

# A Brief Response to Mr. McMahon

Ralph Allan Smith

Not all critiques are worthy of detailed response. One such example is the essay “Blurred Vision: Theological Degeneration In Ralph Smith’s Misconceived Covenantal Theology” by C. Matthew McMahon. McMahon’s is a blurred critique. Only a few words are necessary.

First, I am said to be a liberal. Evidence for this is found in my “redefinition” of the word covenant to mean “relationship” rather than “agreement.” Ask yourself how many *liberals* you know who believe in the inerrancy of the Bible and six-day, young-earth creationism. After you finish writing the list, add me.

Second, my “redefinition” of the word covenant comes from John Murray and his book *The Covenant of Grace*. The entire book is devoted to refuting the idea that a covenant is merely an agreement. Murray wrote,

From the beginning of God’s disclosures to men in terms of covenant we find a unity of conception which is to the effect that a divine covenant is a sovereign administration of grace and of promise. *It is not compact or contract or agreement that provides the constitutive or governing idea but that of dispensation in the sense of disposition. . . .* And when we remember that covenant is not only bestowment of grace, not only oath-bound promise, but *also relationship with God* in that which is the crown and goal of the whole process of religion, namely, *union and communion with God*, we discover again that *the new covenant brings this relationship also to the highest level of achievement*. At the centre of covenant revelation as its constant refrain is the assurance ‘I will be your God, and ye shall be my people’. The new covenant does not differ from the earlier covenants because it inaugurates this peculiar intimacy. It differs simply because it brings to the ripest and richest fruition the relationship epitomized in that promise. [Emphasis added.]

O. Palmer Robertson, too, denies that a covenant is merely an agreement. He wrote, “Extensive investigations into the etymology of the Old Testament term for “covenant” (בְּרִיתָה) have proven inconclusive in determining the meaning of the word. *Yet the contextual usage of the term in Scripture points rather consistently to the concept of a “bond” or “relationship.”* And again, “A long history has marked the analysis of the covenants in terms of mutual compacts or contracts. But *recent scholarship has established rather certainly the sovereign character of the administration of the divine covenants in Scripture.* Both biblical and extra-biblical evidence point to the unilateral form of covenant establishment. No such thing as bargaining, bartering, or contracting characterizes the divine covenants of Scripture. The sovereign Lord of heaven and earth dictates the terms of the covenant.” [*The Christ of the Covenants*, pp. 5, 15. Emphasis added.]

For the record, I include the notion of agreement within the larger idea of relationship.

Obviously the Father, Son, and Spirit agree with one another. But a covenant is more than just a contract or agreement. God's covenant with His people is epitomized in the expression: "I will be your God and you shall be My people" (Lev. 26:12; cf. Ex. 6:7; Lev. 11:45; 22:33; 25:38; Num. 15:41; Deut. 26:17; 29:13; Jer. 7:23; 11:4; 30:22; Ezek. 36:28; etc.). This is not a contract or agreement, but a relationship of love.

Third, I am said to be a tritheist. I have written a short essay on tritheism that provides a longer answer to this and there are three lectures available on WordMp3.com that include an answer to this aspect of Rick Phillips critique of my position.

Suffice it to say I suggested that Kuyper's view of the covenant among the Persons of the Trinity should be added to Van Til's understanding of the Trinity. In so saying, I have not denied my commitment to the doctrine of the Trinity as historically defined. Like Van Til, I am offering a supplementary idea. Or, to state it more accurately, I am reminding people of the supplementary idea offered by Abraham Kuyper.

There are so many detailed misrepresentations in the essay that it would be tedious for me to deal with them and more tedious for you read them. If anyone has the time and interest to deal with the issue fairly, let them read my three books, *Paradox and Truth*, *The Eternal Covenant*, and *Trinity and Reality*, as well as the essays on the net that answer Phillips, including the recent essay on tritheism, and my net-book, *The Covenantal Structure of the Bible*. That is really not a lot of reading. I am sure there may be places to criticize and I have received some criticism that has been helpful. I would be glad for more. And if I have the opportunity to rewrite one or more of my books, I hope I can do better the next time.

I am not surprised by criticism. Anyone who publishes must not only expect it, but humbly seek it. I was surprised, however, by the kind of criticism that came. I never imagined that I would be accused of heresy and tritheism for endorsing John Murray's definition of the covenant, Van Til's ideas about the Trinity, and Abraham Kuyper's view of a Trinitarian covenant. But that is the world of popular Reformed theology in our day — a clear indication that we really do need reform.