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**Henry Bullinger
and the Covenant
of Grace**



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Henry Bullinger and the Covenant of Grace

George M. Ella

Bullinger's lasting contribution to the Reformation

'Covenant' Theology is widely accepted today as an essential ingredient of Reformed doctrine. The earliest, most developed, comprehensive and meticulously perfected exposition of this doctrine was presented to the public during the middle 1520s by Heinrich Bullinger (1504–1575) of Zürich. His exposition of the 'Covenant' remains the classical and most widely accepted view of God's Testament for His people. Indeed, this teaching is likely the greatest and most lasting contribution Bullinger ever made to the Reformed churches so that he can truly be called the Father of Reformed 'Covenant' teaching. He above all our Reformers pointed out to an all-embracing degree how the same essential message of salvation is seen throughout the entire Bible from Genesis to Revelation. The 'Covenant' thus provides a focusing point in Bullinger's teaching for all the doctrines of grace. For Bullinger, baptism, the Lord's Supper, predestination, election, reprobation, law and gospel, the forgiveness of sins, justification, sanctification and the perseverance of the saints, are all to be understood in the 'Covenant' context of God choosing a people for Himself

in Christ and binding them to Him for eternity. This 'Covenant' thus centres alone in the work and offices of the Lord Jesus Christ through whom as Head of the 'Covenant' all believers have access to every 'Covenant' blessing.

Trying to prove who was first in reviving the Scriptural teaching that God's one 'Covenant' was revealed in both Testaments is, however, fraught with difficulties. Bullinger's major rival as a re-discoverer of 'Covenant' theology during Reformation times was thought for some time to be Ulrich Zwingli (1484–1531) of Zürich. Bullinger was Zwingli's colleague from 1523–31 at nearby Kappel and Bremgarten and became his successor at Zürich in 1531 after Zwingli's death in the Second Kappel War. Zwingli also appears to have developed a 'Covenant' theology in the 1520s though it is not easy to date each writers' separate works during this period. We know, for instance, that several very early works of Bullinger are lost or preserved merely in fragments, and this is also probably the case with some of Zwingli's seminal Reformed works, so one cannot be too dogmatic. Furthermore, Bullinger's *Von dem Touff* (On Baptism) which refers to one 'Covenant' of grace throughout the Scriptures, has recently been dated

immediately after Zwingli's arguments referring to a 'Covenant' in his *Reply to Hubmaier* of November 5, 1525, and not in late 1524 as formerly supposed. Hans-Georg vom Berg, in his 1991 edition of *Von dem Touff* gives between 5 November and 10 December, 1525, as the possible date of writing. Similarly Bullinger's *Answer to Burchard*, which also deals with the 'Covenant' to a high degree, previously dated 1525, is now believed to have been written a year later. Zwingli is thus thought, by a very slim margin of mere days, to be the first to use the word 'Covenant' to describe God's one saving plan outlined in both Testaments.

Who influenced whom on the doctrine of the 'Covenant' of grace?

This modern view, however, is not above criticism. The methods used appear to be like dating what came first, the hen or the egg and, in reality, are merely based on the assumption that Zwingli, being twenty years older than Bullinger, had had a longer time to ripen in his Reformation ideas. Thus, the criterion used for placing Bullinger's works on the 'Covenant' after Zwingli's *Reply to Hubmeier* is merely one of assumed dependence. In fact, it appears difficult for some scholars to see any similarities between the two men's works without claiming that Bullinger must have relied on Zwingli for his material merely because they

suppose that Bullinger was Zwingli's pupil. The evidence brought forward to back up this hypothesis is meagre. For instance, Hans-Georg vom Berg believes that he has discovered in Bullinger's *Von dem Touff*, (notes 20, 25, 38, 54, 78, 79, 92, 108 etc.) evidence that Bullinger followed Zwingli. Bullinger refers to baptism as a 'Pflichtzeichen' or sign of commitment, a term Zwingli also uses, so the deduction is made that Bullinger copied Zwingli. So, too, Bullinger likens Anabaptists practice to the baptizing of geese and thus must have taken over the idea from Zwingli as the older man likens Anabaptist re-baptism to bathing geese. But all this proves is that the two Swiss-Germans, who both spoke the same kind of idiomatic German, used much the same terminology and imagery. Such arguments prove that Bullinger must have taken his theology from Zwingli as little as they prove that Bullinger took his language from his older friend, whom Bullinger did not meet until he himself was already an author of several books.

