

Covenantal Confusion?

An Attempt to Understand the Confused and the Confusion

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“Covenantal Confusion” — the title of an essay by Rev. Richard Phillips — accurately describes the current state of Reformed theology (though that is not the meaning of the title for Phillips). Covenant theologians have longstanding disagreements about various aspects of covenant theology. Some believe in a Covenant of Redemption, some do not. Some see the Covenant of Redemption as so important that without it, Covenant Theology itself would be in danger. For others, the Covenant of Grace alone is necessary. When it comes to the Covenant of Works, there is basic disagreement about how it should be understood. More importantly there are many, especially among Reformed theologians in the Dutch tradition, who deny the existence of a Covenant of Works. Complicating all of these various differences are diverse definitions of the covenantal idea itself. In short, there is hardly a single aspect of the traditional covenantal theology that is not the subject of one sort of dispute or another. For many Reformed church members, I suspect the doctrine of the covenant is enshrouded in mystery.

In plain terms, covenantal muddle is the situation we face. I think this is the sign of a deep underlying problem. But whether I am correct or not, confusion reigns in the world of Covenant Theology and a simple call to return to the Westminster Confession is a counsel of despair. It ignores the fact that the current confusion is in part a result of the inadequacy of the Confessional standards to answer certain questions.¹ The example of the theological differences between two important theologians illustrates this perfectly. No one in the 20th century was more devoted to the Westminster faith than John Murray and Meredith Kline. But they both not only suggested profound revisions to the traditional faith, they also disagreed deeply with one another about a proper understanding of that faith. If John Murray and Meredith Kline, both seeking to be faithful to Westminster, cannot find in that confession a way out of the confusion, neither will we. It is time to go back to the Bible.

Richard Phillips does not seem to realize that the title of his essay describes the symptom of an illness that has long plagued the Reformed world. Nor does he seem to understand that it was to offer a way out of that confusion that I summarized the contributions of Abraham Kuyper and Cornelius Van Til as they were developed and synthesized in the Biblical theology of James B. Jordan.² In fact, Phillips understood so little of what I wrote that responding to his essay in detail would be more tedious than it is worth — not just for me, but for the reader as well. To follow the discussion, the poor reader would have to constantly jump back and forth between my

¹ Or, perhaps it would be better to say, the result of the Confession answering too many questions. We would probably be better off with a confession that was more general and allowed more breathing room for theologians to study and learn until a deeper unity is achieved.

² Even in this my work was not original. Books and lectures by John Frame and Vern Poythress, as well as lectures, writings and email interaction with Jeff Myers and Peter Liethart enabled me to understand the doctrine of the Trinity from a Van Tillian perspective and consider broader Biblical and theological implications.

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original book, Phillips' essay, and the present essay. How many would have the stamina to do it?

However, a short and simple answer on some of the issues he mentions may be appropriate. Just for the record, therefore, contrary to Phillips' assertions: 1) I do not deny the forensic theory of justification; 2) My suggested redefinition of the covenant is not based upon speculation but exegesis; 3) Nothing in my theology of the Trinity or the covenant requires or implies a denial of the distinction between faith and works; 4) I do not assert or believe that the covenant we have with God as sinners redeemed in Christ is the same covenant Adam had in the Garden "without modification since the fall;" 5) I do not believe and have never suggested that men stand before God on the basis of their own covenant keeping faithfulness. In each of these and other details, Phillips has fundamentally misunderstood and misrepresented my views. He does not interact with or respond to any of my exegetical or theological arguments against the Covenant of Works, even though he exerts his greatest energy in this paper on that topic. To respond on each of these issues in detail would require a lengthy and difficult essay that very few people would even read.

Rather than dealing with these and other issues Phillips brings up, forcing my readers to run a theological gauntlet, I would like to offer a very different kind of response to Richard Phillips' essay. First, I am simply going to show that Richard Phillips has so deeply misunderstood my essay that a direct response is not really necessary. Second, I am going to offer an explanation for Phillips' confusion. The reason I am writing this sort of response is that I assume many young pastors, elders, and Reformed Christians with a serious interest in the Bible may be asking themselves, how could Phillips get things so wrong? If Smith's books did not contain something significantly erroneous, why would Phillips express the kind of concern he does? After all, Richard Phillips is a good Reformed pastor. He has served Christ faithfully in the ministry for years and was chosen by the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals to speak at the Pastors Conference on Reformed Theology. How could he be so far off the mark? I think that is a fair question and answering it may be more important than burdening the reader with a point by point refutation of Phillips' essay. If someone is interested in what I actually said, I hope they will take the time to read my books. They are both short and, although addressed to pastors and teachers, written to be understood.

