

# THE REFORMATION COVENANTS

## **Redeeming Covenant: A Critical Reflection on Puritan Covenant Theology, Democracy, and Racism in the United States**

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Covenant theology has been a central conceptual framework of the Reformed tradition since the Reformation. Today, however, covenant theology seems to be losing its appeal to many postmodern Christians, particularly with young people. In fact, not only the idea of covenant, but also many other traditional Christian symbols and concepts are losing their cultural significance. And under the influence of antiauthoritarian and deconstructive postmodernism today, many of the ideas of the Bible are losing their moral credibility and authority. Also, the ability to differentiate between a covenant and a contract has become very difficult in our time. Thus the concept of covenant is regarded as a dry and tedious task that places the importance on a procedural and legal process, giving a negative perception that a covenant is bureaucratic.

Finally, a critique of covenant theology that is more serious than the two noted above is, in effect, raised within the Christian community: covenant theology has been misused as a theological tool to justify various forms of racism such as American Anglo-Saxon nationalism, South African apartheid, Jewish Zionism, and so forth. This is an idea that is hardly acceptable for the sentiments of today's young Christian generation that emphasizes horizontal relations, as well as individual human rights and equality.

How then should we understand covenant theology in this time-honored situation? Is it a theological tool of Western colonialism in the past? Is it the product of the Old World that has lost its usefulness today? Or is it a theological concept that needs to be reconfigured and reinterpreted? As we celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, we must once again review the meaning of the covenant theologically while facing various criticisms of the covenant idea.

This essay examines the relationship between covenant theology and racism in the various challenges facing covenant theology today, focusing on the Puritans' faith and practice. The relationship between covenant theology and racism raises a concern for Korean American immigrant churches and Asian American churches in the United States as they experience marginalization and racial discrimination, frequently becoming the targets of white nationalists who are inspired by a racist interpretation of covenant theology.

In the meantime, many Reformed theologians and social scientists have been constantly and vigorously studying the impact of covenant theology on the modern democratic and capitalist development of England and the United States. Covenant theology—rediscovered from Zwingli and Calvin at the time of the Reformation—was further deepened theologically by the Puritans

of England and New England. In fact, the Puritans of New England attempted a republican system of politics through the election of democratic representatives, inspired by the congregational form of the polity of their churches. The organization and order of the Puritans were based on the belief that all human beings are equally gifted with divine human rights from God, which was further elaborated through the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights. And this Puritan, representative, democratic thought became the basis of American democracy. The American-born, Jewish political scientist Daniel Elazar wrote:

The road to modern democracy began with the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century, particularly among those exponents of Reformed Protestantism . . . who developed a theology and politics that set the Western world back on the road to popular self-government, emphasizing liberty and equality.<sup>1</sup>

[I]t is a historical fact that those groups that accepted covenant theology and made it the cornerstone of their faith were also the groups that became committed earliest to human liberty and contributed most to its advancement.<sup>2</sup>

The fact that the religious enthusiasm based on the Puritans' covenant ideas led to the roots of American democracy is also mentioned in detail by the French scholar Alexis de Tocqueville who traveled to the United States in the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup>

But at the same time, various racist ideologies and policies derived from the abuse or misuse of covenant theology have directly contributed to racial discrimination and racialization in the United States today, to the point that "racial discrimination is the original sin of the United States." They have become religious and spiritual roots that justify colonialism, nationalism, white privilege, and white supremacy. In the following essay, I want to briefly review the racist practices and policies that the Puritans conducted through the abuse of covenant theology.

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Misuse of the covenant idea for racial discrimination can be found in the writings of John Winthrop (1588–1649), a Puritan leader and the second governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, who served as governor for 12 of the colony's first 20 years. When he left England in 1630, he beseeched the Puritan immigrants on the *Arbella* to make a covenant with God in a manner similar to the Israelites, who made a covenant with God at Mount Sinai. Winthrop charged the people to be devoted to God and practice "a model of Christian charity" in the "new land." He emphasized that no human beings are better than others in their own power, and that there is no one rich by his or her own merits; therefore, everyone should do all things for the glory of the Creator and for the commonwealth of humankind, so that the community they hoped to build would shine like "the city upon the hill" to the world.<sup>4</sup>

1. Daniel J. Elazar, *Covenant and Commonwealth: From Christian Separation Through the Protestant Reformation*, vol. 2 of *The Covenant Tradition in Politics* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 1996), 312.
2. *Ibid.*, 151.
3. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, vols. 1–2, trans. Henry Reeve (College Station, PA: Pennsylvania State University, 2002), <http://seas3.elte.hu/coursematerial/LojkoMiklos/Alexis-de-Tocqueville-Democracy-in-America.pdf>.
4. John Winthrop, *A Model of Christian Charity* (1630), [http://winthropsociety.com/doc\\_charity.php](http://winthropsociety.com/doc_charity.php).

