and shared elements of "biblical humanism" with Arminian thought.³ Jürgen Moltmann has argued that Cameron's theology set forth a salvation-historical paradigm and a "hypothetical" definition of the covenant of grace over against Reformed predestinarianism,⁴ and Brian Armstrong has characterized it as resisting the "legalism" of the rising Reformed federal theology with a salvation-historical construal of the covenant of grace as "hypothetical," albeit within the bounds of the canons of Dort.⁵ Alternatively, at least one scholar has argued that Cameron was "no Arminian," despite the worry on the part of his contemporaries that there were Arminians among his students,⁶ and another has characterized his work as "scholastic," given to arguments, distinctions, objections, and replies—quite in accord with the general patterns of early Reformed orthodoxy.⁷ There is, in short, disagreement over the place of Cameron's thought in the spectrum of early Reformed orthodoxy, specifically in relation to the rise of federal theology, although the majority of writers tend to place distance between Cameron's thought and

² Thus John Durkan, "The French Connection in the Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries," in T. C. Smout, ed., *Scotland and Europe, 1200-1850* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1986), p. 29.

³ Stephen Strehle, "Universal Grace and Amyraldianism," in *Westminster Theological Journal*, 51 (1989), pp. 345-346.

⁴ Jürgen Moltmann, "Prädestination und Heilsgeschichte bei Moysse Amyraut," in *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte*, 65 (1953/54), p. 281.

⁵ Brian G. Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy Protestant Scholasticism and Humanism in Seventeenth Century France* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), pp. 55-56.

⁶ David G. Mullan, "Theology in the Church of Scotland, 1618-c. 1640: A Calvinist Consensus?" in *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 26/3 (1995), pp. 599-600.

⁷ P. G. Ryken, "Scottish Reformed Scholasticism," in *Protestant Scholasticism: Essays in Reassessment*, ed. Carl R. Trueman and R. Scott Clark (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press, 1999), p. 201.

the orthodoxy of the era. Given, moreover, the recent critiques of Strehle's understanding of seventeenth-century theology,⁸ of Moltmann's views on covenant theology and of Armstrong's understanding of the rise of Reformed orthodoxy,⁹ there is reason to examine Cameron's covenantal perspectives and re-evaluate their relationship to the developing federalism of the early seventeenth century—indeed, to offer the thesis that his work did not stand in opposition to the trends in early Reformed orthodoxy but is in fact quite representative of that development.

Cameron was born and educated in Glasgow. His abilities were recognized early on and, at about the age of twenty, he taught Greek in the University of Glasgow. Shortly thereafter, he emigrated to France and taught classics at the Collège de Bergerac and served the Protestant Academy of Sedan from 1602 to 1603. Subsequently, he studied in Paris and Geneva, arriving in the latter city shortly after the death of Beza and working for approximately a year (1616-1607) under Jean Diodati and Theodore Tronchin. Before returning to France toward the end of 1608, he studied at Heidelberg, where he defended his theses on the divine covenants.¹⁰

Apart from a brief return to Scotland from January 1622 to June or July of 1623, during which time he held the chair of theology in Glasgow by appointment of James I, Cameron's

⁸ See the reviews of Strehle's *Calvinism, Federalism, and Scholasticism: a Study of the Reformed Doctrine of Covenant* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1988) by Adrio König in *Calvin Theological Journal*, 24 (1989), pp. 366-371; and Lyle D. Bierma in *Sixteenth Century Journal* 21 (1990), pp. 269-271.

⁹ Cf. Lyle B. Bierma, "The Role of Covenant Theology in Early Reformed Orthodoxy," in *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 21/3 (1990), pp. 457-459; idem, "Covenant or Covenants in the Theology of Olevianus," in *Calvin Theological Journal*, 22 (1987), pp. 228-250; idem, *German Calvinism*, pp. 24-25, 162-168; Willem J. Van Asselt, *The Federal Theology of Johannes Cocceius (1603-1669)*, trans. Raymond A. Blacketer (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2001), p. 75; Richard A. Muller, *After Calvin: Studies in the Development of a Theological Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 67-72; idem, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2003), I, pp. 34-37.

¹⁰ Cf. Bonet-Maury, "John Cameron," pp. 326-327.

career was spent in France. In 1618, Cameron was called as a professor of theology to the Academy of Saumur, serving there until 1622. On his return to France from Scotland in 1623, he attended the synod of Charenton in September and resumed his professorial duties at Saumur in October. In the spring of 1624, he transferred to Montauban as a preacher and teacher in that academy. His death in November 1625 resulted from wounds inflicted in a riot against Protestants in Montauban.¹¹ Cameron's works are collected in three volumes of academic lectures and disputations published in Saumur shortly following his death and in a collected *Opera*, edited by Friedrich Spanheim and published in Geneva in 1642.¹²

The two most extensive analyses of Cameron's theology to date, namely, the studies by Moltmann and Armstrong, have depicted his covenantal thought as a salvation-historical counter to the Reformed "orthodox tradition" as represented on the one hand by Bezan predestinarianism and on the other by the two covenant model of the Reformed federalism of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.¹³ Armstrong goes so far as to argue that the "temporary" nature of the Old Testament subservient and largely legal covenant in Cameron's schema ought to be seen as a "remedy" to the "legalism" into which the Calvinism of the day had fallen,¹⁴ and Moltmann indicates that Cameron's approach to the covenant of grace emphasized the "condescension and

¹¹ Cf. Bonet-Maury, "John Cameron," pp. 328-344.

¹² John Cameron, *Joh. Cameronis S. Theologiae in academia Salmuriansis nuper Professoris, Praelectionum in selectoria quaedam N. T. loca Salmuri habitarum*, 3 vols. (Saumur, 1626-1628); *Joannis Cameronis Scoto Britanni Theologi Eximij TASWZOMENA sive Opera partim ab auctore ipso edita, partim post eius obitum vulgata, partim nusquam hactenus publicata, vel è Gallico idiomate nunc primum in Latinam linguam translata*, ed. F. Spanheim (Geneva: Jacob Chouet, 1642).

¹³ Thus, Jürgen Moltmann, *Gnadenbund und Gnadenwahl: Die Prädestinationslehre des Moyses Amyraut, dargestellt im Zusammenhang der heilsgeschichtlich-foederaltheologie Tradition der Akademie von Saumur* (Göttingen, 1951); idem, "Prädestination und Heilsgeschichte bei Moyses Amyraut," in *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte*, 65 (1953/54), pp. 270-303; and Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy*, pp. 42-70.

¹⁴ Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy*, p. 55.

accommodation of God” in engaging in a mutual partnership with human beings in contrast to the more typical Calvinistic understanding of the covenant of grace as resting on the sovereignty and freedom of God.¹⁵ In the view of Moltmann and Armstrong, Cameron’s theology represents a critique of Reformed orthodoxy, both in its stress on accommodation and in its “gradation and historical ordering of the legal covenant and in his hypothetical formulation of the covenant of grace.”¹⁶

If the datum that Cameron’s works were published in Geneva in an edition supervised by Friedrich Spanheim—one of the major opponents of Amyraldianism and a “usual suspect” in the delineation of “rigid Calvinism”—were not enough to give one pause in accepting the verdict of Moltmann and Armstrong, a close, contextual examination of Cameron’s *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere theses*¹⁷ presents a rather different picture than that provided by the extant scholarship. Cameron’s threefold covenant definition, as offered in this work, actually belongs to one of the major trajectories of developing Reformed covenantal thought. What is more, it hardly offers an alternative approach to the broad outlines of Reformed predestinarianism extant in the era and shortly afterward codified in the Canons of Dort. It in no way presents the divine condescension in covenant or the covenantal mutuality between God and his people as somehow opposed to the sovereignty and freedom of God in his elective willing, as Moltmann implies.¹⁸ Indeed, as Armstrong somewhat grudgingly indicates, some of Cameron’s formulations look toward those of

¹⁵ Moltmann, *Gnadenbund und Gnadenwahl*, p. 32.

¹⁶ Moltmann, “Prädestination und Heilsgeschichte bei Moyse Amyraut,” p. 281; cf. Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy*, pp. 50, 52, 55, 57.

¹⁷ John Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere theses* (Heidelberg, 1608), also in *Opera*, pp. 544-552; and *Praelectiones*, III, pp. 609-630; and in translation, *Certain Theses, or, Positions of the learned John Cameron, Concerning the Three-fold Covenant of God with Man*, trans. Samuel Bolton, in *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom* (London: J. L. for Philemon Stephens, 1645), pp. 353-401. In the following essay, I have used the text of the theses from Cameron’s 1642 *Opera* and have consulted and emended Bolton’s translation.

¹⁸ Moltmann, “Prädestination und Heilsgeschichte bei Moyse Amyraut,” pp. 278-279.

the Synod of Dort, at least if the Canons are read through eyes of the delegates who were of a non-Genevan stripe!¹⁹ Nor, is the concept of divine accommodation or condescension that is found in Cameron's thought anything more than a truism of the era among the Reformed orthodox.²⁰

A reading of Cameron's covenantal thought, alternative to the theses of Moltmann and Armstrong, as integral to the positive development of Reformed orthodoxy arises not only out of an examination of the text of the document but also out of a reading both of earlier Reformed covenant thought as it provided a context for Cameron's arguments and of later Reformed developments, particularly among the British writers, as they drew on the approaches of Cameron and his predecessors in constructing the larger and more detailed covenant schema of the mid-seventeenth century. In addition, this alternative reading of Cameron will be seen to comport with the recent scholarship on Reformed orthodoxy in which scholars no longer claim neat antitheses between covenantal approaches and so-called scholastic orthodoxy and no longer accept the theory of predestination as a central dogma pressed by Beza and others into the Reformed tradition, but rather argue the rise of an institutional or confessionalized Protestantism variegated and diverse in its contours and in substantial continuity with the Reformation.²¹

¹⁹ Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy*, p. 59; "but then," Armstrong adds, "these canons do not reveal the rigid orthodoxy with which they are commonly charged." Note the critique of notions of a "rigid" orthodox monolith in Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, I, pp. 73-81.

²⁰ Contra Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy*, p. 50, 58, 173-174, who documents the notion of accommodation to Calvin, Cameron, and Amyraut and then comments that "this teaching practically disappeared in orthodox Calvinism." This mistake is repeated with reference to Francis Turretin in Jack B. Rogers and Donald K. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: an Historical Approach* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979), p. 177; see my comments in *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, II, p. 305.

²¹ The recent revisionist scholarship is well represented in Willem J. Van Asselt, P. L. Rouwendal, et. al, *Inleiding in de Gereformeerde Scholastiek* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 1998); Carl R. Trueman and R. Scott Clark,

Antecedents: Aspects of Covenantal Thought Prior to Cameron

The relationship and relative continuity of Cameron's covenantal thought with earlier Reformed understandings of divine covenanting activity appears most clearly in the diversity and fluidity of covenant language in the second half of the sixteenth century. Examination of Cameron's predecessors yields strong evidence that the understanding of covenant found in Cameron's *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere theses* cannot be interpreted as a departure from a "two covenant" model for several reasons. In the first place, the fairly standard modern distinction between "one covenant" and "two covenant" models does not adequately describe the covenantal thought of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Accordingly, second, one does not find a strict two covenant approach in the thought of Cameron's predecessors. And third, Cameron's multi-layered definitions of covenant actually reflect a development in Reformed thought resting positively on the initial covenantal theorizings of such writers as Musculus, Ursinus, Olevianus, Perkins, Polanus, and Rollock.

