

**A Dispute among Neighbors:
The Baptismal Controversy between John Flavel and Philip Cary**

By
Taylor Walls

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Introduction

As a Reformed Baptist, I gladly embrace the Puritans. When I first became a Christian and began to study Reformed theology, my first recourse was to Calvin's *Institutes* and to the Puritans. Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, Watson's *Art of Divine Contentment*, Burrough's *Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*, and Flavel's *The Fountain of Life Opened* did my soul much good in my development of christian character and a warm affection for Christ. Their emphasis on putting doctrine into practice is something that greatly needs to be revived in our modern age of heightened intellectualism. However, though I am in agreement with the fundamental teachings of mainstream puritanism, there is one area in particular where I unfortunately have to dissent—Infant Baptism.

It is clear that the puritans in general were paedobaptists: both the presbyterian majority and the congregationalists. Though this was the majority position during the puritan era, it was still the subject of much debate and controversy. There were hundreds of tracts and books written on this subject.¹ This debate especially exploded during the years of the protectorate where the numbers of baptists and other groups exploded due to the great amount of religious toleration that they experienced.

However, on the whole, this debate was a “dispute among neighbors”. Though either side accused the other of error, the majority of disputants recognized their

¹ Beeke, Joel R. and Mark Jones. *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012) 725.

contender to be within the realm of orthodoxy. For this reason, we ought to have the utmost patience and charity in any discussion on this controversy, knowing that there have been and still are many great servants of God on either side.

This debate was literally and metaphorically a dispute among neighbors. As we will demonstrate, both of the sides of this debate should be considered within the realm of Reformed Orthodoxy, and thus it is a debate within the Christian household. Likewise, the two main contenders on whom we will focus—John Flavel and Philip Cary—were literally neighbors in the town of Dartmouth during the heat of their debate.

Though it be among friends, it is still an important debate and one that rages on even until today. While looking at a particular debate that took place in the year 1690 between these two neighbors, this paper will give an analysis of each of these men's view of covenant theology, distill the baptismal controversy to questions about covenant theology, and demonstrate that the 17th century Particular Baptists were by and large in agreement with the Reformed Orthodoxy of the puritan mainstream.

The Dispute's Context

Before we get into the debate itself, it will be helpful to first set the debate in its larger and more particular historical contexts.

English Puritanism

The beginning of the puritan movement is typically dated to the Elizabethan reforms of 1558 and 1559 that reestablished the Church of England as the official state church of England and legislated that all christian worship be done in accordance with the

Book of Common Prayer. The Puritans were not satisfied with many of the practices of the Book of Common Prayer that smacked too much of Catholicism. They sought to further reform the church and bring all of its practices in line with Scripture—which is the only rule for christian faith and practice.

In their theological context, the Puritans stood on the shoulders of the Reformers like Calvin, Zwingli, Ursinus, Bullinger and the Reformed Scholastics that followed them like Beza and Turretin. The Puritans sought to take the sound, systematic and federal theology of the Reformers and explain it further and apply it to all of life. J. I. Packer summarizes the Puritan movement in this way: “What they did was form informal, ginger-group networks, united by knowing that the furtherance of God’s kingdom in England, and His glory thereby, was what they all were after. Preaching, prayer, ‘conference’ between themselves on kingdom topics, ordered family life, and Sabbatarianism, marked them out.”²

The political atmosphere of the 17th century was very volatile. When James I (rg. 1603-1625) took power after the death of Elizabeth in 1603, toleration of dissenting brothers was rare. Charles I (rg. 1625-1640), apart from his religious persecution, was also a political despot, ruling without Parliament for the majority of his reign. This usurpation of the Parliament’s power, and the over-extension of Charles’ power into Scotland, led to the English Civil War that ended in the Long Parliament, the

² Packer, J. I. *Puritan Portraits*. (Geanies House, Fearn, Ross-shire, Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2012) 12-13.

establishment of the Solemn League and Covenant, the setting up of the Westminster Assembly, and the period of the Interregnum.

This period from about 1642-1660, the Interregnum, was a time when the Puritan cause excelled. Puritan theology was systematized in the Westminster Confession, and Presbyterianism was established in place of the Church of England.

Presbyterianism did not last long, however, and it was replaced by the protectorate of Oliver Cromwell who governed from 1653 until his death in 1658. Cromwell was very tolerant in policy, and therefore the cause of the minority puritans excelled. Many Baptists and Congregationalists were promoted to important places in Cromwell's courts and armies. It was during this time that many Particular Baptist churches were planted among the midland counties of England.

After the failure of Richard Cromwell to fill the shoes of his father, many people, even some Puritans, pled for Charles II to come and return to power. Charles II (1660-1685) returned with great promises of toleration and religious freedom, but due to particular revolts in the first few years of his reign he tightened the belts and revived the Elizabethan settlement by passing the Clarendon Code. This set of legislation established between 1661 and 1665 led to the great ejection of many Puritan ministers in 1662 and further persecution of the Puritans by the state/church officials. This continued until the Glorious Revolution of 1688 when William of Orange came and ousted James II.

Particular Baptist Puritanism

The role of the Particular Baptists in the Puritan movement has been the matter of some debate, but according to Joel Beeke's definition of Puritanism, the estimation of some charitable mainstream Puritans, and the self identification of the Particular Baptists themselves they ought to be included in this broader group.

Joel Beeke, one of the leading Puritan scholars today, summarizes the Puritan movement similarly to how J. I. Packer did above:

In summary, the late sixteenth-century and seventeenth-century movement of Puritanism was a kind of vigorous Calvinism. Experientially, it was warm and contagious; evangelistically, it was aggressive, yet tender; ecclesiastically, it sought to practice the headship of Christ over the faith, worship, and order of His body, the church; politically, it was active, balanced, and bound by conscience before God, in the relations of king, Parliament, and subjects.³

Though many scholars hesitate to put the Particular Baptists in the same group as the Puritans—and maybe in a stricter, historical sense some of them wouldn't be—but according to Beeke's definition of Puritanism as a theological movement, there is no reason why they wouldn't be included. Therefore, as a theological movement affirming Reformed Orthodoxy, the Particular Baptists were within the mainstream thereof, though a very small minority.

