

## Law and Gospel in the Calvinist Tradition

When John Calvin wrote the first edition of the Institutio in 1536, he followed the order of Luther's Short Catechism, expounding Law before Gospel, but in 1539 and in the subsequent editions he abandons this order, asserting the priority of grace over law. His understanding of the Old Testament as well as of Paul led him to see that the message of the Old Testament as well as of the New is fundamentally one of grace - of promise and fulfilment - and that law is given in the framework of grace, as the gift of grace and designed to lead to grace.

Western theology, both Catholic and Protestant, has too often inverted this order and misrepresented both Paul and Judaism. We see this, not only in Lutheran thought, but also in Puritanism and Calvinism, for in spite of Calvin's important insight, "federal Calvinism" (as enshrined for example in the Westminster Confession of Faith) was to be built on a dogmatic structure which asserted the priority of law over grace. If on the one hand this was to be one of the sources of anti-semitism in Christian history (i.e. the view that the Jews are "legalists", but we Gentile Christians believe in grace! - a view which so much recent scholarship has shown to be a travesty of authentic Judaism) on the other hand, I think we can see here one of the reasons why Calvinism has too often been associated with legalism and a rigid moralism, as in Scottish history. The development from Calvin to federal Calvinism is in no small way characterised by the inversion of the order of Gospel and law.

The concern of this paper is to comment on this and show its importance politically, ethically and socially, as well as theologically.

## The Covenant of Law and the Covenant of Grace in Federal Calvinism - the Nature-Grace Model

The central concern of the Reformation was the recovery of the meaning of grace - of justification by grace alone. One of the prime ways in which the Reformers contended for sola gratia was to say that that is the meaning of election. Our salvation is grounded in the

free, unmerited grace of God without any prior consideration of worth or merit, not on any foreknowledge by God of our fulfilling prior conditions, as Calvin was to argue against Pighius. This line of argument was developed in the doctrine of "the double decree", especially in the hands of Calvin's successor, Theodore Beza who proceeded to make "the double decree" (as Calvin had not done) the major premiss of his system of theology (eg in his Tabula of 1555) teaching the doctrine of a "limited atonement", that Christ is the Mediator, not for all men, but only for the elect. God decrees all that happens, electing some, rejecting others, and then sends Christ to execute the decree of salvation for the elect.

The result was that in the period between 1550 and 1560 lively controversies (associated with Pighius, Bolsec and Sebastian Castellio) took place raising such questions as: If God is sovereign over all men, and not just over the elect, how is he related to the whole human race - if Christ is only the Head of the elect? If God decrees all for his own glory, is God responsible for sin and evil? What is the relation between the will of God and the will of man? Again, the elect, the saints who are justified by grace alone, must live responsibly in the world at large. How then do they interpret their existence in the realms of culture, public morality and the State? There was a search for a basis for a social ethic.

With these questions doubtless very much in his mind Zacharias Ursinus, the Heidelberg Lutheran who became a Calvinist, in 1562, in his Major Catechism, first put forward the concept of a foedus naturale as a prelapsarian covenant, as a way of interpreting creation and Genesis 1-3, which none of the magisterial reformers had done. When God created Adam, He created him the child of nature, to discern the laws of nature by the light of reason, and then on the basis of law (natural law and symbolic law) made a covenant or contract (foedus) with him, that if he obeyed and kept the covenant, God would be gracious to him and his posterity. But Adam transgressed, and brought down divine judgement on himself and all for whom he contracted. In this way, man was responsible for evil, not God. Adam had abused his God given freedom. Here was a way of mitigating the harsher element of a high doctrine of the decrees and

interpreting the relation between the sovereignty of God and human responsibility.