The understandings of covenant inherited by Reformed writers in the sixteenth century from both the patristic and medieval past included such concepts as the divine covenant or *pactum* establishing and maintaining the world order, a prelapsarian covenant with Adam, and a history of divine covenanting after the fall, divided into administrative periods or dispensations of the history of revelation. All of these understandings, moreover, are present and identified by varied terms in the writings of such sixteenth-century Reformed thinkers as Wolfgang Musculus, John Calvin, Zacharias Ursinus, and Caspar Olevianus.²²

eds., *Protestant Scholasticism: Essays in Reassessment* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1999); and Willem J. Van Asselt and Eef Dekker, *Reformation and Scholasticism: an Ecumenical Enterprise* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 2001). Also note Muller, *After Calvin*, pp. 3-16, 25-62.

²² The best discussion of these writers remains Lyle D. Bierma, *German Calvinism in the Confessional Age: The Covenant Theology of Caspar Olevian* (Grand

Thus, by way of example, Musculus distinguishes between a *foedus generale* and a *foedus speciale*, the former being God's temporal covenant with the created order to preserve the day and night, the seasons, and the framework of creation, the latter being the everlasting covenant of God, manifest in a series of historical administrations, for the sake of the believers before the law (*ante legem*), under the law (*sub lege*), and after the law (*post legem*). If one were to diagram Musculus' covenantal language in the manner typical of later sixteenth-century so-called Ramist models, there would be an initial division of covenant into the categories of general and special, followed by a further division of the second member, the *foedus speciale*, into its three administrations.²³

The *foedus generale*, linked by Musculus (as by Calvin) to the narrative of the flood,²⁴ is absolute or unilateral, given that it binds God to his ordinance for the governing of creation without presenting any stipulations to fulfilled by other parties. The *foedus speciale* is conditional or bilateral, inasmuch as in all of its forms it is a mutual covenant under which the human participants have the responsibility to fulfill stipulations. The presence of stipulations ought not, however, to be understood as in any way compromising the utter graciousness of salvation since both the faith and the good works of believers rest on the grace of God: faith is a gift to the elect and good works arise out of the agency of the Holy Spirit.²⁵

Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996).

²³ Wolfgang Musculus, *Loci communes sacrae theologiae* (Basel: Johann Herwagen, 1560, 1568, 1573), cap. 14 (pp. 130-133, in the edition of 1573); translated as *Commonplaces of Christian Religion* (London: R. Wolfe, 1563; second edition, London: H. Bynneman, 1578).

²⁴ Cf. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses, called Genesis*, trans. John King (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1847-1850), 9:8-9, in loc. (I, pp. 296-297).

²⁵ Musculus, *Loci communes* (1573), cap. 14; cf. Bierma, *German Calvinism*, pp. 49-53; and Richard A. Muller, *Christ and the Decree: Christology and Predestination in Reformed Theology from Calvin to Perkins* (Durham, N.C.: The Labyrinth Press, 1986; second printing, with corrections, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1988), pp. 48-49.

Musculus also distinguishes between *foedus* and *testamentum*, covenant and testament—with the result that he can indicate (like Zwingli, Bullinger, and Calvin) that there is one gracious covenant of God in both the Old and the New Testaments, the New Testament being instituted or inaugurated by the death of Christ, its testator, as the final administration of the eternal covenant with Abraham.²⁶ This model of a general temporal covenant with all creation and a special eternal covenant with the elect, the latter divided into dispensations *ante legem*, *sub lege*, and *post legem*, carries over into Stephanus Szegedinus' theology.²⁷

Zacharias Ursinus, writing probably a year or two after the publication of Musculus' *Loci communes*, offered a similar covenant model, albeit with several different accents. Like Musculus, Ursinus distinguished between a covenant "in creation" and the "covenant of grace," and—like Zwingli, Bullinger, Musculus, and Calvin—identified the covenant of grace as a single covenant from the time of the fall "to the end of the world," divided however into Old and New Testament administrations.²⁸ Whereas

²⁶ Cf. Musculus, *Loci communes* (1573), cap. 14 (p. 133); with Ulrich Zwingli, *Refutation of the Tricks of the Catabaptists*, in Samuel Macaulay Jackson (ed.) *Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531): Selected Works* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1972), p. 234; cf. pp. 228-229, 231, 236-237; Heinrich Bullinger, *De testamento seu foedere Dei unico & aeterno brevis expositio* (Zürich: Christoph Froschauer, 1534), fol. 28 recto; and John Calvin, *Institutio christianae religionis, in libris quatuor nunc primum digesta, certisque distincta capitibus, ad aptissimam methodum: aucta etiam tam magna accessione ut propemodum opus novum haberi possit* Geneva: Robertus Stephanus, 1559); in translation, *Institutes of Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. F. L. Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1950), II.x.1-2; also see Bierma, *German Calvinism*, p. 53.

²⁷ Stephanus Szegedinus, *Theologiae sincerae loci communes de Deo et Homine perpetuis Tabulis explicati et scholasticorum dogmatis illustrati* (Basel, 1588); cf. the comments in Heppe, *Geschichte des Pietismus*, p. 208, where Heppe, as in his *Reformed Dogmatics*, confuses the chronology on the basis of a late dating of Musculus' *Loci communes*.

²⁸ Zacharias Ursinus, *Catechesis, summa theologiae, per quaestiones et responsiones exposita: sive capita religionis Christianae continens*, qq. 10, 33, 35, in *D. Zachariae Ursini ... Opera theologica, quibus orthodoxae religionis capita perspicue & breviter explicantur*, ed. Q. Reuter, 3 vols. (Heidelberg: Lancelot, 1612), I,

Musculus' understanding of the *foedus generale* or covenant in creation refers it to the world order and focuses on the Noahic covenant and on other biblical texts that could be best associated with the divine *potentia ordinata*, Ursinus' understanding of the covenant in creation associates it directly with the natural law as represented in the Decalogue and as established with humanity from creation onward. Although it would be a mistake to understand Ursinus' covenant in creation as a purely prelapsarian covenant, given that it manifests not only "what kind of person God created" and "for what purpose," but also "into what state he has fallen, and how he ought to conduct his life after being reconciled to God," the definition does have a prelapsarian legal dimension that is lacking in Musculus' definitions. Significantly, it also connects that prelapsarian legal understanding with the Decalogue, a development not found in Musculus' *Loci communes*.²⁹

Caspar Olevianus' *De substantia foederis gratuiti inter Deum et electos* is certainly the most extensive exposition of covenantal thought from the latter part of the sixteenth century—and it is one of the more probable sources of Cameron's views. Olevianus' primary concern is to present the covenant of grace as the eternal covenant of salvation proclaimed first to Adam following the fall, then to Abraham, and subsequently through the prophets, finally to be confirmed in the testament of Christ, who is the foundation of the covenant in all time.³⁰ As Bierma points out, Olevianus' understanding of covenant incorporates both unilateral or absolute and bilateral or conditional elements.³¹

If the covenant of grace provides Olevianus with his central focus in the *De substantia foederis*, it is not the only covenant with

col. 10ff.; translated as *The Larger Catechism*, in Lyle D. Bierma, Charles D. Gunnoe, Karin Y. Maag, and Paul W. Fields, *An Introduction to the Heidelberg Catechism: Sources, History, and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), pp. 163ff.

²⁹ Ursinus, *Summa theologiae*, q. 10 (*Larger Catechism*, p. 164).

³⁰ Caspar Olevianus, *De substantia foederis gratuiti inter Deum et electos, itemque de mediis, quibus ea ipsa substantia nobis communicatur* (Geneva: Eustathius Vignon, 1585), pp. 51-56, 97, 295-297.

³¹ Bierma, *German Calvinism*, pp. 66-69.

which he is concerned: there is also, in his view a prelapsarian *foedus creationis* or *foedus naturale* in which God has ensconced the fundamental law of creation, the *ius creationis*. The concept has a certain affinity with Musculus' notion of a covenant in creation but, as in Ursinus' thought, it is clearly prelapsarian. In Olevianus' view, moreover, as in Ursinus' this *foedus naturale* was known to Adam and, in the fall, lost as a path to fellowship with God, albeit not set aside as a norm for human conduct.³² Indeed, the terms of the natural covenant are reiterated in the *foedus legale* given to Moses on Mt. Sinai as a standard of obedience for the people of Israel: the Decalogue is identical with the *ius creationis* but for its form—written on tables of stone, whereas the *ius creationis* was inscribed on the heart. In this representation of law, however, there is also a distinction to be made between its use under the natural covenant and its use in the legal covenant: the law of Moses now functions to convict of sin and to direct believers to Christ. The *foedus legale*, therefore, not only relates to the original natural covenant but also serves the covenant of grace under the Old Testament and provides the form of Christian obedience: the “law,” in Olevianus' view, “is a part of the covenant of grace.”³³

In the next generation, Dudley Fenner, William Perkins, Amandus Polanus, and Robert Rollock all developed the language of the prelapsarian covenant and contributed to the discussion of the flow of God's postlapsarian covenant activity through the Old into the New Testament. Fenner, whose *Sacra theologia* of 1585 evidences perhaps the earliest doctrinal use of the term *foedus operum*, assumed that both the *foedus operum* and the *foedus gratuitae promissionis* participated in the general understanding of a covenant between God and human beings as consisting in “the action of God stipulating” and “the action of human beings receiving the stipulation,” with regard to the bestowal of eternal life on the fulfillment of a condition.³⁴ Thus, for Fenner, both the covenant

³² Cf. Olevianus, *De substantia foederis*, pp. 9-13, 251, 254; with Bierma, *German Calvinism*, pp. 112-120.

³³ Olevianus, *De substantia foederis*, p. 295, also pp. 12-13; cf. Bierma, *German Calvinism*, pp. 122-125.

³⁴ Dudley Fenner, *Sacra theologia sive veritas qua est secundum pietatem ad*

of works and the covenant of gracious promise are conditional, in the former the condition being perfect obedience, in the latter the receiving of Christ. Although the implication of Fenner's biblical citations is that the covenant of works is prelapsarian, he understood its functions as enduring—namely, the implementation of the eternal decree by identifying the entire world as under divine condemnation and the manifestation of the miseries of sin for the sake of drawing human beings toward their restoration under the gracious covenant.³⁵ This model allows Fenner to identify the Decalogue in its pedagogical use as the stipulations of a *foedus operum* made specifically with the Jewish people, without clearly identifying the Mosaic *foedus operum* with the prelapsarian *foedus operum* and without fully defining the relationship between the two covenants and the two testaments.³⁶ It is also important to note that, although Fenner does provide perhaps the earliest reference to a *foedus operum*, his term for God's second, gracious covenant, *foedus gratuita promissionis*, points in two directions, i.e., toward later language of the covenant of grace but also toward the alternative usage, found in Ball among others, covenant of promise. In addition, Fenner's discussions of the distinct administrations of covenant in the various stages of the Old Testament history evidence less interest in the unity of the covenant of gracious promise than in the distinct models of piety and polity observed in each era.³⁷

The primary definition of covenant found in William Perkins' *Golden Chaine* (1590/91) is significant inasmuch as it applies both to the covenant of works and to the covenant of grace and understands both of the covenants as essentially conditional, echoing the definitions of Bullinger and Ursinus as well as elements of Calvin's definitions:

unicae et verae methodi leges descripta (London, 1585), IV.i (pp. 87-88).