Likewise, some other leading voices among the Puritans recognized the orthodoxy of the calvinistic baptists. Coffey and Lim point out that the "Calvinistic Baptists, for example, were widely recognized as orthodox and pious, and the Puritan national church of the Cromwellian era incorporated some Baptists alongside

³ Beeke and Jones. *A Puritan Theology*. 5.

Presbyterians and Congregationalists.”⁴ The rise of the Baptists in public estimation came about mainly during the tolerant years of Cromwell, but others who gave due attention to the public confessions of these men recognized their orthodoxy. In response to the publication of the 1644 London Baptist Confession, Daniel Featly, an anglican who was temporarily a member of the Westminster assembly and in no way a friend of the Baptists, said in his book *The Dippers Dipt*,

If we give credit to this confession, and the preface thereof, those who among us are branded with that title, are neither Hereticks nor Schismaticks, but tender-hearted Christians, upon whom, thro’ false suggestions, the hand of authority fell heavy whilst the hierarchy stood; for they neither teach freewill, nor falling-away from grace, with the Arminians; nor deny original sin, with the Pelagians; nor disclaim magistracy, with the Jesuits; nor maintain plurality of wives, with the Polygamists; nor community of goods, with the Apostolici; nor going naked, with the Adamites; much less aver the mortality of the soul, with Epicures and Psychopannychists.⁵

In the third place, The two main Particular Baptist confessions coming from this era were both designed to demonstrate their agreement with the other major groups within Puritanism. Particular Baptist scholar James Renihan said,

Their religious faith was nurtured in the world of English Puritanism. We know that they sat under the preaching of well-known ministers, maintained friendly relations with some of the most famous theologians of their day, and some were trained at the Universities where theology faculties were dominated by Puritans. Similarly, when these early Baptists wished to declare their common agreement with the Puritans around them, rather than creating new doctrinal standards, they

⁴ John Coffey and Paul C. H. Lim, introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 5. cited in Beeke, Joel R. and Mark Jones. *A Puritan Theology*. 2.

⁵ Featly, Daniel D.D. *The Dippers Dipt*. (London: N. B. And Richard Royston, 1647) 177-178

employed and edited well-known paedobaptist Confessions in order to highlight the many doctrines held in common with the broader Puritan movement.⁶

In the preface to the 2LBC, the framers of the confession plainly assert their desire to be seen in unity with the Presbyterians and the Congregationalists. These are their words: "... in these articles (which are very many) wherein our faith and doctrine is the same with theirs [the Presbyterians and Congregationalists], and this we did, the more abundantly, to manifest our consent with both, in all the fundamental articles of the Christian Religion, as also with many others."⁷

Both the 1644 and the 1689 London Baptist Confessions were built upon the foundation of other major puritan confessions. The 1644 borrowed greatly from the 1596 True Confession written by Henry Ainsworth, and the 1689 built on the Westminster Confession of 1646 and the Savoy Declaration of 1658. "In doing this, they were declaring with some vigor their own desire to be placed in the broad stream of English Reformed confessional Christianity."⁸

Therefore, understanding puritanism in a slightly wider sense, it is clear that the Particular Baptists ought to be included in this group. If we limit it to mere presbyterianism, we have to exclude such exemplar Puritans as Thomas Goodwin and John Owen, and if we limit it to Paedobaptists, then we exclude men such as John

⁶ Renihan, James. "Covenant Theology in the First and Second London Baptist Confessions". In Barcellos, Richard C. *Recovering a Covenantal Heritage: Essays in Baptist Covenant Theology*. (Palmdale, CA: Reformed Baptist Academic Press. 2014) 46.

⁷ Renihan. *Faith and Life for Baptists*. 214.

⁸ Renihan. "Covenant Theology in the First and Second London Baptist Confessions". In Barcellos, Richard C. *Recovering a Covenantal Heritage: Essays in Baptist Covenant Theology*. (Palmdale, CA: Reformed Baptist Academic Press, 2014) 60.

Bunyan. Therefore, in light of these arguments, it is clear that the Particular Baptists should be included within Puritanism as a theological movement.

The Dispute's Participants

The particular dispute we will examine took place in print and in private between John Flavel and Philip Cary in the year 1690. These two men were both neighbors in the town of Dartmouth. There are indications within the books that they shared their manuscripts with each other before they went to print. For this reason, Philip Cary's response to Flavel was actually already being written and on its way to print as John Flavel's first book came out. It seems like they both had high estimation of each other as private individuals, though the debate gets heated at times.

John Flavel (1628-1691)

John Flavel is beyond doubt within the puritan mainstream, and he lived as a light through some of the roughest times of persecution during the 1600s. J. I. Packer summarized his ministry in this way: "He gained distinction as a preacher of the classic Puritan type, expository, analytical, didactic, applicatory, searching, converting and edifying, with divine unction regularly empowering his pulpit work."⁹ He was both the son and the brother of pastors.¹⁰ His father trained him at home until he continued his studies at Oxford. He was exemplar in his learning and was recommended early to assist Mr. Walplate in ministering to a church in Diptford in 1650. He was ordained later that

⁹ Packer, J. I. *Puritan Portraits*. 91.

¹⁰ *The Life of the Late Rev. Mr. John Flavel, Minister of Dartmouth.* in *The Whole Works of the Reverend John Flavel*. Vol. 1-6. London; Edinburgh; Dublin: W. Baynes and Son; Waugh and Innes; M. Keene, 1820. iv.

year on October 17, 1650.¹¹ A few years later, in 1656, he would move to Dartmouth in Devonshire where he would serve the church there for the rest of his days.¹²

Flavel was targeted by the laws of the Clarendon Code and was forced to flee the city and take refuge in more rural areas, to which his parishioners would resort every Lord's day. They would meet in the midst of the woods, though often times disrupted by the local authorities. In defiance of the Five Mile Act and the Conventicle Act he would often have meetings with his people and joined with other churches for prayer and fasting, and many times he would sneak back into the city in order to counsel and tend to his flock.¹³

Dartmouth was a port city and in order to find a secret place to worship together, his flock would often resort to "Salstone Rock, and island in the Salcombe Estuary that is submerged at high tide. In that refuge, the congregation would 'linger in devout assembly till the rising tide drove them to their boats.'"¹⁴ Despite the threats of local magistrates and the laws of the king, and despite many offers from larger, wealthier churches in London,¹⁵ Flavel remained faithful to the Lord and to his little flock all of his days. John Flavel went to be with the Lord after suffering from a stroke on June 26, 1691.