Adding Misunderstanding to Confusion

I am going to offer two brief examples of the deep confusion of Phillips' essay to show that he simply does not understand what I am saying. I am not trying to suggest that Phillips is unintelligent or theologically incompetent. As I said above, I assume he is a good and faithful minister of Christ. How he could misunderstand me so completely is what I will address in the next part of the essay. The point now is to show, very succinctly, that he has. Of course, the best proof that he has is for the reader to read my book for himself and then re-read Phillips' essay. Those who do will be surprised, I think, at Phillips' interpretation.

The first of my two examples concerns Phillips' charge that my view of the Trinity tends towards tritheism. He even suggests that I am "aware of the tri-theistic leanings" of my theology and try to temper them by advancing *perichoresis* as "the basis of Trinitarian union." This particular charge is interesting because one of the most important parts of my book *Paradox and*

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Truth was the criticism of Cornelius Plantinga's social view of the Trinity. In contrast to Plantinga, I favored Cornelius Van Til's view. Phillips referred to *Paradox and Truth* and has presumably read it. If he thinks I hold a social view of the Trinity and lean towards tritheism, he has fundamentally misunderstood my position. His discussion of my view of the Trinity falls so far short of basic accuracy that it seems pointless to respond.

What is interesting here is that we can compare Phillips' understanding of my position with that of another Reformed theologian, John Frame. Frame also read my book *Paradox and Truth*. I do not know what Frame thought about my view of a covenant among the Persons of the Trinity, but in his new volume on the doctrine of God, he was kind enough to say, "Thanks to Ralph A. Smith for his excellent critical summary of Plantinga's argument in *Paradox and Truth*."³ John Frame, one of the most respected Reformed theologians in America today and an expert on the doctrine of the Trinity, did not find my views to be "tending towards tritheism" nor did he warn his readers that my book diverges from Reformed orthodoxy. Why should he? I am merely restating the views of Cornelius Van Til and Abraham Kuyper!

The reader will have to ask himself why an expert on Trinitarian theology like John Frame missed the Trinitarian errors of my theology. Perhaps there is something else going on here. Maybe the problem is less in Smith's writing than in Phillips' reading.

The second example of deep confusion in Phillips' essay is found in his assertion that the definition of a covenant as an *agreement* rather than a *relationship* is a matter of consensus among Reformed theologians.⁴ This requires a little more explanation than the first point. To begin with, we need to see how important this is to Phillips' understanding of Covenant Theology. In an essay for the Knox Seminary colloquium titled *The Auburn Avenue Theology, Pros and Cons: Debating the Federal Vision*, Phillips wrote the following.

This is a remarkable assertion on which to build an entire theology, since it flies in the face of the broadest theological consensus. There are very few matters in which one can find so widespread agreement among biblical scholars and theologians as that a covenant is *not* a relationship. Instead, contrary to Schlissel, a covenant is a treaty, an arrangement, that serves as a means for entering into a relationship.⁵

This means that while the two are most closely related, we must note a distinction between a covenant and the relationship entered into by means of that covenant. We hear people speak of being "in" or "out" of the covenant. But given the above distinction, this involves a category error that risks (and frequently realizes) the danger of considering the covenant as a container. One is not and cannot be "in" the covenant because the covenant is not something in which one can be. There is a covenant community, comprised of those to whom the covenant has been presented, and one may be in it. But a covenant is a contract or treaty, not a container, an

³ John Frame, *The Doctrine of God: A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2002.), p. 701.