³⁵ Fenner, *Sacra theologia*, IV.i (p. 88).

³⁶ Fenner, *Sacra theologia*, VIII.i (p. 282).

³⁷ Fenner, *Sacra theologia*, V "De politeia divina post lapsum"; VI.vii "De politeia sub Abrahamo"; VI.viii "De politeia sub Isacho"; etc.

Gods covenant, is his contract with man, concerning the obtaining of life eternall, upon a certaine condition. This covenant consists of two parts: Gods promise to man, Mans promise to God. Gods promise to man, is that, whereby he bindeth himself to man to be his God, if he performe the condition. Mans promise to God, is that, whereby he voweth his allegiance unto his Lord, and to performe the condition between them.³⁸

Perkins goes on to distinguish between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. The former, which Perkins associates directly with the Decalogue, is “Gods covenant, made with the condition of perfect obedience.”³⁹ The latter, reached only after Perkins offers an full exposition of all of the commandments, namely, “the covenant of grace, is that whereby God freely promising Christ, and his benefits, exacts againe of man, that hee would by faith receive Christ, and repent of his sinnes.”⁴⁰ As McGiffert has pointed out, this discussion of the two covenants does not follow the pattern of a historical sequence of covenants, namely a prelapsarian and a postlapsarian, but serves primarily to distinguish between the unperformable and unattainable condition of salvation under the legal covenant, perfect obedience, and the freely bestowed and therefore attainable condition of salvation under the covenant of grace, faith in Christ.⁴¹ The covenant of

³⁸ William Perkins, *Armillæ Aureæ, id est, theologiae descriptio mirandam seriem causarum & salutis & damnationis juxta verbum Dei proponens* (Cambridge: John Legat, 1590); the translation appeared in a single volume in 1591, as *A Golden Chaine*, and is also found in *The Workes of ... Mr. William Perkins*, 3 vols. (Cambridge: J. Legat, 1612-1619), p. 31, col. 2-p. 32, col. 1; cf. Heinrich Bullinger, *Compendium christianae religionis* (Zürich, 1556), lib. 11, cap. viii; with Zacharias Ursinus, *Explicationes catecheticae*, in *Opera*. ed. G. Reuter (Heidelberg, 1612), I, col. 99; and John Calvin, *Commentary upon the Book of Psalms*, 132:12, in *CO*, (*CTS Psalms*, V, p. 155); cf. Anthony Hoekema, “The Covenant of Grace in Calvin’s Teaching,” in *Calvin Theological Journal*, 2 (1967), pp. 143, 147-8, 157-8.

³⁹ Perkins, *Golden Chaine*, p. 32, col. 1.

⁴⁰ Perkins, *Golden Chaine*, p. 70, col. 2.

⁴¹ Michael McGiffert, “From Moses to Adam: the Making of the Covenant of Works,” in *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 19/2 (1988), pp. 143-45; on Perkins’

grace, therefore, is also called a testament, given that its conditions are met not by the works of the beneficiary: in it “we do not so much offer, or promise any great matter to God, as in a manner only receive.”⁴²

Still, it ought not to be concluded that Perkins’ disallowed the notion of a prelapsarian covenant with Adam or that his understanding of the prelapsarian relationship between God and Adam did not coordinate with his understanding of the covenant of works. Perkins did hold to a prelapsarian covenant made with Adam⁴³; he also clearly identifies the covenant of works both with the natural law and with the commandments of the Decalogue; and he held that Adam, by nature, had the commands of the Decalogue in his heart prior to the fall.⁴⁴

Amandus Polanus’ *Partitiones theologicae*, published in 1590, provides a brief definition of the covenants following the doctrine of Christ, where he focuses on the promises of the Gospel and calling.⁴⁵ Like Fenner and Perkins, he subsumes all discussion of covenant under a single definition and then, echoing Musculus’ model, makes an initial bifurcation of covenants into eternal and temporal, or as he would later say, spiritual and corporeal. A

covenantal thought, also see McGiffert, “The Perkinsian Moment of Federal Theology,” in *Calvin Theological Journal*, 29/1 (1994), pp. 117-148; Young Jae Timothy Song, *Theology and Piety in the Reformed Federal Thought of William Perkins and John Preston*. Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1998); Donald K. McKim, “William Perkins and the Theology of the Covenant,” in *Studies of the Church in History. Essays honoring Robert Sidney Paul on his sixty-fifth birthday* (Allison Park, Pa.: Pickwick Publications, 1983), pp. 85-101; Victor L. Priebe, “The Covenant Theology of William Perkins” (Ph.D. dissertation: Drew University, 1967).

⁴² Perkins, *Golden Chaine*, p. 70, col. 2.

⁴³ William Perkins, *An Exhortation to Repentance*, in *Workes*, III, p. 415, col. 1B, citing Rom. 5:14.

⁴⁴ Cf. Perkins, *An Exposition of the Creede or Symbole*, in *Workes*, I, p. 154, col. 2D, with idem, *Golden Chaine*, xix, in *Workes*, I, p. 32, col. 1.

⁴⁵ Polanus theology is examined, very much following the contours of the outmoded central dogma theory, in Heiner Faulenbach, *Die Struktur der Theologie des Amandus Polanus von Polansdorf* (Zurich: EVZ Verlag, 1967); also note Robert W. A. Letham, “Amandus Polanus: A Neglected Theologian?” in *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 21/3 (1990), pp. 463-476.

divine covenant is a *pactum* made by God with human beings in which God promises some good and prescribes a certain condition for human beings to oblige: as in Perkins' definition, so with Polanus. In his eternal or spiritual covenants, God promises eternal life; in the temporal or corporeal covenants, God promises temporal blessings. The eternal or spiritual covenants, moreover, are also of two kinds, consisting in the covenant of works and the covenant of grace—the former promising eternal life on condition of perfect obedience, the latter on condition of faith in Christ. The *foedus operum* was inaugurated before the fall (Gen. 2:17) and reinstated or repeated throughout the later history (Ex. 19:5; Deut. 5:2; 1 Kg. 8:21; Heb. 8:9). After the fall, given that its condition can no longer be fulfilled by anyone, it serves to instruct human beings concerning their inability and to draw them toward the promise in Christ.⁴⁶ The *foedus gratiae*, more specifically, “is the reconciliation of the elect with God through the death of the sole Mediator ... Jesus Christ,” divided into the two testaments, the old and the new. In the former testament Christ is revealed in shadows and figures, in the latter he is fully manifest in the flesh.⁴⁷ Further on in the text of the *Partitiones*, Polanus resumes his covenantal definitions, taking up the topic of temporal covenants, with the example of the covenant with Noah, promising never again to destroy the world with a flood.⁴⁸

Robert Rollock, whose writings on the covenant appeared in 1596 and 1597, is probably the most proximate predecessor of Cameron.⁴⁹ Rollock's reading of the covenants stands in

⁴⁶ Amandus Polanus, *Partitiones theologiae christianae*, Pars I-II (Basel, 1590), I.33; also *Partitiones theologiae christianae*, pars I-II (London: Edmund Bolland, 1591), I.33 (pp. 53-54); cf. idem, *Syntagma theologiae christianae* (Hanau, 1609; Geneva, 1617), IV.xxxiii (p. 450, col. 2A-B), where the language of “spiritual” and “corporeal” replaces that of “eternal” and “temporal.” Also note Polanus, *The Substance of the Christian Religion* (London: R. F. for Iohn Oxenbridge, 1595), a translation of the *Partitiones*.

⁴⁷ Polanus, *Partitiones theol.*, I.33 (pp. 54-55).

⁴⁸ Polanus, *Partitiones theol.*, I.40 (p. 69).

⁴⁹ Robert Rollock, *Quaestiones et responsiones aliquot de foedere Dei, deque sacramento quod foederis Dei sigillum est* (Edinburgh: Henricus Charteris, 1596); idem, Rollock, *Tractatus de vocatione efficaci, quae inter lococ theologicae*

continuity with a series of elements found in the earlier definitions:

The couenant of God generally is a promise, under some one certaine condition. And it is twofold: the first is the couenant of works; the second is the couenant of grace. *Paul Galath. 4. vers. 24.* expresslie sets down two couenants, which in the old Testament were shadowed by two women, as by types, to wit, *Hagar* the handmaide, and *Sarah* the freewoman: for saith he, *these be those two couenants...* The couenant of workes, which may also be called a legall or naturall couenant, is founded in nature, which by creation was pure and holy, and in the law of God, which in the first creation was ingrauen in mans hart.⁵⁰

Rollock thus accepts the terminology of a *foedus operum* and a *foedus gratiae* found somewhat earlier in the works of Fenner, Perkins, and Polanus and he clearly identifies the covenant of works as also a legal or natural covenant in creation, drawing together themes from Ursinus with the Perkinsian understanding of the two covenants, works and grace, as distinguished primarily on the basis of Galatians chapter four. Rollock also maintains the understanding of both divine covenants, works and grace, as conditional, with perfect obedience as the condition of the former, faith in Christ the condition of the latter.⁵¹

The fall, moreover, does not abolish the covenant of works; it remains as a promise of life in the face of human incapacity.⁵² Rollock also adds that the covenant of works, first inscribed on the heart, was repeated by inscription on tables of stone—reiterated and written down, first by Moses, then by the prophets. The Decalogue, in other words, is a restipulation of the

communissimae recensetur (Edinburgh: Robert Waldegrave, 1597); in translation, *A Treatise of Effectual Calling*, trans. Henry Holland (London: Felix Kyngston, 1603); also note idem, *Analysis logica in Epistolam Pauli Apostoli ad Galatas* (London, 1602), 4:24-25, in loc.

⁵⁰ Rollock, *Tractatus de vocatione efficaci*, ii (pp. 8-9); idem, *Treatise*, ii (pp. 6-7).

⁵¹ Rollock, *Treatise*, ii-iii (pp. 8, 13).

⁵² Rollock, *Treatise*, iii (pp. 21-22).

covenant of works.⁵³ The covenant of works also serves, in the elect, as a condemnation that drives them to seek salvation through faith in Christ in the covenant of grace. The law, however, is abolished for Christians only in its utterly negative and tyrannical sense as the covenant of works, but preserved in its pedagogical sense.⁵⁴

As for the covenant of grace, Rollock insists that it follows immediately on the abolition of the covenant of works as a way of life, although it is less clearly revealed in the Old Testament than in the New, given that under the Old Testament, grace is revealed alongside of the law.⁵⁵ Even so, inasmuch as Christ is the sole mediator of the covenant of grace, his advent was proposed to the patriarchs, set forth more clearly to the prophets, and even more clearly to the last of the prophets, before the full “promulgation” of Christ following his advent.⁵⁶

II. Cameron’s Covenantal Thought — Basic Issues

The Morphology of Covenant in Cameron’s

De triplici Dei cum homine foedere theses

John Cameron’s *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere theses*, argued in the University of Heidelberg in 1608,⁵⁷ stands at the center of the early orthodox development of covenant theology. It was preceded by the efforts of thinkers like Ursinus, Olevianus, Fenner, Perkins, Polanus, and Rollock, but still belongs to the formative phase of covenant thought. Cameron’s delivery of his theses before the faculty at Heidelberg, taken together with his

⁵³ Rollock, *Quaestiones et responsiones aliquot de foedere Dei*, fol. A4 verso-A5 recto.