¹¹ *The Life of the Late John Flavel*. iv.

¹² At first the pastoral duties were divided between him and Mr. Allein Geere, but his partner passed away four months after the great ejection of 1662. cf. *ibid.* vii.

¹³ *Ibid.* vii-viii.

¹⁴ Beeke, Joel R. and R. J. Pederson. *Meet the Puritans: With a Guide to Modern Reprints*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2006) 247.

¹⁵ *The Life of the Late John Flavel*. ix.

One of his hearers once summarized the effect of Flavel's preaching with these words: "In short that person must have a very soft head, or a very hard heart, or both, that could sit under his ministry unaffected."¹⁶ Mixing his ability to make clear theological distinctions and impactful applications made Flavel a very able puritan minister who still speaks on earth while his soul lives in heaven. His voice can still be heard in the 3,600 pages that are contained in his 6 volumes of collected works.¹⁷

Philip Cary (d. 1710)

Philip Cary is a relatively unknown minister from the 17th century. In one of the most thorough modern works of historical theology on the covenant theology of the particular baptists, Pascal Denault does not even refer to Philip Cary and his works on this subject.¹⁸ He is most know because of this current debate that he had with his neighbor, John Flavel.

He was an apothecary, the son of an apothecary, from Dartmouth in Devonshire. He was a Particular or Calvinistic Baptist and was even one of the ministers that attended the 1689 General Assemblies in London, though he was not one of the signatories to the confession.¹⁹ His book, *The Solemn Call*, which was the beginning of this neighborly

¹⁶ *The Life of the Late John Flavel*. vi.

¹⁷ Packer, J. I. *Puritan Portraits*. 92.

¹⁸ Denault, Pascal. *The Distinctiveness of Baptist Covenant Theology: A Comparison between Seventeenth-Century Particular Baptist and Paedobaptist Federalism*. Revised Edition. (Vestavia Hills, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2017)

¹⁹ Ivimey, Joseph. *A History of the English Baptists*. Vol. 1-3. (London, 1814). Digital version. (Paris, AR: The Baptist Standard Bearer, Inc. 2005) 2:88; cf. Renihan, James M. *Faith and Life for Baptists: The Documents of the London Particular Baptist General Assemblies, 1689-1694*. (Palmdale, CA: Reformed Baptist Academic Press, 2016) 44.

debate with John Flavel, was even recommended in the letter to the churches that the one of the general assemblies sent out.²⁰ So much was it recommended that six of the much respected London pastors (William Kiffin,²¹ Robert Steed, Benjamin Keach, John Harris²² and Richard Adams) who were all signers of the confession wrote the epistle dedicatory of *A Solemn Call*.²³ This fact puts him within the mainstream group of Particular Baptist pastors after the return to the monarchy.

He was not among the university educated and for this reason was disdained by many of his opponents. In his first book, *A Disputation between a Doctor and an Apothecary*, he gives an apology for the doctor who interacts with him and defends his honor in engaging with someone like him, though many had advised him not to.²⁴ He indirectly quotes the doctor as saying, “he does not apprehend it any disgrace (as some would have it) to have been engaged with me; for that I am a careful, painful, and industrious searching person, much conversant in the present controversie; and (as he believes) can say as much for my perswasion, as any other whatsoever.”²⁵

²⁰ Ivimey, Joseph. *A History of the English Baptists*. 2:88-89.

²¹ William Kiffin (1616-1701) was a major figure among Baptists in this time and supported many church planting efforts all over England during the Interregnum. He also was a signatory to the First London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1644 and 1646.

²² John Harris was also the publisher.

²³ Cary. *A Solemn Call*. iv

²⁴ Cary, Philip. *A Disputation between a Doctor and an Apothecary*. (London: B. W., 1684) ii-iii.

²⁵ *Ibid.* iii.

He also claims to have minimal understanding in the ancient languages (though he did know Latin and uses it often in his discourses), and he even surprises Dr. Burthogge with his knowledge of ancient writers.²⁶

He was the author of three books that can be found online today in facsimile form: *A Disputation between a Doctor and an Apothecary* (1684), *A Solemn Call* (1690), and *A Just Reply* (1690). Cary died in the year 1710.

The Dispute's Source

Having given the historical context of this particular debate and established that this is a debate within the Reformed Orthodoxy of puritanism, we now proceed to demonstrate that the root of the baptismal controversy is differing views of covenant theology.

Federal or Covenant theology is an area of dogmatics that came to the fore during the 17th century, especially among the English and Dutch Puritans. The Puritan era, in England and in the Netherlands, has produced the most classic works on covenant theology. Though the beginnings of this can be seen in the Reformers, the clearest explanation of the covenants comes from their predecessors among the Puritans.²⁷

²⁶ Ibid. 11-12.

²⁷ Golding, Peter. *Covenant Theology: The Key of Theology in Reformed Thought and Tradition*. (Scotland, UK: Mentor, 2008). 14-26. Pascal Denault also says, "This approach [covenant theology] was born of the Protestant Reformation and was developed extensively thereafter, particularly by the seventeenth-century Puritans." Denault, Pascal. *The Distinctiveness of Baptist Covenant Theology: A Comparison between Seventeenth-Century Particular Baptist and Paedobaptist Federalism*. Revised Edition. (Vestavia Hills, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2017) 11.