⁴ I have written another essay dealing with this topic in somewhat more detail. If nothing else, the reader will get a good idea of what I mean when I say that it is tedious to go through each of these charges. See the essay: *Covenant Theology: Consensus or Confusion?*

⁵ Richard D. Phillips, "Covenant and Salvation, or What Is a 'Christian?'" *The Auburn Avenue Theology, Pros and Cons: Debating the Federal Vision*, ed. E. Calvin Beisner (Fort Lauderdale: Knox Theological Seminary, 2003), p. 78. Emphasis in the original.

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arrangement that defines the terms by which two parties may be in a certain relationship. This is the very error endemic to the Federal Vision and it exerts a controlling effect on their formulation of the covenant and salvation, of grace and the sacraments, indeed of the whole question of who is and how one becomes a Christian.⁶

Two points are important here. One, though it is true that in the past there was a consensus among Presbyterians that a covenant was an agreement, Dutch Reformed theologians held a broader view. But debate on this issue has never meant rejection of Reformed theology. Furthermore, the days of consensus clearly ended when John Murray wrote a short but very important book called *The Covenant of Grace: A Biblico-Theological Study*.⁷ The basic purpose of John Murray's excellent book was to refute this consensus on the basis of the Biblical use of the word "covenant."⁸ He succeeds remarkably and concludes the essay with the following.

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.*⁹

Hence, when we come to the climax and apex of covenant administration in the New Testament epoch, we have sovereign grace and promise dispensed on the highest level because it is grace bestowed and promise given in regard to the attainment of the highest end conceivable for men. It is no wonder then that the new covenant is called the everlasting covenant. As covenant revelation has progressed throughout the ages it has reached its consummation in the new covenant, and the new covenant is not wholly diverse in principle and character from the covenants which have preceded it and prepared for it, but it is itself the complete realization and embodiment of that sovereign grace which was the constitutive principle of all the covenants. 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.*¹⁰

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ John Murray, *The Covenant of Grace: A Biblico-Theological Study* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1988, reprint of 1953 edition.).

⁸ Ibid., pp. 5-7.

⁹ Ibid. pp. 30-31. Emphasis added.

¹⁰ Ibid. pp. 31-32. Emphasis added.

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Thus, in seeing the covenant as a relationship which comes to us as a gift of divine grace and love, I am simply following John Murray's view. I am not proposing something new and different, nor am I pushing some odd brand of "covenantal confusion." Murray's essay on the Covenant of Grace is one of the most important works on the covenant written in the 20th century by one of most respected and influential Reformed theologians of the 20th century. Its impact has been tremendous. How, then, can Phillips suggest that there is still a consensus that a covenant is an agreement? *John Murray exploded that consensus*. As a graduate of Westminster Theological Seminary, Phillips should be well aware of that. He should know too that Meredith Kline and O. Palmer Roberson also define a covenant as a relationship. If there is a consensus among recent Reformed Biblical theologians, it may be more in the direction of relationship than it is in the direction of contract or agreement.¹¹

What I have tried to show here is that Phillips is out of step with theologians of the stature of John Frame and John Murray. It is not just that he disagrees with them. His view *cannot account for* Murray's whole perspective on the covenant as a relationship or John Frame's endorsement of my critique of Plantinga. My understanding of the covenant is partially based upon Murray's understanding of the covenant and my view of the Trinity is largely based upon Cornelius Van Til's profound exposition of Trinitarianism, which Frame emphasized and explained so well in his *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought*.¹² I have not tried to answer Phillips' criticisms directly. I have cited these two issues to show that Phillips' critique of my views is based upon gross misunderstanding.

Finally, Phillips' assertion of a Reformed consensus is especially disturbing for another reason. On the one hand, it allows him to imply that those who disagree with him are unfaithful to the Reformed faith. This, in turn, leads to a false over simplification of the issues that is unhealthy for the Reformed faith in the long run. Theologians and pastors who call us to simply return to the Westminster Confession, to find in it the remedy to covenantal confusion, are blind to the present state of theological discussion. They are seeking for stability in a document that once provided a standing place, but which now stands itself in desperate need of revision. Indeed, one of its most zealous defenders, Meredith Kline, suggests important and fundamental revisions to the Confession.

