

The Invincible Doctrine Of Federal Headship

Adam ... "who is the figure of him that was to come," (Romans 5: 14). "For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive," (1 Corinthians 15:22).

Federal headship!

It is a glorious reality.

In its light we have true knowledge of ourselves and our fellow men. First, we know ourselves to be dead in Adam, for "the [first, cjc] covenant being made with Adam as a public person, not for himself only, but for his posterity, all mankind descending from him by ordinary generation, sinned in him, and fell with him in that first transgression;" and second, we can know certain hope of heaven, for we learn that "the covenant of grace was made with Christ as the second Adam, and in him with all the elect as his seed." [1] In Adam we are fallen sinners cast upon the mercy of God, and in Christ we are redeemed sinners raised up to sit in heavenly places.

The Reformation recovered the doctrine of federal headship, the Reformed have developed and placed it in its covenantal setting.

As such it is the invincible doctrine of Federal Headship!

We shall discuss the doctrine, and then note that when the Reformers' tied headship into predestination they had loosed a truth that might not rest until it had led the church of Christ into the knowledge of God's covenant - Federal Theology.

Federal Headship?[2]

One person appointed by God to represent the many within his covenant. That one is the Head. He is like the root from which the whole organism of his body springs forth and grows. He is a public person who represents every member of the whole number that is incorporated into him. God endows the Head with authority and the legal right to represent his offspring, to stand in their place, to act on their behalf and in their name. Furthermore, such is the legal relation of the members to their head that each is accounted by God to act in, with and by the head.

Adam and Christ are both representative heads within God's covenant.

Adam represented all mankind under the first covenant, variously called the covenant of creation, life, friendship or works. Within that covenant Man was assured of life in God's presence and blessing while ever he kept covenant by loving God in perfect, personal, perpetual conformity to God and his command. Man was also warned that if ever he broke covenant by sinning against God: "...thou shalt surely die." Adam broke that covenant. "In Adam all die"

Adam's sin belongs to, and effects not only himself, but all men descending from him by ordinary generation. Adam headship means that we sinned in him and

fell with him in his first transgression. All are involved in that sin through headship. Legally we are guilty of that original sin for it is ours in Adam. Organically, we partake of the sinful nature of our head; so that from our mother's womb we are devoid of original righteousness, totally depraved, utterly unwilling, unable and opposed to all that is spiritually good, and wholly inclined to all evil – continually!" Sin and misery has swallowed mankind whole! This truth is invincible – it might be denied but it cannot be escaped!

Should this dreadful reality strike home to our hearts we will never again think in terms of co-operating with God or contributing toward our salvation! We will at last agree with God, "by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin." The broken covenant will sound in our hearts as it did in Adam's, "thou shalt surely die." How could we even begin to understand the universality of sin and death, or indeed our own need of the Saviour sent from God without this knowledge. It is a dreadful reality, but it is our reality in Adam.

In like manner Christ, the Second Adam, was appointed by God in eternity to be the head of the covenant of grace. "His goings forth are from of old, even from everlasting," (Micah 5:2). At his appointment God gave all the elect unto Christ as his seed, thereby establishing Christ as Head over the whole body of his elect, (Ephesians 1:4-5.) On the basis of this eternal predestination Christ was authorised and commissioned to act as Head of his elect within the covenant of grace. He came forth to fulfil all the demands of the broken covenant in the place of his seed; and thereby to redeem his body, bestow upon them the adoption of children, and lift them into glorious life with their covenant God.[3] His obedience effects (actually redeems and saves to the uttermost) all in whose name and place he acts. Just as really as the first head's sin destroyed his natural seed, so Christ's obedience saves his elect seed: "even so in Christ shall all be made alive."

This reality – the might, power, and sufficiency of Christ's headship is the substance of the gospel. It is the good news that God publishes in the world fallen in Adam, because his covenant demands that the body be united to its Head through faith. Surely, this reality ought to give pause to those of Reformed persuasion who insist that God must desire that all who hear the gospel should be saved. Men, we ask, what of the Headship of Christ? What is the content of your gospel?

Christ's headship also ensures that the covenant is unconditional. Christ is the one who is appointed to act on behalf of all God's elect. According to the tenor of his own ordinance, God looks to the head not to the body for the provision of everything necessary. Every conceivable requirement, condition, or pre-requisite for salvation must be satisfied by the Head. Nothing – absolutely nothing – is wanting. Therefore, God is satisfied. Salvation must now be applied to the body as a free gift, by grace alone. Headship demands it.

This truth has tremendous significance to saving faith. If a sinner should wish to contribute one particle toward his own salvation, he commits the outrageous crime of despising Christ![4] Arminianism is a crime. Labouring to become good enough to be saved is a crime. Self-righteousness is a crime. Federal headship demands faith in Christ ALONE. The Reformers' View Point.

In Adam all die - in Christ shall all be made alive – as is determined by eternal predestination. Headship is predestined. Federal headship is predestination outworked. That was the distinctive perspective of the Reformers on this subject.

