

COVENANT RENEWAL

Genesis 1:26-28

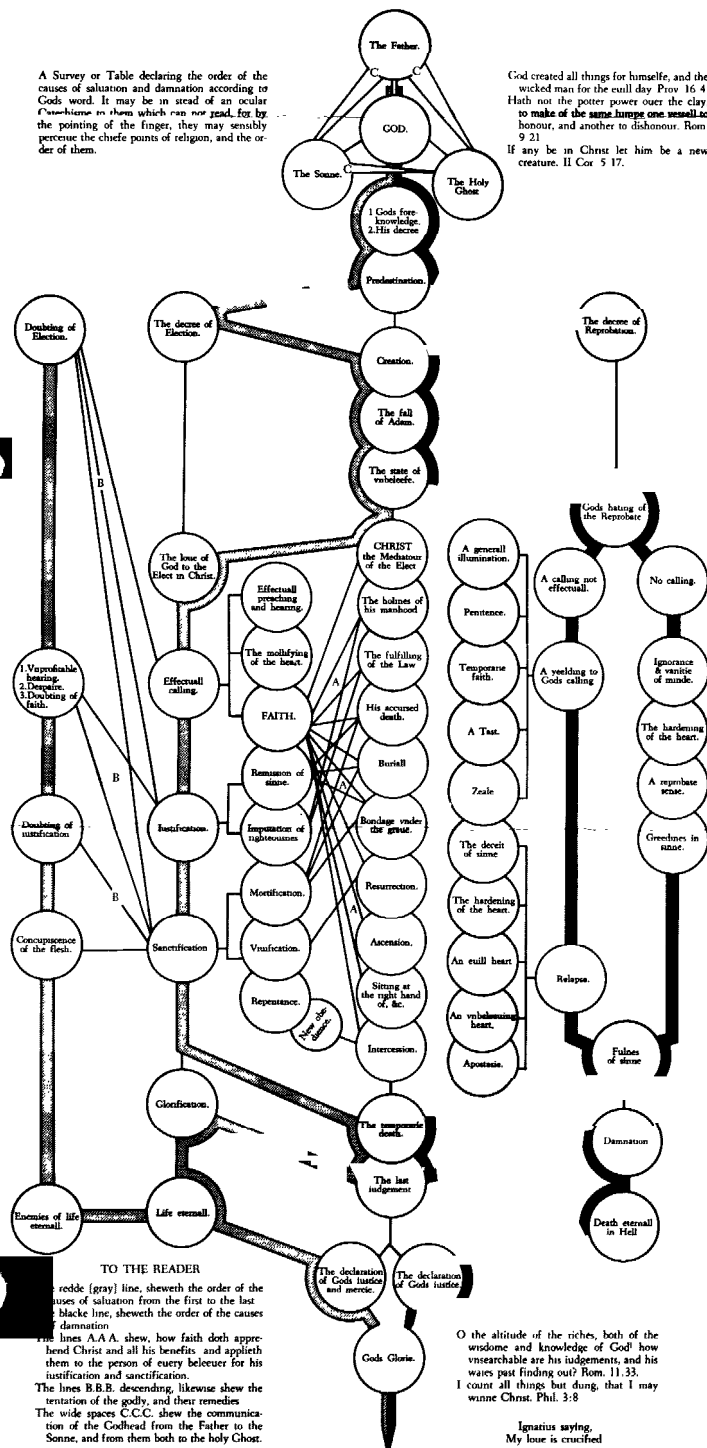
Matthew 28:18-20

Vol. I, No.

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June, 1987

THE INESCAPABILITY OF A MASTER PRINCIPLE



"The canon or rule of life and faith is either from God or from man. It is either the canon of covenant law, or it is the canon of man's word as law."—R. J. Rushdoony¹

Man always organizes his thoughts according to some kind of structure: call it a master principle, a paradigm, a system, a grid, an outline, or a central idea. He unavoidably seeks to order his thinking. Indeed, he cannot even **think** without some kind of organization. Perhaps this explains why a well-ordered "**hand**," meaning good penmanship, **nor**-really coincides with a well-ordered **mind**; and, a sloppy hand often means a sloppy brain, a disorganized mind that cannot work through a logical procedure, so as to arrive at intelligible, or even unintelligible solutions, which is often the case with twentieth century man. Hence, man seeks something by which to organize his thoughts. If he does not seek God's structure, then he finds it in man's system.