The Westminster Confession is not the Word of God. As such, it cannot provide the kind of rest that only Holy Scripture can. All merely human documents grow old. Most of them, like their authors, eventually die. It is not contrary to Reformed theology to question creeds and confessions or to suggest that they need to be improved upon or revised. To the contrary, the Reformed principle is *Sola Scriptura*. If Reformed theologians were to reject the work of revising the Westminster Standards, they would be implicitly suggesting the virtual infallibility of mere man-made writings. They would be endorsing a traditionalism that runs contrary to the very spirit of the Westminster Confession.

¹¹ I discuss this more fully in, *Covenant Theology: Consensus or Confusion?*

¹² John M. Frame, *Cornelius Van Til: An Analysis of His Thought* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1995).

The Psychology of Misunderstanding

Richard Phillips is an honors graduate of Westminster Theological Seminary and a leader in the Reformed world. How is it possible that he could forget or ignore the main point of John Murray's important work on the covenant? How is it that his reading of my *Paradox and Truth* differs so much from John Frame's? How can I assert that his misunderstanding of my views is so fundamental that responding to him in detail would be futile?

To answer these and similar questions, I appeal to what I will call "the psychology of misunderstanding." I assume both Phillips' intelligence and integrity. I do not believe that his gross misrepresentation of my position is due to malice, carelessness, or some other moral failure. There is a much better explanation.

The vocabulary for that better explanation comes from Thomas Kuhn's famous work, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. That Kuhn's approach to scientific arguments applies also to theological disagreements is suggested in Kuhn's work itself. But those who doubt the applicability of Kuhn's approach can read Vern S. Poythress, *Science and Hermeneutics: Implications of Scientific Method for Biblical Interpretation*,¹³ an entire book devoted to demonstrating how Kuhn's analysis of scientific theory applies to theology.¹⁴ Poythress does not apply Kuhn in cookie-cutter fashion. But given certain qualifications and modifications, Poythress does see Kuhn's work as important in understanding theological disputes as well as scientific ones.

The specific relevance of Kuhn's work for the present discussion is found in the importance of paradigms for our understanding. Kuhn used the word "paradigm" to describe clusters of belief that underlie scientific theories and experiments. Unfortunately what he meant by the word "paradigm" is less than altogether unambiguous. Thus, Margaret Masterman criticized Kuhn for not providing a clear definition, finding no less than 21 different senses in which the word is used.¹⁵

Poythress summarized her conclusions in his work on hermeneutics. The various uses of the word "paradigm" in Kuhn can be placed in three broad categories. The first is what Masterman called "metaphysical paradigms." Poythress explains these as "unquestioned presuppositions about the nature of the world," in other words, worldviews.¹⁶ The second category is "sociological paradigms" which are "roughly what Kuhn later called disciplinary matrices. These are specific assumptions and values in the background of a specific discipline. They are analogous to theological systems in systematic theology or hermeneutical systems in exegetical disciplines."¹⁷ The third type is "artifact" or "construct paradigms," which Poythress

¹³ *Science and Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988). This is now part of a larger volume edited by Moises Silva, entitled *Foundations of Contemporary Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996). Page numbers and references in this essay are from the earlier publication.

¹⁴ See also, Ian Barbour, "Paradigms in Science and Religion" in Gary Gutting ed., *Paradigms and Revolutions* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980). Barbour suggests various modifications of Kuhn's thesis within which he finds it applicable to questions of religion. His and Poythress' views on Kuhn differ significantly.

¹⁵ "Kuhn, of course, with that quasi-poetic style of his, makes paradigm elucidation genuinely difficult for the superficial reader. On my counting, he uses 'paradigm' in not less than twenty-one different senses in his [1962], possibly more, not less." Margaret Masterman, "The Nature of a Paradigm" in Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave ed., *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 61.

¹⁶ *Science and Hermeneutics*, p. 78.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

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describes as “specific scientific achievements, embodied in crucial theoretical advances and crucial experimental results supporting the theories.”¹⁸ Poythress sees no exact analogy in theology here, though standard exegetical answers on specific texts are similar.¹⁹

Poythress believes that Kuhn’s work is valuable in the study of theology.

