

The Trinitarian Covenant in John 17

At least since the time of Olevianus there has been a tradition in Reformed theology that believes in a pretemporal covenant between the Persons of the Trinity.¹ This covenant, often called the counsel of peace, provides according to Geerhardus Vos, the “center of gravity” in Reformed theology:

In the dogma of the counsel of peace, then, the doctrine of the covenant has found its genuinely theological rest point. Only when it becomes plain how it is rooted, not in something that did not come into existence until creation, but in God’s being itself, only then has this rest point been reached and only then can the covenant idea be thought of theologically.²

In line with this tradition, but taking it a step further, James Jordan finds his definition of the covenant in God Himself: “*the covenant is the personal structural bond among the three Persons of God.*”³ This contrasts with Vos, who found a “genuinely theological rest point” for the doctrine of the covenant in what was actually a soteriological conception. The “counsel of peace” is the covenant made between the Father and the Son for the salvation of the elect. No doubt this notion connects the doctrine of the covenant with the doctrine of election and connects election with God’s working in history. But what it does not do is provide a genuinely theological rest point, for it does not make the doctrine of the covenant essentially Trinitarian.

Jordan’s definition of a covenant, however, does. In his view, the covenant refers first and foremost to the personal relationships of Father, Son, and Spirit. When God created man in His own image, it meant, among other things, that Adam was created to enjoy the covenantal fellowship of the Triune God. When man’s creation is taken into account, the covenant is defined as follows: “*the covenant is a personal-structural bond which joins the three Persons of God in a community of life, and in which man was created to participate.*”⁴

As evidence for this view, Jordan cites only one Scripture, John 17:20-21:

Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on me through their word; That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me.

¹ See: Lyle D. Bierma, *German Calvinism in the Confessional Age: The Covenant Theology of Caspar Olevianus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996).

² *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. by Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), p. 247.

³ James B. Jordan, *The Law of the Covenant* (Tyler, Tex.: Institute for Christian Economics, 1984), p. 4. (Italics in the original.)

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

Both Jordan's Trinitarian view and the more traditional view held by prominent Reformed theologians of the past may be and have been questioned. One problem with the traditional view that there is a covenant between the Persons of the Trinity – whether thought of in Trinitarian or in soteriological terms – is that the Bible contains no explicit reference to such a covenant. In the words of O. Palmer Robertson, “A sense of artificiality flavors the effort to structure in covenantal terms the mysteries of God's eternal counsels. Scripture simply does not say much on the pre-creation shape of the decrees of God. To speak concretely of an intertrinitarian ‘covenant’ with terms and conditions between Father and Son mutually endorsed before the foundation of the world is to extend the bounds of scriptural evidence beyond propriety.”⁵

Moreover, the word covenant does not appear in the context Jordan cites. In fact, the word “covenant” does not appear in the entire Gospel according to John, nor in his epistles. It is used in the book of Revelation only once (11:19). Jordan's citation of John 17:20-21 provokes the questions: Why should the covenant idea be read into a book of the Bible that never mentions it? And if a covenant is to be found here, why should it be a covenant that is nowhere else mentioned in the Bible? Are there not other approaches to this passage of Scripture that do more justice to both the general context of the Gospel of John as well as the immediate context of our Lord's prayer?

Non-Covenantal Approaches to Interpretation

Although the following classification involves some oversimplification, it seems fair to say that there are three basic approaches to John 17:20-21. First, one may take an “ontological-literal” approach which suggests that Jesus speaks of “oneness of being.” The concept “perichoresis” developed by Gregory Nazianzen to describe the way in which the divine and human natures of Christ “coinhere in one another without the integrity of either being diminished by the presence of the other,” was also used to describe the “way in which the three divine Persons mutually dwell in one another and coinhere or inexist in one another while nevertheless remaining other than one another and distinct from one another.”⁶ Interpreting John 17:20-21 in these terms, the approach apparently followed by F. L. Godet, the ontological unity of the Persons of the Trinity is seen as the basis of a similar unity among believers brought about by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

Second, it is also possible to see the unity referred to here as an ethical unity of fellowship and love among the Persons of the Trinity, which is then reflected among Christians, an approach followed by H. A. W. Meyer. The third type of interpretation is one in which the ethical and ontological are combined. Hendriksen, for example, writes “To be sure, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one *in essence*; believers, on the other hand, are one in mind, effort, and purpose... These two kinds of unity are not the same. Nevertheless, there *is* a resemblance.”⁷

The gap between an ontological and an ethical approach is rather wide and a combination of the two may seem risky. The reason for the diversity in interpretation is to be found in two

⁵ O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), p. 54.