Bullinger often led the way along the Reformed path

In the case of Zwingli's *Reply to Hubmeier*, we are asked to believe that as soon as that letter was sent off to Hubmeier, Bullinger was given a copy which he immediately used to compose a far more detailed, extensive, and in important parts quite different work, which he finished on the very next day or very

shortly afterwards. The truth is that Bullinger was often ahead of Zwingli in his Reformed works and he was clearly often the one who influenced Zwingli, or at least beat him to writing on the subject. This had very much to do with the fact that Bullinger saw his calling at the time as being principally in writing and not preaching, whereas Zwingli saw his calling primarily in preaching and only took to his pen when circumstances compelled him. So, too, Bullinger's works on the 'Covenant' were more detailed and developed than Zwingli's ever became. On December 10, 1525, for instance, Bullinger sent off his *De institutione et genuina eucharistiae* to Bartholomäus Stocker, emphasising the importance of the Lord's Supper in God's 'Covenant' for His people. Again, Bullinger was ahead of Zwingli here as the Zürich Superintendent had not involved the Eucharist in his references to a 'Covenant' anywhere near as clearly as Bullinger, nor presented any full-scale plan of how the 'Covenant' as a whole worked. So too, in the coming year, Bullinger was far more productive than Zwingli on the topic of the 'Covenant' and Zwingli only began to teach a more detailed doctrine in his *Elenchus* (Refutation of the Tricks of the Re-Baptisers) which appeared in July 1527. This work, however, was still less comprehensive than Bullinger's previous works on the subject.

Oddly enough, the idea that Zwingli might have been dependent on Bullinger, as the two men worked diligently together at this time, appears not to

have been raised by other scholars. Yet Bullinger was obviously growing in his influence on Zwingli, and we have Bullinger's own testimony in his diary that he was the one who wished to inform the public quickly on newly discovered Reformed principles, whereas Zwingli pleaded for caution. We do know for certain, however, that when Zwingli wrote his *Reply to Hubmeier* in November of 1525, he must have been influenced in some way by Bullinger or at least had asked him for help. Evidence for this is found in a letter from Leo Jud, dated 1 December, 1525, thanking Bullinger for drawing Zwingli's attention to quotes from Tertullian and Lactantius supporting the 'Covenant' unity of the Scriptures which Zwingli had used in his November work. Bullinger was in Zürich from June to November, 1525, and the two men consulted each other often during this period, especially concerning the Eucharist. So it is very likely that Bullinger had discussed his views on the 'Covenant' in conjunction with the Eucharist and Jud's remark referred to these discussions. Bullinger's departure from Zürich coincided with Zwingli's publication of his *Reply to Hubmeier*. So, too, there is scarcely any evidence that Bullinger ever stood in Zwingli's shadow and learnt his doctrines from him. Indeed, most of the available evidence points to independence of thought in Bullinger which always caused him to pursue Reformed paths either in front of or abreast of Zwingli.

Bullinger emphasised the unity of the Testaments before Zwingli

There is far more to a doctrine, however, than the word that describes it. Bullinger's teaching on the subject was worked out in conjunction with his studies of the two Testaments so that when looking back on his rise to faith through reading the Scriptures in his *De Scripturae negotio* of November 30, 1523, Bullinger could write, "In brief, I discover that the New Testament is nothing other than the interpretation of the Old, in that the latter promises, the former teaches what has been made real; the latter more concealed, the former more open; the latter in veils and figures, the former with clear evidence and the things itself."¹ In a footnote, he adds "The New Testament is a commentary."² In this passage, Bullinger also shows that Christ based His calling on the Old Testament Scriptures and proclaimed that the Old Testament bore witness to Him (John 5:39–47). Likewise, Acts 15:14–21 shows that the Apostles saw their work as carrying out the message of the Old Testament. So, too, Paul, when he told Timothy that all Scripture was written on inspiration of God, he was chiefly referring to the Old Testament (2 Timothy 3:16–17).³ If we, however, compare Zwingli's teaching with Bullinger's at this time, we find the older man, on the appearance of his *Taufbüchlein* in late May 1525, still emphasising the distinctions and contrast rather than the unity of