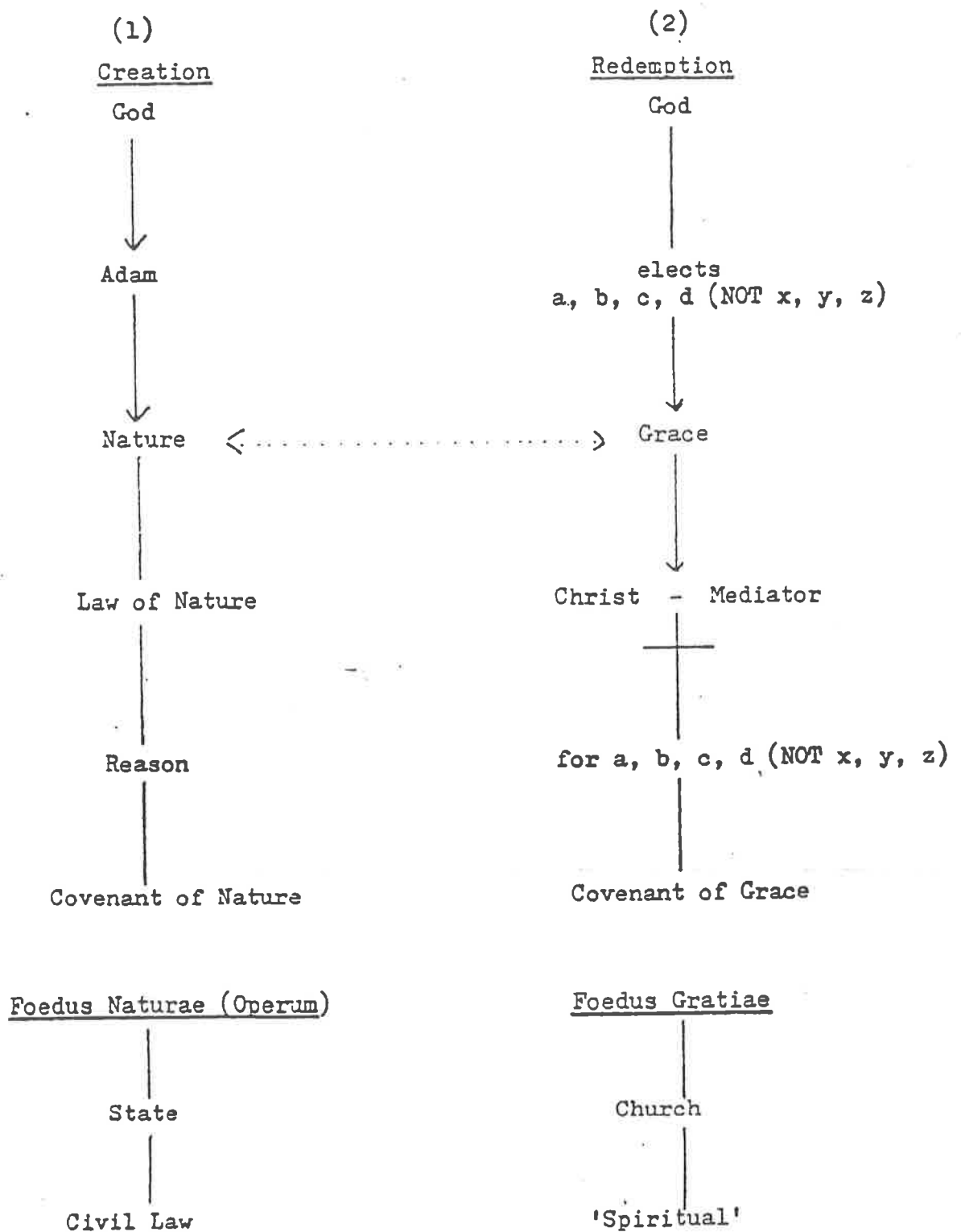
For Ursinus, the concept of a foedus naturale was an answer to a genuine problem, but not a coordinating principle in his theology. But that is what it was to become before the end of the 16th century, in English puritanism and Scottish Calvinism, and exercise such a powerful influence politically, in the rise of modern democracy. Among the many students who flocked to study in Heidelberg under Ursinus, Olevianus and Zanchius, was an English puritan, Thomas Cartwright, a friend of Beza and a Cambridge professor, who brought the concept back to England. In 1585, his friend Dudley Fenner wrote his Theologia Sacra (with an Introduction by Cartwright) where the concept of foedus was used as a basis for expounding Reformed Theology, and where the phrase "a covenant of works" (foedus operum) was first used. God has made two covenants, the covenant of works (the covenant of law) with all men, and the covenant of grace with the elect through Christ the Mediator. From this sprang the whole scheme of "federal theology", developed by William Perkins in England, and so to influence puritanism in England Scotland and N. America, and through Ames and Cocceius, Calvinism in Holland. The federal scheme became the absolute orthodoxy of the whole Puritan Calvinist world on both sides of the Atlantic, and found its first confessional status in the Westminster Confession of Faith. In these terms, theologians interpreted the relationship between Creation and Redemption, State and Church, the "civil" and "spiritual" realms., Reformed Theology had been reformulated in terms of the Western Nature-Grace Model, with its roots in mediaeval thought. The twin concepts were those of natural law and foedus (covenant or contract).