⁶ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), p. 102.

⁷ William Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary, Exposition of the Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1953), vol. 2, p. 364.

expressions. First, in the verse immediately following those cited by Jordan, Jesus says that He has bestowed glory on the believers that may be one “just as we are one” (vs. 22). Though more explicit here in verse 22, the same suggestion that the oneness of believers is analogous to a oneness in God is already found in verse 21. To do justice to this passage, then, one must determine what kind of unity Jesus is here speaking of.

Second, Jesus uses unusual expressions for His relationship both to the Father and to believers. He does not simply say “be one as we are one,” He also says “as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us.” These unusual “in” expressions seem to be explaining the idea of “oneness” here: “that they all may be one; *even as* thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us.” A correct interpretation of these verses, then, will also have to explain what Jesus means by these remarkable “in” expressions.

In my opinion, the three approaches suggested above offer less than satisfactory answers to both problems. On the one hand, the oneness referred to here seems to be something other than “ontological” oneness, for although the “ontological” type of interpretation can account for the “in” expressions, it is difficult to imagine what it would mean for believers to be one in a manner similar to the ontological oneness of the Trinity. The indwelling of the Spirit does not really provide an answer, for the Spirit’s residence in believers is not to be understood “ontologically.”

On the other hand, an interpretation that suggests the oneness here is a mere oneness of purpose and love seems overly tame, almost trivial, and entirely unable to account for the “in” expressions. The very difficulty of making good sense of the language employed compels us to consider other possibilities.

Legitimacy of Covenantal Interpretation

What Jordan’s citation of these verses implied was a covenantal interpretation. He has not expounded that in detail, but careful consideration of the language in John 17:20-21 offers support for his insight and justification for the view that Reformed theology offers a distinctly Trinitarian view of the covenant. This passage offers the primary, if not the exclusive, exegetical basis for such a view. It begs for careful examination.

What would a covenantal interpretation here mean? We might say that a covenantal interpretation is simply an intensification of the ethical view. I think that it is more. By defining the love and fellowship envisioned, the covenant offers an explanation of Christian unity that goes deeper than a mere unity of purpose or love. Or, to put it in different words, the very ideas of love and unity in the Bible are not comprehensible apart from the covenant. These words belong to the covenantal sphere of language. Unity on this view would be unity in the covenant, something more than the notion of “ethical” unity and something that is possible to be held in common between God and man, unlike ontological union.

A covenantal also interpretation offers a Biblical answer to the unusual “in” expressions employed in this context. It seems best to understand our Lord here as alluding to Old Testament ideas. To begin with, the idea of God’s presence with His people, first in the Garden, then in the tabernacle and the temple, is the Old Testament background for Jesus’ promise that the Spirit will “dwell in” believers. In Solomon’s prayer dedicating the temple, he expresses in non-theological language the precise point that God’s presence with Israel was covenantal not “ontological.” It was a fulfillment of the promise of the Abrahamic covenant that God would be

with His people to bless them and make them a channel of blessing for the whole world (1 Ki. 8:20-21, 23-53).

Though a covenantal interpretation promises to provide insight on both interpretive problems, the original questions have not yet really been answered: If Jesus intended to express covenantal unity, why didn't He speak of the covenant? How can the covenant be an interpretive grid in a book of the Bible that seems so unconcerned with the covenantal idea that the word "covenant" does not even appear? Unless these questions can be answered, Jordan's citation of John 17:20-21 might justly be regarded as another example of Reformed scholars reading their pet covenant doctrine into a passage of Scripture when there is in fact no justification for such a reading *in the context*.

To answer the question of whether or not a covenantal interpretation best fits the passage, we must consider Jesus' words in context — first in the context of the whole Bible, then, in the context of John's Gospel, and, finally, in the most immediate context of the upper room discourse, for which the prayer in chapter 17 provides a conclusion.