It was this devout Puritan, John Winthrop, who laid the foundation for the spiritual, political, and cultural institutions of New England, but his views and policies about other races were the exact opposite of the biblical values he emphasized on the *Arbella*. An owner of Native American slaves himself, he was a member of the committee that wrote and legislated the first slave law in North America in 1641. When he saw numerous Native Americans dying from diseases that the whites had brought, such as the measles and smallpox, Winthrop interpreted this as the providence of God to provide the Puritans with the opportunity to expand in the colonies.<sup>5</sup> Based on these religious ideologies and policies, the Puritans accumulated a great amount of wealth; they actively participated in the slave trade using the triangle of New England, the Caribbean, and the western part of Africa, while justifying the annihilation of indigenous people and the enslavement of Africans.<sup>6</sup> There is still Winthrop Bay in Antigua, named after Samuel Winthrop, son of John Winthrop, who was a lieutenant governor and who owned many slaves on his plantations. His brother John Winthrop II, a governor of Connecticut, also owned many slaves on his property. These facts show that slave possession in early New England was not exceptional but pervasive.

The contradiction within Puritanism—the emphasis on the uncompromising practice and exemplary life of faith based on a solemn covenant with God, on the one hand, and their cruelty toward other races, on the other hand—was passed down to the descendants of New England Puritans. Jonathan Edwards, one of the greatest theologians of the United States, showed a similar contradiction in his public advocacy of slavery despite his many creative theological thoughts.<sup>7</sup> He and his wife felt no sense of guilt in buying and selling slaves. Edward’s attitude was not much different from the general attitude of society at the time, except to emphasize that slaves should be treated humanely.

In other words, slavery was by God’s providence, and God had appointed various races to have different statuses and positions in society. So they did not doubt the justification of slavery. The ethical question they were worried about was how they, following the teachings of Ephesians and Colossians, fulfilled their Christian duties as slave masters.<sup>8</sup> In addition, Edwards’ cousin, Stephen Williams—a Puritan pastor in Longmeadow, Massachusetts who recorded the most famous Edwards sermon (“Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”) at the start of the first Great Awakening—had two of his black slaves commit suicide within a few days apart because of his harsh punishment.<sup>9</sup>

When we look back at US history, we find that the misuse of covenant theology served as the religious genealogy of racism in the United States.<sup>10</sup> It justified the ideology of “manifest destiny” for the colonial expansion of the United States in the nineteenth century.<sup>11</sup> It was later expressed

5. Richard A. Bailey, *Race and Redemption in Puritan New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 29.
6. The Puritans likewise were reluctant to baptize Africans because they would acquire the same status as whites.
7. As far as slavery is concerned, Jonathan Edwards tended to differentiate between spiritual and social salvation, similar to Luther’s two-kingdom theory.
8. There was a theological controversy about God’s providence for slave status: whether it was from the time of creation or from the fall of humanity.
9. Bailey, *Race and Redemption in Puritan New England*, 106–107.
10. “Ideology of superior identity in John Winthrop’s *A Model of Christian Charity*,” *Early US Literature*, <https://earlyuslit.wordpress.com/2013/08/09/ideology-of-superior-identity-in-john-winthrops-a-model-of-christian-charity/>.
11. Today “manifest destiny” means that the United States has been chosen to change the world because of its politico-moral superiority and influence. Its ideology of God’s destiny that is bound to be so, which has historical connections with the Puritans’ covenant theology, has become the basis of American exceptionalism.

in the form of imperialism and colonialism toward other countries, and internally as white supremacy. Its influence has been passed down to many white evangelicals today as we have seen in the rise of white nationalists and their support for Trump’s racist policies.