In relation to this particular controversy, Pascal Denault, a modern Reformed Baptist, says,

The most obvious distinction between Baptists and Presbyterians is, of course, baptism. However, baptism is not the fundamental distinctive between these two groups. We propose that covenant theology is that distinctive between Baptists and paedobaptists and that all the divergences that exist between them, both theological and practical, including baptism, stem from their different ways of understanding the biblical covenants. Baptism is, therefore, not the point of origin but the outcome of the differences between paedobaptists and credobaptists.²⁸

In this section of his book on Covenant Theology, Denault affirms that not only baptism, but even other differences such as the nature and structure of the church find their root in this debate over covenant theology. Likewise, Joel Beeke and Mark Jones recognize that “From earliest times Reformed theologians argued for the validity and necessity of infant baptism in the context of the covenant of grace.”²⁹ That is to say, the primary arguments for infant baptism stem from a particular understanding of the covenant of grace (particularly its continuity).

This is not only a modern realization, Puritans such as John Owen, Thomas Goodwin, Stephen Marshall, and Samuel Petto all based their arguments for infant baptism on their understanding of the abrahamic covenant.³⁰ John Flavel also recognized that paedobaptism is not derived from an explicit Scripture reference, but it is a deduction from different passages and ideas concerning the covenant of circumcision and baptism as a replacement for circumcision. For this reason he says, “But some men want abilities,

²⁸ Denault, Pascal. *The Distinctiveness of Baptist Covenant Theology*. 21.

²⁹ Beeke and Jones. *A Puritan Theology*. 725.

³⁰ Beeke and Jones. *A Puritan Theology*. 727.

and others are too sluggish and lazy to gather together, compare and weigh all these, and many more hints and discoveries of the mind of God, which would give much light unto this point [infant baptism].”³¹

This was not merely the source of the main arguments of the paedobaptists, but the particular baptists took this as the central battle ground in the debate for believer’s baptism. Many of these debates spent much time looking at passages such as Acts 2:39 and 1 Corinthians 7:14 and others, but the more thorough debates always had a discussion of the abrahamic covenant. Philip Cary recognizes, as indicated by the title of his book,³² that proponents of infant baptism put much stress on the nature of the covenants—the abrahamic covenant in particular. The writers of the epistle dedicatory to Cary’s *A Solemn Call* state explicitly, “The main Arguments that are made use of by Pædobaptists for the support of their Practice herein, are taken from the Covenant with Abraham...”³³ Nehemiah Coxe, a Particular Baptist, and potentially the main editor of

³¹ Flavel, John. *The Righteous Man’s Refuge*. in *The Whole Works of the Reverend John Flavel*. Vol. 1-6. London; Edinburgh; Dublin: W. Baynes and Son; Waugh and Innes; M. Keene, 1820. 3:451-452

³² The full title of the book, in puritan style, is: *A Solemn Call Unto all that would be owned as Christ’s Faithful Witnesses, speedily, and seriously, to attend unto the Primitive Purity of the Gospel Doctrine and Worship: Or, a Discourse concerning Baptism: Wherein That of Infants is Disproved, as having no Footing, nor Foundation at all in the Word of GOD. By way of Answer to the Arguments made use of by Mr. William Allen, Mr. Sidenham, Mr. Baxter, Dr. Burthogge, and others, for the Support of that Practice. Wherein the Covenant made with Israel at Mount Sinai, Exod. 20. That in the Land of Moab, Deut. 29. As also the Covenant of Circumcision made with Abraham Gen. 17:7, 8, 9. Whereon so much stress is laid for the Support of Infants Baptism, are plainly proved to be no other than three several Editions of the Covenant of Works; And consequently, that no just Argument can thence be deduced for the Justification of that Practice. Together with a Description of that truly Evangelical Covenant GOD was pleased to make with Believing Abraham; containing the Sum of the Everlasting Gospel then Preached unto him; since Proclaimed by the Apostles; and which now remains to be yet further Published unto every Nation, Kindred, Tongue, and People, for the Obedience of Faith.*

³³ Cary. *A Solemn Call*. iii. cf. *Ibid*. 120.

2LBC, also affirms in his preface that he spends so much time on the abrahamic covenant in his discourse because it is so often the emphasis of arguments for paedobaptism.³⁴

In light of this, we can safely conclude that the debate between credo and paedobaptism boils down to a debate about Covenant Theology. Having laid this foundation of the historical and theological context, we now proceed to examine how John Flavel and Philip Cary used Covenant Theology in their debate over infant baptism.

The Dispute Itself

As before mentioned, this debate took place in private and in print between two neighbors. Philip Cary first wrote a book, *A Solemn Call*, which incited the hesitant response of John Flavel in his *Vindiciae Legis Et Foederis*. Cary's first book does not address John Flavel directly,³⁵ rather, and more boldly, it addresses many prominent paedobaptists including Richard Baxter, Obadiah Sedgwick, William Allen, Cuthbert Sydenham and Richard Burthogge.

In this book, after addressing some exegetical arguments for paedobaptism and spending much time defining the regulative principle of worship, he then sets out to prove that the abrahamic covenant and the mosaic covenants of Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 29 are all different administrations or publications of the covenant of works. Flavel then counters in his book and seeks first to demonstrate that Sinai is a covenant of grace, and then work backwards to the abrahamic covenant. He argues that

³⁴ Coxe, Nehemiah. *A Discourse of the Covenants that God Made with Men before the Law*. (J.D., 1681). iii-iv.

³⁵ Beeke and Jones. *Puritan Theology*. 731.

conditions, which Cary affirms circumcision to be, are not a necessary sign of a covenant of works, for even the new covenant administration has the conditions of faith and repentance.

The second round of the debate was sparked by Cary's response to Flavel in his book, *A Just Reply*. Flavel then concludes the debate with his *Vindiciarum Vindex*. John Flavel would die the next year in 1691 and thus ending the debate between these two men. However, a couple of years later Benjamin Keach (1640-1704) would include these words in the subtitle of his book, *The Ax laid to the Root*, "together With an answer to Mr. John Flavel's [Flavel's] last Grand Arguments in his *Vindiciarum Vindex*, in his Last Reply to Mr. Philip Cary."³⁶

We will highlight three major points that distinguish the covenant theology of Philip Cary and John Flavel.³⁷ These points are the extent of the covenant of works, the dichotomy of the abrahamic covenant, and the conditionality of the new covenant.³⁸

The Extent of the Covenant of Works

The Westminster Confession summarizes the typical paedobaptist view of covenant theology in these words: "There are not, therefore, two covenants of grace differing in substance, but one and the same under various dispensations" (WCF 7.6).