Context of Scripture

The theme of unity among men is one that finds profound emphasis early in the Bible in passages relevant to the exegesis of John 17. The tower of Babel project was a self-conscious attempt on the part of Nimrod — a spiritual descendent of Cain — to build the city of man in opposition to the kingdom of God. The people were united in evil. They all had "one lip," an expression which includes, but also apparently means more than, one language. It also implies that they had a united "confession of faith," a covenantal unity of thought and commitment. But this was a malevolent unity of covenantal rebellion that roused God's judgment against the race.

From the time of Babel men have been disunited by divine decree. Not only their languages, but their whole way of thinking was made different, necessitating the division into separate nations. Shortly after Babel the distinction between the seventy nations in Genesis 11 was further complicated by God's calling Abraham to be the head of a priestly people. This established the distinction between the seed of Abraham and the rest of the nations (Gen. 12:1-3). Thus, the fundamental disunity of the race from the time of Babel and the necessity of a solution to the problem of man's racial alienation are basic themes of Biblical theology, themes which are vital to understanding the Abrahamic covenant.

It is also essential to note here that the Abrahamic covenant was granted by God in part as a solution to Babel, promising a future restoration of man's unity. In the climactic words of the original promise: "in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed" (Gen. 12:3; the same "in" language is also used in Gen. 18:18 and 28:14). Later, when the prophets foresaw the day the whole world would be blessed in the Messiah, they were expounding the Abrahamic covenant. Zephaniah even alludes specifically to Babel, when he foresees the day when that judgment shall be undone: "For then will I give to the peoples a pure lip, that they may all call upon the name of the LORD, to serve him with one shoulder" (Zeph. 3:8; cf. Psa. 22:27-29; 67:4, 7; 72:8-11; 86:9; Isa. 2:2-3; 11:9; 19:18; 49:6; etc.).

The coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, of which Jesus spoke much in His final discourse, was manifested in the spiritual gift of speaking in unknown languages. Now, whatever else this may mean, the significance of this gift in reference to Babel is clear. The curse of Babel which divided the human race into seventy estranged nations is now done away in Christ. Men still have multiple languages, but those who believe in Christ have been given one "lip," one

covenantal confession of faith. They are united in their faith in and worship of the Father, Son, and Spirit. The seed of Abraham who brings blessing to all the families of the earth has come!

If this is the correct Biblical theological context in terms of which Jesus' prayer for unity is to be understood, then it is not unnatural to interpret Jesus' words as covenantal expressions. If unity among men is a covenantal concern from the time of Abraham, then it is most natural that the disciples themselves, as well as modern readers of the Gospel, should interpret Jesus' words in the context of Babel, the Abrahamic promise, and the covenantal gift of the Spirit. Before we can conclude that this is the background theological motif for Jesus' words, however, we must also consider the context of the Gospel according to John, and the more immediate context of the farewell discourse, as well as the most immediate context of John 17.

Context of John's Gospel

As we mentioned above, the Gospel according to John does not use the word "covenant." Therefore, apart from the fact that every book in the Bible is covenantal in a general sense, it might seem that the covenant has no special significance in John's Gospel. It may seem even more unlikely that the idea of the covenant provides the background for our understanding Jesus' words in John 17:20-21. Closer attention to the details of John's Gospel, however, discloses its emphatically covenantal character. For it is not the presence or absence of the word "covenant" which is decisive. It is, rather, the "omnipresence" of the broader theology of the covenant, an abundance of covenantal expressions, symbolism which alludes to the covenant, and the elaborate coalition of all these factors which determine our understanding of John's Gospel as "covenantal."

