

***The Call of Grace: How the Covenant Illuminates Salvation and Evangelism***, by Norman Shepherd. Grand Rapids: P & R Publishing, 2000. Reviewed by Christopher Lensch.

### *Background*

At the end of the twentieth century Professor Norman Shepherd was at the center of debate in conservative Presbyterian circles regarding his teaching of God's covenant. Building on contemporary advances of understanding of ancient covenant-making, Dr. Shepherd developed his doctrine of the divine covenant that emphasized the bi-lateral roles of both God and man within the covenant relationship. At issue in the debate was man's "covenant obligations" to God and the question of what function man's faith and obedience served in the covenant relation to God.

This question impinged on the great Reformation doctrine of justification. Since it appeared that Dr. Shepherd was not fully satisfied with the Westminster Confession's statement on justification, and when some of his colleagues objected to how he framed his statement of justification, Norman Shepherd changed jobs and ecclesiastical affiliation.

This short book is the transcription of two separate public addresses given by Dr. Shepherd. The first section, presented in 1999, summarizes the author's teaching regarding man's relation to God through divine covenant. The second section represents his earlier thought that develops a covenantal approach to evangelism; it was presented in 1975 and published the next year within a collection of essays out of Westminster Theological Seminary.

### *Strengths*

The essence of God's covenant with man is captured in God's own statement, "I shall be your God, you will be my people, and I shall dwell in your midst." Expressions of the covenant, often in technical formulas or covenant language, run the entire length of the Scriptures. An understanding of the biblical framework of the covenant is highly relevant because of its ultimate expression in the new covenant.

Norman Shepherd has put a lot of thought into the importance and relevance of covenant theology. All covenants in sacred history always have two sides that reflect God's promises (and threats) on the one hand, and man's obligations on the other. In his first section Dr. Shepherd develops the interrelation of both parties through the Abrahamic, Mosaic, and New covenants. A key strength is his insistence on seeing God's grace in each one of these covenants, not only in giving promises but also in his enabling his people to fulfill their obligations. Even the Mosaic covenant, accurately described as a conditional covenant,<sup>1</sup> has many gracious elements, like (1) the promised fulfillment of God dwelling in the midst of his people in the form of the Shekinah, (2) the assurance of forgiveness, and (3) the wisdom of God's law that called his people to holiness.

A valuable insight from the second section is the connection Shepherd makes between Jesus' Great Commission and the Abrahamic covenant. The parallels are subtle but real.<sup>2</sup>

Also, in the first and most recently developed section, the author reaffirms that the promised blessings of the covenant are not by works of obedience. Rather they "point to sovereign grace" as stated in Rom 4:16 and Eph 2:8-9 (p. 45).

### *Weaknesses*

Norman Shepherd addresses the implications of a covenant framework of life. One ultimate issue of relevance is the age-old question of God's sovereignty and man's responsibility. In this matter Shepherd does not qualify his construct nor use the language of the classical Reformed statements.<sup>3</sup> While he believes in God's unconditional power of predestination, in terms of the life of the church and the gospel, he wants to avoid a focus on the eternal decrees of God. He uses the words "mystery" and "incomprehensible" in this connection, saying that man cannot delve into God's purposes.<sup>4</sup> What we can see in the church, according to Shepherd, is a person's faithfulness in living out one's covenant obligations. Herein is the shift from a classical perspective to one that puts the focus on man and his obligations in the covenant.

Shepherd rightly insists that "the blessings of the new covenant are pure grace" (p. 50). However, his new emphasis on the Christian's necessary faithfulness flowing from faith, an emphasis that he believes has been neglected in Reformed circles, has helped launch modern Reformed churches into uncharted waters. In trying to balance the poles of God's bi-lateral covenant, Dr. Shepherd has tilted toward an anthropocentric ecclesiology. Disciples who hold to an "objective view" of justification that promises salvation at baptism<sup>5</sup> have moved toward a mechanical soteriology that also can be described as more anthropocentric.

### *Conclusion*

*The Call of Grace* is the revised publication of two messages that originally were produced for public audiences. For this reason Dr. Shepherd's position on the covenant is presented here on a more popular level. It does not claim to be an exhaustive treatment of his position, and the popular approach may explain why there are occasional, unsubstantiated generalizations.

Other Reformed leaders<sup>6</sup> have raised serious concerns about Dr. Shepherd's theology. What is not said in this book in terms of Shepherd's divergence from the Reformed creeds may be as great a concern.

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<sup>1</sup> In historic terms the Mosaic covenant is recognized as a "suzerain-vassal treaty" because of all its conditional statements, as opposed to the unconditional "royal grant" type of treaty given to Abraham.

<sup>2</sup> Consider how these Abrahamic elements are found in the Great Commission: Abraham was the father of many nations, (Gen 17:4); he would inherit the land/earth (17:8), called the "world" in the Great Commission; all peoples of the earth would be blessed in Abraham (Gen 12:3; 17:18); God's blessings would come upon Abraham's

descendants primarily through godly instruction through their generations (Gen 18:19), an element that sounds much like “teaching them to observe all things...”; and finally, both the Abrahamic covenant and the Great Commission command a covenant rite of initiation. Another argument for Abrahamic-New Covenant parallels that Shepherd does not mention is the symmetric structure wherein Matthew opens his gospel with Abraham and closes it with the Great Commission parallels to the Abrahamic covenant.

<sup>3</sup> Note the WCF 3:5, 6, 8; 9:4, and Jonathan Edwards’ *Freedom of the Will*. Also, Shepherd appears to avoid reference to the classic construction of the covenants of works and of grace.

<sup>4</sup> The author devotes two chapters (6, 7) to what he perceives are difficulties for Calvinists in evangelism because of their interest in the invisible work of God in election and regeneration. Here is a fuller statement: “From the perspective of the covenant, there is mystery because we are creatures and God is the Creator. We cannot know God exhaustively. God remains incomprehensible. We can never know God’s decree as he knows it, and for that reason we cannot begin to reflect on his salvation from the perspective of the decree, even though our salvation originates in the predestinating love and purpose of God. To look at covenant from the perspective of election is ultimately to yield to the primal temptation to be as God. The proper stance for Adam and all of us after him is a covenantal stance of faithful obedience. Only from that perspective can election be understood as grace. Therefore, although from the perspective of covenant there is mystery, there is no dilemma and no paradox or contradiction” (p. 83).

<sup>5</sup> At least in this book (pp. 101-103) Shepherd does not appear to go as far as some of his disciples or those of the “Federal Vision” movement who tie the justification of the sinner with public baptism.

<sup>6</sup> See *The Current Justification Controversy* by O. Palmer Robertson. There are numerous reviews of *The Call of Grace* on the internet. Three include <http://www.paulperspective.com/docs/beisner2.pdf>, [http://www.grebeweb.com/linden/shepherd\\_review%20\\_venema.html](http://www.grebeweb.com/linden/shepherd_review%20_venema.html), and <http://www.trinityrcus.com/Articles/reportshepherd1.htm#call>.