



Abstract from Article

REFORMATION BRITAIN, THE POLITICAL DIMENSION OF THE COVENANT, AND THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE SCOTS

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Abstract

The three particular ideas lying at the root of Puritan political thought, even though they may not have been mentioned, were the idea of calling, the idea of covenant and the idea of the separate spheres of church and state. The transition from medieval to modern times, as has often been suggested, was marked by a transformation in which one man's relationship to another ceased to depend so much on the estate or station in life occupied by each, but rather came to be based more on whatever covenant, i.e. contract or agreement, might exist between them. Whether this change owed anything to religious ideas or whether certain religious ideas were themselves the product of the change will never be known, but it is clear that many sixteenth and seventeenth-century Protestants, and especially Puritans, considered their relationship with God as if it were based on a covenant. The English and Scottish Protestants seem to have been especially taken with the notion of a national covenant, and even tended to look upon themselves as an elect nation, and as the successors of Israel. Though they had to acknowledge that many among them gave no perceptible evidence either of faith or of outward obedience to God's commands, they viewed every failure as a threat to their standing with God. Further, the covenant concept as an architectonic principle for the systematisation of Christian truth which was presented by the Puritans, provided a unique angle on Reformed theology. This implied the principle of a *Covenant of Works*, which represented the covenant made between God and mankind through Adam. In this covenant God promised to grant eternal life to those who perfectly fulfilled the demands of the law, but man, by his fall, made himself incapable of life by this covenant. However, the Lord established the *Covenant of Grace*, whereby He freely offered salvation through Jesus Christ. This covenant required man to have faith in Christ in order to qualify for salvation. Consequently, the covenant was understood as being bilateral of nature (God's conditional promise to man and man's response), where the burden of fulfilling the covenant rested on man (the covenant being fulfilled in the obedience of the individual). Puritanism in the British Isles therefore exhibited a tendency towards emphasising the individual's responsibility within God's absolute sovereignty. Central to this tendency was the covenant, which influenced Puritan theology to such an extent that it could not escape relevance to Puritan political theory. Puritan sociology revolved around the idea that God was the initiator and administrator of a binding contract consisting of the mutual assent between the divine (Himself) and human participants. The Puritan, George Walker, wrote in 1641 that the "word covenant in our English tongue, signifies, as we all know, a mutual promise, bargain, and obligation between two parties". The Scottish mindset concerning this heavenly contract permeated Puritan society to produce a group conscience, and Puritans knew that if they abided by the conditions of this contract, God would respond positively; if not, God would impose negative sanctions. It was this covenantal idea that gave rise to a social ethic relevant to an external control of society through

the legal system, as well as control from within through the conscience. The covenant provided a basis for a moral obligation binding on all men within a given community. The Puritan emphasis on the development of and contributions to the political aspects of the covenant has not been given its rightful place within Puritan theology. The rich Scottish history of banding, John Knox's covenantal expressions, the Scottish National Covenant (of 1581 and 1638), the Solemn League and Covenant (1643), and the publication of *Lex, Rex* (1644), are some of the events in British history that serve as beacons attesting to the legacy of the British Isles to political covenantal theory. What is more, the prominence of the Scottish Presbyterians to covenanting and politics during this period outweighed the contributions of their English counterparts. It is against this background that an observation regarding the relationship between Puritan political theory and the covenant is made, and the necessary exposure and consequent appreciation thus instilled.

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