An adequate presentation of the material confirming the importance of the covenant in John requires a commentary on the whole Gospel, but the basic evidence may be briefly cited. First, Jordan's outline of the Gospel of John in terms of the tabernacle suggests that the covenantal presence of God with His people is one of John's central concerns.⁸ Second, Meredith Kline draws attention to the fact that John in particular, even more than the other Gospels, presents Christ as the new Moses, the mediator of a new covenant.⁹ Third, John's Gospel may justly be called the "Deuteronomic" Gospel, for many of its major verbal themes are imported directly from the book of Deuteronomy.¹⁰ As Pryor points out:

It is especially noteworthy that on many occasions the injunctions to love God and to obey/keep his commands are brought together, so that we can see that love for God is always demonstrated by covenant obedience (Deut 6:5-6; 7:9; 10:12-13; 11:1, 13, 22; 19:9; 30:6-8; Josh 22:5). This Deuteronomic pattern (and note in 30:6-8 the promise of a renewed people, the

⁸ James B. Jordan, *Through New Eyes: Developing a Biblical View of the World* (Brentwood, Ten.: Wolgemuth and Hyatt, 1988), pp. 266-269. Of this same idea, John W. Pryor writes, "But of all the covenantal images in John's Gospel, perhaps the most powerful is what is given in 1:14. The motif of divine presence in Israel as the sure sign of their covenant status was a central motif of the Old Testament." John W. Pryor, *John: Evangelist of the Covenant People* (Downers Grove, IL.: InterVarsity Press, 1992), p. 158.

⁹ Meredith G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, revised edition, 1975), pp. 190-95.

¹⁰ John W. Pryor, *John the Evangelist of the Covenant People*, pp. 161-63.

foundation of the new covenant hopes) has been taken up by Jesus in John. Not only does the Johannine corpus use ‘commandment’ and ‘to command’ with greater frequency than the rest of the New Testament, but love for Christ and obedience to his commands are brought together in a way which reminds us of the Deuteronomic covenant obligations.¹¹

Fourth, throughout his Gospel John presents the special relationship between Jesus and the heavenly Father in the terms of the covenant. Nothing could be more significant than the fact that the fundamental formula of the covenant, “God with us,” finds various forms of expression in John in reference to the relationship between Father and Son. In the very first verse of the prologue, John writes “and the Word was with God,” using the Greek “pros” to describe the uniqueness of Jesus’ covenantal intimacy with the Father. Later in the prologue, John signifies covenantal fellowship between the Father and the Son as the basis for the Son’s revelation of the Father: “No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him” (1:18).

The same theme finds profound, if only infrequently direct, expression in some of the most important passages describing the relationship of the Father and the Son. Confronted with Pharisees who challenge his testimony, Jesus answers that His testimony is true, even if He bears witness of Himself. He then turns the tables on them, condemning them for judging in the flesh and adding a word about His own judgment: “Ye judge after the flesh; I judge no man. And yet if I judge, my judgment is true: for I am not alone, but I and the Father that sent me” (8:15-16). Not only are the inherently covenantal ideas of judgment and witness — two of the most important themes in John’s Gospel — here linked to the covenantal presence of the Father with the Son, but the often repeated fact of the Father’s sending the Son into the world — which can only be called a covenantal commission — is also associated with God’s presence with the Son. The Father sent the Son to fulfill a covenantal task and is therefore with Him to bless the Son’s labor.

This point finds direct and clear expression later in the same chapter when Jesus says: “And he that sent me is *with me*: the Father hath not left me alone; for I do always those things that please him” (8:29; emphasis added). This places the whole idea of Jesus’ commission into the world (5:23, 30, 36, 37; 6:39, 40, 44, 57; 8:16, 42; 10:36; 12:49; 14:24) as well as the works He performs (5:17, 20, 36; 10:18, 25, 32, 37, 38; 14:10, 11; 15:24) in an explicitly covenantal context, defined by a typical variation of the quintessential covenantal formula, “God with us.”

Not less important than the covenantal idea of God’s presence is John’s emphasis on the love of the Father for the Son. The Father loves the Son before the foundation of the world (17:24) and, because of that love, He shows all things to the Son (5:20) and has given all things into the Son’s hand (3:35). This love is set forth in explicitly covenantal terms, clearly alluding to the language of Deuteronomy: “As the Father hath loved me, so have I loved you: continue ye in my love. If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father’s commandments, and abide in his love” (15:9-10 cf. Dt. 7:9, 12; 10:12; 11:1 ff.; 11:13 ff.; etc). Or again: “Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life, that I might take it again... This commandment have I received of my Father” (10:17, 18b). The Father loves the Son because the Son keeps the Father’s commandments (15:9-10); the Son does His will (4:34; 5:30; 6:39-40) and fulfills the commission given to Him (17:4). Also, through covenantal

¹¹ Ibid., p. 162.

obedience, the Son proves His love to the Father for all the world to see: “But that the world may know that I love the Father; and as the Father gave me commandment, even so I do. Arise, let us go hence” (14:31).