What makes Kuhn so interesting, and potentially fruitful, is his claim that knowledge does not always change by piecemeal additions and subtractions. Human knowledge is not to be viewed as so many bits, added to the total sum of knowledge like so many marbles to a pile. Rather, what we know is colored by the framework in which we have our knowledge. This framework includes assumptions, values, procedures, standards, and so on, in the particular field of knowledge.²⁰

This contextual conditioning easily explains why it is so notoriously difficult to argue someone into an alternation of the type considered in the previous section. For instance, as is well known, arguments aiming at religious conversion often do not succeed. Failures occur not merely because potential converts have deep emotional investments in religious views that they already hold but because they have difficulty integrating any particular argument offered them into their own full-fledged framework of knowledge, assumptions, standards, values, and the like. Judged by *their* standards, or by what they suppose that they know, the argument does not seem plausible.²¹

As theological debaters have found out, appeal to a proof text does not always persuade the opponent. From the advocate’s point of view, the implications of the proof text seem perfectly clear. But the opposing position, *as an entire framework for analysis and synthesis*, provides standard resources for handling problem texts.²²

How does all of this relate to the question at hand? To begin with, for Richard Phillips, a particular interpretation of the Westminster Confession functions at the level of a “sociological paradigm.” Please note, I am not saying that the Westminster Confession itself is his sociological paradigm, but a specific understanding of the Westminster Confession. The Confession is a broader document than is often recognized, having been written by a committee of men from significantly diverse theological backgrounds. Moreover, the Westminster Standards were never intended to be used as a narrowly construed theological litmus test.²³

For a particular interpretation of the Confession to function as a sociological paradigm means that Phillips reads the Confession itself through this framework and assumes that he is reading it “the way it is supposed to be read.” More important for the present discussion, this matrix of assumptions and presuppositions provides Phillips with colored glasses through which he sees the whole theological debate about the covenant. To change the metaphor again, his

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 79.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 79-80.

²¹ Ibid., pp. 80-81. Emphasis in original.

²² Ibid., p. 81. Emphasis in the original.

²³ See James B. Jordan, “Misusing the Westminster Confession” *Biblical Horizons*, no. 166, Feb. 2004. Online at: <http://www.emmanuelphx.org/misusingwcf.htm>

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interpretation of the Confession is the Procrustean bed upon which he places my books. My views must be stretched in some places and truncated in others in order to fit the bed, but having forced things into place, Phillips gains a sense cognitive relief. Now, at last, things have been rationally explained!

It may sound as if I am being cynical or sarcastic. Please do not misunderstand. I am not being sarcastic or trying to belittle Phillips' views. The cognitive relief gained when something has been fit into one's own paradigm is part of the way paradigms are supposed to work. I believe that we all function in terms of metaphysical and sociological paradigms. I also believe it is good that we think with and through paradigms and not just about them. When we have the correct "metaphysical paradigm" or worldview, we are on the way to a true understanding of the world. To the degree that our "metaphysical paradigm" or worldview is correct, it facilitates our understanding of the Bible and the world and saves us from wasting our time investigating unfruitful and meaningless questions. Neither Richard Phillips nor I can be conned into donating money to an archeological dig dedicated to finding the bones of Jesus. Our presuppositions serve us well by informing us from the beginning that searching for our Lord's bones is a waste of time and economic resources.

Sociological paradigms, however, do not have the same deep claim as metaphysical paradigms. It is one thing to switch from Dispensationalism to Reformed theology — a paradigm conversion at the level of a sociological paradigm which I went through during the 1980s. It is something very different to be converted from Buddhism to Christianity — a worldview conversion. Neither level of conversion is simple or common. As Poythress explained, we normally judge which arguments are reasonable in terms of our paradigms. Usually, arguments that do not fit our framework will not even seem to make sense.

Thus, for example, Phillips dismissed outright two of my three arguments for a covenant among the Persons of the Trinity. He did not even consider them worth commenting on, in spite of the fact that one of them was an extended exegetical argument. He was so confident that these arguments were irrelevant to the debate that he stated my whole interpretation was based upon an argument from silence, which hardly describes the one remaining argument that he did discuss. What happened to the exegesis and the arguments based upon Biblical interpretation? They did not even merit consideration. What happened to the substance of the remaining argument? It was reduced to silence when forced into the frame of another paradigm.

