

# THE PRESBYTERIAN QUARTERLY.

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## I.

### SOME OBJECTIONS TO THE FEDERAL THEORY OF IMMEDIATE IMPUTATION.

WE will notice the most radical objection first. A distinguished theologian, who teaches immediate imputation, and who would be classed as a Calvinist, objects to the federal theory on the ground that "it is extra-scriptural, there being no mention of such a covenant with Adam in the account of man's trial." What he thinks of the covenant of grace may be gathered from the fact that he makes election logically subsequent, in God's decree, to the purpose to redeem. "The true order of the decrees," he holds, "is therefore as follows: 1, The decree to create; 2, the decree to permit the fall; 3, the decree to provide a salvation in Christ sufficient for the needs of all; 4, the decree to secure the actual acceptance of this salvation on the part of some—or, in other words, the decree of election." Such an order of the decrees is obviously inconsistent with a federal relation on the part of the Redeemer to any particular class of fallen men. It implies that his work had equal reference to all. Election is simply an expedient to save the scheme from ignominious failure. We understand this author to make a square issue. The natural relation is the only one we sustain to Adam: our union with Christ begins when we exercise saving faith. The theory of the covenant being extra-scriptural, he does not employ the terms which belong to it. To use Bishop Butler's distinction, he objects to the evidence rather than to the contents of revelation. We agree with him entirely that the question is one of fact. If the doctrine of the covenants is not a matter of divine revelation, then any

theory based upon it is worthless. But is our author correct? If so, our Westminster Confession has been cast in an unscriptural mould. The whole system of theology taught in our Southern Presbyterian seminaries is founded on a legal fiction. We ask those of our readers who are familiar with the argument for the covenant to bear with us while we state briefly some of the main Scripture proofs. The author from whom we have quoted is a favorite with our young men as a book of reference. We write chiefly for their benefit.

If the objection stated means that the transaction in the garden of Eden is not called a covenant in the record given in Genesis, no exception can be taken. Many criticisms have been urged with confidence that have really no bearing on the question whatever. Some, for instance, have hesitated over the existence of a covenant with Adam on the ground of the inequality of the parties, notwithstanding the revealed fact that God made covenants with sinful men like Noah, Abraham, and David. Others have found no place for such a covenant since the Creator had sovereign right of control over the creature, overlooking the fact that this, as well as all other covenants, was made for the benefit of man. In the language of our Confession of Faith, "The distance between God and the creature is so great that, although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of him, as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God's part, which he hath been pleased to express by way of covenant." But to return from this digression, we acquit our author of holding that nothing is mentioned in the Scriptures but what is mentioned by name. He holds, for instance, that the Scriptures teach the doctrine of the Trinity, but he does not find it there under that name. What he means is that no mention of any sort is made of a covenant with Adam in the account of man's trial. The elements of a covenant are not to be found in the record of man's probation in Adam.

The Westminster Shorter Catechism refers to the transaction in the garden of Eden as a *special act* of providence, which God exercised toward man in the estate wherein he was created. The

phrase calls attention to the fact that the record contains an account of some new dispensation—some order of things different from, and additional to, what had been previously mentioned. It is, therefore, not an account of the institution of moral government. By virtue of the constitution God gave him, man was under such a government the moment his existence began. He knew his obligations, and was aware of the danger of disobedience. The question has to be met: What change in the divine administration is mentioned in this record? Now for some proof that we have in it an account of the institution of a covenant. First, as Witsius observes, the whole history of the first man, as given in the early chapters of Genesis, proves that he was not regarded as an individual person simply. It was not said to our first parents only “be fruitful and multiply”; nor is it true of Adam only that “it is not good that man should be alone.” More particularly should it be noticed that the words “dust thou art and unto dust shalt thou return” were not confined to Adam. The disobedience of the first man reached, in its consequences, his whole race. They sustained some relation to him by which they, without a single exception, became involved in the consequences of his acts. So much lies on the face of the records. Some of the language might be accounted for on the principle of our natural relation to him as the first father. But the Apostle Paul, in the Epistle to the Romans, puts an interpretation upon the first disobedience of the first man which the natural relation utterly fails to sustain. He teaches that the descendants of Adam took part in the commission of his first sin, and that the condemnation which was passed upon Adam was at the same time passed upon his posterity. Several schemes have been devised, by which it is attempted to show that all the descendants were present on the occasion, and actually committed the sin. These will be noticed at the proper time. If they are found untenable, we are shut up to the conclusion that a federal relation obtained, and that it is implied in the account of the fall. If Adam’s posterity did not commit his first sin actually, they must have done so representatively. But do we not find more in the record than simply a hint of a federal transaction? May we not claim