Finally, closely associated with the previous language, there is a combination of Johannine themes which together compose a covenant. John presents Jesus as sent by the Father into the world (3:17, 34; 5:36, 38; 6:29, 57; 7:29; 8:42; 10:36; 11:43) to speak specific words (3:34; 12:49; 14:10, 24; and do a specific work (4:34; 5:17, 20, 36; 9:4; 10:25, 32, 37, 38; 14:11, 12) for which He is rewarded (6:37-39; 17:2), which is to say that John has described Jesus’ mission as including all the distinctive elements of a covenant in a context that is pregnant with covenantal language.

In the light of the above evidence, partial as it is, it should be clear that a covenantal approach to the words of Jesus in John 17:20-21 is anything but unnatural. On the contrary, given the above understanding of the larger context of John’s Gospel, the real questions become: Why should we avoid the term “covenant” in describing a relationship that is presented in language clearly alluding to Deuteronomy? And, why should we avoid the word covenant to describe a relationship that has all the distinctive elements of what the Bible calls a covenant? If we ought not to use the word “covenant” to describe the relationship between the Father and the Son, what other word should we use?

Context of the Farewell Discourse

What we find in the farewell discourse, of which the prayer in chapter 17 is the climax and conclusion, confirms our perspective on the Gospel as a whole, for this section of the Gospel includes a concentrated emphasis on the same distinctively covenantal themes. Jesus was sent into the world by the Father (13:20; 15:21; 16:5; 16:27-28; 17:3, 8, 18, 21, 23, 25) to speak certain words (14:10, 24; 15:22-23; 17:8) and accomplish certain deeds (14:10, 11; 15:24; 17:4) for which He is rewarded (17:2, 6, 9, 10, 11, 12, 24). Jesus keeps the Father’s commandments because He loves the Father (14:31), and by that same obedience He abides in the Father’s love (15:10). Jesus is never alone because the Father is “with” Him now (16:32) even as the Father was “with” Him before the foundation of the world (17:5).

Another remarkable feature of the farewell discourse is that the relationship between Jesus and the Father is repeatedly seen as parallel to the relationship between Jesus and the disciples. In His prayer to the Father, Jesus says “As thou hast sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world” (17:18; cf. 20:21). He also says that the world will know that the disciples are His followers when they love one another, just as He also says that the world will know that He loves the Father when He keeps the Father’s commandment (13:34-35; 14:31). Again, the disciples are to keep Jesus’ commandments and so prove they love Him (14:15, 21, 23; 15:9-10), just as He has kept the Father’s commandments (15:10). The parallels here are all “covenantal” in nature. In other words, the relationship of Christ and the Father is a pattern for the relationship between Christ and the disciples because they are both covenantal relationships.

An especially important passage in the farewell discourse is the famous allegory of the vine and the branches. Here Jesus employs a well-known Old Testament image of the covenant relationship between God and His people (cf. Deu. 32:32; Ps. 80:8-16; 128:3; Isa. 5:1-7; Jer. 2:21; Hos. 10:1; etc.). Neither Jesus’ disciples nor a Biblically educated modern reader can possibly miss the covenantal reference of this symbolic language. Furthermore, and significant for the understanding of John 17:20-21, the expressions “in me” and “in you” are clearly used to

describe a covenantal relationship. The branches are “in” Christ (15:2, 4, etc.), but if they do not “abide in” Him, they will not bear fruit and, therefore, be cast away (15:2, 6). Those which do “abide” will “bear fruit” (15:2, 5). To abide “in” Christ means to remain “in” Christ’s love, which means obedience to His commandments (15:9-10).