⁵⁴ Rollock, *Treatise*, iii (pp. 22-24).

⁵⁵ Rollock, *Quaestiones et responsiones aliquot de foedere Dei*, fol. B5 recto.

⁵⁶ Rollock, *Quaestiones et responsiones aliquot de foedere Dei*, fol. B5 verso-B6 recto.

⁵⁷ John Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere theses* (Heidelberg, 1608), also in *Opera*, pp. 544-552; and *Praelectiones*, III, pp. 609-630; and in translation, *Certain Theses, or, Positions of the learned John Cameron, Concerning the Three-fold Covenant of God with Man*, trans. Samuel Bolton, in *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom* (London: J. L. for Philemon Stephens, 1645), pp. 353-401.

Scottish origins, surely account in some part for the strong similarities of his thought to the covenantal writings of Olevianus and Rollock.

At first sight, Cameron's title, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere theses*, appears to be a bit misleading, given that the reader does not encounter the three covenants or threefold covenant until the seventh thesis, where Cameron declares in a marginal header that the "conditionall covenant is threefold." It is not, however, Cameron's purpose to argue only three covenants, but to focus his theses on the threefold conditional or hypothetical covenant of God, as distinct from other covenants. The first six theses in the treatise set forth an entire covenantal schema, embracing all of the major covenants of God, with a view to placing the hypothetical covenants properly within the larger schema and then concentrating on their proper definition. The treatise, accordingly, argues at least five divine covenants, distinguished into two groupings: in the first division of the topic, admittedly Ramist in fashion, covenant is distinguished into absolute and hypothetical. Cameron examined the first member of the dichotomy only briefly, noting the eternal covenant with the elect and the covenant with Noah as absolute, inasmuch as they are simple covenants, lacking the requirement of restipulations from their human parties and being bestowed unconditionally.⁵⁸ In the second division of the covenant, the conditional or hypothetical branch, Cameron identifies three covenants, the prelapsarian covenant of nature, the "subserving" or Mosaic covenant of the Old Testament, and the covenant of grace.⁵⁹ This second division becomes the body of the treatise, in which Cameron's burden is both to relate and to distinguish the three covenants, largely for the purpose of identifying a suitable postlapsarian place for the law in relation to the covenant of grace.

⁵⁸ Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere theses*, i; cf. Andrew Alexander Woolsey, "Unity and Continuity in Covenantal Thought: A Study in the Reformed Tradition to the Westminster Assembly," 2 vols. (Ph.D. dissertation: University of Glasgow, 1988), I, pp. 156-157; and note the discussion in Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy*, pp. 51-57.

⁵⁹ Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere theses*, vi-vii.

Moreover, the treatise, a set of theses presented at the University of Heidelberg, ought not to be identified as a full-scale covenant theology, such as would appear later in the works of Johannes Cocceius, Franz Burman, Francis Roberts, and Herman Witsius. Nor indeed ought one to follow the extravagant appraisal of Moltmann that “these theses not only stand as a foundation of [Cameron’s] theology, but also for the program of the Academy of Saumur” and serve as the “root” of Amyraut’s “salvation-historically presented doctrine of predestination,”⁶⁰ or the similar appraisal of Armstrong that “Cameron is one of the first Reformed theologians to set forth an explicit formulation of covenant teaching as the locus under which all theology was to be comprehended.”⁶¹ Such statements breathe too much of the air of the central dogma theory to stand scrutiny; and Cameron himself left no clear index to a center or foundation of his theology. As for the theological program of Saumur, it was far too variegated and *locus* oriented to be founded on any single doctrine.⁶² Cameron’s theses are just that: a set of theses; they review a particular subject and make no pretense of offering a foundation for theology as a whole.

Cameron’s initial distinction between *foedus absolutum* and *foedus hypotheticum* does, initially, appear to stand in partial contrast with the works of Reformed thinkers written between 1580 and 1600, although the contrast is not, as one would expect from Moltmann’s and Armstrong’s generalizations, in Cameron’s identification of hypothetical or conditional covenants. If Armstrong were to be followed, the “emphasis” on conditional covenants “suggests a heritage not common to continental Reformed theology” but rather belonging to the older English theological tradition.⁶³ This element of the definition belongs,

⁶⁰ Moltmann, “Prädestination und Heilsgeschichte bei Moysse Amyraut,” p. 275.

⁶¹ Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy*, p. 48.

⁶² Cf. Moysse Amyraut, Louis Cappel, and Josue La Place, *Syntagma thesium theologiarum in Academia Salmuriensi variis temporibus disputatarum*, 2nd ed., 4 parts. (Saumur: Joannes Lesner, 1664; 2nd printing, 1665).

⁶³ Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy*, p. 48, note 139.

however, to all of the definitions that we have seen from Fenner, Perkins, Polanus, and Rollock, for it belongs to the very nature of God's covenants with human beings that they carry with them conditions or stipulations. What is somewhat different is Cameron's initial bifurcation into absolute and hypothetical rather than, as in Musculus' model, general and special, or in Polanus' schema, temporal and eternal or spiritual and corporeal covenants. It is his identification of absolute covenants that offers a relative departure from the pattern.⁶⁴

Arguably, it is this discussion of absolute covenants prior to the hypothetical that is the most striking aspect of Cameron's exposition, and one of its least appreciated elements. In the extant scholarship, Armstrong notes that Cameron's concept of *foedus hypotheticum* was juxtaposed with a *foedus absolutum*. But the only example that he offers of the latter is the covenant with Noah. Armstrong goes on to claim that

Cameron's distinction between the *foedus absolutum* and *foedus hypotheticum* stems from his rigid adherence to the dichotomization so characteristic of Ramism. At any rate, the *foedus absolutum* does not seem to be of importance or use in his covenant teaching.⁶⁵

Armstrong offers no evidence to substantiate the claim that the distinction between absolute and hypothetical covenants rests primarily on Ramist dichotomization and he omits entirely that Cameron had also identified God's covenant with the elect as a *foedus absolutum*, a point which would seem to alter the judgment that *foedus absolutum* occupies a less than important place in Cameron's thought! Moltmann notes the absolute covenant with the elect but does not discuss it.⁶⁶ Attribution of the dichotomy to Ramism does, of course, press Cameron toward Moltmann's model for the development of covenant theology, according to which Ramism, humanism, and an *a posteriori*, salvation-historical

⁶⁴ Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere theses*, i-ii.

⁶⁵ Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy*, pp. 49, 52.

⁶⁶ Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere*, i; cf. Moltmann, "Prädestination und Heilsgeschichte bei Moysse Amyraut," pp. 276-277.

understanding undergirds a covenantal alternative to *a priori*, Aristotelian, scholastic, predestinarianism.⁶⁷ As we shall see, however, Cameron does not at all fit Moltmann's paradigm.

Under the rubric of *foedus hypotheticum* or conditional covenant Cameron further argued three covenants: the *foedus naturae*, the *foedus subserviens*, and the *foedus gratiae*; that is, the prelapsarian covenant, the post-lapsarian covenant of the Old Testament law, and the covenant of grace respectively.⁶⁸ This threefold division of hypothetical or conditional covenant is, as Cameron indicates, the primary issue to be addressed in his theses, his purpose being to examine what these hypothetical covenants have in common and how they differ.⁶⁹

In Armstrong's view, this threefold covenant model is Cameron's distinct "innovation in Reformed theology," with the *foedus subserviens* as the most significant "novelty," indeed the issue upon which Cameron was willing to "risk his theological reputation" for the sake of offering a "corrective" to the "legalism" of Reformed thought in that era.⁷⁰ In Armstrong's view, there was "no precedent" in earlier Reformed theology for a three covenant model.⁷¹ By contrast, the older study by Bonet-Maury identifies the element of Cameron's originality as lying in the *foedus naturale*, as it rests on "the testimony of the inner conscience." In Bonet-Maury's view, this covenant was a matter of "natural religion," a precursor of eighteenth century rationalism and a startling addition to the two covenant model of Old and New Testament "alone ... admitted as a rule of faith by the divines of that time."⁷²

⁶⁷ Cf. Jürgen Moltmann, "Zur Bedeutung des Petrus Ramus für Philosophie und Theologie in Calvinismus," *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte*, 67 (1956-57), pp. 295-318; and note the trenchant critique of Moltmann's claims in Bierma, *German Calvinism*, pp. 162-168.

⁶⁸ Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere*, vii.

⁶⁹ Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere*, vi.

⁷⁰ Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy*, p. 56.

⁷¹ Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy*, p. 49, note 139.

⁷² Bonet-Maury, "John Cameron," p. 327.

Of course, as noted above, the three covenant model, in which the covenant *sub lege* intervened between the prelapsarian covenant and the New Testament manifestation of the covenant of grace was actually a feature of Reformed thought from Musculus onward. Bonet-Maury clearly did not know that most of Cameron's immediate predecessors had already discussed a prelapsarian natural or legal covenant prior to the two covenants or testaments, Old and New, of the history of salvation. More importantly, contrary to Armstrong's contention, the theologians of the generation immediately preceding Cameron—Fenner, Perkins, Polanus, and Rollock—had written extensively on the prelapsarian covenant, the Mosaic covenant, and the covenant of grace and had identified the relationship between the prelapsarian covenant of works, the natural law, and the Mosaic covenant somewhat diversely, yielding only a partial resolution of the question of the relationship between the covenant of works and the Mosaic law: in Fenner's and in Perkins' view it was an exact relationship in which the covenant of works and the law were identified, but in which the prelapsarian covenant received little emphasis; in the thought of Polanus and Rollock, where the prelapsarian covenant of works was more fully juxtaposed with the postlapsarian covenant of grace, it was a less than full equivalency, given the three uses of the law.

What then of Cameron's approach? According to Armstrong, the juxtaposition of the subservient covenant with the covenant of grace in Cameron's thought was an attempt to emphasize "the law-gospel distinction of Luther and Calvin" and to identify the law in its pedagogical use, convicting human beings of sin and leading them to Christ, in whom the law is abolished. Cameron thus, in Armstrong's view, critiques the perceived legalism of the orthodox Reformed by "striking at the very roots of any idea that eternal life was attainable through the law": the *foedus subserviens*, as indicated by Galatians 4:24, was a "covenant of bondage," promising only a life of earthly blessing in Canaan.⁷³ One may well ask at this point whether any Reformed theologian of the era

⁷³ Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy*, p. 56.

assumed that “eternal life was attainable through the law” by any human being in the postlapsarian state—and, if not, how there could have been any legalism against which Cameron might protest.⁷⁴

It is also important to recognize that these three terms do not indicate a simple succession of covenants, as if the prelapsarian covenant of nature were followed by the Old Testament *foedus subserviens* and, after the historical end of the Old Testament, by the covenant of grace. In Cameron’s view, the Old Testament history, although in one sense belonging to the covenant of grace, was also in another sense to be distinguished from the covenant of grace as a covenant preparatory, subject, or “in service” (*subserviens*) to it.⁷⁵ Once, moreover, the larger pattern is recognized, Cameron’s model is seen to be similar in several points to that of Polanus, notably in the identification of the covenant with Noah as distinct from the redemptive covenants of God, and similar also to the approach of Perkins, who was interested primarily in identifying the covenant of works as the Old Testament law, standing within and subordinate to the covenant of grace. It is also reflective of Rollock’s patterns of argumentation, according to which both covenants, works and grace, are conditional, and the law, albeit a republication of the covenant of works, serves not only to condemn but, in its second use, to lead to Christ. Cameron, in fact, is building quite positively on the work of his predecessors.

