A Review of Jeffrey D. Johnson's The Fatal Flaw

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The Fatal Flaw

Of the Theology behind Infant Baptism

For some time I have tried to get my hands on Jeffery Johnson's book, but Amazon did not provide it as new. That is, until I saw it on Solid Ground Books. I was able to get it along with the Kingdom of God and Hercules Collin's Catechism.

I've heard a lot of good about this book and I've also listened to Jeffery Johnson's sermons/lectures on Covenant Theology especially the most recent with Pascal Denault. I've read his chapter in Recovering Covenantal A Heritage and listened to his sermon on the dual nature of the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants which helped me a lot. I was eager to get started on this book and see what I could learn more.



The Paedobaptist Positions

To start, he lays down all the division of Paedobaptism. He numbers 8 –

1. Fides Aliena (Faith of Another) – the church supplies the faith necessary for the infant. Those who hold this position understand that faith is a necessary prerequisite for baptism. But this faith could not come from the infant, thus the Church supplies the faith that is necessary. Those who take this position also believe that baptism removes Adam's guilt and "cleanses the heart of its inward depravity." (p. 6, Augustine, Origen)
2. Fides Infusa (Infused Faith) – Faith is given at the point of baptism. When the infant is baptism, they are also given faith in that act.

3. Fides Infantium – Luther said “In baptism the infants themselves believe and have their own faith.” Luther was the proponent of justification by faith alone and thus for infants to be saved they had to believe. The faith of another could not do it for them. Faith is not transferable.
4. Sacramental Symbolism – This is Ulrich Zwingli’s position which taught that water baptism had no bearing upon the Spirit’s internal work. It was merely an external sign and symbol. Unlike the Roman Catholics and Lutherans, Zwingli did not believe that water baptism administers faith.
5. Pre-credobaptism – Baptism comes before the infant having faith. It does symbolize faith and union with Christ, but does not guarantee it. This is the Reformed Paedobaptist position. The Westminster says: “The efficacy of Baptism is not tied to that moment of time wherein it is administered; yet, notwithstanding, by the right use of this ordinance, the grace promised is not only offered, but really exhibited, and conferred, by the Holy Ghost, to such (whether of age or infants) as that grace belongs unto, according to the counsel of God's own will, in His appointed time.” (chapter 28, paragraph 6)
6. Presumptive Regeneration – I’ve not had much interaction with the Dutch Reformed position here in Holland and I’ve heard only mischaracterizations of it, so I can’t say if this is the position of every church here (I live in the Netherlands). But through the influence of Abraham Kuyper, the church sought to bring baptism closer to faith. This position basically says that we believe that infants have faith and are Christian until proven otherwise. “Although it is not certain that baptism regenerates all infants, the church assumes regeneration until proven otherwise.” (p. 15)
7. Baptismal Regeneration – This is the position which Johnson identifies with the Federal Vision theologians, which basically says that baptism impart faith to all infants to whom it is administered, elect and non-elect. Baptism regenerates all covenant children. Zwingli divided the sign and the sacrament, Federal Vision says “God’s promise assures us there is basic, fundamental unity between the sign and the thing signified. The water and the Spirit cannot be divided.” (p. 16, from The Federal Vision, edited by Steve Wikins and Duane Garner)
8. Paedofaith – Some Federal Vision theologians claim that covenant children are regenerate from the womb. Basically, Christian parents receive Christian and thus believing children from God. “God gives us children with faith. Covenant children begin life as believers, not in need of conversion, but endurance (cf. Heb. 10:36). They should be received and raised as children of God.” (p. 18, from Mark Horne, Why Baptist Babies?)

Although it was really nice to know about all the different positions about infant baptism, the author seeks to directly combat one position and that is the Westminster position (positions 4 and 5). It’s not like from the earliest days of infant baptism that the church understood it was the sign of the Covenant of Grace, or that it did not wash away sin. That is clearly not the case.

The old church practiced infant baptism for other reasons, than the Reformed Paedobaptist churches since the Reformation.