As in the larger context of the farewell discourse, so in this allegory the relationship between Christ and the Father is set forth as the pattern for the relationship between Christ and the disciples. Just as Jesus abides in the Father’s love by keeping His commandments, so the disciples are to abide in Christ. This repeats what is said earlier in the farewell discourse: “At that day ye shall know that I am in my Father, and ye in me, and I in you. He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me: and he that loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and will manifest myself to him. . . . Jesus answered and said unto him, If a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him” (14:20-21, 23). Clearly, then, the farewell discourse and especially the covenantal picture of the vine and the branches provides the contextual key for understanding the unusual “in” expressions of Jesus’ prayer.

Thus, in the verses that form the immediate context for Jesus’ prayer, the covenantal themes found throughout the Gospel are repeated, a parallel is drawn between Jesus’ relationship with the Father and His relationship to the disciples, a famous symbol of Israel’s covenant relationship with God is used to describe the relationship of Jesus with the disciples, and, finally, in the symbolic language of the covenant picture, as well as in other parts of the farewell discourse, Jesus uses, with a covenantal significance, various “in” expressions like the ones in His concluding prayer. Once again, then, the question is not why we should read the passage covenantally, but how we could possibly read it any other way.

Covenantal Exposition of John 17:20-23

When we interpret John 17, we must keep in mind the fact that we are approaching perhaps the most theologically profound author of the New Testament, quoting what may be the most theologically profound of all of Jesus’ words. While it is not possible to do justice to this passage, we may suggest the contours of a covenantal interpretation. The important elements to be considered are the following four: 1) the purpose of the prayer as stated in verse 21 and verse 23; 2) the meaning of the glory given to the disciples in verse 22; 3) the idea of unity in verses 21 and 23; 4) the meaning of the “in” phrases.

Purpose of Prayer

That the purpose of Jesus’ prayer was the unity of His disciples is emphasized by repetition, with slight variation, in verses 21 and 23: “that the world may believe that thou didst send me,” “that the world may know that thou didst send me,” and “[that the world may know that thou] lovedst them, even as thou lovedst me.” On any interpretation of the exact meaning of the three phrases employed, it is probably best to view them as envisioning a single purpose. But what exactly does Jesus mean by this petition?

In the previous verses, Jesus has already made a clear distinction between the world and His disciples. Even more He specifically denied that He prayed for the world (vs.9). He described the world as hostile to Himself and His followers (11, 14, 15, 16). Given this context, we have to

ask, whether there has been a change and He is now praying for the world, or whether the threefold petition for the world is to be understood as a prayer for judgment in accordance with the previous context?

A prayer for judgment seems highly unlikely. It not only forces the language of Jesus' prayer into a peculiar straightjacket consistency, it ignores the important transition in verses 17-19, the contextual key to the meaning of Jesus' view of the world in verses 21-23. The transition is clear. After first praying that the disciples would not be overcome by the world (14-16), Jesus prays for their sanctification and refers to their being sent into the world with a mission like His. This is where the perspective on the world changes. Rather than being the place of evil for which Jesus refuses to pray, the world is now seen from the perspective of Jesus' mission. It is the place Jesus was sent to save: "For God sent not the Son into the world to judge the world; but that the world should be saved through him" (Jn. 3:17).

It is, therefore, in terms of the mission of the Church as a continuation of the mission of Christ that Jesus prays for the world in words that recall the earlier prayer for His disciples: "And this is life eternal, that they should know thee the only true God, and him whom thou didst send, even Jesus Christ. . . . [they] knew of a truth that I came forth from thee, and they believed that thou didst send me." (17:3, 8). A prayer for the world to know and believe that Jesus was sent by the Father, and to know that the Father loves the Church as He loves Christ can only be a prayer for the salvation of the world — a prayer, in other words, for the fulfillment of the promise of the Abrahamic covenant.

Meaning of Glory

The idea of glory, one of the main themes of John's Gospel, surprisingly, often has reference to Jesus' death (7:39; 12:16, 23; 13:31-32). However, in the present context it seems to be resurrection glory that is in view, for the glory in consideration here is the glory that Jesus shared with the Father before the world began and the glory to which He is returning (17:1, 5, 24).