³⁶ Keach, Benjamin. *The Ax Laid to the Root, Parts I & II* (London: John Harris, 1693)

³⁷ Beeke and Jones in their book, *A Puritan Theology*, examine the substance of this debate but primarily through the lens of John Flavel, since they are more in agreement with his position. In this paper I will seek to focus on Cary's positions, while doing justice to John Flavel's position. His positions are less well known, but they represent the common federalism of 1689 Particular Baptists in the late 17th century. In this way this paper will provide a different perspective on this debate that I hope will compliment and supplement the presentation by Beeke and Jones.

³⁸ Cary, Philip. *A Just Reply*. 35. cf. Flavel, John. *Vindiciae Legis*. 6:323-326.

Cary interestingly turns the typical presbyterian framework of one covenant of grace under differing administrations on its head, and says that the different administrations are actually different republications of the covenant of works. He, along with other Particular Baptists, saw that the covenant of circumcision in Genesis 17, the Sinai covenant of Exodus 20, and the Moab covenant of Deuteronomy 29 were essentially different administrations of the covenant of works.

Each of these covenants were made with a group and their natural offspring. By seeing them as successive administrations of the covenant of grace, paedobaptists affirm that this inclusion of the seed continues under the new testament administration (unless God were to explicitly abrogate it), though the outward sign has changed from circumcision to baptism. However, Cary argues that these are in fact conditional, breakable administrations of the covenant of works. He concludes his discourse on this subject with 23 arguments that he uses to prove that the Sinai covenant is a covenant of works.³⁹ Though some of the people involved in these covenants, such as Abraham and Moses, believed the promise of the Gospel, and thereby were included in the covenant of grace, these covenants themselves were only administrations of the covenant of works which led the members thereof to Christ by showing their inability to obtain the promised life by their works.

Flavel, in his *Vindiciae Legis et Foederis*, clearly lays out the main points of distinction between him and Cary in this respect:

³⁹ Cary, Philip. *A Solemn Call*. 182-187.

The difference betwixt us here is not (1.) Whether both these be called covenants in Scripture? Nor (2.) Whether there was no grace at all in both, or either of them; for we are agreed, it is grace in God to enter into covenant with man, whatever that covenant be. Nor (3.) Whether the Sinai law be not a covenant of works to some men, by their own fault and occasion? Nor (4.) Whether the scriptures do not many times speak of it in that very sense and notion wherein *carnal justiciaries* apprehend and take it; and by rejecting Christ, make it so to themselves? Nor (5.) Whether the very matter of the *law of nature* be not revived and represented in the *Sinai law*? These are not the points we contend about. But the question is, Whether the Sinai law do in its own nature, and according to God's purpose and design in the promulgation of it, revive the law of nature, to the same ends and uses it served to in Adam's covenant; and so be properly and truly a covenant of works? Or whether God had not gracious and evangelical ends and purposes, viz. By such a dreadful representation of the severe and impracticable terms of the first covenant, instead of obliging them to the personal and punctual observance of them for righteousness and life, he did not rather design to convince them of the impossibility of legal righteousness, humble proud nature, and shew them the necessity of betaking themselves to Christ, now exhibited in the new covenant, as the only refuge to fallen sinners. The latter I defend according to the Scriptures, the former Mr. Cary seems to assert and vehemently argue for.⁴⁰

In order to define what he means by a covenant of works, Cary quotes from John

Owen's treatise on *The Doctrine of Justification*:

The whole entire Nature, (saith Dr. Owen) of the *Covenant of Works*, consisted in this; *That upon our Personal Obedience, according unto the Law and Rule of it, we should be Accepted with God, and Rewarded with him.* Herein the *Essence* of it did consist. And what ever Covenant proceedeth on these terms, or hath the Nature of them in it; however it may be varied with Additions or Alterations, is the same Covenant still, and not another.⁴¹

In agreement with John Owen, Cary affirmed that any covenant that promised life upon the fulfillment of a particular condition and threatened death upon the failure to complete this condition is a covenant of works. He saw this in the covenant made with Adam in Gen 2:16-17 (along with most paedobaptists), in the covenant of circumcision

⁴⁰ Flavel, John. *Vindiciae Legis et Foederis*. 6:323.

⁴¹ Philip Cary, *A Solemn Call*. 124. Cf. Owen, John. *The Doctrine of Justification*. In *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, vol. 5 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, n.d.), 275–276.

and in Sinai.⁴² Though he recognizes that the law was given to curb sin and to point the members to the work of Christ, the Sinai covenant in itself did not offer them this salvation, but it directed them to another source of righteousness and law-fulfillment.

Flavel denies this Cary's view of the republication of the covenant of works by way of syllogism:

[Major:] In the covenant of circumcision, Gen. 17 God makes over himself to Abraham and his seed to be their God, or give them a special interest in himself.

[Minor:] But in the *covenant of works*, God doth not, since the fall, make over himself to any, to be their God by way of special interest.

[Conclusion:] Therefore the covenant of circumcision cannot be the covenant of works.⁴³

Flavel affirms that the Sinai covenant and the abrahamic covenant cannot be republications of the covenant of works because God makes himself their God by way of this covenant. However, Cary responds:

So that it is too apparent to be justly denied, but that God doth indeed, in the Covenant of Works, make over himself to Sinners to be their God in a way of special Interest; but it being upon such hard terms, that it is utterly impossible that way to attain unto Life; he hath therefore been pleased to abolish that, and to make a New Covenant, which is *not like*, or *not according* to the former, which was Conditional; but that which is wholly Free and Absolute.⁴⁴

Cary affirms that the promises are indeed the same for the covenant of grace and the covenant of works, however the main difference between them is the terms. However, we receive the benefits not by virtue of the covenant of works itself and our works

⁴² Philip Cary. *A Solemn Call*. 121-122.

⁴³ Flavel, John. *Vindiciae Legis*. 6:344.