Though not yet singled out for attention, developed nor systematised, this doctrine was integral to the Reformers' thought. Martin Luther saw it as one of his "very strong arguments":

Seeing that through the one transgression of the one man, Adam, we are all under sin and damnation, how can we attempt anything that is not sinful and damnable. ...Original sin itself, therefore, leaves free choice with no capacity to do anything but sin and be damned.[5]

John Calvin, laments that "the ancient doctors of the church touched upon this subject so obscurely," and proceeds himself to work with the doctrine of federal headship at considerable length.[6] He agrees with Augustine on the subject in his defence of predestination: "As he alone was predestinated, as MAN, to be our HEAD, so many of us are also predestinated to be his members.[7] Of Adam Calvin writes:

1. The eternal predestination of God, by which he decreed, before the fall of Adam, what should take place in the whole human race and in every individual thereof, was unalterably fixed and determined.
2. That Adam himself, on account of his departure from God, was deservedly appointed to eternal death
3. And lastly, that in the person of Adam, thus fallen and lost, his whole future offspring were also eternally condemned; but so eternally condemned that God deems worthy the honour of his adoption all those whom he freely chose out of that future offspring.[8]

John Knox in his defence of Predestination was, if anything, even clearer:

In the first man Adam (who fell from his purity) have we neither love, righteousness nor life, but the contraries, to wit, hatred sin, and death. But God, as he had chosen his Elect before all beginning in Christ Jesus His Son, so has he placed these gifts in the second Adam alone, 'that out of his fullness we may all receive even grace for grace.'[9]

The Reformers restored headship to the orbit of eternal predestination. Headship is God's will. Divine predestination, they insisted, determines the truth with respect to the headship of Adam and of Christ. Headship serves God's purpose to glorify his justice and make his power known in the punishment of sin, and it serves his ultimate purpose to show his covenant to elect mankind redeemed unto himself in Jesus Christ! Election is a covenantal act. Election demands a covenant head. And a covenant head demands a covenant theology. Thus, the Reformers' faithfulness to God's sovereign predestination became the launching pad for our covenant theology. In fact, it would seem that for the Reformers predestination was their covenant theology!

How did they dispense with the Pelagian assertion that the same all men /many/ whole world is represented by Adam and by Christ? Knox is representative: "You make the love of God common to all men, and that do we constantly deny, and say, that before all beginning God hath loved his Elect in Christ Jesus his Son, and that from the same eternity he hath reprobated others." They brought predestination down like an axe on this pernicious root. They taught Adam and Christ as Heads of two distinct categories. Under Adam, stand all mankind concluded in sin and justly liable to eternal damnation. Out of Adam God chooses the whole world of elect sinners, arraying them under Christ as their Head and Redeemer, leaving the world of reprobate sinners forever in Adam. Christ is not their head. That many has no part in him, for they are children of wrath who shall perish in the way of their own sin. Common grace in Christ? The Reformers constantly denied it! The federal headship of Adam and of Christ according to predestination forbid it.

That was federal headship according to the Reformation.

In our day, many are embarrassed by the Reformers' unwavering adherence to predestination – but the heirs of the Reformation ought never be. Their faithfulness gave the Reformed churches the direction and impetus they needed to understand God's purpose in predestination in terms of the realisation of his covenant with man in Christ the head. That development brought forth in the Reformed churches a mature confession of predestinarian federal theology – that confession is the Westminster Confession of Faith.

At its very heart stands the Son of God appointed from all eternity to be the Mediator of the covenant of grace, the second Adam, the federal head of God's elect.

The invincible Head of the invincible covenant of the invincible God!

He is the death knell to all universalism.

He is the nemesis of conditional theology.

He is the heart of Reformed covenant theology!

He is the only hope of heaven for a son of Adam like me!

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Footnotes

[1] Westminster Larger Catechisms
22 and 31.

[2] We have used the term federal because this headship is most emphatically a covenantal ordinance. Headship exists because God establishes his covenant in and through Jesus Christ. Adam was but "the figure of him that was to come," (Romans 5: 14.) Christ is no "Plan B" demanded by the failure of the first Adam. Christ (the end) is before Adam (the means) in God's eternal counsel. Adam is first in time, because Christ must save his people from their sins. Adam serves him who "is the Head of the body, the church, who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the pre-eminence, for it pleased the Father that in Christ should all the fullness dwell," (Col.1:18-19.)

[3] It might also be noted that the Divine appointment of Christ as Head of God's elect provides the legal ground for him to act as a Surety and Substitute, for the imputation of sin to him, for him to offer himself in a vicarious atonement for sin, for the imputation of his righteousness for justification, and the impartation of his righteousness for sanctification. Lose headship and lose all!

[4] Francis Turretin, Institutes of Elenctic Theology,
(Philipsburg: P&R, 1997), Vol 2, p. 247-248.

[5] Martin Luther, Luther and Erasmus: Free Will and
Salvation, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1969), p. 315

[6] John Calvin, Institutes, Book
2, chapter 1, sections 4 – 11.

[7]
John Calvin, Calvin's Calvinism (Grand Rapids: RFP, p. 124.)

[8] Ibid, p. 124.

[9] John Knox, Works Of John Knox,
(Edinburgh, James Thin, 1895), Vol. 5, p. 60, 61.