that all the elements of a covenant are there? There are two parties. God, as creator and lord, makes the proposals; Adam, as creature and holy subject, silently, but cheerfully, accepts them. There was a penalty attached to disobedience, as was proper where the parties were Creator and creature. There was a corresponding promise, on condition of perfect obedience. This third feature does not appear in the record, except by way of implication, but it is supplied from the relation of Adam and Christ, the second Adam. The result of the probation in Christ shows what would have been the result in the first trial if Adam had been faithful. The result would have been life in a higher sense than he enjoyed by virtue of his position as a creature under moral government. It would have been life in the sense of confirmation in holiness, and exemption from the possibility of ever coming under condemnation. The race would have been justified and adopted into the family of God. And the transition becomes easy from this reference to the second Adam to the last proof we think it necessary to adduce. In the fifth chapter of Romans, Paul illustrates the method of a sinner's justification by the manner in which all become condemned. He says Adam was a type of Christ; and he indicates the one and only point of resemblance: "Therefore as, by the offence of one, judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so, by the righteousness of one, the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life." By the offence of one, all connected with him are condemned; by the righteousness of the other, all connected with him are justified. There is a union in each case, in virtue of which the consequences of actions are imputed. It is not said in so many words that the bond of union is federal in its character; but we confess that, to our mind, this is the natural inference. It suits both sides of the parallel. It requires no labored argument or ingenious reasoning to make it fit. But we refer to the parallel chiefly because it proves that a covenant in one case involves a covenant in the other. If there is a covenant of grace, then there was a covenant of works. What remains to be done under this head is, therefore, to state briefly a few of the Scripture proofs of the existence of a covenant of grace. That is,

that there is a covenant between God the Father and God the Son in reference to the salvation of the chosen people. The general proof of this doctrine is found in the subordination of the Son in the plan of salvation. The Father gave him a work to do, and promised him a large reward on condition of the execution of that work. To this the Son, as an equal in the Godhead, agreed. No one can read the Scriptures without perceiving the evidence that the plan of salvation is a covenant. Christ speaks of himself as *sent* by the Father; of his delight in doing the will of the Father; as having finished the work which the Father had given him to do. And he speaks of his people as given to him of his Father. Besides this general proof, there are also specific references to this covenant. In Luke xxii. 29, "And I engage by covenant unto you a kingdom, as my Father hath engaged by covenant unto me." In Hebrews vii. 22, Christ is expressly called the surety of a covenant. And in Hebrews xiii. 20 we read of the "blood of the everlasting covenant." Similar passages might also be cited from the Old Testament; but we have trespassed already on the indulgence we craved at the beginning.

We will notice, in the second place, an objection that is brought against the righteousness of the federal principle as a ground of imputation. This objection is urged against the federal principle only as it appears in the covenant of works. Exception is taken to holding the posterity responsible for Adam's sin because they were not consulted, and did not give consent to the federal arrangement. Witsius suggests that this complaint would not be heard if Adam had secured the promise of the covenant, and not the curse. It has also been suggested that the real tendency of the federal arrangement is seen in the case of the second Adam. Attention has been called to the fact that of all arrangements that are conceivable under the circumstances, the federal was the one attended with least risk of disaster. And it has been urged still further that if the federal principle must be ruled out, then no remedy can be furnished in case of disaster. There is force in all these suggestions, but they can hardly be said to meet the objection. They show the benevolence of the federal principle, but the objection is urged against its justice. There should

be no disposition to merge the justice into the benevolence of God. On the other hand, there is also a caution to be observed. Inability to harmonize the principle in question with our standards should not lead us to shut our eyes to its presence in the Word of God, or to criticise the divine procedure in cases where he has employed it. The following from Witsius is pertinent: "Nor does it become us to entertain doubts about the right of God, nor inquire too curiously into it; much less to measure it by the standard of any right established amongst us despicable mortals, when the matter of fact is evident and undisputed. We are always to speak in vindication of God, 'that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest.' He must, surely, be utterly unacquainted with the majesty of the Supreme Being, with his most pure and unspotted holiness, which in every respect is most consistent with itself, who presumes to scan his actions, and call his equity to account. A freedom this, no earthly father would bear in a son, no king in a subject, no master in a servant."