⁴⁴ Cary, Philip. *A Just Reply*. 75-77.

therein, but through the mediation of Christ who fulfills it on our behalf as our surety.⁴⁵ We are made the people of God, and He becomes our very God by virtue of Christ's work of satisfaction—His fulfillment of the Law. Though we could never obtain this promise by virtue of our fulfillment of the covenant of works, due to our fallen condition, it is obtained on our behalf and granted to us by the work of Christ.

Flavel also finds fault with this position by affirming that the Sinai covenant with the ceremonial law included could not be the covenant of works, since it has so much of Christ in it typologically. He says, "These two he makes one and the same *covenant of works*; though there be some that doubt whether the mere *moral law*, may not be a *covenant of works*; yet I never met with any man before, that durst affirm the *ceremonial law*, which is so full of Christ, to be so; and to this law it is that *circumcision* appertains."⁴⁶ However, Cary says that though the covenant of works is indeed given with evangelical intentions—to show us our sin and inability and point us to Christ the perfect sacrifice—it does not provide the very substance of it. Though the mosaic covenant serves and directs us unto Christ, it doesn't provide the benefits of Christ's mediation in itself. As a covenant of works, it leaves us completely condemned and completely dependent on God's grace in a new covenant. Though it had the shadow of the Gospel, it did not provide the very substance thereof. It does not provide this blessing of itself, it directs us to another source to find it—Christ in the new covenant.

⁴⁵ Cary, Philip. *A Just Reply*. 27.

⁴⁶ Flavel, John. *Vindiciae Legis*. 6:323-324.

The Dichotomy of the Abrahamic Covenant

This leads us to the second main distinction between these two theologians: the nature of the abrahamic covenant. The abrahamic covenant is the most important of the covenants in the consideration of infant baptism.⁴⁷ For example, John Owen agreed with Cary with respect to the Sinai covenant being a republication of the covenant of works, however he still held to infant baptism on the basis of the abrahamic covenant.⁴⁸ This is also the focal point of the argument of John Flavel, though he begins by showing Sinai is a covenant of grace.⁴⁹ However, this is where we see the primary distinctive of baptist covenant theology—the dichotomy of the abrahamic covenant.⁵⁰

Philip Cary clearly indicates that there are two aspects to the abrahamic covenant: a spiritual and physical, a heavenly and “domestic”. He details the typical baptist view of the abrahamic covenant in this way:

In order to the Resolution whereof, we must understand, that as *Abraham* by Promise stood in a double Capacity; *viz. First*, As he was a natural Father unto the *Jews*, who proceeded from him in a course of Natural Generation. *Secondly*, As he was a Spiritual Father; in which respect he was the Father of many Nations, comprehending the Spiritual *Israel*, whether Jews or Gentiles throughout the World: So accordingly, the Promises made unto *Abraham*, were of two sorts; some respecting his Natural Seed; whether Domestick or National, which were Typical of the Spiritual; as the Birth of *Isaac*; the Deliverance of his Posterity out of *Egypt*; the possessing of the Land of *Canaan*, with many other temporal

⁴⁷ Cary, Philip. *A Just Reply*. 1. cf. Flavel, John. *Vindiciarum Vindex*. 3:497.

⁴⁸ Beeke and Jones. *Puritan Theology*. 726-729

⁴⁹ Flavel. *Vindiciae Legis*. 6:3235 cf. Beeke and Jones. *Puritan Theology*. 733; Cary. *A Just Reply*. 1.

⁵⁰ For a further discussion of this see Denault, Pascal. *Distinctiveness of Baptist Covenant Theology*. And Johnson, Jeffrey. *The Kingdom of God: A Baptist Expression of Biblical and Covenant Theology*. (Conway, AR: Free Grace Press, 2014.)

Blessings and Benefits, Annexed thereunto. And others again respecting in a peculiar manner, the Spiritual Seed, the Family of the Faithful, the Elect, of whom through Christ he was the Father; and which are Evangelical, belonging in an especial manner to the Gospel Covenant.⁵¹

Though affirming the covenant of circumcision to be a covenant of works, Cary affirmed that Abraham did enter the covenant of grace by believing the promise.⁵² The covenant of grace has always existed and has always consisted of only believers given to Christ before the world in the covenant of redemption.⁵³

This consideration of a twofold covenant made with Abraham also made it plain that there was a two-fold seed.⁵⁴ The only way to ever become a member of the covenant of grace, before or after the incarnation, is by the mediation of Christ. In the covenant of grace, or the promise of grace, made with Abraham in Genesis 12, and 15 both Jew and

⁵¹ Cary, Philip. *A Solemn Call*. 46. cf. Cary. *A Just Reply*. 58

⁵² Cary, Philip. *A Solemn Call*. 120.

⁵³ Cary, Philip. *A Solemn Call*. 24. In the federal theology of Cary, there are only two administrations of the covenant of grace: believing members before the incarnation of Christ, and believing members after the incarnation. He affirms that the promises and substance of the covenant are the same, but the outward benefits are slightly different. He demonstrates these different benefits under the post-incarnation administration in this way: “Then it was with Expectation of Christ *to come*; now, with Assurance of Christ *already come* in the Flesh, and accomplishing what was fore-told of Him. Then Christ was shadowed with *dark Types*; now we see Him unvailed in a *plain History*... Particularly [also] in respect of the clearness of the Revelation of the Gospel Covenant; and also in respect of the universal tender and publication of it; in as much as now not only the small Nation of the Jews, but also of all Nations, Believers are brought into the participation of the same; together with the more abundant Communication of the Holy Spirit. To which purpose we are told that *the Holy Spirit was not yet given*; to wit, neither in that manner, nor measure, as afterward, *because Christ was not yet Glorified*. Jo. 7:39.” The Old Testament administration of the covenant of grace had its foundation in the covenant of redemption. Therefore, the membership of the covenant of grace is as extensive as the elect who had come to faith in the promise of God, and so it is now. The only appropriate members of the covenant of grace are those who are the children of Abraham by Faith (Gal 3). The reality of this covenant of grace is revealed to Adam in Genesis 3:15, Abraham in Genesis 12, 15, and 22, and the Israelites are even pointed to it by the promise of a coming prophet like Moses (Deut. 18).