Although I do not believe that infant baptism is a biblical practice, but I must agree with Jeffery Johnson that the Westminster position of Covenant Theology and infant baptism is the closest to the Scripture from the above options. For some people to be truly “Reformed” you have to hold to Covenant Theology which supports the practice of infant baptism, forgetting that there is a difference between Baptist and Presbyterian Covenant Theology. If you would like to learn more about 1689 Baptist Covenant Theology, which is called 1689 Federalism see my attempt to make a case for it when expositing the 7th chapter of the 1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith here.

The Westminster Position

The author spends some time first to explain the Presbyterian/Westminster. The basis of the Westminster position is continuity between the covenants of the Bible.

They understand that the Lord established a covenant of works in the Garden with Adam as the representative of the human race which he broke. Then the Lord established the Covenant of Grace in Genesis 3:15 and onward. This was Covenant of Grace was differently administered under Noah, Abraham, Moses, David and Jesus. But the essence of these covenants was

the same.

The logic is understandable. If infants were admitted into the covenant under Moses and Abraham and the New Covenant is basically and essentially the same, then infants should also be admitted into the New Covenant. The question is, whether if these covenants truly were administrations of the one Covenant of Grace.

The Westminster says the following of the Covenant of Grace in chapter 7 –

> Man, by his fall, having made himself incapable of life by that covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the **covenant of grace**; wherein **He freely offers unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ**; requiring of them **faith in Him**, that they may be saved, and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto eternal life His Holy Spirit, to make them willing, and able to believe. (paragraph 3)

As Calvinists, our Presbyterian brethren along with us believe in salvation by grace and in Christ throughout the ages. This is what is here conveyed in the Confession. The essence of the Covenant of Grace is faith and salvation in Christ, although that had different outer form under the various covenants. Abraham did not have as much clarity about the Messiah as we now by the grace of God have. This is expressed in the fifth paragraph –

> This covenant was **differently administered** in the time of the law, and in the time of the Gospel: under the law it was administered by promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the paschal lamb, and other types and ordinances delivered to the people of the Jews, all **foresignifying Christ to come**; which were, for that time, sufficient and efficacious, through the operation of the Spirit, to instruct and build up the elect in faith in the promised Messiah, by whom they had full remission of sins, and eternal salvation; and is called the Old Testament.

Under the law, by that meaning the whole period of the Old Testament, the Covenant of Grace was seen in the shadows and prophecies (See certain shadows in the Noahic, Abrahamic, Mosaic and Davidic covenants). But under the New Testament dispensation we have a fuller revelation of God's purposes and the Covenant of Grace which was fully revealed in the New Covenant.

The Westminister position is summed up in the last sentence in paragraph 6 –

> …There are not therefore two covenants of grace, differing in substance, but **one** and the same, under **various dispensations**.

As Pascal Denault puts it: one covenant, two administrations.

Sign of the Covenant

Our Presbyterian brethren argue that the sign of the covenant of grace prior to the New Covenant was circumcision. Circumcision was applied to all males within the covenant. In fact, 8 days old infants were required to be circumcised.

They see the sign of the covenant being replaced from circumcision to baptism on the basis of their interpretation of Rom 4:11 and Col 2:11-12. Johnson spends quite some time on Romans 4:11.

Now let us apply the Westminster understanding of the Covenant of Grace to this. The Covenant of Grace was administered under Abraham and Moses and obviously included infants. In fact it commanded infants to bear its sign. Therefore, unless the contrary could be proven, infants are also admitted into the last administration of the Covenant of Grace – the New Covenant and should receive its sign, which they believe is baptism.

It's understandable if the theology of the Covenant of Grace is correct.

Turn the Tables!

For those credobaptists who are not familiar with the Westminster position which is rooted in Covenant Theology, infant baptism is something they would not come up with by simply reading the Bible. Thus, they think that the case is closed by the fact that infant baptism is nowhere described or commanded in the New Testament.