Let us dwell for a moment on this question of consent. If we had been present, as Adam was, and consented to the covenant, there would have been no injustice in the arrangement. Such we understand to be the position of the objector. Is there not a mistake made here? Is it true that we are treated differently in the case from Adam? Was Adam's consent asked, or was it assumed? No doubt it was given, freely and heartily given. His holy nature made this certain. But that is not the question. We venture to affirm that there is not a particle of evidence in the record that Adam's consent was asked, or that he had any right to decline the proposals made to him. We will go further, and claim that the Creator had the right to determine on what terms the trial of Adam's integrity should be held. The fact of creation is regulative in all questions as to the ethical right of God to govern his creatures. If, then, Adam's consent was assumed, his mere presence does not count for much. If it be said that Adam gave consent to an arrangement in which he was to be an actor, while we are assumed to give consent where we are permitted to act only representatively, that is true. But even this residuum

of the objection is greatly modified when we reflect that Adam was the only member of his race who could begin life in the maturity of his powers. Ordinarily it is considered a wise arrangement that parents should act for their children, both in sacred and in secular concerns.

Let us now examine some of the schemes by which the objectors would get over the difficulty. When a substitute is offered for a proposition, it is necessary that the mover shall show, not only that a substitute is needed, but that the one he presents should be adopted. Here, if time permitted, we might test the claims of all the substitutes that have been offered. This, however, is by no means necessary. When we remember that Paul teaches that all sinned in the first sin of Adam, and that judgment came upon all unto condemnation at that time, there are only two conceivable solutions; either we were in some real sense identical with Adam, or we were identified with him by some federal arrangement. The range of inquiry is still further narrowed when the scheme of identity advocated by Edwards is by common consent rejected. Now let us see, if we can, what the substitute is which is proposed, and the manner in which it is applied to the case. Then we will be prepared to determine whether it should be preferred to the federal theory. Humanity, it is claimed, existed in its entirety in Adam. If we understand the theory in its unmodified statement, it holds that, numerically, humanity was in Adam. It sinned and was corrupted when he disobeyed the command of God. His act was the act of all men descending from him, because that nature which belonged to him has been distributed to all. The same thing that sinned has been distributed. It forms the basis of unity. Every man actually committed the first sin because his humanity was present on the occasion and acted. On this ground, the sin can be justly imputed to every man. Such, in substance, is the theory, and such its application. A single remark will bring out the failure of this theory. It does not identify us personally with Adam. We have the humanity that sinned, but we are not the person who committed the sin. Adam's personality was his own, and so is ours. Müller, who has insisted most strenuously on causality as essential

to the notion of guilt, says, "Only a personal essence, and not a mere creature of nature, can render itself a subject of guilt. This arises from the fact that only a personal essence is able to be the real author of its actions and states, so as they may be imputed to it."

We have time to notice only one more objection, and that very briefly. It is said that the federal theory contemplates each descendant of Adam at birth as innocent, and that corruption supervenes when God arbitrarily imputes the guilt of Adam's sin. We will set against this objection the following statement from the writings of the late Rev. Dr. John L. Girardeau: "According to the federal theology, every man, before his earthly history begins, had a legal and representative existence in Adam, and so in him really performed representative acts which really entailed legal consequences. In this sense, every man really sinned in Adam, and fell with him in his first transgression. And, in this sense, every man was condemned in Adam, in the moment of Adam's condemnation. The guilt of the first sin, which was really, although not subjectively and consciously, his sin—which was his sin by virtue of the representative relation he sustained to it—was imputed to him, in God's court, as the ground of his condemnation. It follows that every man comes into the world already condemned on the ground of imputed guilt. This, the doctrine of Immediate Imputation, has for the very burden of its teaching; this, precisely this, it was formulated to enforce. How, then, can it suppose the subsequent existence in innocence, even for an instant, of any soul of man? Why, it is this doctrine, and this alone, which accounts for the beginning of earthly existence in inherent corruption. It does this by showing that every man had, before birth, lost his innocence, and was condemned, and that therefore no man could, consistently with divine justice, be brought into earthly existence in innocence."

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