#### The Political significance of the Nature-Grace Model

The political significance of this (apart from its theological implication) was enormous. Two events deeply disturbed Western Europe in the 16th Century, after the Reformation. The first was the deposition of Mary Queen of Scots in 1567 (and her being beheaded in England in 1587), raising the question: What are the rights of a

sovereign vis a vis his or her people? Have the people a right to depose their sovereign? The second was the massacre of the Huguenots on the Eve of St. Bartholomew in 1571, raising the complementary question; What are the rights of a people vis a vis the sovereign? Has a sovereign the right to massacre his people? How do you safeguard the rights of both king and people? The answer given was, "By Covenant" (foedus) - by "contract of government". At the time of his coronation, a king makes a solemn covenant or contract with his people, whereby they bind themselves together under law to guarantee each other's rights under specific conditions. This raised a very important set of questions. What is the nature and source of human rights? What constitutes lawful government? What is the seat of sovereignty in law? Is it in the monarchy, or in the people, or above both in God? Is the king above the law? Is violence ever justified in the defence of liberty? John Calvin argued that we must never resort to violence in the defence of religious liberty. But situations emerged in France, England and Scotland where reformed churchmen were prepared to use violence - but only lawfully, where a legal contract had been broken. Again the twin concepts of covenant and law, of foedus and natural law, were seen as foundations for civil law. There was a passionate concern to maintain the universal reign of law. Scholars searched the Bible, especially the Old Testament and examined every conceivable passage where the word "covenant" appears, to find a basis for "lawful government", to defend their freedom against tyranny - using the Bible as a book of legal precedents. In the process they appealed to mediaeval notions of natural law and social contract (contract of society and contract of government). A wealth of literature appeared, which was to be enormously influential in the rise of modern democracy. For example George Buchanan's, De Iure Regni Apud Scotos of 1570; The Vindiciae contra Tyrannos by Junius Brutus (the French Huguenot, Duplessis Mornay), and Samuel Rutherford's Lex Rex or The Law and the Prince, which was the political manifesto of the Scottish Covenanters. The common argument was that no one is above the law, neither king nor people. Civil law enshrines natural law (the foedus naturale) discerned by Reason. Justification for these views was found in the Old Testament covenant passages, in mediaeval contractarian writers and in historical precedents in European history.

Nature/Grace Model  
of Federal Theology (Puritan Calvinism)  
(eg Westminster Confession)



Out of all this literature emerged two principles in the struggles against tyranny and the doctrine of "the divine right of kings".

(1) The passionate belief in Justice - the conviction that "right and not might" is the basis of all political society and of every system of political order in a true democracy. (2) The passionate belief in Liberty - the conviction that will, human consent and not force, is the basis of true government.

