More important is the question of the internal counsels of the Trinity. If the covenant of grace (made with humans) relies upon an eternal covenant of redemption (made within the Trinity), then upon what does the covenant of works rely? Does it not imply some eternal counsel—perhaps a “covenant of fallibility”—on the part of the Triune God to subject humanity to probation and to permit the human failure?

Not only that. From eternity past God also knew that some human beings would not be saved. He always knew that, if He created the world, He would end up sending some people to hell. Yet He created the world anyway. Necessarily, hell was always an aspect of God’s purpose in bringing glory to Himself. Somehow, God is glorified (His perfections are exhibited, recognized, and admired) not only by the salvation of those sinners who believe, but by the condemnation of others who do not. Is any biblical Christian really prepared to suggest that the Great White Throne detracts from the glory of God? And if not, then must we also posit some eternal “covenant of damnation” within the counsels of the Trinity?

God’s purpose includes multiple ways of glorifying Himself. He has a plan for those whom He will save. He also has a plan for those who will reject His salvation. He is glorified by both aspects of this plan. Furthermore, God is presumably glorified by the judgment of the angels who sinned (2 Pet. 2:4; Jude 6), just as He is glorified by the worship of those spirit beings who praise Him (Isa. 6:1-4; Rev. 4:8-9). Does this imply an eternal (for lack of a better expression) “covenant of angels,” made in eternity past among the Godhead? God receives glory in many ways, and although individual salvation is one of those ways, it is certainly not the only one.

It appears that the language of covenant is not particularly useful when describing those theological constructs (redemption, works, grace, fallibility, condemnation, angels) that arise from the eternal counsels of the Trinity. For one thing, if we consistently apply this language to every aspect of the Divine counsels, we end up reducing the significance of the term covenant to apply to nearly any intra-Trinitarian purpose or extra-Trinitarian require-
ment or offer. There is no obvious mechanism for distinguishing those
divine purposes and acts that are covenantal from those that are not.

For another thing, if we prioritize one of these hypothetical covenants (the
covenant of grace) as the catch-all category for God’s plan of self-glorifica-
tion, we run the risk of skewing our entire grasp of God’s purpose. We can
certainly speak of a covenant of grace, but our language will be meaningful
only in explaining God’s plan to redeem individual sinners. This language is
less useful in describing God’s plan to glorify Himself through the judgment
of those who reject His salvation. It is not useful at all in explaining how
God gets glory from the praise of righteous spirit beings or the condemna-
tion of sinning angels.

This is the point at which dispensationalists become uneasy with covenant
theology. As they see it, the problem with covenant theology is not so much
that it posits a covenant of grace (allowing for a weakened sense of the word
covenant), as that a covenant of grace is only useful in dealing with one as-
pect of God’s overall plan. The redemption of individual sinners is certainly
part of God’s plan to glorify Himself. Just as certainly, it is not the only part.

If we attempt to press the covenant of grace beyond its rightful boundaries
and to make it a rubric to cover all the ways in which God brings glory to
Himself, then we will diminish the diversity of ways in which God glorifies
Himself through the different aspects of His plan. We will also flatten the
development of the stages through which God administers His plan. The
covenant of grace has the potential to become a Procrustean bed in which
the dazzlingly pluriform revelation of God’s glory is trimmed back to fit
into a schema revolving around individual redemption.

Specifically, the covenant of grace provides no ready mechanism for dealing
with God’s plan for nations. Consequently, if we focus only on the covenant
of grace, we will tend to collapse God’s dealings with peoples (nations) into
his dealings with persons (saved individuals). One of the major themes of
Scripture is that God intends to work, not only through the redemption of
individual believers, but also by calling entire peoples.

God’s plan for nations cuts across His plan for individuals. The two are
interwoven, but neither displaces the other. If we wish to understand God’s
entire revealed purpose in self-glorification, then we must give as much
attention to His working with nations as we do to His work in redeeming
individuals.

All Christians agree (or should) that God’s purpose is to glorify Himself.
The sticking point between dispensationalism and covenant theology is
to discover how God intends to do that. By focusing upon the covenant of
grace, covenant theologians make God’s program of self-glorification nearly
identical with His program of individual salvation. Dispensationalists, how-
ever, insist that God intends to bring glory to Himself in many ways, and

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