But through Covenant Theology the Paedeobaptists turn the tables upon the non-covenantal Credobaptist. They teach that

the covenants of God were made with the believers and their seed. This is one basic aspect of the various administrations of the Covenant of Grace (from their perspective), which they assume would continue to the last administration of the Covenant of Grace, that is – the New Covenant. This is understandable. Thus, they counter the non-covenantal credobaptism with the following:

> "Unless an express statue of repeal and prohibition of the former privilege can be produced, the natural conclusion is that the old rule remained in force as regards their place of infant children of the believer within the visible fellowship of faith to which their parent belongs." (p. 28, from Douglas Bannerman)

The tables have now been turned. The non-covenantal Credobaptist demands proof for infant baptism, the covenantal Paedobaptist argues from the previous administrations of the covenant of grace and places the burden of proof in the hands of the Credobaptist.

For the non-covenantal Credobaptist to win the argument, he would have to provide a prohibition for infant baptism, or an explicit statement about the exclusion of infants from the New Covenant.

The Critique of the Westminster Position

Throughout the book Jeffery Johnson tries to demonstrate why the Westminster position is inconsistent and unbiblical. He starts by examining the analogy between baptism and circumcision (chapter 2).

Baptism is the New Circumcision?

While examining circumcision under the Old Testament Johnson finds these discrepancies:

1. Male Exclusivity – Circumcision was restricted to males.
2. Jewish Citizenship - Circumcision was the requirement for citizenship in Israel, not faith. Membership within the covenant was not based upon faith, but upon bearing the sign of the covenant.
3. Unbelieving Adults – Not only infants, but all adults would have been circumcised. Abraham was circumcised when he was 99. Genesis 17 says that not only Abraham's direct family, but everyone in his house (even the slaves) had to be circumcised and receive the sign of the Abrahamic Covenant. We can't simply assume that everyone in Abraham's house was already a believer in the true God. Obviously there would have been some adult unbelievers who received the sign.
4. Children of Unbelievers – The Westminster position says that the promise is given to believers and their seed. But why? Under the Old Testament it did not matter if the parents had true faith. Their children had to be circumcised and thus receive the sign of the covenant.
5. Different Meaning – Circumcision under the Old Testament had nation and political significance which baptism does not have. Circumcision was the sign for the Abrahamic Covenant which the Jewish males bore in their body. It set them apart as God's national old covenant people.
6. Different Participants – From the above mentioned differences between baptism and circumcision do not have the same participants. Unbelievers had received the sign of the covenant which our Presbyterian brethren would never knowingly do. Furthermore, circumcision under the Old Testament was *properly* administered to children of unbelievers, but this the Westminster position would not do.

There is an analogy between circumcision and baptism, but it is wrong and unbiblical to make them identical.

The New Testament teaches that circumcision was replaced by *circumcision* of the heart. We do not believe that the NT teaches that circumcision was replaced by baptism, but rather it was replaced by spiritual circumcision – the circumcision of the heart (e.g. Rom 2:28-29; Col 2:11-12, see this too).

The Nature of the Old Covenant

Johnson identifies "continuity" to be the essence of Westminster Covenant Theology. It is the pin holding it all together. The

emphasis in Westminster Covenant Theology is upon continuity between the covenants. In Dispensationalism it is upon the discontinuity. The 1689 Baptist position seeks a balanced position between both continuity and discontinuity.

The majority of Reformed Paedobaptists believe that the Mosaic Covenant was an administration of the Covenant of Grace and thus it was a covenant of grace, rather than of works.

Johnson begs to differ along with 1689 Federalists and even some Paedobaptists. A lot of assumptions and inferences are drawn by Paedobaptists concerning the New Covenant based upon the Mosaic being an administration of the Covenant of Grace which would be unjustified if it were not a covenant of grace. One thinks of the mixed membership of the covenant. Rom 9:6 says "…For not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel," therefore our Westminster brethren assume that this continues also in the New Covenant. All who were descended from Israel were in the covenant, or as they would say in the outward administration and received the sign of the Abrahamic Covenant. All who belonged to the covenant participated in the essence and inner administration and truly knew God.

Johnson goes on to prove that the Mosaic Covenant was not an administration of the Covenant of Grace, but rather was a covenant of works. He demonstrates this by showing its conditionality, curses, the fact that it was broken and also by going to the analogy of Paul in Galatians 4:21-31. Galatians 4 is pretty clear upon the contrast and the vast differences between the Mosaic and the New. I also seek to demonstrate the Mosaic was of works by going to 2Cor 3 here.