the two Testaments. He must have thus moved from a belief in two separate Testaments with contrasting teaching to a unity of doctrine regarding God's plan of salvation in both Testaments between late May and early November of 1525. By that time, however, Bullinger had been teaching the unity of the Testaments for at least two years, though he did not use exactly the same terms as Zwingli. Indeed, it is clear from Bullinger's works that he rarely uses a fixed *terminus technicus* to describe the eternal 'Covenant' of grace but speaks sometimes of a '*punt*', sometimes of a '*gmecht*', sometimes of a '*testament*'. He also uses various Latin equivalents such as '*foedus*', '*testamentum*' and '*pactum*', the words being used as synonyms at times and at other times with divers meanings.

Bullinger's 'Covenant' teaching bilateral

Peter Opitz in his *Habilitationschrift* on Heinrich Bullinger's theology agrees that in *Von dem Touff*, which Bullinger wrote for Henry Simler to help him contend with the Catabaptists, Bullinger deals with elements concerning baptism which Zwingli had also discussed earlier in the year but adds that in his doctrine of the 'Covenant' outlined in that work, he takes on a position and emphasis (*Stellung und Prägung*) which can be traced back to his work before meeting up with Zwingli.⁴ In *Von dem Touff*, Bullinger emphasises

God's 'Covenantal' requirements concerning His creatures, a point almost totally left out by Zwingli. Unlike Zwingli, Bullinger anchors baptism firmly in God's 'Covenantal' dealings with man and relates how God by His mercy alone first made a 'Covenant' of grace with Adam, then Enoch, then Noah and then with Abraham and his seed for ever. Zwingli saw the idea of 'Covenant' simply in the form of how God obliged Himself in mercy to serve man, whereas Bullinger adds how obliged man is to walk uprightly before God. There is thus a bilateral aspect in Bullinger's doctrine lacking in Zwingli. Furthermore, in outlining this bilateral responsibility, Bullinger sees one of Abraham's major 'Covenantal' tasks being to institute circumcision as a 'Covenant' sign pointing to the grace God offers. In the same way, Christian parents are obliged to have their children baptised as a 'Covenant' sign. Similar comparisons provided by Wayne Baker make him also conclude that:

"This does not mean, however, that Bullinger then became Zwingli's student any more than he had previously been bound to Luther and Melancton. Rather, he worked on his own point of view with some intellectual and spiritual freedom. Indeed, the single time Bullinger mentioned a theological matter in connection with Zwingli in his Diarium, he emphasised his own independence."⁵

Be this as it may, in Bullinger's 1527 work *Studiorum ratio*, Bullinger points out that all the books of the whole Bible point to the one eternal 'Covenant' which is thus the central theme of God's Word. Furthermore, Bullinger goes down in history, as far as we know at the present time, as the Reformer who first penned a complete work solely on the topic of the 'Covenant'. This was his *De testamento seu foedere dei unico et aeterno expositio* or *On the One and Eternal Testament or 'Covenant' of God* of 1534 which quickly went into 15 editions and in which Bullinger outlines that all God's 'Covenant' promises in both the Old and New Testaments are centred in the eternal son of God and are thus 'one and eternal' in themselves. The subtitle of this work is Bullinger's most used text, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him," (Matt. 17:5).