What is of importance for us here is to notice that in the Reformed world, the law-grace model (the nature-grace model) was a powerful instrument for social renewal in the struggle for democracy. This can be seen in the American Declaration of Independence, in the conviction that "God has made all men equal, with inalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness".

Paradoxically, in the American Civil War of 1859-61, Calvinists fought Calvinists, presbyterians fought presbyterians on the question of slavery. What was their difference? Not the nature-grace model of federal Calvinism. That was the orthodoxy of the old Princeton school. There were no real differences on the subjects of grace, election, atonement, the need for personal salvation. The answer lies in two different views of natural law (and the orders of creation). Where the Yankees believed that all men are equal with equal rights, the Southern theologians like Palmer, Dabney, Thornwell taught that God has created us with ethnic diversities, some black, some white, some masters, some slaves and found biblical justification for their view of natural law. In terms of different concepts of natural law, each side exegeted the Old Testament differently, and found sanctions either for preserving the status quo (slavery) or for political renewal, for the emancipation of the slaves, with equal rights for all. The radical separation of Church and State, the federal constitution of the U.S.A. and the Bill of Rights all had their roots in the nature-grace model of puritan Calvinism.

The importance of this is seen today in the subject of apartheid in South Africa. Why is it that the same Puritanism worked itself out

in one way in the development of democracy in N. America, and in another way in Afrikanerdom in South Africa? (cf. The Puritans in Africa by Wm. de Klerk) The answer again lies in different views of natural law. Where others feel that apartheid is a denial of human rights for the blacks, the Dutch Reformed Churches in South Africa have found justification for separate development, both in Calvinist notions of natural law and in the concept of "orders of creation" of certain Lutheran missiologists like G. Warneck. God by nature means there to be separate ethnic development. If grace presupposes nature (natural diversity), doesn't destroy it but perfects it, then divine sanction can be found for apartheid in civil law and in the church. (cf. the D.R.C. Human Relations in the light of Scripture.)

In other words the nature grace, law-grace model of federal Calvinism has been used both as an instrument of renewal and of reaction. It gave rise to modern democracy and a concern for human rights, but it has also been used to justify slavery, apartheid, certain forms of rigid sabbatarianism, etc..

In Ireland today we see behind the struggle between "nationalists" and "loyalists", two different views of the Western nature-grace model. In Catholic Southern Ireland, the State embodies in civil law the insights of natural law (on abortion, contraception etc.) as interpreted by the Roman Catholic Church. In Protestant Northern Ireland, we see the dualism of Westminster Calvinism in presbyterians like Rev. Ian Paisley, who is on the one hand the ardent fundamentalist evangelist, preaching grace to the elect ("the born again") and at the same time the politician, the leader of the democratic unionists and an active member of parliament. On both sides, what controls behaviour in both "nationalism" and "loyalism", is not the Gospel, but a fusion of the law-grace, nature-grace model with romantic loyalty to one's nation (Volk), be it pro-British or anti-British. As in the Germany of the 1930s, with the "German Christians", there was a status confessionis, calling for the Barmen Confession of 1934, so in N. Ireland, two types of "Irish Christians" confront each other, each claiming divine (and historical) sanction for their politics. There is a status confessionis for the Church, with the need for a Belfast Confession(!) to call all Christians to

(2) In dualistic fashion, it separates creation and redemption. It fails to interpret creation Christologically. In the New Testament, Christ is presented as both Creator and Redeemer. By limiting grace and the mediatorial headship of Christ to the "elect", Calvinism falls back on the concepts of "orders of creation" and "natural law" to interpret the State, race relations, social justice, ethnic diversity, anthropology. On this model, there are two alternatives, either (a) to stress the radical separation of State and Church, as in pietism, or where politicians tell Churchmen to keep out of politics, or (b) to effect false syntheses between Church and State, as in forms of Erastianism, or civil religion (again, e.g. "the German Christians" "Irish Christians" or Afrikaner "Nationalists"). In the latter, divine sanction can be given to political ideologies or romantic concepts of the Volk. Then it is our concept of "nature" which controls our understanding of "grace", and not the Gospel.