Covenant and the Amor Dei

Cameron’s introduction of the concept of the divine love or *amor Dei* into his discussion gives evidence of the integral role played by the concept of absolute covenants in his covenant schema as a whole. Adumbrating the later emphasis of various Reformed thinkers, including both Amyraut and Cocceius, on the divine love undergirding covenant, Cameron moves beyond his initial division of the covenants by arguing that “this distinction of

⁷⁴ Cf. Muller, *After Calvin*, pp. 175-189.

⁷⁵ Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere*, vii.

the Covenant” into absolute and hypothetical covenants “depends on the distinction of the love of God” into antecedent and consequent.⁷⁶

For in the *absolute* Covenant, there is nothing in the creature that doth *impell* God either to *promise*, or to *performe* what he had promised; But in that *Covenant* to which a *restipulation* is annexed, God doth *fulfill* what he hath promised, because the *creature* hath rendered what is required; And although God hath made such a *Covenant*, wherein he hath *promised* so great things, upon *condition* of man’s performance, yet all this proceeds from the *antecedent* love of God.⁷⁷

Armstrong argued a relationship between this understanding of hypothetical covenant and the love of God and the language of hypothetical universalism characteristic of the later Amyraldian soteriology.⁷⁸ What Armstrong does not note is that Cameron’s way of introducing and using the distinction belongs to the ongoing polemic between the Reformed and the Remonstrants: Arminius had argued quite pointedly that the right of the creator over creation “cannot extend further than is allowed by that cause ... on which it was dependent.”⁷⁹ God’s goodness and his love determine the nature of his creation and the nature of creation in turn determines the character of the divine right over it. In Cameron’s understanding, however, God’s antecedent love for

⁷⁶ Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere*, iii; on the importance of the concept of divine love in Cocceian theology see Willem J. Van Asselt, “*Amicitia Dei* as Ultimate Reality: An Outline of the Covenant Theology of Johannes Cocceius (1603-1669),” in *Ultimate Reality and Meaning. Interdisciplinary Studies in the Philosophy of Understanding*, 21/1 (1988), pp. 37-47; and idem, *Federal Theology of Johannes Cocceius*, pp. 315-321.

⁷⁷ Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere*, iv.

⁷⁸ Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy*, p. 49.

⁷⁹ Jacob Arminius, *Disputationes privatae*, in *Opera theologica* (Leiden, 1629), XXVII.iii; cf. Richard A. Muller, “God, Predestination, and the Integrity of the Created Order: A Note on Patterns in Arminius’ Theology,” in *Later Calvinism: International Perspectives*, ed. W. Fred Graham, Sixteenth Century Essays & Studies (Kirksville, MO: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1994), pp. 431-446.

the creature is entirely voluntary. Therefore, the nature of the arrangement provided in God's hypothetical covenants is not determined by anything apart from the divine love and will freely exercised.⁸⁰ According to Cameron, the antecedent *amor Dei* is the source of all good in creation and the foundation of the hypothetical or conditional covenants; the consequent *amor Dei* is a love bestowed on rational creatures who fulfill the obligations belonging to God's hypothetical covenant.⁸¹

Armstrong notes the parallel between Cameron's covenantal argument and his discussion, elsewhere, of the relationship of the antecedent love of God to election. In a "first degree" of antecedent love, God loves the entire world and gives Christ to be the life of the world; in a "second degree" of antecedent love, God bestows faith on the elect alone and wills to save only them.⁸² Cameron also indicates that the eternal decree can be distinguished into two antecedent decrees: to restore the *imago Dei* in a manner consistent with the *iustitia Dei* and to send his Son to save all those who believe; and two consequent decrees: to "render human beings capable of believing," and "to save those who believe."⁸³ Cameron, thus, offers a parallel in his teaching concerning the divine decrees to his doctrine of the covenants: there are antecedent decrees regarding the work of Christ, hypothetically universal in scope, and consequent decrees that are particular. Armstrong indicates a parallel between this conception of the decrees and the language of antecedent and consequent love that undergirds Cameron's conception of the *foedus hypotheticum*.⁸⁴

Contrary, however, to Armstrong's reading, Cameron's understanding of an absolute and a hypothetical covenanting is not so much the parallel of his language of hypothetical universalism as

⁸⁰ Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere*, iv, v.

⁸¹ Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy*, p. 49; cf. Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere*, iii-iv.

⁸² Cameron, Letter of December 1610, in *Opera*, p. 531, col. 2; cited and discussed in Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy*, p. 58.

⁸³ Cameron, Letter of December 1610, in *Opera*, p. 529, col. 2; cited and discussed in Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy*, p. 58.

⁸⁴ Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy*, pp. 49, 57.

its mirror image. In other words, where the covenant is absolute and resting on an antecedent love, the decree is hypothetical; but where the covenant is hypothetical and resting on God's consequent love, the decree is absolute. On the one hand, the hypothetical universalism of the prior decree is juxtaposed with the particularity of the absolute covenant with the elect, emphasizing the full sufficiency of Christ's satisfaction but adumbrating its limited efficacy; on the other hand, the hypothetical universalism of the covenant is juxtaposed with the particularity of the subsequent decree, emphasizing the universality of the call of the gospel but also indicating the divine purpose underlying limited human response.

This pattern has major implications for understanding the Salmurian soteriology. It indicates a covenantal or federal continuity with Reformed predestinarianism that has been left unexamined in discussions of hypothetical universalism. Against Moltmann's assessment, it offers an element of the Salmurian theology that presses it away from rather than toward Arminianism;⁸⁵ and against Armstrong's thesis, it demonstrates the point, recognized even by seventeenth-century opponents of Amyrdianism like Francis Turretin, namely, that views of Cameron and his Salmurian successors were not heresy and, like it or not, were consciously framed to stand within the confessionalism of the Canons of Dort.⁸⁶ In the specific case of Cameron's covenantal thought, it ought to be understood not as a protest against various developments in Reformed theology but

⁸⁵ Contra Moltmann, "Prädestination und Heilsgeschichte bei Moysse Amyraut," p. 283.

⁸⁶ See Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr., 3 vols. (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 1992-1996), XII.xii.1-25. Turretin regarded the Salmurian school as within the Reformed camp, but stood opposed to it, including its espousal of the three-fold covenant scheme. For a fuller discussion of Turretin's critique of Salmurian views on the three-fold covenant, see, J. Mark Beach, "Christ and the Covenant: Francis Turretin's Federal Theology as a Defense of the Doctrine of Grace" (Ph.D. dissertation, Calvin Theological Seminary, 2005), pp. 351-369.

rather as an integral part of the rather fluid and variegated history of early Reformed covenantal thought.

III. The Threefold Covenant: Nature, Grace, and the Subservient Covenant

The Identification of the Covenants—Division of the Topic

The central purpose of Cameron's treatise is the exposition of the threefold hypothetical covenant or covenants, specifically those covenants characterized by the presence of a "restipulation" in their basic terms of agreement. The point is made in Cameron's initial two theses:

In Scripture, covenant occasionally signifies an absolute promise of God, without any restipulation . . . but frequently in the holy Scriptures the term covenant (*foedus*) is employed in order plainly to signify the gratuitous promise of God, with however the restipulation of a duty, both required by God and, (if God so willed) to be fulfilled by the creature, without moreover any intervening promise.⁸⁷

The key to understanding Cameron's approach to hypothetical covenants lies in his interest in identifying their common elements and their distinction. This approach itself stands in continuity with the way in which the Reformers argued the similarity and distinction of the two testaments within the covenant of grace. Cameron draws on the model of similarity and distinction, using it not only as had been done by earlier writers, with reference to the relationship of the Old Testament *foedus subserviens* to the New Testament and to the *foedus gratiae*, but also with reference to the relationship of both of these covenants to the

⁸⁷ Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere*, i-ii: "Foedus iin Scriptura interdum significat promissionem Dei absolutam, sine ulla restipulatione . . . sed occurrit saepius in sacris litteris *Foederis* nomen its usurpatum ut planum sit eo significari gratuitam Dei promissionem, cum restipulatione tamen sed officii, quod alioqui, etiam nulla tanta interdedente promissione, & a Deo exigipotuisset, & a creatura (siquidem sic vellet Deus) praesdrtari debuisset."

foedus naturae—the common ground of all three being their conditionality. Of course, all of Cameron's immediate predecessors, whatever their emphasis in discussing the covenant of works, understood it, together with the covenant of grace as conditional. But his approach is most clearly like that of Olevianus and Rollock, the primary difference being the addition of the term *foedus subserviens* to indicate the legal covenant of the Old Testament.⁸⁸

After offering his basic definitions of the conditional covenants,⁸⁹ Cameron offers a comparison, according to their similarities and dissimilarities, of the covenants of nature and grace.⁹⁰ He then provides a series of theses devoted to the covenant of grace as a second division of his analysis of the conditional covenants, dividing it, as Rollock had done, into theses concerning the covenant of grace as promised and as promulgated.⁹¹ He next introduces the Old Covenant or *foedus subserviens*, comparing it first to the covenant of nature,⁹² and second to the covenant of grace.⁹³ He concludes with a set of theses that offer final definitions of the three hypothetical covenants.⁹⁴ This division of the topic is important to the understanding of the relationship of salvation-historical to doctrinal or dogmatic patterns in Cameron's thought: the broader outline of the work reflects a predominant interest in the similarity and distinction of the three covenants, particularly as this issue relates to the relationship of the Old to the New Testament and to the relationship of the covenant of grace in the Old Testament dispensation to the Old Covenant or *foedus subserviens*. The discussion has salvation-historical elements, as was

⁸⁸ Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere*, vii.

⁸⁹ Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere*, vi-vii.

⁹⁰ Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere*, viii-xix.

⁹¹ Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere*, xx-xxxv (promised); xxxvi-xli (promulgated); cf. Rollock, *Quaestiones et responsiones aliquot de foedere Dei*, fol. B5 verso-B6 recto.

⁹² Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere*, xlii-lxv.

⁹³ Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere*, lxvi-lxxxviii.

⁹⁴ Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere*, lxxix-lxxxii.

the case also with Rollock's, but its argumentative structure, again, like Rollock's, is not itself historical.

The Foedus Naturae and the Foedus Gratiae

Having established that the conditional covenant is threefold, Cameron indicates that his first concern is to compare and contrast the prelapsarian covenant of nature and the postlapsarian covenant of grace as the "principal" (*praecipua*) covenants, leaving the issue of the postlapsarian covenant of nature in the Old Testament, the *foedus subserviens* for a subsequent discussion.⁹⁵ There are, in Cameron's view, four fundamental points in which the covenants of nature and grace agree: in their "general end," which is the glory of God; in the covenanting persons, namely, God and man; in "external form" inasmuch as "a restipulation is annexed to both"; and in their inalterable nature or character.⁹⁶

There are, however, six basic differences between the two covenants. First, the covenants differ in their divinely intended end or goal: the covenant of nature has as its end the "declaration of God's justice," the covenant of grace "the declaration of his mercy."⁹⁷ Second, their foundations differ: in Cameron's, as in Ursinus' and Olevianus' view, the covenant of works is founded on the "creation of man" and on the original "integrity of human nature," the covenant of grace on the redemption of humanity by Christ.⁹⁸ Third, Cameron indicates as difference in the "quality and manner" of the persons in covenant: in the covenant of nature, "God requires his due (*ius suum*) of man pure and perfect," whereas in the covenant of grace, "God as a merciful Father offers himself to the sinner."⁹⁹

Given this difference in quality and manner, the covenants also differ, fourth, in stipulation. The covenant of nature requires

⁹⁵ Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere*, vii.