If the Mosaic was truly of works and not based upon grace, then it is wrong to view the New Covenant through the Mosaic.

> Holding on the motif that the old and new covenants are essentially the same Paedobaptist covenant theologians view the new covenant through the spectacles of the conditional nature of the old covenant. Consequently, since the old covenant included the non-elect and obvious stipulations, this must mean that the new covenant contains these things as well. If the new is essentially the same as the old, then conditions and covenant-breakers must be artificially imposed upon the new covenant. (p. 95)

In chapters 7 and 8 Johnson deals with the "biggest dilemma for covenantal Paedobaptists. How do they make the covenant of grace look like a covenant of works, or vice versa?" The dilemma is conditions and covenant-breakers within the old covenant.

In chapter 9 the author identifies the fatal flaw of Paedobaptist covenant theology, it is the fact that they label the Mosaic Covenant of Works as a covenant of grace. The fact that the Mosaic contains covenant breakers and condition is contrary to the notion of a covenant of grace as he sought to argue in the previous chapters. In chapter 9 he also looks to "the problem of making the covenant of grace breakable." (p. 121)

The next two chapters he examines the deficiencies (chapter 10) and purpose (chapter 11) of the Old Covenant.

In chapter 12 and 13 he writes about the discontinuity between the Old and New covenants. He identifies four aspects in which they differ:

1. Different Participants – Based from the Abrahamic promise of "to you and your seed" Presbyterians argue for the continuity of that promise for all the administrations of the Covenant of Grace, unless there is a prohibition or exclusion of infants. But Johnson counters by saying that the reference to "you and your seed" Paul sees as referring to Christ in Galatians 3:15, therefore this promise is not referring to unbelieving Jews, rather to Christ and those who are in Him (Gal 3:29). The promises were made to Abraham and his seed, which is Christ and all who are in Him.
2. Different Substances – This is the obvious conclusion if the Mosaic was not an administration of the Covenant of Grace. While the New and Mosaic covenants are two different covenants and not merely administrations of the Covenant of Grace, that does not mean that they don't have similarities. The Old Covenant foreshadowed the New Covenant. The earthly things pointed to the spiritual realities of the New Covenant. For example, people entered the Old Covenant by their birth within the nation of Israel, but people enter into the covenant by the new birth – by being born from above. Under the Old Covenant circumcision was an outward and fleshly act, while under the New Covenant it is a spiritual thing and it refers to regeneration. Johnson believes that Paedobaptists are wrong to "cling to the shadows of infant circumcision. In so doing, they mix the ineffectual and temporary shadows of the old covenant

with the eternal realities and power of the new covenant.…by connecting infant circumcision…with baptism." (p. 157)

3. Different Durations – The Old Covenant was destined to pass away. God did not intend it to be eternal. The fact that it had passed away is clear for example from Hebrews 8:13. While the New Covenant is called the "eternal covenant" in Heb 13:20. The Old Covenant was abolished in order to establish the New (Heb 8:6-11).
4. Different Efficacies – "The old covenant did not contain or offer grace (unmerited mercy – justification, or inward power – sanctification) to its members, while the new covenant does." (p. 163) The efficacy of the Mosaic was depended upon the obedience of the people as can be seen in many places in the Old Testament (e.g. Ex 19:5-6; Deut 30:19; Gal 3:10). But the efficacy of the New Covenant is not depended upon man, but upon the God-Man. It is He who provides that which God requires. He is the Covenant Keeper and by His doing we are made righteous and have a loving relationship with God. Chapter 13 is dedicated to the discussion of this topic along with questions concerning the law, justification and sanctification established by the New Covenant.

I very much enjoyed these two chapters and benefited from his insights and was strengthened in my position.

In chapter 14 he lays out the nature of the New Covenant in contrast to the Mosaic Old Covenant. The differences include federal headship, theocracy, carnal perpetuity. He furthermore examines a few things like substitutionary atonement, the efficacy of infant baptism and nature of the Church in light of the knowledge gained about the nature of the New and Old covenants.