(3) It builds theology on a view where Law is prior to grace. This is clear in "federal theology" where the "covenant of works" (foedus operum, foedus naturale) is the major premiss of the whole system. Here the covenant of law is seen as the prime covenant, embodying God's primary intention for humanity in creation, and the covenant of grace is seen as the God given "means" whereby God secures the ends of the covenant of law for the elect. The older federalists said that God made the covenant of works twice - with Adam who broke it, and with Christ who kept it! But the danger is then that not only is law prior to grace, but grace is subordinated to law, as the means of securing the ends of (natural) law. This is why in South Africa, the State and the Church exist to secure the ends of nature, and find divine sanction for apartheid in the State and in the Church.

(4) It has substituted a legal understanding of man for a filial. God's prime purpose for man is legal, not filial. But this yields an impersonal view of man, as the object of justice, rather than the object of love. We can give a man his "legal rights" but not see him as our brother. (e.g. S. Africa and N. Ireland (?)). In the New Testament, God's prime purpose in Creation, Incarnation, atonement, and the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost is filial, not just legal - "to bring sons to glory".



(5) In the movement from Calvin to Calvinism, there was a basic shift in the doctrine of God, from a prime emphasis on God as Triune to a Stoic concept of God as the Law-giver, and to an Aristotelian concept of God in whom there are no unrealised potentialities. The triune God has His Being-in-loving, and has created man for filial purposes that we might find our true being (humanity) in loving. The God of Stoicism is conceived of primarily in terms of legal justice, who has created man for legal obedience.

(6) This shift in the doctrine of God and in anthropology is reflected in a shift in attitude to Holy Scripture - from Scripture seen as the revelation of grace to scripture as a book telling us our duty. Where the First Helvetic Confession of 1536 interprets the scopus scripturae as to show forth the grace of God in Christ, the Westminster Confession and Catechisms of 1645 say that Scripture principally teaches "what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man". The Bible is increasingly seen as a book of legal precedents and used at times to legitimate slavery, white supremacy, civil religion and severe sabbatarianism. Such attitudes were justified in terms of a synthesis between the "self-evident light of nature" and the "evident light of revelation", as in the theology of Charles Hodge in the old Princeton school.

(7) Much modern evangelism has its roots in Puritan preaching which in turn adapted the Western ordo salutis from the mediaeval period, viz.

Man - Law - sin - repentance - grace  
 This order lies behind federal Calvinism with its distinction between the covenant of law made with mankind in Adam, and the subsequent covenant of grace made for the elect in Christ. So the old preachers preached law to give their hearers a sense of sin, in order to exhort them to repent and receive grace and forgiveness - what the puritans called "law work". It failed to grasp the significance of Calvin's distinction between "legal repentance", where repentance is a condition of forgiveness, and "evangelical repentance", where repentance is a response to grace and the Word of the Cross. In true "evangelical repentance", forgiveness (the Word of the Cross) is logically prior to repentance. (Institutio III 3.3)

The above considerations help us to see that for all that the

nature-grace model has been so influential in the rise of democracy, as an instrument of social renewal, in the struggles for justice and liberty, today we must return to a more trinitarian, incarnational model, and rediscover the priority of grace over law and interpret law as within the Gospel. Some of the most burning issues of today are about humanity, the problems of poverty, war, nuclear armaments, race, tyranny, the women's movement. For too long we have used simply the language of "rights" - human rights, civil rights, women's rights, etc. i.e. the language of natural law. Is it not better to use the language of "humanity" - the Irenaeus model of the Greek Fathers, that what was lost in Adam is restored in Christ. For this we need a more biblical, Christological model, if we would see the organic connection between justification and justice, evangelism and social concern, evangelism and humanisation. We need to recover the concept of "the all inclusive humanity of Christ "as Creator and Redeemer" to transcend the deep dualisms of our culture.