⁵⁴ Cary, Philip. *A Solemn Call*. 50

Gentile may receive the promised, heavenly inheritance if they seek for it by means of God's appointed mediator, the one particular seed (Gal. 3:16).⁵⁵

However, the covenant of circumcision only concerned the physical seed of Abraham and to this covenant was the sign of circumcision attached. There was no necessity that a member of this earthly covenant would belong to the heavenly covenant. Circumcision did not oblige God to include them in the promises, rather it obliged the receiver to fulfill God's law perfectly, or seek refuge in Christ's righteousness, which is the only viable option.

As there are two seeds, there are also two circumcisions as Paul demonstrates in Romans 4. Cary affirms that *only* Abraham received circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith (Gen. 15:6; Rom 4:10-12).⁵⁶ Ishmael nor any of his other children had the promises sealed unto him by his circumcision. Rather, "So that Circumcision was so far from being *a Seal of the Righteousness of Faith*, or of the Gospel Covenant, to the Generality that were under it, that it was rather a *Token of Servitude and Bondage*; and such a *Yoke*, that as the Apostles tell the *Jews*; *Neither they, nor their Fathers were able to bear it.*"⁵⁷

Abraham, who received circumcision after faith, received it as a seal and sign of that faith. However, the children of Abraham, who are only concerned in that covenant of circumcision, receive it as a sign that entitles them to obtain the promise by fulfilling the

⁵⁵ Cary, Philip. *A Just Reply*. 58-59.

⁵⁶ Cary, Philip. *A Solemn Call*. 53-54, 204-205.

⁵⁷ Cary, Philip. *A Solemn Call*. 54.

righteous demands of God's law in themselves, which is impossible, or following in the footsteps of believing Abraham. Therefore, in the scheme of Cary, the only circumcision that has ever really mattered is that circumcision of the heart. Abraham's outward circumcision indicated that he had been circumcised in his heart, but that of his children only demonstrated to them their need for a heart circumcision.

This view of the abrahamic covenant was some-what revolutionary in federal theology up to that point. However, it was clearly a common Baptist position expressed by many in that time.⁵⁸ This is one of the main points that gave John Flavel the most frustration. He presents Cary's position by saying, "you boldly cut Abraham's covenant, Gen. 17 into two parts, and make the first to be the pure covenant of grace, which is the promissory part, to the *ninth verse*; and the *restipulation* (as you call it, p. 205.) to be as pure a covenant of works." He says that this position is "such as no man that ever I met with took before you."⁵⁹

Cary responds by saying that it is not a brutal cutting of the covenant in pieces, rather it is recognizing that Abraham was entitled to the benefits of the covenant of grace by his faith, but his seed would not be entitled thereunto except by following after the same example of faith. Paul in Galatians 3 clearly demonstrates that we are all the children of Abraham by faith in Christ, not by mere external circumcision.

⁵⁸ Johnson, Jeffrey. *The Kingdom of God*. 36-38. cf. Denault, Pascal. *Distinctiveness of Baptist Covenant Theology*. 120-126. In this place, Johnson cites many Particular Baptists who affirm this same view of the abrahamic covenant: Nehemiah Coxe, Robert Howell, John Spilsbury, Thomas Patient, Henry Lawrence, Philip Cary, and Benjamin Keach.

⁵⁹ Flavel, John. *Vindiciae Legis*. 6:344

The establishment of the covenant of circumcision does ensure to Abraham the fulfillment of the promises through one particular promised seed, and does provide some blessings and benefits for his natural posterity, but the true substance of the promises is to be only enjoyed by believers.

In light of this position, Flavel also complains that this position leads to the absurdity of putting certain godly men in the Old Testament dispensation under two different covenants at the same time. They are at the same time under the covenant of grace and the covenant of works, which are so clearly at odds one with another. Flavel also claims that this absurdity has the inevitable consequence of an intermediary state between justification and condemnation and leads to the idea of purgatory.⁶⁰ However, Cary affirms that the real difficulty is not seen in having two parallel covenants, one of grace and one of works, rather the difficulty is having one covenant that combines both the condemnation that comes inevitably from the law and the grace that is granted in the covenant of grace.⁶¹ Partaking of the covenant of works is intended to drive us to seek pardon, grace, and life by virtue of the promised covenant of grace. As Cary says,

For it may be reasonably concluded, according to my Principles, that how harsh or dreadful soever the Terms or Conditions of the Legal Covenant were, to those that were under it (as *Moses* and the whole Body of the *Israelites* then were) yet the Grace of the Gospel Covenant far superseded, and was, by far, more Victorious, Powerful, and Efficacious: (Rom. 5:17, 20). ... Is it not therefore much more congruous and suitable to Reason, as well as also to the constant Analogy of the Christian Faith and Doctrine, to affirm as *Paul* doth, that these are the two Covenants, and that the Sinner being scared with the dread and terrors of the Legal Covenant, is forced thereby to have recourse unto the Gospel Covenant for

⁶⁰ Flavel, John. *Vindiciae Legis*. 6:332-333.

⁶¹ Cary, Philip. *A Just Reply*. 4-10.

succour, which the Spirit of God hath assured us, is of such a superabounding Nature, for Comfort and Salvation, above what the other contained for Death and Condemnation?⁶²

Therefore we see that in Cary's federal theology there is not a dual membership, or intermediate state, as Flavel supposes, rather all are considered and condemned under the covenant of works until they are driven by the terrors of it to cling unto the promises of Christ in the new covenant.