⁹⁶ Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere*, viii.

⁹⁷ Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere*, ix.

⁹⁸ Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere*, ix; cf. Ursinus' *Larger Catechism*, pp. 164-165, 167-168; Olevianus, *De substantis foederis*, pp. 9, 128-130, 151; and Bierma, *German Calvinism*, pp. 76-78, 113-115.

⁹⁹ Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere*, ix.

“natural righteousness” (*iustitia naturalis*), whereas the covenant of grace requires only faith (*tantum fides*).¹⁰⁰ This distinction between the covenants raises a series of questions for Cameron: Why is it that the first covenant requires “obedience and love” (*obedientia & amor*) while the second requires faith? Given the inseparability of faith and righteousness, how can it be that faith and righteousness are “opposed” in the covenant of grace? And given that the covenant of nature presupposes some sort of faith on the part of man, how is it different from the faith required in the covenant of grace?¹⁰¹ To the first question, Cameron responds that faith, which he understands in traditional terms as a firm persuasion, is required only as a consequence under the first covenant. Inasmuch as man had not sinned and was in no way separated from the love of God, Adam certainly had faith or trust in God and God’s love, but faith was not required by the terms of covenant since Adam, unlike his fallen progeny, stood in no need of the special persuasion of faith that he was “precious and acceptable to God.” In addition, the requirement of the covenant of nature corresponds to strict justice, whereas the requirement of the covenant of grace corresponds with God’s free mercy, given the inability of fallen man to satisfy God’s justice or righteousness.¹⁰²

In response to the second question, Cameron denies that faith and righteousness are opposed in the covenant of grace. The reason that faith replaces righteousness as the condition of covenant is that, after the fall, the two cannot serve together in the same place and manner as grounds of justification. Righteousness can appear before the bar in the “court of Justice” or “Righteousness” (*forum Iustitiae*) whereas faith appears only in the “court of Mercy” (*forum Misericordiae*). In the court of justice, the justice or righteousness demanded by the *foedus naturae* serves as the standard by which the righteous are acquitted and the unrighteous condemned; and the judicial process does not ask the question, “have you believed that you are precious to God,” but

¹⁰⁰ Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere*, ix.

¹⁰¹ Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere*, xi.

¹⁰² Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere*, xii.

rather “have you loved God?” In the court of mercy, by contrast, there is not an inquiry concerning one’s love of God but only concerning one’s faith. Those who believe are acquitted, and those who do not believe are turned over to the court of justice.¹⁰³

These considerations point directly to Cameron’s answer to the third of his questions. The absence of faith as a requirement of the *foedus naturae* in no way implies the absence of faith in the prelapsarian state. Indeed, faith before the fall and faith after the fall under the covenant of grace are congruous: “both are a persuasion of the love of God, both engender in man the mutual love of God, which abounds, because faith is abounding.”¹⁰⁴ The difference, however, resides in the issue of foundation and effect. Faith before the fall rests on the integrity of unfallen human nature, presupposes natural righteousness, and arises *per modum naturae*; after the fall, under grace, faith is grounded in “the promise made in Christ” and arises in man *per modum gratiae supernaturalis*. As for the effect of faith, before the fall it resulted in a mutable righteousness and holiness lower in character than the eternal and immutable righteousness and holiness that arise from faith under the covenant of grace.¹⁰⁵ Thus, the fourth difference, that of “stipulation” between the covenants—the covenant of nature requiring “natural righteousness,” the covenant of grace requiring only faith.¹⁰⁶

Both covenants promise eternal life, but (fifth) they differ in the kind of life promised. Under the covenant of nature, fulfillment of the stipulation would have provided an everlasting earthly physical life in Paradise, under the covenant of grace, an everlasting spiritual life is promised in heaven. Extended duration of earthly or natural life would have been the result of the covenantal promise to Adam, the earthly head of the human race. Heavenly life is the proper possession of all those who believe in

¹⁰³ Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere*, xiii.

¹⁰⁴ Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere*, xiv.

¹⁰⁵ Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere*, xiv.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere*, ix.

Christ and belong to him, the new head of the human race, by “right of adoption” (*ius adoptionis*).¹⁰⁷

The sixth difference between the two covenants concerns the manner of their ratification (*forma sanctionis*). The covenant of nature had no mediator and was “promulgated” immediately, without a promise preceding it, whereas the covenant of grace has a mediator and was therefore “first promised, and then much later promulgated and ratified in the blood of the Son of God.”¹⁰⁸ This is a distinction that generates a substantial discussion of the person of the Mediator and of the relationship of incarnation to the administration or dispensation of the covenant of grace, specifically, concerning the similarities and differences between the Old and the New Testament.

*From Promise to Promulgation: the Foedus Gratiae in
the Old and New Testaments*

Cameron’s discussion of the covenant of grace begins with a distinction of the covenant into its “being promised to the Fathers, first to Adam, then to the Patriarchs, and then to the people of Israel” and “as being fully promulgated when the fulness of time was come, Gal. 4:4; 1 Pet. 1:12.”¹⁰⁹ This division of the topic, with its indication of three subdivisions of the Old Covenant preceding the New, taken together with Cameron’s comments concerning the degrees or gradations in the obscurity of the revelation between the first promise of the covenant and its full promulgation,¹¹⁰ provides some foundation for Moltmann’s and Armstrong’s stress on the salvation-historical approach of Cameron’s covenantal teaching. Still, it is worth remarking that this model is neither new with Cameron nor any more central to

¹⁰⁷ Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere*, xix.

¹⁰⁸ Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere*, ix: “In Foedere Naturae nullus fuit Mediator, deinde Foedus Naturae non prius promissum quam promulgatum fuit, at Foedus Gratiae prius promissum, dein multo post promulgatum & sancitum est in sanguine Filii Dei.”

¹⁰⁹ Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere*, xx, citing also Genesis 3:15 and chapters 12 and 15, with reference to Adam and the patriarchs.

¹¹⁰ Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere*, xxviii.

his argument than it was to various of his predecessors, contemporaries, and successors in the Reformed tradition. The issue of the similarity and distinction between the Old Testament and New Testament administrations of the covenant of grace had been imbedded in Protestant theology by Melancthon, Bullinger, Musculus, Vermigli, and Calvin.¹¹¹ Among Cameron's immediate predecessors, Fenner, certainly, had pressed the issue of the various administrations of covenant throughout history, and in far greater detail than Cameron. What is more, Cameron's initial, potentially Ramistic distinction between the covenant promised and the covenant promulgated, does not lead so much to a salvation-historical survey of the covenant as to a more or less doctrinal set of further distinctions, first concerning how Christ was the Mediator under the Old Testament as well as in the New,¹¹² and second concerning how the "efficacy" (*efficacia*) of Christ "promised" differed from the "efficacy" of Christ "promulgated" following the historical fulfillment of his work.¹¹³ Contra Moltmann, there is no intrinsic relationship between the bifurcatory models of Ramism and an interest in salvation-history. Rather, Ramism provided a method that gave clarity of organization to any and all genres of theology, as well as to other disciplines, such as philosophy and law; and its primary thrust was toward topical rather than historical exposition.¹¹⁴

The primary differences noted by Cameron concerning the distinction of the testaments relate to the condition of the Mediator as to be incarnated (*incarnandus*) or as incarnate (*incarnandus*) and to the obscurity of the revelation in its types and figures for the duration of the Mediator's work *incarnandus* in comparison to the clarity and fulness of the revelation of the

¹¹¹ Cf. Melancthon, *Loci communes theologici*, CR 21, cols. 192-206 (1521), 453-56 (1535), 800-816 (1543); Heinrich Bullinger, *Sermonum decades quinque* (Zürich: Froschauer, 1552), III.viii; Musculus, *Loci communes*, xxv; Vermigli, *Loci communes* (1583), II.xvi; Calvin, *Institutes*, II.x-xi.

¹¹² Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere*, xxi-xxxii.

¹¹³ Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere*, xxxiii-xl.

¹¹⁴ Cf. Bierma, *German Calvinism*, pp. 25, 162-168; with Muller, *PRRD*, I, 181-184.

Mediator *incarnatus*.¹¹⁵ Albeit largely topical in its divisions, this discussion does offer some more or less historical perspectives on the covenant inasmuch as Cameron recognizes degrees or gradations (*gradus*) in the relative obscurity of the Old Testament promise on its course toward fulfillment. The issue facing Cameron, however, is not so much salvation-history in the modern sense, or even distinct phases of the administration of the covenant in the sense of a Fenner before him or a Cocceius after him, as the progress of revelation from shadowy types toward fulfillment. Thus, in Cameron's view,

Before the Law given by Moses, the promise was more obscure (*obscurior*); and when the Law was given, to the times of the Prophets, it remained less than clear (*minus clara*); from the times of the Prophets, unto John the Baptist, it was clearer (*clarior*); and when our Lord Jesus Christ, who did both execute and promulgate the counsel of the Father concerning the restoration of the church, succeeded John, it became most clear (*clarissima*); during its accomplishment, somewhat less plainly (*minus aperte*); after its accomplishment, most plainly (*apertissime*).¹¹⁶

Nor was this progress from obscurity to clarity of revelation without purpose. It reflected the movement from prophecy to fulfillment and it was suited to the ages of the church as she grew from infancy to maturity; and it was also fitting that the promise would become clearer as the time of its fulfillment approaches and the people to whom it had been promised were increasingly expectant of the fulfillment. In its infancy, the church was more imperfect than in subsequent eras, and her instruction was, accordingly, more imperfect. The giving of the law, moreover, marked a transition, given that once the law was revealed, the sense of sin increased and the progress of revelation in the times of the prophets provided a new clarity of promise suited to this heightened sense of human sinfulness.¹¹⁷ There is, moreover, a

¹¹⁵ Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere*, xxi-xxiii, xxv-xxvi.

¹¹⁶ Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere*, xxviii.

¹¹⁷ Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere*, xxix-xxxi; cf. Calvin,

suitable parallel between the progress of expectation in the time before the coming of Christ and the progress of hope as Christians in the time after Christ's advent look toward the future.¹¹⁸

A parallel progress can be observed, in Cameron's view, in the matter of the efficacy of Christ's work: "in many ways, the efficacy of Christ promised was less than that of Christ exhibited."¹¹⁹ In view of the examples and arguments that Cameron offers to this thesis, it appears that his point was not so much that the salvation made available to the patriarchs and ancient Israelites was incomplete—as if Abraham were less justified than Paul—but that the character of the salvation bestowed was less clear. Cameron does not, in other words, hypothesize that justification was incomplete under the Old Testament, only that it was less fully understood. Specifically, whereas "the remission of sins" under the Old Testament "was certain with God, still it was less perceived given the cloud of the law"; and as "less perceived" offered "less consolation" than under the New Testament, where the depth of sin and the fulness of its remission would become apparent.¹²⁰ Furthermore, the promise has widened in its focus: it was initially given only to the immediate families of the patriarchs, later to the people of Israel alone, and only subsequently to the Gentiles.¹²¹ In this sense, the efficacy of Christ exhibited is far greater than that of Christ promised—a far greater number of people has been given the promise of salvation. Among the reasons for this initial limitation of the efficacy of redemption, Cameron indicates that the election of the Jews and the rejection of the Gentiles under the Old

Institutes, II.xi.5-8.

