



Abstract from Article

WILLIAM TYNDALE'S CONCEPTION OF COVENANT

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Abstract

The right way, yea, and the only way, to understand the scripture unto salvation', declared William Tyndale, is to seek in it, 'chiefly and above all, the covenants made between God and us. For the Henrician heresiarch, the key to the reforming of England was the bible in translation, and the key to the bible was the idea of covenant. By the power of that idea he proposed to free England from the clutch of Rome: covenant would unlock scripture, cleanse it of popish corruptions and lit it to its work of reformation. Thus instructed, his countrymen would build their faith not 'on Roman sand but on the rock of God's word, according to his covenants. . '. Tyndale was not the first theologian to discover covenant in scripture, but he infused the concept with unprecedented energy: it became his cardinal principle of exegesis and the ruling element in his project of religious revolution. But though the immediate influence of Tyndale's work can be only meagrely documented, that work foreshadowed the later character of English covenant thought in a significant way – one signalled by the writings just cited. It has been an argument of this essay that his conception of covenant was not contractual. It will have been recognised, however, that the manner of his presentation was strongly moralistic and that, in addition, his objectives were intensely practical: he used the mandates of the law, as the terms of covenant, to advance the protestant cause in England. It was this concern for practical holiness, rather than the underlying theme of covenantal trust, that Hilsey and the Declaration picked up. In the same way, from that point forward, English covenant thought would prove persistently moralistic; but in detaching covenant from Tyndale's metaphysic (taking for granted, it may be, what Tyndale had felt impelled to prove) English divines did not need his writings to teach themselves to apply the idea in practice. Thus it appears that the spirit of his covenant theology had little direct influence on English religious thought. Tyndale's teaching was specific to his time; his importance was less that of a progenitor than of a participant in the crisis of trust that marked his moment at the dawning of the modern age.

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