The Conditionality of the Covenant of Grace

The last main point of difference between Flavel and Cary is their view of the conditionality of the covenant of grace. Cary explicitly affirms that the Gospel, the new covenant, is an "absolute" or unconditional covenant. However, Flavel affirms that it requires the fulfillment of the condition of faith and repentance. Flavel summarizes the controversy on this point in this way:

The controversy here betwixt us is not (1.) Whether the gospel-covenant requires no duties at all of them that are under it? Nor (2.) Whether it requires any such conditions as were in Adam's covenant, namely, perfect, personal, and perpetual obedience, under the severest penalty of a curse, and admitting no place of repentance? Nor, (3.) Whether any condition required by it on *our* part, have any thing in its own nature meritorious of the benefits promised? Nor (4.) Whether we be able in our own strength, and by the power of our free-will, without the *preventing* as well as the *assisting* grace of God, to perform any such work or duty as we call a *condition*? In these things we have no controversy; but the only question betwixt us is,

Whether in the new covenant some act of ours (though it have no merit in it, nor can be done in our own single strength) be not required to be performed by us, antecedently to a blessing or privilege consequent by virtue of a promise? And whether such an act of duty, being of a suspending nature to the blessing

⁶² Cary, Philip. *A Just Reply*. 7-8.

promised, it have not the true and proper nature of a *gospel-condition*? This I affirm, and he positively denies.⁶³

The debate is not whether we are saved by the completion of some works, but rather it centers on whether faith and repentance are antecedent conditions to covenant enjoyment.

Philip Cary everywhere affirms and stresses the absolute and unconditional nature of the covenant of grace. It is upon this foundation that he concludes that the covenant of circumcision is not an administration of the covenant of grace, since it required the condition of circumcision and threatened separation from the covenant if it was not done. However, Flavel sees that the presence of conditions does not necessitate that a covenant be an administration of the covenant of works, because even the new covenant requires the conditions of faith and repentance.

Though of course both men affirmed that faith was a gift of God and all of grace. Flavel clarifies that it is clearly an act done by us, though the power be of God. He says,

This is a mistake, and the mistake in this leads you into all the rest; though faith (which we call the condition on our part) be the gift of God, and the power of believing be derived from God, yet the act of believing is properly our act, though the power by which we believe be of God? else it would follow, when we act any grace, as faith, repentance, or obedience, that God believes, repents, and obeys in us, and it is not we, but God that doth all these.⁶⁴

Philip Cary makes this same distinction, however. He does so by citing the words of John Owen in his discourse on *The Doctrine of Justification*:

It is commonly said (saith he) that *Faith* and *New Obedience* are the *Condition* of the New Covenant. But yet because of the Ambiguous Signification, and various

⁶³ Flavel, John. *Vindiciae Legis*. 6:325-326

⁶⁴ Flavel, John. *Vindiciae Legis*. 6:352-353.

use of that Term (Condition) we cannot certainly understand what is Intended in the Assertion. If no more be Intended, but that these things, though promised in the Covenant, and wrought in us by the Grace of God, are yet *Duties* indispensibly required of us, in order unto the Participation and Enjoyment of the *full end* of the Covenant in Glory, it is unquestionably true. But, if it be intended, that they are such a Condition of the Covenant, as to be by us performed. *Antecedently* unto the Participation of any Grace, Mercy, or Priviledge of it, so as that they should be the Consideration, and Procuring Causes of them, that they should be all of them, as some speak; the *Reward of our Faith and Obedience*; it is most false, and not onely contrary to Express Testimonies of Scripture, but destructive of the Nature of the Covenant it self.⁶⁵

Though Cary and Flavel are in agreement on this point, it appears that the main distinction comes from whether faith is part of the grace of the covenant itself. Cary affirms it plainly to be: “For although Faith be required in order of Nature, Antecedently unto our actual Receiving of the Pardon of Sin; yet is that Faith it self wrought in us by the *Grace of the Promise*.”⁶⁶ In another place he affirms, “But then it must withal be considered, that these also are wrought in us, given to us, and bestowed upon us, by vertue of that Promise and Grace of the Covenant.”⁶⁷ Therefore we see that it is not a condition, if we use the term at all, in the sense that circumcision was a condition of the covenant of circumcision. Rather, the fulfilling of these “conditions” are included in the blessings promised by the covenant.

This is further demonstrated by Cary when he shows that if we call faith a condition of the new covenant, it is not a condition in the same sense as obedience was under the previous covenant. Faith and repentance do not replace perfect obedience in the

⁶⁵ Cary, Philip. *A Solemn Call*. 238-239. cf. Owen, John. *The Doctrine of Justification*. 5:114; Cary, Philip. *A Just Reply*. 32-33.

⁶⁶ Cary, Philip. *A Solemn Call*. 238.

⁶⁷ Cary, Philip. *A Just Reply*. 101-102, 106-107

way the neonomians claimed. However, the perfect obedience is fulfilled by Christ our surety and we are united to that blessing by faith.⁶⁸

This debate is essentially a debate about the *ordo salutis*. Cary is trying to be careful to clarify that man is in no way able to believe and obey the Gospel unless previously worked upon by the Holy Spirit. He must first be a recipient of grace before he can believe. Interestingly, Cary uses Flavel's book, *The Method of Grace*, in order to defend his position on the necessity of the receipt of grace before a sinner can believe.⁶⁹

Cary recognized that his position could be labeled as antinomian:

We are told indeed by some that to affirm, that it is wholly free and Absolute; and to make that the Covenant of Grace, properly so called, which God made with Christ; is to destroy the whole Tenor of the Gospel, and to lay the Foundation of all Libertinism, and Looseness of Conversation.⁷⁰

However, he does not thereby shy away from exalting the grace of God in the new covenant. He realizes that the law is still a rule for life for us in the new covenant, and he also realizes that gospel obedience and good works are inevitable consequences and essential aspects of the covenant blessings. Therefore, though we do not attribute our inclusion in the covenant to these things, they do evidence the fact that we are in the covenant.

⁶⁸ Cary, Philip. *A Just Reply*. 105

⁶⁹ Cary, Philip. *A Just Reply*. 102-103,

⁷⁰ Cary, Philip. *A Just Reply*. 236.

Conclusion

In conclusion, John Flavel and Philip Cary, though disagreeing in several points, can still both be included in the realm of reformed orthodoxy. Though they differed in their views on the republication of the covenant of works, the nature of the abrahamic covenant, and the conditionality of the new covenant—which also was the main thing that led them to differing views on baptism—they still both clung to Christ and His righteousness alone for their justification. Though at times they cast cavils on the other and accuse the other of misrepresentation, we can still learn from them the importance of charity in these debates we have with people with whom we have so much in common. Though there are important distinctions to be made, especially in the realm of covenant theology, between paedobaptists and baptists, it is still clearly a "dispute among neighbors."

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