Communication between those who hold to different positions in the debate about the Trinity and the covenant will be difficult, since this debate touches issues at the level of a sociological paradigm. In other words, this is a debate about the very theological systems which provide us the spectacles through which we see and interpret the Bible and the world.

I do not believe that communication is impossible. To no small degree it depends on the person. Some theologians and thinkers are better than others at "changing spectacles" for the sake of argument. Nevertheless, it is difficult even for those who have been trained and practiced. Some people are constitutionally unequipped to change spectacles, even for the sake of trying to understand another's position. Others probably could have learned to change spectacles if they had been trained to do so, but, lacking that training, they are not quite able to think through opposing arguments from the inside. Still others, who might have the kind of mentality that could shift from one perspective to another, have been trained *not* to change spectacles. They have come to regard it as disloyalty even to imagine a different position. And there are other types of persons beyond these as well. In brief, there are all sorts of explanations

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for any particular person's inability to see a debate from more than one perspective and those reasons might vary from one debate to another. Among them is fear that one might be influenced if he allowed himself to "give in" to the other view. Any one or combination of these reasons is sufficient to more or less render debate ineffective.

Debates that seem to touch the reliability of the Westminster Confession create no little strain for Bible-believing Presbyterians. Not only have ministers taken vows to uphold the Westminster Standards, they also remember the history of Presbyterian theological debate and how giving in to a loose interpretation of the Confession has led many Presbyterian churches into apostasy. Leaders are naturally wary of views that call for a revision of the Westminster Standards. However, leaders also need to be wary of dangers in other directions as well. Turning the Westminster Confession, or rather, a particular interpretation of the Westminster Confession, into a litmus test for Reformed orthodoxy threatens to reduce Reformed theology to a brand of fundamentalism. Continental Reformed theologians and Presbyterian theologians have disagreed on many subjects and their debates have contributed to the theological and spiritual growth of the church. Forcing Reformed ministers to agree on one particular interpretation of the Confession will not only stifle the kind of research that leads to theological advance, it will prevent sincere scholars with Reformed leanings from joining Reformed groups for fear of the constant fighting and bickering that is associated with confessional loyalty.

To me, the essence of the Westminster faith is to be found in its vision of all of life as covenantal and its view of God as the Triune sovereign God of grace. Westminster soteriology is Biblical monergism. The revision to the Standards that I suggest is thoroughly consistent with my understanding of the heart of Westminster theology. But Phillips, along with not a few others, sees the essence of the Westminster faith expressed in the twofold covenant scheme. A denial, therefore, of the Covenant of Works seems to them like a denial of the whole Westminster faith. This functions as a presupposition for Phillips. Thus, for men like Phillips, the kind of revision I suggest may be more or less equivalent to denying the sovereignty of God. Phillips apparently believes my view entails denying justification by faith and that it even distorts one's view of the Trinity.

That is why Phillips is not able to fairly represent my views. His commitment to his own paradigm prevents him from even seeing the rationality of my arguments. That is why I have concluded that a detailed response to his critique — which amounts really to nothing more than insisting on his sociological paradigm or Covenant of Works theology — is unnecessary. The only readers who will be persuaded by his presentation are those who are already more or less committed to his view. Or at least, so I hope. Readers who are open to consider the issue in the light of the Scriptures are encouraged to read my books for themselves. They will see that Phillips has not understood what I wrote, nor provided any sort of answer to it.²⁴

Conclusion

This paper is not an attack on Richard Phillips character or theology. It is an account of his inability to read what I have written that almost entirely exonerates him from culpability for the

²⁴ I believe the same holds true for Phillips representation of other writers as well. We will not come to understand Peter Leithart or the Auburn four from Phillips' summary of their views. His arguments, even if they were decisive, would be the successful refutations of a non-existent position.

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gross misrepresentation of my views in his essay. I believe that this is a fair statement of the matter. I do not want pastors and elders to be placed in the situation that they believe they have to decide between good guys and bad guys. Though there are debates of that sort, this is not one of them. Phillips is not a bad guy and I have no reason to doubt his basic theological competence or his sincere concern for the good of Christ's Church.