I know that man may not always be aware of a structure — especially a humanistic one—to his thought processes, but there is a grid of some sort that he uses to interpret, think and filter. Whether he realizes it or not, or whether or not he wants to admit it, there is something molding his reasoning processes, or lack thereof: some philosophy, religion and theology.

Ideological structure is doubly important when it comes to theology. To your left, you have an interesting example of how Protestant theology was organized in the sixteenth century by the great English puritan, William Perkins. At first glance it appears confusing. It may look like something drawn by an inebriated draftsman, or it may look like some renaissance weirdo just discovered a compass and decided to show it off through his ability to draw circles.

But keep in mind that this diagram was designed to explain the order of salvation, one of the biggest issues of sixteenth century theology. It was so effective as a teaching device that it became a significant tool for **transferring** the ideas of the Reformation from one generation to another. And any teacher worth his salt knows that if what he is teaching is worth its salt, then it should be transferred; if the teacher is ineffective in transferring his illustrious body of knowledge, then he has failed as a teacher. Perkins understood this grim reality of teaching so well that he became one of the most successful theological instructors, providing a grid by which the theology of salvation could be communicated.

The other and even more important theological structure coming out of the Protestant Reformation was the "six loci [**words or things**]: literally meaning the "six doctrines: The six loci organized all of theology under six key doctrines: the doctrine of God, the doctrine of man, the doctrine of the Per-

1. R. J. Rushdoony, *Infallibility: An Inescapable Concept* (Vallecito, California Ross House Books, 1978), p. 26.

son and Work of Christ, the doctrine of salvation (**soteriology**), the doctrine of the Church (**ecclesiology**), and the doctrine of last things (**eschatology**).

Within the first hundred years of Calvinism, the six loci format was being used to teach reformed theology. Its significance lay in its simplicity, and again, its ability to organize a massive amount of information. It provided a grid for doing Protestant theology, as opposed to Aquinas's *Theologiae*, which had become the greatest theological feat of the Middle Ages, performing the same function of organizing in relation to Roman Catholic theology.

On the other hand, the six loci's glaring weakness is its apparent artificial structure. It purports to be **theocentric (God-centered)**, but it **subtly** tends to equate other doctrines as having the same significance as the doctrine of God. Hoeksema says,

Its [the **loci's**] weakness stares you in the face; for strictly speaking, one would have to treat the entire dogmatics under the first locus [The doctrine of God]. The five following the first [The doctrine of man, the person and work of Christ, salvation, the Church, and last things] can by no stretch of the imagination be called coordinate with it.²

Hoeksema goes on to side-step his own criticism and to endorse the very structure he criticizes. Unfortunately, he lets his significant insight go, almost to say, "Here's a major flaw, but let's just ignore it because this is such a 'sacred' way of organizing theology." To be more to the point with his observation, however, **the real problem with the six loci is that they blur the Creator/creature distinction by allowing the last five doctrines to be coordinate with the first loci.** So the loci worked well as a scheme of theology for a while, but the Golden Age of Calvinism was quickly detoured in history by the Age of Enlightenment (rationalism), never to return to its glory.

I believe there is a reason why the six loci drifted so easily into rationalism.³ When the theological structure of a system is not directly tied to Scripture, the door is left cracked open for other humanistic organizing concepts to gain a foothold, either rational or irrational. More to the point, Rushdoony is quoted at the beginning of this newsletter:

The canon or rule of life and faith is either from God or man. It is either the canon of covenant law, or it is the canon of man's word as law.

A canon in some form or another is inescapable. Perhaps the greatest theological contribution of Rushdoony has been the insight that man cannot be truly original in his thinking. If he does not think God's thoughts, he cannot think "other" thoughts. Rather, he thinks counterfeit thoughts. **Biblical reality is inescapable**, in other words. For every Biblical truth, there is a flip-sided expression of it in the history of human thought. Or to put it another way, every human idea contrary to God is the inverse of some Biblical reality. Thus, master principle is the counterfeit of covenant.

Either man structures his thinking according to the covenant, which is God's Word, or he structures it according to some paradigm that is according to man's organizing principle. The problem with the loci is that they are not explicitly

tied to the Bible's own system of organization.⁴ And anything that is not explicitly Biblical will become implicitly, and at last, explicitly unBiblical. It will limp off into a pagan thought-form.