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One example outside the United States of abusing covenant theology is the history of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa, which supported apartheid. The Dutch Reformed Church abused the Bible and the idea of covenant in a similar way to the Puritans. In particular, they used the story of the Tower of Babel to illustrate God’s plan for separate nations and the segregation of races, and to claim a privileged place for their power and rule over other races. Similarly, religious fundamentalists and extremist Jews in Israel still use the story of Moses’ conquest of Canaan to justify their racist policies against Palestinians.

The above examples clearly demonstrate that the idea of covenant was used as a political tool to justify racism. Whereas the Reformed covenant theology of the Puritans showed good results in practicing biblical values and realizing a democratic political system within the white community, it also served as a means of justifying exclusiveness and oppression toward “others.” While fighting against authoritarianism, outdated social conventions, and feudalism, they created another, even more brutal, racial classism. While emphasizing natural law, natural right, and human dignity, the natural human rights and dignity of other races were completely neglected. They limited universal norms and ordinances to the political life of whites alone, while committing crimes against all other races. They called for sanctification to be practiced throughout society, but did not consider what sanctification meant in their relations with other races.

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Why, then, has this covenant theology—which has made a great contribution to the development of democracy, human rights, constitutionalism, and civil society—been used as a tool of racism that justified genocide and slavery? Could covenant theology not be used as a political ideology to support racism and imperialism? How should we understand this incompatible contradiction of Puritan faith with regards to human rights and racism? In light of these heartbreaking historical facts, is the idea of covenant too problematic to be redeemed?

We cannot see the contradictions of covenant theology solely as a matter of faith practice or application of the Bible. In other words, it is difficult to see that such grave mistakes and heinous acts were the result of greed arising only from human sinfulness. I believe that there is also a theological limitation in understanding the covenant of the Bible. In other words, within Reformed covenant theology, some theological problems still remain that call for our critical analysis and clarification, and the following is my own theological reflection.

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(1) In providing a theological basis for racism, the Puritans’ covenant theology operated in close association with Calvinist ideas of election, providence, and predestination: all the work of this world is fulfilled according to God’s intended will; God knows our fate from the beginning, including those who are saved and those who are not. When these ideas were applied to race relations, the Puritan and Dutch settlers created a racist theological ideology that claimed themselves as God’s chosen ones and other races as the cursed ones, which helped to justify their conquest of “the new land” and a new continent in the name of God’s providence. Here we see a

tremendous fallacy that arises when an important theological concept is applied to social problems without going through careful examination and critical tests. The idea of predestination has a biblical basis, but when its application is overstrained and far-fetched to justify blatant political hegemony and economic greed, it leads to practices that are completely contrary to the message of the Bible.

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(2) In close association with the doctrine of predestination, the Puritans understood themselves as a “New Israel” and attempted to interpret the norms, values, and events in their lives in light of the narrative of the Mosaic covenant that encompassed the exodus-wilderness-Canaan experience. However, they did not confine this theological understanding to the spiritual and symbolic meanings of the narrative, but applied it to their political, economic, and racial relations. In other words, borrowing from Israel’s story of the conquest of Canaan, they linked themselves to Israel, the Americas to Canaan, the natives to the Canaanites, and subjected the latter to their conquest and destruction. They used Moses’ covenant theology as a political ideology to support racism and the abolition of indigenous peoples. The historical damages were terrible beyond any repair.

The theological error of the Puritans was that they attempted to interpret their actions and the historical events of their time almost solely on the basis of the Mosaic covenant and the conquest of Canaan, without seeing it organically and syntactically in the whole flow of the Bible. In fact, the various implications of the Mosaic covenant for politics, social systems, and law are relatively detailed in the Bible, so the way the Puritan theologians approached the Sinai covenant may seem natural. The problem, however, is that they did not view the Mosaic covenant as a covenant theology within the context of the entire Bible from the Old Testament to the New Testament, but instead engaged in selective interpretations. Indeed, all the Old Testament covenants culminated in the New Covenant of Christ in the New Testament. The New Covenant is the final, conclusive, and eschatological covenant. The previous covenants have only partial and procedural positions. It was the work of the New Testament to reinterpret all the laws contained in the Old Testament covenants under the incarnation, life, death, and resurrection of Christ. In fact, this is what Jesus did through the Sermon on the Mount.