If that assumption is correct, we are again faced with the difficulty of unusual language. What does Jesus mean when He says "And the glory which thou hast given me I have given unto them" (22a)? My suggestion is that Jesus is referring here to the blessings of salvation in general but especially the gift of the Holy Spirit, the one who will glorify Christ in and through the disciples (16:14). This is in accord with Jesus' earlier promise that the Holy Spirit would be given to those who believe in Him transforming believers into Edenic gardens that bring the water of life to the world: "He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, from within him shall flow rivers of living water. But this spake he of the Spirit, which they that believed on him were to receive: for the Spirit was not yet given; because Jesus was not yet glorified" (7:38-39).

If it is the gift of the Spirit that is especially in mind, we understand also how the gift of this glory is related to the unification of believers and the salvation of the world. For whatever the gift of glory here is, it brings a unity to the people of God that is analogous to the unity between Christ and the Father (22b) and it is this unity that persuades the world that Christ has been sent of the Father (21, 23). The theology here seems to demand that the glory given by Christ is to be associated especially with the Spirit.

Idea of Unity

We are now ready to consider the unity spoken of in verses 21 and 23. This is a unity brought about by the gift of glory. It must be observable to the world since it is a means for the salvation of the world (21, 23). Visible unity of this sort, especially in the context of John's Gospel, must mean the unity of covenant life. There is no reference here to an institution as such. When the unity here is said to be like the unity of the Father and the Son, it can only mean a unity of love and purpose grounded in the eternal covenant.

Covenant unity is included in the figure of speech Jesus used to describe covenantal life as branches abiding in the vine through obedience to God's commandments. When the people of God live in obedience to God's word, their lives governed by a single covenantal standard, they will manifest unity of fellowship and purpose, just as Jesus kept the Father's commandments and walked in perfect unity with Him.

Meaning of "in" Phrases

There are four important "in" phrases. Two refer to Jesus and the Father: "Thou, Father, in me" (21, repeated in verse 23) and "I in thee" (21). Two refer to Christians "they also may be in us" (21) and "I in them" (23). The first two phrases refer to the Father and the Son mutually indwelling one another. This mutual indwelling is both the basis for the perfect unity of the Father and the Son and the pattern for the unity of Christians. It is obvious that a fully "ontological" interpretation of the mutual indwelling of the Father and the Son could only suggest a unity of Christians that is vaguely similar. My suggestion is that we should see the ontological mutual inexistence of the Persons of the Trinity as having covenantal implications and, therefore, as being also a pattern for the unity of God's people. Unless the ontological coinherence of the Persons of the Trinity has covenantal connotations, there could be no real analogy between the relationship between Christ and the Father and the relationship between God and man. The Persons of the Trinity dwelling covenantally in one another offers a theological background for the fact that God makes His covenant with His people by "dwelling in" them.

The other two expressions refer to Christians being "in" the Father and the Son, and Christ being "in" Christians. Once again the immediate context of the farewell discourse contains similar language. Christians are said to be "in" Christ and commanded to abide in that position through covenantal obedience (15:1-10). For believers to be "in" the Father and the Son must have a similar meaning. Believers dwelling in God, in other words, refers to covenantal relationship.

This is also the meaning of Christ dwelling in the believer, referred to in an earlier context when Jesus says, "In that day ye shall know that I am in my Father, and ye in me, and I in you. He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me: and he that loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and will manifest myself unto him. . . . If a man love me, he will keep my word: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him" (14:20-21, 23). Christ dwells in us as covenant Lord. Disobedience to His commandments brings discipline, or even expulsion (15:6). Obedience brings blessing, for obedience to the commandments is an expression of love and loyalty to Christ which He rewards with deeper fellowship and greater blessing, whereas disobedience is a rejection of His Lordship.

Summary

If our interpretation of these four basic issues is correct, the meaning of the paragraph in which Jesus prays for the unity of all believers will be something like the following. First, Jesus prays not only for the disciples but also for those who believe through the disciples preaching (20) in order that they all may be one in covenantal faith and obedience (21a).

Second, Jesus takes this to a higher theological plane when He indicates that the covenantal unity of believers has its ground in His dwelling in them and its pattern in the mutual indwelling of the Persons of the Trinity (21b, 23a). Christ speaks of a mutual indwelling of God and man when He says that believers are to be in God (21b) and He will be in them (23a). This mutuality of indwelling points to the deep mystery of covenantal fellowship and oneness that comes to fulfillment in the new covenant in Christ.