Bullinger's 'Covenant' doctrine developed through his dealings with the Catabaptists

Bullinger tells us in his diary for 1534 that he wrote his work on the 'Covenant', as hinted above by Opitz concerning Bullinger's *Von dem Touff*, chiefly against the Catabaptist views of the day. Many of these varied movements rejected the entire 'Covenant' idea as being merely Jewish and part of an Old Testament which had no relevance to Christians. Bullinger pointed out that in rejecting the Old Testament,

Catabaptists rejected not only the ‘Covenant’ and the signs pointing to the work of grace in Christ but to a right use of the ordinances and the central themes of law and gospel. Bullinger’s *On the One and Eternal ‘Covenant’* is divided into three parts, the first of which is taken up with a Biblical definition of the term ‘Covenant’ which Bullinger sees as being synonymous with ‘testament’. This testament is bi-lateral because it outlines not only the eternal inheritance of God’s people through an act of grace, but also the binding duties of believers in living according to the ‘Covenant’. The German word for ‘Covenant’ is Bund which is similar in meaning to the English word ‘Bond’. It includes not only the idea of the ‘Covenant’ itself as used in English but also the idea of ‘keeping the Covenant’. Then, secondly, Bullinger shows that through this ‘Covenant’, God first unbinds the sinner from his bondage to sin and then binds him to Himself, placing him under a mutual obligation to serve his God. Thus Bullinger emphasises not only Psalm 103:8 ff. and Romans 11:36 when stressing that the ‘Covenant’ is all of grace, but he equally emphasises Genesis 17:1 which states that the believer must walk before God and be perfect. The Zürich Bible translates Gen. 17:1 as “I am the almighty God, walk before me then you will be unpunishable.” For Bullinger, the perfect man is the man whose condemnation has been removed from him and who has been justified and sanctified in Christ. The ‘Covenant’ people are those whom

God has no cause to punish eternally because our ‘Covenant’ Head, the Lord Jesus Christ, has sealed the ‘Covenant’ in His own obedience to the law and His vicarious death under its penalties. Then, thirdly, Bullinger deals with all the questions which might arise during a study of his ‘Covenantal’ doctrines such as the relationship between the Old and New Testaments, body and spirit, law and gospel and also the relationship of baptism to the ‘Covenant’ gospel. As Bullinger explained in *Von dem Touff*, he sees the ‘Covenant’ sign of circumcision as pointing ahead to the blood sacrifice of Christ. After that sacrifice was made once and for all eternity, the ‘Covenant’ sign became the unbloody sign of water baptism demonstrating the cleansing powers of Christ’s work on the cross and the outpouring of the Spirit of God on His people.

Annotations

Anmerkungen

¹ Unveröffentlichte Werke aus der Kappeler Zeit, De Scripturae negotio, p. 25.

² Novum testa(mentum) est commentarius.

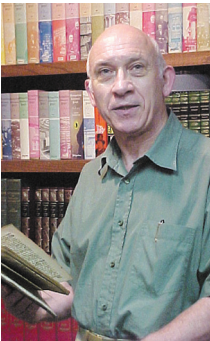
³ De Scripturae negotio, p. 25.

⁴ Opitz, p. 320.

⁵ This was the reference on September 12, 1524 when Zwingli asked him not to publish his findings on the Lord's Supper.

The Author

Über den Autor



Dr. George M. Ella was born in England in February 1939, and as a teenager moved to Sweden to continue his training as a Forestry Apprentice. After his conversion he returned to England to study theology. Whilst at the London Bible College, he attended the worship services of the well-known Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. Upon graduation at London and Hull Universities, he worked as a school teacher and evangelist among the Lapps. For the past 32 years Dr. Ella has lived in Germany, near the Dutch border. Now retired, his career included work as a Senior Civil Servant, university examiner and writer of curricula

for librarian assistants and apprentice retailers for the state's commercial colleges. This work included editing and grading textbooks. After adding various external degrees and post-graduate qualifications in theology/literature, business studies, education, history, psychology and library science at Uppsala, Duisburg and Essen universities, he gained a doctorate in English Literature at Duisburg University. He has written a number of books prior to this volume, including works on William Cowper, James Hervey, John Gill, Andrew Fuller, William Huntington and Augustus Toplady. Dr. Ella was nominated for the John Pollock Award by Prof. Timothy George in 2001. A major work on the English Reformation Exiles under Mary I will appear shortly. Dr. Ella has authored numerous biographical essays and doctrinal studies which have appeared in magazines such as the Banner of Truth, the Banner of Sovereign Grace Truth, the English Churchman, the Baptist Quarterly, Focus, New Focus, the Bible League Quarterly, and the Evangelical Times.

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