However, I do believe that Phillips' essay is a failure. As a Reformed leader he has a responsibility to those he interprets as well as to his readers. In this sense, his inaccurate handling of the material disqualifies him as a competent guide on this issue. The problem is not his basic theological competence, it concerns the special competence needed for theological debate between brothers who are equally committed to the truth of God's word. For whatever reason, Phillips has not yet learned to sympathetically read those he disagrees with, at least in this debate. He is not able to understand the other position from the inside. By misrepresenting the theological opinions of those he debates against, he undermines his own purpose.

Every Christian leader at every level faces the harsh reality that sometimes his best efforts are not good enough. He is simply inadequate to the task. If Phillips is honestly not able to do any better than his essay "Covenant Confusion," he needs to reconsider whether or not he ought to be part of the debate. If he is going to continue to participate, he has a moral obligation to seek to properly represent other views. In order to do so, he needs to learn how to read those views "from the inside."

Of course, those like myself who have the audacity to suggest revisions to confessional faith should not be naïve. If you publish a book calling for the revision of the Westminster Confession's view of the covenant, a doctrine not only confessed but cherished by Presbyterian ministers, you should expect to be criticized. Whining about it is absurd. I can hardly expect Phillips or the majority of Presbyterian ministers to accept my views on Westminster or the covenant. In most cases, the ones who *might* be persuaded of a new paradigm are the younger men, the pastors and theologians of the next generation. It is more to them that I have addressed my books. Humanly speaking, they will be the ones who decide the future of Reformed theology.

These young men need to understand how serious the issue is. What I have presented is in fact a call to a paradigm shift, a challenge to revise the traditional reformed Covenantal theology. This call is not by any means original with me. I am repeating what John Murray said about the need to rethink covenant theology and attempting to do that rethinking within the paradigm shift(s) suggested by Abraham Kuyper, Cornelius Van Til, and James Jordan.

To demonstrate the validity of this suggested shift, young men must consider the teaching of the Bible and the history of Reformed theology in some depth. That is what I have tried to do in my two short books *Paradox and Truth* and *Eternal Covenant*. My conclusion is that Murray and Frame (Van Til) point the way to a necessary revision of Reformed theology, one that aims to solve the kind of covenantal confusion that Phillips is ironically promoting. Whether or not I succeeded is a question that cannot be answered by reading Phillips. Rather than fruitlessly and tediously interacting with arguments and assertions that utterly miss the point, I ask those interested in real theological discussion to consider my work for themselves. Better yet, read Kuyper, Van Til, Murray, Jordan, Meyers, and Leithart. All I have done is combine and summarize their writings.²⁵

²⁵ I should point out that Phillips is obviously more interested in the theology of the Auburn pastors than in my work on the Trinity and the covenant. I have not really addressed the issues they bring up, except perhaps in

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Some of the brightest Reformed lights in the 20th century suggest revisions to our understanding of the Reformed faith. I believe that those revisions enhance the Reformed faith and our understanding of the Bible. Richard Phillips believes they do not. How do we approach debates of this sort? The Reformed standard is *Sola Scriptura*. Let's judge the issues in its light.

And until we can attain real unity among Reformed thinkers, let's allow pastors and theologians enough confessional room to move. Murray denied the Covenant of Works but was not treated as if he had renounced the Reformed faith. Meredith Kline holds views on the Law of Moses that contradict the interpretation of many, if not most, Reformed thinkers, but he is not treated as if he had betrayed the Reformed faith. Not a few pastors and theologians in the Presbyterian world today disagree with the Confession's six-day creationism — a point on which I think the Confession is correct — without being considered “heretics.” If Reformed denominations are going to be flexible on the doctrine of Creation, they ought to be flexible on the details of the doctrine of the Covenant. If they are going to allow debate and tolerate difference from the Confession in a matter where its position is unquestionably clear, they should allow open debate on the details of the doctrine of the covenant, where the Confession is less transparent and a variety of interpretations exist.

passing. But, as with my books, I highly recommend for young men to go to the Auburn pastors themselves rather than to Phillips or other critics to discover what they are saying. Richard Phillips is not the only one in this debate whose paradigm glasses are functioning as blinders. Critics of the Auburn pastors have not represented them accurately, probably for the same sorts of reasons that Phillips is unable to understand or accurately represent what I have written.