The Fallacy of an Abstract Master Principle

Rushdoony has called this pagan structure of thought, a "master principle," in his brilliant essay, "The Search for a Master Principle." He says,

One of the persistent problems which haunts human thought, and philosophy and theology in particular, is the search for a master principle, a universal, and sometimes a particular, in terms of which all things can be understood. The history of human thought gives us a succession of master principles and ideas, and a remarkable variety of them. These include yang and yin, karma, kamis, ideas or forms, mathematics, evolution, the existential self, and much, much more.⁵

Again, to paraphrase the lead quote of this article, "Man either organizes his thinking according to the covenant, the true master principle, or he structures his thought according to the wrong framework, the false master principle." Significantly, Rushdoony lodges essentially five criticisms of a master principle that follow the five points of the covenant, as I have explained them in an earlier issue of *Covenant* and in my book,

By

Rushdoony does not use the same order of the covenantal points, with the exception of the first one (transcendence), but he does use them, meaning he inescapably thinks in terms of the covenant because of his commitment to the covenant. Anyone who has read Rushdoony at length should not be surprised, for he consistently offsets the "canon of covenant law" over and against the "canon of man's word as law" throughout his writings, but most especially in his magnum opus, *of Biblical Law*.⁶ On page 7, for example, Rushdoony equates Biblical law with "covenant," and he even footnotes Meredith Kline, from whom I have drawn my entire thesis about the covenant. And on page 694 of the same volume, he makes the bold statement, "Law and covenant are used synonymously, and all men are inescapably involved in that reality." Thus, let us examine Rushdoony's covenantal arguments against the "search for a master principle."

Master Principle: Covenant vs. Abstraction Transcendence

The first point of the covenant is true transcendence, meaning God is distinct yet near (Sovereign and personal) at the same time (Deut. 1:1-3). Rushdoony begins his criticism of a master principle on this point.

That master principle was once viewed as more or less transcendent, and was sometimes even named "God"; now it is seen as immanent and, even more as entirely the product of man. . . . No master principle or idea exists in, behind, or beyond the universe. There is, rather, the Master Person, the triune God. . . .

4. I think the six loci can be tied to the Biblical model, as perhaps I will do in a later *Covenant Renewal*, but my point here is that I don't know of anyone who has either tied them to the covenant or some other Biblical paradigm. Hence, the Church has been left to drift in a sea of theology without a self-consciously Biblical structure for its central ideas.

5. R. J. Rushdoony, *The Necessity for Systematic Theology* (Vallecito, California: Rose House Books, 1979), p. 62.

6. R. J. Rushdoony, *Institutes of Biblical Law* (Nutley, New Jersey: Craig Press, 1973), pp. 4ff.

2. Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, [1966] 1973), p. 13. Brackets mine.

3. Anyone who doubts that they were intercepted by the thinking of the Enlightenment should sit down on a rainy day, and he should try reading Charles Hodge's systematic theology better, wait for a rainy season because you'll never get through it. Don't misunderstand, Hodge was orthodox, but his systematic theology is one long rationalistic exercise of interacting with rationalism.

Gnosticism is a very minor aspect of our times, but, more sophisticated in form, the same impetus governs education. The “higher” the education, the more impersonal and abstract the learning. Critical analysis seeks to penetrate beyond the real and the personal to the abstract and the impersonal as somehow the truth about **things**.⁷

Rushdoony astutely recognizes that the master principle takes on transcendence and immanence, making creation into God, and God into creation. It is elevated beyond God in its transcendent expression, making Him subservient to whatever idea or concept has become the master principle. On the other hand, it reduces God in its immanent version, when man himself becomes the creator of a master principle to which God must submit.

The Biblical covenant, however, teaches that God is carefully distinguished from man, and at the same time that God is a **person**. He is totally distinct from creation, so that nothing can be beyond Him, and there can be no standard above Him to which He is accountable. Yet, God is infinitely **personal, so that He** can be present without losing His **personality**. The Biblical covenant, and the Biblical covenant only, sets out this view of true transcendence.

Hierarchy

The second point of the covenant moves from transcendence to a visible demonstration thereof through Biblical representatives, from a distinct yet personal God to a manifestation of His distinctness and personhood in history through appointed persons (**Deut. 1 :8ff**). They specifically mediate God’s judgment in history, contrary to the master principle’s explanation of the relationship between history and ideas, as explained by Rushdoony in an interesting story.