In the old covenant era, when God made a covenant with Israel to be their covenant Lord, He came to them and dwelt in the tabernacle and temple, just as He had originally dwelt with Adam in the Garden. This dwelling with man in the old creation was from the beginning a temporary state that pointed forward to the indwelling of the Spirit (cf. 1 Cor. 15:20-28, 35-50). In both, the old creation dwelling “with” man and the new creation dwelling “in” man, there is an analogy to the mutual indwelling of the Persons of the Trinity, not indeed in its ontological meaning, but in its covenantal significance.

Third, Jesus indicates that the purpose of this covenantal indwelling is the extension of covenant blessing to all the world (21c). Abiding in Christ, the covenant picture of Christians united in Him and bearing fruit through obedience, provides the bridge which links indwelling and the conversion of the world, for when the world sees an obedient Church, it will be converted and the Abrahamic promise will be fulfilled.

Fourth, Jesus speaks of the gift of the glory of God, and the Spirit of glory who glorifies Christ and His people (22). As Jesus taught the disciples shortly before He prayed, it is through the indwelling of the Spirit that Christ and the Father are also present (14:15 ff.) and, therefore also, through the Spirit that Christians are one. The same Holy Spirit dwelling “in” all of us, not indeed in any “ontologically” limiting sense, but dwelling in us as He did in the tabernacle, brings all Christians together into one. Through the Spirit, we share the covenant life of God.

Fifth, Jesus implies that His indwelling the Church brings about increased covenantal unity over time (“that they may be perfected in one,” 23). There is a process, a covenantal process of pruning the branches so that they bear more fruit, which leads to perfected unity. As the Church matures over time, the world is eventually converted, for it can no longer resist the revelation of the glory of Christ in and through the Church.

Conclusion

It seems fair to conclude, then, that we not only may but must consider the covenant to understand John 17:20-21. Furthermore, we have seen that we not only may but must speak of a pretemporal intertrinitarian covenant to do justice to the profound language of Jesus' prayer. The Father and the Son mutually indwell one another, and the Holy Spirit, in an ontological sense which can never be true of man, but this coinherence of the Persons of the Trinity is also the ground of God's covenant life. From eternity the Father, Son, and Spirit share a fullness of covenantal love, and it is this personal fellowship of the Trinity that is the life of the covenant.

Jordan's Trinitarian view of the covenant brings covenant theology to a rest point that is Trinitarian and therefore theological in the highest and most profound sense. Because the covenant consists in such mutual love and commitment, Jordan calls the covenant a "personal" bond. Because the Persons of the Trinity are related hierarchically, and because the covenant expresses the absolute demands of God's holiness and righteousness, the covenant is a "structural" bond. The Persons of the Trinity, absolutely devoted to the mutual blessing and glorification of one another, constitute a covenantal community of life.

It is true, as Robertson points out, that the Scripture says little about the "pre-creation shape of the decrees of God" or about "terms and conditions between Father and Son mutually endorsed before the foundation of the world." But it does not say nothing about such things, for Jesus clearly spoke of having been commissioned by the Father to speak specific words and perform specific deeds. And He was promised a reward for that work. Of this there can be no doubt. The fact that there is not much written about this sublime and wonderful truth should not cause us to doubt the reality of the little that is written.

But perhaps where Robertson errs, and many other Reformed scholars with him, is when he speaks of the covenant as if "terms and conditions" were the essence of it. They are not. Rather, the covenant should be thought of as a fellowship of love, a "personal-structural bond" joining the Persons of God in a "community of life." In other words, the covenant is not simply a means, it is also, and most importantly, the end. Certainly God saves us through His covenant, but we must not forget that He saves us unto His covenant. The gift of the Holy Spirit to indwell us and make our bodies His temples is the means of our sanctification, but it is no mere means, for the gift of the Spirit is the very essence of salvation. And when our bodies have been resurrected by that same Spirit and we attain the fulness of our salvation, we will share the covenant life of God in the New Jerusalem.

And I saw no temple therein: for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it. And the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof. . . . And there shall be no more curse: but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it; and his servants shall serve him: and they shall see his face; and his name shall be in their foreheads. (Rev. 21:22-23; 22:3-4)