Chapter 15 is titled "The Meaning of Circumcision." Here he brings up the two texts most often used by Paedobaptists to make the connection between baptism and circumcision. Those are Genesis 17:10 and Romans 4:11. He examines Romans 4:11 and shows the difference between Abraham's circumcision and infant circumcision. He furthermore argues that the covenant of circumcision was pertaining to the natural seed of Abraham and not the spiritual seed.

This leads us to the next chapter which is titled "The Error of Integrating the Flesh with the Spirit." In chapter 16 he seeks to show "the impossibility of applying this verse [Romans 4:11] to new covenant baptism without mixing physical and spiritual realities in the process." (p. 195)

Covenantal Dichotomism

This book is dividing into two parts. The first was the Fatal Flaw where the Paedobaptist Covenant Theology is examined and combated. The second part is dedicated to the study of continuity and discontinuity between the covenants of God.

Part 2 is a very quick read containing small chapters exploring the connection between the various covenants of God. He focuses on the Abrahamic, Mosaic and Davidic.

Throughout his work (part 1 as well as part 2), Johnson tried to establish and make clear the distinction between Abraham's twofold seed. So here he also shows and stresses that. It is crucial not apply those things which pertain to the fleshly seed of Abraham to the spiritual seed.

I very much enjoyed the second part also. It was a quicker read, but nonetheless helpful and biblical.

Johnson believes that the covenant with Abraham concerning the fleshly seed under which circumcision was included was a covenant of works. On the other hand the covenant concerning Abraham and his Seed was a covenant of grace as Abraham did not need to do anything. It was ***a*** covenant of grace, not the Covenant of Grace (as I seek to capitalize). The Abrahamic Covenant was both conditional and unconditional. It was unconditional for him. He did not do anything to earn such great promises by God, but his fleshly seed had to obey to receive the blessings.

The Abrahamic Covenant had a dual nature and it depended from which perspective we looked upon it. "…I hold that God's promises to Abraham in Genesis 12 and 17 cannot be separated. I believe that these promises recorded in these two chapters are a part of the same covenant. However, the Abrahamic Covenant is in essence two covenants in one. The promises of Abraham have two dimensions. In that the covenant has two fulfillments, two participants, two conditions…For Abraham and his spiritual seed, it was an unconditional covenant of grace. For Abraham's natural seed, including Christ Jesus, it was a covenant of works." (pp. 216-217)

Chapter 6 of part two was also enjoyable. It shows the centrality, or to borrow a title from one of his sermons, "The Primacy

of the Abrahamic Covenant." He shows how both the Mosaic and the New Covenant flow and have their basis in the Abrahamic Covenant.

The same dual nature exists also in the Davidic Covenant. For David it was unconditional, but for his descendants, they had to obey to enjoy the blessing as can be seen in Psalm 132:11-12. Although many kings in Israel's history did not deserve to reign as much as they did, but because of the King of kings that would come from their blood, the Lord had patience with the wicked kings.

All of these covenants brought more revelation about the one Covenant of Grace.

This has been a long review, I leave with the last quote:

> Finally, in the fullness of time, under the new covenant dispensation, the covenant of grace was manifested in its fullness. Although the covenant of grace existed prior to the coming of Christ, it was not fully manifested until the establishment of the new covenant. It was first published after the fall, but only in part. Although the Abrahamic Covenant was a higher expression of God's grace, it was not until the new covenant that we see its full glory. Before Christ the **covenant of grace was promised**. After Christ the **covenant of grace was established**. (p. 247, emphasis added)

Final Words

I very much enjoyed the tone and scholarship of Pastor Johnson. I loved this work and I would like to recommend it to you. You will not regret it. He argues from the Bible and that's what I love.

The shortcomings that I see in the book are the fact that he does not spends much time to explain how the Covenant of Grace was in promise form under the Old Testament, the inconsistent use of the Elect's Standard Version (haha) and typo's. Other than that, 5 stars book.

I will Lord willing, start reading the Kingdom of God some time soon.