In a small city, with only a single Negro family, moderately successful, popular, accepted, and at ease, a civil rights administrator for an area, a college graduate, sought to analyze the local situation in terms of sociological abstractions. The fact was that the family was godly, hard-working, and personally a pleasure to know, but this fact did not constitute a valid abstraction for understanding “race relations” in that community. This simple incident pinpoints the problem. The humanist seeks an abstraction from the facts to understand the facts. The Christian seeks the Creator of all facts as the means of understanding the facts. The humanistic Biblical commentator tries to analyze the situation of a Bible passage historically, then to abstract from that an idea which will account for the facts. **The Christian sees God as the source of the word, the situation, and the history, and sees that totally personal God at work in all things.**⁸

God, not an idea, is controlling history, and this God is a covenant-making, covenant-keeping God. He establishes His covenant with man and works it out in history. He reveals Himself and acts in history through **covenant**, not abstract ideas. Rushdoony expresses this thought when he says,

The Bible, in fact, is divided into two sections, the Old Testament and the New [or renewed] Testament, witnessing to the two great stages of **covenant history**. The Bible as a whole is God’s **covenant** word or law, His declaration of the **history and nature** of His **covenant**.⁹

Thus, the **Biblical** covenant always points to God as the mediator of life and death in history. He appoints a set personal hierarchy, as illustrated in the hierarchy of Israel under Moses (Exodus 18), but He does not set up a hierarchy of impersonal abstract ideas **to mediate grace or wrath to history**.

Ethics

The third aspect of the **Biblical** covenant has to do with **law**, specifically explaining that there is an **ethical cause/effect** relationship in the universe. It expresses cause/effect in terms of faithfulness (covenant-keeping) or unfaithfulness (covenant-breaking). Rushdoony explains that the master principle is not concerned with ethics—holiness, righteousness and dominion. To the contrary, it places cause/effect in abstract principles.

An education which begins with the faith that the living God is a person, not an abstraction, and that all creation is a personal fact brought forth by the totally personal God, **will seek to further the practical implications of that truth. It will work to further knowledge, righteousness, holiness, and dominion.** It is not an accident that only out of Christian **cultures** have science, technology, and agriculture developed to a **considerable** degree: concreteness of our faith requires **it**.¹⁰

Then Rushdoony cites the “Preliminary Principles” of the **in** chapter 1, **article IV** to illustrate further the importance of an ethical **cause/effect** relationship.

That truth is in order to goodness; and the great touchstone of truth, its tendency to promote holiness; according to our Saviour’s rule [law], “by their fruits ye shall know them.” And that no opinion can be either more pernicious or more absurd, than that which brings truth and falsehood upon a level, and represents it as of no **consequence** [effect] what a man’s opinions are. On the contrary, they are persuaded that there is an **inseparable connection between faith and practice, truth and duty [cause and effect]**. Otherwise, it **would** be of no consequence either to discover truth, or to embrace **it**.¹¹

Two points of **Rushdoony’s** and the previous quotation are striking. One, it speaks of actions and their effects. Two, it speaks of an ethical relationship between what man does and what results in his life. Faith, not an abstract idea, is what issues into obedience and obedience results in **dominion**. Covenant-keeping, not an idea, leads to conquest. Ethics, not concepts, are always explained in the Biblical covenant as the “key” to success and victory (**Deut. 7:1ff.**) Again, this connection is found in the **covenant Word of God**. **As Rushdoony himself has said, “A covenant book is thus a canonical book: it is the rule of faith, its law. The books of the Bible are canonical because they are covenantal; they are law because they are covenantal.”**¹²

Sanctions

The fourth point of the covenant is called “sanctions” because it discusses a concept of judgment. It explains entrance into the covenant as the reception of a “self-maledictory” oath, an oath appropriating the judgment of God through God’s own judgment on **Himself**, i.e. the Cross. This

7. Rushdoony, *The Necessity for Systematic Theology*, pp. 62-63. Hereafter abbreviated, *TNFST*.

8. Rushdoony, *TNFST*, pp. 64-65. Bold-face mine.

9. Rushdoony, *Infallibility*, p. 26. Bold-face mine.

10. Rushdoony, *TNFST*, p. 64.

11. Emphasis and brackets mine.

12. Rushdoony, *Infallibility*, p. 26.

part of the covenant also teaches that there are two types of judgment: judgment unto life (blessing), and judgment unto death (cursing).

