



Abstract from Article

FEDERAL THEOLOGY IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY: TWO TRADITIONS?

Bierma, L D

Published: *Westminster Theological Journal*, 45 (1983), 304-21.

Abstract

The last thirty years have seen a remarkable growth in interest in the early history of the reformed federal (or covenant) theology. Modern historians of Christian thought have acknowledged the Zwinglian roots of this theology since the mid-nineteenth century, but it is only relatively recently that the subject has gained the attention of a wider circle of scholars. What sparked this new interest was in large part the research of Perry Miller, whose essay, "The Marrow of Puritan Divinity", (1935) and first volume of "The New England Mind" (1939) demonstrated the significance of the covenant idea for life and thought of seventeenth-century Puritanism. Since then an increase number of scholars have been investigating the origins of covenant thought on the continent and the extent of its influence across the channel. The subject of this essay is a hypothesis that over the years has come to dominate much of the recent scholarship. It was first proposed on the pages of Church History in March 1951 in an article by Leonard J. Trinterud entitled "The Origins of Puritanism." Trinterud's basic thesis was that at the heart of Puritan political and religious thought lay the notion of covenant; that the origin of the covenant idea in Puritanism could be traced in its secular form to the natural law, social contract theory in English medieval thought, and in its theological form to the early English Reformers Tyndale and Frith; and that whatever influence continental federal theology exerted on Puritan thought came not from Geneva and John Calvin but from Zurich and the Reformers of the Rhineland. It was Trinterud's contention that the Rhineland, not the Genevan, type of covenant thought "provided the initial impulses toward both the early and the final forms of the [Puritan] covenant theology". Trinterud was certainly breaking new ground here. Perry Miller, of course, had also made much of the theological differences between Calvin and the Puritans, maintaining that Puritan covenant theology served to nullify the rigid predestinarianism of Calvin, who "hardly made any mention of the covenant." But Trinterud was now arguing that Calvin "indeed used the word 'covenant' very frequently" and that it was not so much his negative influence as the positive influence of the Zurich and Rhineland reformers that helped to shape Puritan covenant thought. The theological differences between Calvin and the Puritans could be attributed in part to the two views of covenant Reformed Switzerland. That Trinterud's essay is now recognized as a "milestone in Puritan studies" is due in large measure to the wide acceptance of this "two traditions" theory during the last twenty years. One of the first to adopt the thesis (though without mentioning Trinterud by name) was the Danish scholar Jens Moller in the article, "The Beginning of Puritan Covenant Theology" published in 1963. Moller, too, insisted that there were "two fundamentally different ways of understanding the covenant" in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, one originating in Zurich, the other in Geneva. The Genevan view stressed the role of God's grace in the covenant; the Zurich view emphasized the human responsibility of obedience. For Calvin the covenant is God's promise; for Zwingli, Oecolampadius, and Bullinger it is an agreement between God and man. For Calvin the covenant is fulfilled in Christ; for Zwingli it fulfilled in and by us. For Calvin, finally, the sacraments bear witness to God's fulfillment of the covenant in the past; for Zwingli

they bear witness to the believer's intention to fulfill the covenant from that point on.

All content copyright © 2006 De Freitas & Raath. All rights reserved. No duplication is permitted in any form without obtaining prior written consent from the authors. Please visit <http://www.christianlaw.co.za> for additional abstracts and articles related to biblical political and constitutional theory.