¹¹⁸ Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere*, xxxi.

¹¹⁹ Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere*, xxxiii: "Minor fuit efficacia promissi quam exhibitum Christi multis modis."

¹²⁰ Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere*, xxxiii: "Primo, Remissio peccatorum tametsi fuit certa apud Deum, minus twamen sentiabatur propter obiectam nubem Legis. Secundo, percepta minorem adferebat consolationem propter minorem sensum peccati ... et obscuriorem notitiam illius glorie & vite quae remissionem peccatorum consequitur." Cf. Calvin, *Institutes*, II.xi.10.

¹²¹ Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere*, xxxiv; cf. Calvin, *Institutes*, II.xi.

Covenant stand as permanent types of election and rejection, of the *ecclesiae Dei* and the *ecclesiae Satanae*.¹²²

The Foedus Subsर्वiens and the Foedus Naturae

After his discussion of the fulness of the covenant of grace promulgated,¹²³ Cameron indicates that it would be quite fitting to discuss the superiority of the covenant of grace over the covenant of nature, but he reserves this discussion until he has compared the “old” or “subsर्वient covenant” of the law both to the *foedus naturae* and the *foedus gratiae*. Cameron’s term, *foedus subsर्वiens*, marks a linguistic difference between his formulation and those of predecessors like Olevianus, Perkins, and Rollock, but his teaching is substantially the same, recognizing the positive relationships and continuities between the *foedus subsर्वiens* and legal foundation of the *foedus naturae*, and situating the *foedus subsर्वiens*, understood as the covenant made with the people of Israel, within the historical framework of the *foedus gratiae* and as preparatory to its fulfillment.

Accordingly, in a series of arguments that have parallels Olevianus’ analysis of the *foedus legale*, Perkins’ exegesis of Galatians 4:24-25, and Rollock’s, Cameron identifies *foedus subsर्वiens* as the proper characterization of the old covenant (*vetus foedus*), specifically the Mosaic covenant into which God entered with Israel at Mount Sinai. It is called “subsर्वient” because its purpose was to prepare the people of God for faith and for the “evangelical covenant,” which had fallen into obscurity because of sin, and, in the time before the full inauguration of the gospel, to restrain their impiety.¹²⁴ Thus, the covenant made at Sinai is not identified as the “old covenant” because it is first (it clearly was not, being preceded historically by the covenant of nature and the covenant of grace), but because “it ought to wax old, to give place

¹²² Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere*, xxxiv.

¹²³ Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere*, xxxv-xli.

¹²⁴ Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere*, xlii; Olevianus, *De substantis foederis*, pp. 12-13; and cf. Bierma, *German Calvinism*, pp. 122-124.

to a better covenant, and then be abolished.”¹²⁵ It stands between the covenant of nature and the covenant of grace and must be understood by comparison with both, in the order of Cameron’s discussion, first with the covenant of nature, then with the covenant of grace.¹²⁶

The subservient covenant and the covenant of nature possess five points of agreement. The contracting parties in both covenants are “God and man.” Second, both covenants have stipulations and, indeed, third, the same stipulations, namely, the moral law. Fourth, the promise of both covenants, generally considered, is the same, namely, a blessed life. Fifth, both covenants lead or point toward Christ.¹²⁷ These two covenants do, however, differ considerably, in as many as twelve ways. The covenant of nature was a covenant founded on the creation itself, made with all mankind in a state of innocence, and engraved on the heart, without any preparatory events (*praeludia*), whereas the *foedus subserviens* was founded on the special election of Israel, made only with Israel in the fallen state, and engraved on tables of stone, after a long preparation.¹²⁸ The *foedus naturae* binds man only to the natural law; the *foedus subserviens* adds ceremonial regulations. The former promised Paradise, the latter the land of Canaan; and, although both covenants lead to Christ, the *foedus naturae* does so only incidentally (*per accidens*), while the *foedus subserviens* leads to Christ as its “proper scope” (*proprius scopus*). The covenant of nature, moreover, was not made to oppress human beings or to drive them to Christ, but only to indicate what obedience was due to God. The subservient covenant was intended to convict human beings of sin and drive them to Christ.

¹²⁵ Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere*, xliii: “vetus appellatur, non quia prius (ut nonnulli hariolantur) sed quia inveterascere, & succedenti praestantiori foederi decedere, denique aboleri debuit.”

¹²⁶ Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere*, xliv.

¹²⁷ Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere*, xlv.

¹²⁸ Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere*, xlvi; cf. Olevianus, *De substantia foederis*, p. 295; Perkins, *Commentarie upon Galatians*, 4:24-25, in loc., the fourth reason (p. 306); Rollock, *Quaestiones et responsiones aliquot de foedere Dei*, fol. A4 verso-A5 recto.

The covenant of nature, moreover, is an eternal covenant made without a mediator; the subservient covenant, a temporal covenant with a mediator.¹²⁹

The Foedus Subserviens and the Foedus Gratiae

The *foedus subserviens* or temporal covenant of the Mosaic law, extending from Sinai to the advent of Christ, stands in considerable agreement with the *foedus gratiae*: the author of both covenants is God and both are made between God and sinful man. Both covenants, moreover, reveal sin and restrain it, each is an identifier of the church of God (*symbolum Ecclesiae Dei*), and both lead to Christ. Each is made through a mediator and both promise life.¹³⁰ Still, the differences are substantial: Cameron notes seventeen, most of which find direct parallels in the earlier Reformed tradition, whether in its early and mid-sixteenth-century formulation or among Cameron's late sixteenth-century orthodox predecessors.

Thus, according to Cameron, although the author of the two covenants is the same, he relates to the covenant quite differently: in the *foedus subserviens*, God condemns sin and approves only of righteousness, whereas in the covenant of grace, he acquits from sin and brings about a renewed righteousness in human beings. Accordingly, the two covenants differ in stipulation—with the old covenant stipulating “this do and live,” the new, “believe and you shall not come under judgment.”¹³¹ If moreover, both covenants reveal sin, they differ in the manner of revealing it: the subservient covenant reveals sin in a derived or secondary sense by manifesting the inability of human beings to keep covenant; the covenant of grace reveals sin directly and primarily by specifically teaching that “man is a sinner” in need of forgiveness.¹³² The

¹²⁹ Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere*, xlvi, elaborated at length in theses xlvii-lxv, which are not discussed here.

¹³⁰ Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere*, lxvii.

¹³¹ Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere*, lxviii; cf. Perkins, *Commentarie upon Galatians*, 4:24-25, in loc., the first and third reasons (p. 306), further, p. 307.

¹³² Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere*, lxviii.

abolition of the law that marks the full promulgation and execution of the covenant of grace relates to the removal of the pedagogical use of the law and the termination of Mosaic forms of worship.¹³³

Although both covenants lead to Christ, the old covenant does so indirectly, the covenant of grace directly. Even so, both are badges or signs of the church, but the old covenant is carnal, the new covenant spiritual. This carnal-spiritual differentiation is, moreover, marked by the identity of their respective mediators: the mediator of the old covenant is Moses, a human being; the mediator of the new covenant is Christ the *theanthropos*, the God-man. Likewise, the old covenant was a means to an end, the new is the end itself.¹³⁴

The focus and effect of the two covenants are also quite different: the Old covenant was given in a spirit of bondage and terrifies the conscience of “man dead in sin.” The old covenant is from Mt. Sinai and is a “hand-writing against us”; it shuts out the gentiles and promises the land of Canaan. The new covenant is given in grace by the spirit of adoption and it comforts the conscience human beings not dead but in terror of sin. The new covenant is from Sion and is a “burden cast off”; it receives the gentiles and promises heaven.¹³⁵

IV. The Place and Import of Cameron’s *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere* in the Development of Covenantal Thought

Cameron and Later Reformed Thought

Given, as argued through this essay, Cameron’s covenantal model represented a development within the theological conversation of early Reformed orthodoxy, having clear antecedents in the central trajectory of Reformed covenant

¹³³ Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere*, xxxviii.

¹³⁴ Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere*, lxviii; cf. Calvin, *Institutes*, II.xi.2, 4; cf. Perkins, *Commentarie upon Galatians*, 4:24-25, in loc., the sixth reason (p. 306).

¹³⁵ Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere*, lxviii.

thought, it can also be argued that it served not as an alternative to the orthodoxy of Cameron's day but as part of the development toward the more elaborate covenantal models of later orthodox.

Thus, if the distinction between absolute and hypothetical covenants cannot be found with any frequency prior to Cameron, it did carry directly over into the next generations of Reformed thinkers as a fundamental distinction to be made at the outset of their argumentation, probably understood as offering a clarity not present in earlier distinctions, like Polanus' eternal and temporal covenants. Cameron's model carries over precisely into the thought of John Ball, who begins his doctrinal discussion of covenant with the same distinction of covenants into absolute and hypothetical, understands both the covenant of works and the covenant of grace as hypothetical, and argues that the Mosaic covenant or Old Testament is a subservient covenant related in some aspects to the covenant of works and in others to the covenant of grace.¹³⁶ Ball also follows Cameron precisely in his manner of relating the distinction of covenants into absolute and conditional to the "primary or antecedent" and the "secondary or consequent love" of God.¹³⁷ In moving from the Old Testament administration of the covenant of grace to its New Testament administration, Ball also, like Cameron and Rollock before him, distinguishes between the covenant as "promised" and the covenant as "promulgated."¹³⁸

Nicholas Byfield, within a decade of Cameron, argued a covenant of creation, a covenant of works or legal covenant, and a covenant of grace (with the distinct administrations of the Old Testament and the New Testament administration of the covenant variously distinguished). Jacob Alting notes the model as well but questions it: "some propose a threefold covenant, Natural in Adam; Legal through Moses; & Evangelical, through Christ."¹³⁹

¹³⁶ John Ball, *A Treatise of the Covenant of Grace*. London: G. Miller, 1645), I.i, ii, iii, vii (pp. 3-4, 6, 17, 93-96).

¹³⁷ Ball, *Treatise of the Covenant of Grace*, I.i (p. 4).

¹³⁸ Ball, *Treatise of the Covenant of Grace*, I.iii (p. 27).

¹³⁹ Nicholas Byfield, *The paterne of wholsome words. Or a collection of such truths as are of necessity to be believed vnto saluation separated out of the body of all*

The problem, in Alting's view, is that Scripture does not testify directly to the existence of the natural covenant in Adam; it is inferred by analogy from the natural law. This natural covenant, Alting adds, coincides according to its substance with the legal covenant, and the latter is its fuller and clearer repetition.¹⁴⁰

John Preston begins one of his discussions of the covenant of grace with the comment that the covenant is double, "either absolute and peculiar, or conditionall," inasmuch as it is "absolute and peculiar onely to the Elect" but conditional with reference to "all men,"¹⁴¹ echoing Cameron's initial distinction between the absolute covenant with the elect and the hypothetical covenant of grace in history. A similar reflection of Cameron's approach is found in Edward Leigh's treatise of 1633 on the promises of God, in which, after declaring several paradigms for distinguishing the divine promises, Leigh examines the distinction between absolute and conditional—the former including God's promise after the flood never again to destroy the world, and his promises concerning the advent and second coming of Christ.¹⁴² When he defines covenant, moreover, Leigh indicates that there are two kinds, one that rests on "a simple promise of grace without a condition," the other indicating "a mutuall contract or agreement between the parties covenanting by stipulation and promise."¹⁴³ Leigh's development of the theme of covenant also contains a section delineating the covenant of works and the "evangelical covenant" in which the similarity and difference of both covenants

theologie made euident by infallible plaine proofes of Scripture. And withall, the seuerall vses such principles should be put to, are abundantly shewed. A proiect much desired, and of singular vse for all sorts of Christians (London: F. Kingston, 1618); cf. Jacob Alting, *Methodus theologiae didacticae*, in *Opera omnia theologica: analytica exegetica, practica, problematica: & philogogica*, 5 vols. (Amsterdam, 1687), xi (V, p. 96).