Judgment according to the master principle, however, is different. It is cerebral and abstract, having nothing to do with a personal God. **Rushdoony** says,

Abstraction (Latin *ab*, from + *trahere*, to draw) means the separation of a quality, idea, aspect, or principle from a total object; it rests on the premise that the best means of understanding the total object is by means of an abstraction of its quality or principle.

Analysis comes from Aristotle, and his analysis considers all aspects on a par in order to isolate the key aspects for purposes of knowledge, i.e. for abstraction. The goal of analysis is to isolate, to dissect. Man the thinker [of abstract principles], having analyzed, isolated, and abstracted, then, after Kant, plays God by means of **synthetic judgments which view the world as will and idea.**¹³

Rushdoony keenly observes that abstract analysis is a process of **synthetic judgment**. At the beginning of his statement, **Rushdoony** notes that analysis comes from the Latin, meaning “separation,” and separation is the essence of judgment, the fourth aspect of the covenant. Covenants are always cut—separation is even implied in the word—by a process of separation. In Deuteronomy, the covenant is ratified when the nation of Israel is **divided by activities on Mt. Ebal, the mount of cursing, and Mt. Gerizim, the mount of blessing**. In the Abrahamic covenant, the covenant is entered by animals being severed and burnt with fire. And in the New Covenant, Jesus is covenantally separated from His Father when He says, “My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?” Thus, separation is judgment.

The difference between Biblical judgment by sanctions and abstract separation of ideas is critical. Biblical judgment is an act of being submitted to God and His covenant Word. Abstract judgment attempts to remove God from the picture, as **Rushdoony** says, “viewing the world as will and idea.” Biblical judgment views the world not as a place of raw effort and pedantic ideas; rather, the world is the stage on which God conducts His drama to the end that the wicked are cursed and the righteous are blessed. These sanctions of cursing and blessing are not impersonal ideas, but they are personally applied by a personal God, who is the God of the covenant.

continuity

The final point of the covenant has to do with the **transfer of inheritance**. It makes certain that the faithful receive the inheritance and the unfaithful are disinherited. **Rushdoony** instinctively recognizes this when he makes one final obser-

vation about the master principle according to the fifth point of the covenant.

Anti-Biblical education abstracts ideas from reality and scholars from the world of wholeness and action. Christian education and systematic theology immerses the godly into that world and requires an accounting of God's people. When God called His covenant people Israel and gave them the Promised Land, that land was not a safe harbor but the main highway of the ancient world. **Israel could be faithful or apostate, but it could not be abstract.** The Sermon on the Mount [Matt. 5:1-7:29] and the Great Commission [Matt. 28:18-20] do the same with the New Israel of God.¹⁴

Where did God give Israel the Promised Land? There are a number of places, but the **key** place of transfer is the final section of the Book of Deuteronomy (Deut. 31-34), which I have called the fifth point of the covenant. Here Moses gathers the people of Israel, charging Joshua by saying, “Be strong and courageous, for you shall go with this people into the land which the Lord has sworn to their fathers to give them, and you shall give it to them as an inheritance” (Deut. 30:7).

The fifth point of the covenant teaches the precept by which continuity and discontinuity in the kingdom of God would be maintained. It echoes what **Rushdoony** has observed, “Israel could be faithful or apostate, but it could not be abstract.” Continuity is according to “strength and courage” in terms of covenant faithfulness. It does not allow for neutrality or abstractness. It is not commitment, in other words, to a master principle, but it is personal faithfulness to an all-powerful, personal God who makes a personal covenant with His people.

Conclusion

Master principle is inescapable. Man either organizes his life and mind according to the covenant or some abstracted concept that **Rushdoony** has called a “master principle.” There are only two options. As **Rushdoony** has said, “there is the canon of covenant law or the canon of man's word as law!” There is no third option. No other scholar has more clearly stated this contrast between covenant and abstract reason than R. J. **Rushdoony**. No other thinker has **more expressly articulated the inescapability of a master principle than the founder of Christian Reconstruction, best summarized by one of his succinct comments: “Man's life is covenantal. If he is in covenant with anything or anyone, his life is enmeshed therein, and there is then a reshaping of his life in terms of that covenant and faith.”**¹⁵

14. **Rushdoony**, *TNFST*, p. 65. Bold-face mine.

15. R. J. **Rushdoony**, *Law and Society* (Vallecito, California Ross House Books, 1982), p. 475.

13. **Rushdoony**, *TNFST*, p. 63. Bold-face emphasis mine.