The Mosaic covenant and the story of the Exodus cannot be selectively used as a political ideology for the benefit of a modern social, racial, or religious group, because it was a covenant unique to the nation of Israel in a particular situation of the time. The New Covenant of Jesus fulfills the covenant of Moses; there is no distinction in Christ Jesus, whether Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. Jesus accomplished God’s plan to bless all of humanity through Abraham in Genesis 12. The covenant of Christ abolished all ontological and providential bases of racial separation and discrimination because it is the covenant for a whole humanity in which all human beings are equal members in God’s family. In this regard, the Puritan understanding of the covenant was theologically inconsistent and problematic. The notion that they were the chosen people who made a covenant with God justified all the acts they did toward other people, and naturally gave them all the power and privilege. The misuse of the idea of covenant helped to create an “exclusive identity” and led to the justification of privileged consciousness and religious immunity to evil actions, in short, the paralysis of conscience.

The Puritans failed to fully consider the theological and ethical implications of the New Covenant for social ethics, such as political, economic, and race relations. In the course of their social practices of the covenant in the realms of politics, society, the economy, and the church, they

relied solely on the Mosaic covenant, while relegating the New Covenant of Jesus Christ to the spiritual realm of “salvation,” which was seldom related to social ethics. As a result, a racial issue was detached from the moral teachings of the New Covenant—universal inclusiveness and the equality of humanity in Jesus—while defending the most brutal form of slavery in human history.

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(3) The Puritans’ mistake is due to their failure to understand the core message and tenets of the biblical idea of covenant. The message of the biblical idea of covenant is essentially not for oppression (such as racism), but for liberation. This message of covenant forms the basic storyline of the Bible and unfolds through the axis of “liberation and restoration.” In other words, it always has the structure of proceeding from liberation to restoration: for example, Creation covenant: chaos → cosmos; Noah’s rainbow covenant: floods (chaos) → final promise of God’s order; Abrahamic covenant: chaos and fragmentation after Tower of Babel → new Eden symbolizing Canaan, the promise to the community; Moses’ covenant: Egyptian slavery → the land of promise; and Jesus’ New Covenant: the power of Satan → new creation. In this sense, the covenant has a bidirectional attribute of “liberation from” (something negative) and “liberation for” (something positive).<sup>12</sup>

In other words, through the covenant, God transforms and reconfigures a human community from negation to affirmation, from chaos to order, from darkness to the creation of light, from life in slavery to the priestly kingdom, and from the dominion of Satan to a new creation. The covenant thus begins with judgment (liberation) of evil, injustice, and darkness, and leads to the recovery and the making of a new righteous community. Therefore, those who correctly understand the core message of covenant—far from supporting racial discrimination or becoming racists—are empowered to fight against racism and other forms of oppression. It is essential to remember that covenant serves the cause of liberation and restoration, not discrimination and oppression.

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If we are looking for a historical example where covenant served for the liberation and restoration of humanity, we can find it in Martin Luther King, Jr.’s leadership role in the American civil rights movement. I believe that King was a Christian who took the New Covenant of Jesus seriously and applied it to his social movement and vision of a new society. That is, he understood every person as a member of God’s covenant, as shown in Jesus’ new covenant, and historically practiced his theological thought through the nonviolent movement of liberation and restoration.

King never neglected the reality of existing social discrimination and the problem of structural evil. And while recognizing the abuses of racism as political and social issues, he also considered them to be spiritual issues. As a result, King became convinced that racism in nature was completely against the Bible and against the covenant, and advocated other ethical values and principles such as human dignity, nonviolence, love, justice, equality, and so on. He was able to devote all of his life to the movement of human emancipation and racial equality. Furthermore, going beyond his role as a spokesperson of African Americans under oppression, King helped people to dream about the universal, eschatological community, which he called the beloved community where human beings live as brothers and sisters to each other.

12. More details on this will be covered in my upcoming book, *New Covenant Ethics*.

Covenant theology has played a morally ambiguous and contradictory role in American political, religious, and social history. In a certain sense, the idea of covenant symbolizes the best and the worst aspects of the United States. Perhaps, the gap between the universal inclusiveness of the covenant of Christ and the Puritans' practice of racism discloses the fractures within the soul of America.