¹⁴⁰ Alting, *Methodus theol. didacticae*, xi (p. 96).

¹⁴¹ John Preston, *The Breast-Plate of Faith and Love, a treatise, wherein the ground and exercise of Faith and Love, as they are set upon Christ their Object, and as they are expressed in Good Works, is explained*, 5th ed. (London: R. Y. For Nicholas Bourne, 1634), p. 32.

¹⁴² Edward Leigh, *A Treatise of the Divine Promises, in Five Books* (London: George Miller, 1633), I.ii (pp. 15-16).

¹⁴³ Leigh, *Treatise of the Divine Promises*, II.i (p. 114).

are outlined in relation to the Old and New Testaments, an exposition with clear resemblances to Cameron's.¹⁴⁴

Cameron's distinctions within God's conditional covenants between "promise" and "performance" is certainly one of the antecedents of the covenantal thought of Francis Roberts,¹⁴⁵ and, given Cameron's argument that "the efficacy of Christ promised was less than that of Christ exhibited," a probable antecedent of the Cocceian distinction between *paresis* in the Old Testament and *aphesis* in the New Testament dispensation of salvation, albeit this specific language and the biblical texts employed by Cocceius as the basis of his argument (Romans 3:25 for *paresis* and Hebrews 10:18 for *aphesis*) are absent from Cameron's thesis.¹⁴⁶

Cameron's model is also retained, with some variation in the thought of Obadiah Sedgwick, who notes as fairly standard the distinction between the *foedus absolutum* and the *foedus hypotheticum*—the former referring to God's covenant with Noah or to the eternal covenant of God with the elect; the latter to God's prelapsarian and postlapsarian covenants with human beings.¹⁴⁷ Sedgwick also recognized, still in 1661, the fluidity of

¹⁴⁴ Leigh, *Treatise of the Divine Promises*, II.1 (pp. 121-136).

¹⁴⁵ Francis Roberts, *Mysterium & medulla Bibliorum: the mysterie and marrow of the Bible, viz. God's covenants with man in the first Adam before the fall, and in the last Adam, Iesus Christ, after the fall, from the beginning to the end of the world: unfolded & illustrated in positive aphorisms & their explanation* (London: Printed by R.W. for George Calvert, 1657). On Roberts' theology, see Won Taek Lim, *The Covenant Theology of Francis Roberts* (Ph.D. dissertation, Calvin Theological Seminary, 1999; Cheonan: King & Kingdom, 2002).

¹⁴⁶ Cf. Cameron, *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere*, xxxiii, with Willem van Asselt, "Expromissio or Fideiussio? A Seventeenth-Century Theological Debate between Voetians and Cocceians about the Nature of Christ's Suretyship in Salvation History," in *Mid-America Journal of Theology*, 14 (2003), pp. 37-57; idem, "Voetius en Cocceius over de rechtvaardiging," in J. Van Oort, et al, eds., *De onbekende Voetius. Voordrachten Wetenschappelijk Symposium 1989* (Kampen, 1989), pp. 32-47; and idem, *Federal Theology*, pp. 28-30, 282-283.

¹⁴⁷ Obadiah Sedgwick, *The bowels of tender mercy sealed in the everlasting covenant: wherein is set forth the nature, conditions and excellencies of it, and how a sinner should do to enter into it, and the danger of refusing this covenant-relation: also the treasures of grace, blessings, comforts, promises and priviledges that are comprized in the covenant of Gods free and rich mercy made in Jesus Christ with believers* (London:

covenant language: the prelapsarian branch of hypothetical or conditional covenant is variously identified as the *foedus operum*, the *foedus naturae*, or the *pactum amicitiae* with Adam; the postlapsarian branch as *foedus gratiae*, *pactum reconciliationis*, or “covenant of life.”¹⁴⁸

Conclusions

The older scholarship on John Cameron’s covenantal thought was able to identify him as offering a major alternative to early orthodox Reformed theology only because it contrasted a partial analysis of his thought with a caricature of the movement as a whole. Just as Beza’s famous *Tabula praedestinationis* was never intended or (until the nineteenth century) understood as a prospectus for a predestinarian or decretal theological system,¹⁴⁹ so was Cameron’s *De triplici Dei cum homine foedere* never intended as a alternative to Reformed orthodoxy or to the covenantal theologies of the era. Cameron’s work is merely a set of theses outlining an understanding of the covenants; it is neither a model for an entire theology nor a prospectus for a whole program of theological education.¹⁵⁰ Once, moreover, the caricature, namely, of a Bezan predestinarian metaphysic opposed to the humanistic, salvation-historical tendencies of earlier Reformed thought, has been removed; and once Cameron’s theses have been set into the context not of a static Reformed orthodoxy but of a broad, rather diverse and developing movement, Cameron’s multi-covenant

Edward Mottershed, 1661), pp. 5-7.

¹⁴⁸ Sedgwick, *Bowels of tender mercy*, p. 9; and cf. Carol Williams, “The Decree of Redemption is in Effect a Covenant: David Dickson and the Covenant of Redemption” (Ph.D. dissertation, Calvin Theological Seminary, 2005), pp. 228-229.

¹⁴⁹ Cf. Richard A. Muller, “The Use and Abuse of a Document: Beza’s *Tabula praedestinationis*, the Bolsec Controversy, and the Origins of Reformed Orthodoxy,” in *Protestant Scholasticism: Essays in Reappraisal*, ed. Carl Trueman and Scott Clark (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1999), pp. 33-61; with idem, *Christ and the Decree*, pp. 79-96.

¹⁵⁰ Contra Moltmann, “Prädestination und Heilsgeschichte bei Moyses Amyraut,” p. 275; and Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy*, p. 48.

model, with its discussion of the three hypothetical covenants, can be seen as a rather influential statement of the implications of covenantal thinking that drew on earlier Reformed developments and that had significant impact not only on immediate followers like Amyraut but on a broad spectrum of Reformed federalists like Ball, Roberts, Cocceius, Burman, and Witsius. As is the case with the other writers examined here, Cameron's approach stands in the way of the fairly standard but overly simplistic reading of covenantal thought as following either a "one covenant" or a "two covenant" model or as defining covenant as either bilateral and conditional or unilateral and absolute. These understandings are the inventions of modern scholarship, not the paradigms adopted by sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writers.

As a further implication of this analysis of Cameron's thought, we must also call into question, from yet another vantage point, the purported antagonism or, as various modern theologasters like to call it, the "tension," between covenantal thought and predestinarianism or, in the odd Moltmannian form of the thesis, an antagonism between a Ramist, humanistic, salvation-historical, covenantal, *a posteriorism* and an Aristotelian, scholastic, decretal, *a priorism*. There is, after all, little ground for claiming that Cameron's initial division of the subject between absolute and hypothetical covenants derives primarily from Ramism, and even less ground for claiming that Ramism contributed to the development of non-predestinarian, non-scholastic, *a posteriori*, salvation-historical covenant thought, given, among other things, the predestinarian views of such thoroughgoing Ramists as Perkins, Polanus, and Ames. Nor can Ramism be enlisted as a handy explanation for all theological distinctions in the form of dichotomies, unless one wishes to credit Ramus with such distinctions as the Old and New Testament, the two natures of Christ, the flesh and the spirit. Furthermore, as noted previously, Ramism was more conducive to topical than to historical presentations. Neither can Cameron's consistent balancing of his hypothetical arguments with absolute categories evidence "tensions" when his entire argument draws positively on his predecessors and proposes resolutions of theological issues—

resolutions, moreover, that are very much in accord with the broader patterns of developing Reformed orthodoxy!

It is certainly incorrect to claim, as did Moltmann, that Cameron's covenantal thought represented a conscious "distancing" of his theology from Reformed scholastic orthodoxy, as evidenced in the teaching concerning the covenant of grace and in Cameron's establishment of a relationship between covenant and the doctrine of God.¹⁵¹ Cameron's views on the covenant of grace, as we have seen, were quite standard and belonged to the general development of Reformed orthodoxy on the issue. As for Cameron establishing a unique relationship between covenant and the doctrine of God or making covenant the foundation of his thought, we find no evidence for this at all. Cameron's understanding of absolute and hypothetical covenants as reflecting God's love in its antecedent and consequent moments stands quite noticeably within the trajectories of Reformed orthodoxy, and also quite in accord with the orthodox views on the divine attributes and divine decrees found among Cameron's predecessors and contemporaries. Certainly, Cameron's understanding of the antecedent divine love looks toward Amyraut. But none of these arguments stepped beyond the confessional boundaries of the Reformed churches, and none implies a rejection of the scholastic methods of the era, with their theses for disputation and careful distinctions, in favor of a more biblicistic and humanistic model.¹⁵²

Beyond this, and more specific to the reappraisal of Cameron's place in the development of covenant thought, the understanding of God's covenants, both of nature or works and of grace as hypothetical or conditional does not set Cameron apart from the main line of Reformed theological development as evidenced in Olevianus, Ursinus, Fenner, Perkins, Polanus, and

¹⁵¹ Moltmann, *Gnadenbund und Gnadenwahl*, p. 34.

¹⁵² Cf. the comments in Muller, *PRRD*, I, pp. 74-80, on the breadth and variety of Reformed orthodoxy, and pp. 34-37, 71-73, 361-363, 367-382, on late Renaissance scholastic method and its interrelationship with humanism; in particular I take issue with Armstrong's fundamental position that Amyraldianism was a "heresy" outside of the bounds of Reformed orthodoxy.

Rollock. Indeed, all of the Reformed writers cited, whether supra- or infralapsarian in their views on predestination, understood covenant as conditional, grounded in divine promises and stipulations, the latter being restipulated by the human partners in covenant. All of these writers, moreover, incorporated both unilateral and bilateral elements into their covenantal thought. In Cameron's thought in particular, the hypothetical or conditional nature of the covenants was carefully balanced by the absolute divine willing of particular salvation and the effective divine fulfillment of the conditions of the covenant of grace.

In sum, Cameron's covenantal thought, far from moving away from the doctrinal *locus* model to a purely salvation-historical model, evidences a balance between interest in the formulation of a more traditional theological *locus* and the incorporation of various salvation-historical understandings. His approach is, in fact, less attuned to the flow of salvation history than the approaches found in a predecessor like Fenner or a successor like Ball. Cameron understanding of order and organization stands in a high degree of continuity with the models proposed by early orthodox predecessors like Olevianus and Rollock, just as it points toward the subsequent formulations of covenantal thought by various Reformed orthodox writers who can be distinguished from both the more salvation-historical model of Cocceius and the more purely dogmatic approach of Turretin. Both of these aspects of his thought, moreover, belong to the issues and interests he received from the older Reformed tradition, including his immediate predecessors, whether British or continental.