

Norman Shepherd, *The Call of Grace: How the Covenant Illuminates Salvation and Evangelism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2000). 110 + ix pages. Reviewed by John Barach.

Norman Shepherd's name may not be familiar to many *Christian Renewal* readers, but his writing and lectures have influenced many Reformed ministers for several years. Shepherd taught systematic theology at Westminster Theological Seminary from 1963 to 1981 and then pastored two Christian Reformed Churches.

He retired in 1998, but continues to speak and write. The first part of *The Call of Grace* consists of his lectures on the covenant, given at Erskine Theological Seminary in 1999. The second part is a revision of an older essay on the covenant and evangelism.

In the face of opposition from the world, many people have tried to unite Protestants and Roman Catholics. *Evangelicals and Catholics Together* was one such attempt, and it met with strong opposition. But what was remarkable about the published responses, even from the Reformed men in the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, was the "total absence of any appeal to the covenant.... The covenant plays almost no role, either in the Roman Catholic doctrine of salvation, or in the thinking of many evangelical Christians" (63).

Shepherd starts his treatment of the covenant by distinguishing two dangers: antinomianism and legalism. Antinomians stress that we can't merit salvation by keeping the law, but they downplay the importance of obedience. Legalists, on the other hand, recognize that faith without works is dead and that there is no salvation without repentance, but they ground salvation on our good works.

The Bible doesn't teach either antinomianism or legalism. "Divine grace and human responsibility are ... the two sides, or the two parts, of the covenant that God has made with us and with our children" (9). In the Abrahamic covenant, *promise* was in the foreground, but there were also obligations. In the Mosaic covenant, *obligation* was in the foreground, but salvation was still grounded in God's promise and not on man's "meritorious achievement."

Shepherd argues that the Mosaic covenant was not a republication of the so-called "covenant of works" with Adam. (One could wish he had included a chapter on this first covenant!) He shows that the Mosaic covenant was a fulfilment of God's covenant with Abraham. Paul includes it as one of the "covenants of promise" (Eph. 2:12). The sacrifices proclaimed God's gracious forgiveness; the laws pointed Israel toward a blessed life with God. At no point did God require His children to *merit* anything, nor did He encourage them to try.

Like the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants, the New Covenant involves both promise and demand, leaving no room for either legalism or antinomianism. The conditions of the New Covenant are not optional, but neither are they meritorious. "Faith is required, but faith looks away from personal merit to the promises of God. Repentance and obedience flow from faith as the fullness of faith. This is faithfulness, and faithfulness is perseverance in faith. A living, active, and abiding faith is the way in which the believer enters into eternal life" (50).

This biblical view of the covenant provides the best starting point for interaction between evangelicals and Roman Catholics. Shepherd argues that we need to challenge Roman Catholicism at its root by challenging the whole idea of *merit*: man could never merit anything from God, nor did God demand it. At the same time, this covenantal approach allows us to place proper emphasis on verses like James 2:24 and Galatians 5:6. "Salvation is both by *grace* and through *faith*.... Grace is not without conditions, and a living and active faith is not meritorious achievement" (63).

The second part of the book deals with the relationship between the covenant and evangelism. Part of the reason Reformed people lack evangelistic zeal, Shepherd suggests, is that they don't know how to present the gospel as good news to everyone. They approach evangelism in the light of election and regeneration rather than in the light of the covenant.

Because the Great Commission is based on God's promise to Abraham, evangelism ought to be *covenantal*. The promise is for all God's covenant people, for the whole baptized community. Furthermore, we should address

unbelievers as covenant breakers, proclaiming what God has done to bring salvation and calling them to believe. Reformed evangelists can preach John 3:16 as good news to everyone, regardless of whether they are elect.

That call to faith ought to lead to baptism. We can't see whether a person is regenerate. Instead we hear his profession of faith and we see his baptism as a sign and seal of his entrance into the church, the body of Christ. In terms of the covenant, baptism, not regeneration, "is the moment when we see the transition from death to life and a person is saved" (94). But evangelism — in the full sense — doesn't end when a person is baptized. It continues throughout life as we are discipled and as we live in the salvation we have in Jesus Christ.

The Call of Grace is brief but it provides a clear summons to covenantal thinking: "To think covenantally is to think biblically. To think biblically is simply to be loyal to our Saviour, Jesus Christ, the Lord of the covenant" (63). This book would be a valuable addition to your home or church library.