Korean American Christians should not disregard the Puritan passion for faith and their contribution to democracy, nor should they erroneously heroize them as saints. Nor should they inadvertently support this racist Puritan covenant theology (which is still tangible among white conservative evangelical Christians) when it is expressed in American nationalism and foreign policy. Rather, they should not forget that the idea of white chosenness and privilege, which originated from Puritan covenant theology, is still deeply engrained in the marrow of American culture, including Christian institutions. They should remember that this idea of white chosenness and privilege renders divine sanctity and religious legitimacy to racial discrimination, which no legal, institutional, or cultural changes can easily do away with, and that this kind of pseudo-covenant theology makes people of color—such as Asian Americans, including those who were born in or have lived in the United States for generations—second-class citizens.

Covenant constitutes a moral framework that determines who is a member of God's community. Therefore, its charm and psychological impact are enormous. Puritan racism was the result of falsely separating the members of God's covenantal community from Christ and the church, and replacing it with other sociological categories. The standards that decide the members of God's community are not the standards of any political, social, or ethnic group, but only faith in Christ. The identity received from God's covenant is precious and noble. It is based on the deepest, primordial, and fundamental relationship; that is the relationship between my Creator and me, which cannot be altered. However, this relationship is determined by faith alone, which is not limited to any particular person, class, race, or gender, but is responsive to grace. The mistake of the Puritans was that they transformed the boundary of a covenant community determined by God's grace and faith into a boundary defined by skin color.

Furthermore, life in a covenant relationship with God is incompatible with racism. Those who enter into the covenant relationship are required to reject the attitudes of exclusiveness, privileged consciousness, and class divisions. Rather as the co-workers of God, they are called to live a life of service and sacrifice for others. In particular, the Eucharist that embodies the New Covenant of Christ specifically teaches the principles of human equality, dignity, interdependence, and solidarity, in contrast to the pattern of the world that is unequal, individualistic, and competitive.

Racism grounded in a pseudo-covenant theology inherited from the Puritans is still widespread in the United States today, as seen in the election of Trump and the proliferation of white nationalism. Facing this disturbing reality, we need to understand liberation and community restoration as the message of covenant, and the New Covenant of Jesus as a framework for Christian social ethics. Such a decision and action will add a creative dimension and ethical dynamism to our ministry today by enabling us to share Jesus' new covenant as the gospel of hope to those suffering from oppression and discrimination, not as a tool of oppression and discrimination.

As participants in Jesus' new covenant (the fulfillment of all the covenants of the Old Testament), we will be able to have the courage and vision to actively work together for the restoration of humanity and creation. When we correct misused and abused covenant theology in the framework of the universal, eschatological covenant of Jesus, covenant theology will not only be able to overcome racism, but it also can be used as the Christian message of liberation and restoration in the twenty-first century.

## **Redeeming Covenant: A Critical Reflection on Puritan Covenant Theology, Democracy, and Racism in the United States**

### **Conversation starters: Discussion Questions**

Michelle Bartel and Charles Wiley

1. Lee suggests that the Puritans made two errors: first, by applying God's covenant to them alone as white people, and second, by separating the covenant with God from living it out with others. What reasons might there be for Christians to so easily separate our relationship with God from our relationships with others?
2. Call to mind the times you have witnessed baptisms in worship. Maybe you remember your own baptism. How might baptism help us approach our understanding of what covenant means for us as Christians?
3. On page 3, Lee writes that "When we look back at US history, we find that the misuse of covenant theology served as the religious genealogy of racism in the United States." How might we respond to this indictment of covenant theology in terms of confession of sin, assurance of forgiveness, and the passing of the peace?
4. On page 5, Lee exhorts us to attend to God's covenant in Christ: "The covenant of Christ abolished all ontological and providential bases of racial separation and discrimination because it is the covenant for a whole humanity in which all human beings are equal members in God's family." What words and ideas from this quotation can you connect with the following passage from Belhar?
  - "that this unity must become visible so that the world may believe that separation, enmity and hatred between people and groups is sin which Christ has already conquered, and accordingly that anything which threatens this unity may have no place in the church and must be resisted;" 10.3
5. If you were to write a charge and benediction for a worship service that focused on covenant, what are the various ways you could incorporate the following quotation from page 3? "In other words, through the covenant, God transforms and reconfigures a human community from negation to affirmation, from chaos to order, from darkness to the creation of light, from life in slavery to the priestly kingdom, and from the dominion of Satan to a new creation."