

Covenant Violation as A Pathway for Interpreting the Gospel: An Engagement with Schilder and the Yoruba Thought

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Abstract

This paper discussed Schilder's position on the theology of covenant in engagement with the Yoruba thought, identifying their points of agreement and departure and establishing the fruitfulness of Schilder's thoughts on the theology of covenant among the Yorubas. Through library and field studies, it answered whether the levity accorded the Christian faith in the recent by the Yoruba people group is not unconnected to a shallow understanding of the implications of breaking the covenant relationship entailed in the Christian faith. And how the implications of covenant violation, as discussed by Klaas Schilder, can be fruitful for the Yoruba people's understanding of the covenant of grace.

Keywords: Covenant Theology, Klaas Schilder, Reformed Theology, Yoruba

Abstrak

Artikel ini membahas posisi Schilder tentang teologi perjanjian dalam keterlibatan dengan pemikiran Yoruba mengidentifikasi titik-titik kesepakatan dan titik tolak mereka dan menetapkan keberhasilan pemikiran Schilder tentang teologi perjanjian di antara orang-orang Yorubas. Melalui studi pustaka dan lapangan, menjawab pertanyaan apakah kesembronoan yang diberikan iman Kristen oleh kelompok orang Yoruba baru-baru ini tidak terlepas dari pemahaman yang dangkal tentang implikasi melanggar hubungan perjanjian yang terkandung dalam iman Kristen dan bagaimana implikasinya. pelanggaran perjanjian seperti yang dibahas oleh Klaas Schilder dapat menghasilkan pemahaman tentang perjanjian anugerah oleh orang-orang Yoruba.

Kata-kata Kunci: Teologi Perjanjian, Klaas Schilder, Teologi Reformed, Yoruba



Introduction

Covenant Theology, in general, examines the Bible in the light of covenants within it. McGowan defines it as “that system of theology in which the relationship between God and humanity is described in covenantal terms.”¹ It is a reformed theology that discusses God’s dealing with humans with particular focus on Adam and Christ. The theology is discussed under three subheadings: the covenant of works, grace and redemption.

It may also be called Federal Theology. It emphasises one history of God’s people: The Church. The history of the Church and Israel in this view is connected. Covenant Theologians affirm that through Christ Jesus, salvation is fulfilled for all mankind. As noted by Burger, “in the new covenant with Israel, Israel is not replaced but restored in her representative, the Messianic King”.² The Church of Christ thus finds fulfilment in the story of the nation of Israel (cf. Rom 11:11).³ Closely related to this is supersessionism which views the church as a replacement of the nation of Israel since the law has been replaced by grace.⁴

The contrast of federal theology is dispensation theology. Its segmented God’s dealings with human beings into different periods or dispensations. The major point of departure between Federal Theologians and Dispensationalists has to do with the fulfilment of the promise of salvation in Christ and the treatment of the nation of Israel in that regard.⁵

As for the historicity of covenant theology, Golding outlined the contributions of early church fathers and reformers to its development. In particular, he noted the inputs of Barnabas, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus

¹Andrew T. B. McGowan, *Adam, Christ and Covenant: Exploring Headship Theology* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2016), 9.

² J. M. Burger, “The Story of God’s Covenants: A Biblical-Theological Investigation with Systematic Consequences,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 54, no. 2 (2019): 295.

³ Ben Witherington, “Dispensationalism,” in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Christian Theology*, ed. Ian McFarland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 142.

⁴ Matthew A. Tapie, *Aquinas on Israel and the Church: The Question of Supersessionism in the Theology of Thomas Aquinas* (Cambridge: Pickwick Publications, 2015), 10, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.cttlcgf6vw>.

⁵ Charles F. Baker, *A Dispensational Theology* (Michigan: Grace Publications, 1971), 106–108.

and Augustine of Hippo. He also established the involvement of Johannes Cocceius, Calvin, Zwingli, British and German reformers as well as gleanings from the Westminster Confession of Faith. In the end, he submitted that no one can be credited with the invention of covenant theology. The Church fathers and reformers all contributed to its evolution.⁶ The critical contributions of Calvin to the development of covenant theology have also been documented by many authors. Among them are Peter Lillback and Koo Jeon.⁷

Critical words used for “covenant” in the Bible are בְּרִית (*berith*) in the Old Testament and διαθήκη (*diatheke*) in the New Testament. The common meaning of both words suggests “bond”. P.R. Williamson explained that *berith* is used in the Bible to mean three things: 1 - Divine-Human commitment, 2 - An agreement between humans or 3 - Figuratively, a pointer to “solemn commitments made with oneself”.⁸ Hans Burger discussed six nuances of *berith*.⁹ The general agreement among these scholars is that despite the multi-dimensional nuances of *berith*,¹⁰ in the context of covenant, it is perhaps the closest term that conveys the Biblical meaning of covenant in general.

Unarguably, a covenant is not just an “agreement” but a binding pact with a certainty of fulfilment involving oaths and at times blood. Golding calls it “bond in blood”.¹¹ Lillback refers to it as a “binding” he observed that the ancients used “covenant sacrifice as a means of binding armies into a unity”.¹² One concurs then that Covenant generally involves two parties in a pact.

⁶ Peter Golding, *Covenant Theology: The Key of Theology in Reformed Thought and Tradition* (Scotland: Mentor Imprint, 2004), 17.

⁷ See the contribution from Peter A. Lillback, *The Binding of God: Calvin's Role in the Development of Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001). And also Jeong Koo Jeon, *Calvin and the Federal Vision: Calvin's Covenant Theology in Light of Contemporary Discussion* (Eugene: Resource Publishing, 2009).

⁸ P.R. Williamson, “Covenant,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T.D. Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Grand Rapids: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000), 420.

⁹ Burger, “The Story of God's Covenants: A Biblical-Theological Investigation with Systematic Consequences,” 273-274.

¹⁰ Boloje and Groenewald also identified the use of the word in the covenant discussion of Malachi. Blessing Onoriode Alphonso Groenewald Boloje, “Literary Analysis of Covenant Themes in the Book of Malachi,” *Old Testament Essays* 28, no. 2 (2015): 259.

¹¹ Golding, *Covenant Theology: The Key of Theology in Reformed Thought and Tradition*, 77.

¹² Lillback, *The Binding of God: Calvin's Role in the Development of Covenant Theology*, 137.

The Bible is replete with examples of covenants between individuals, groups and nations. Golding identified four and these are:

1. Individual Convenants - This occurs between individuals. It requires mutual obligations – Abraham and Ephron (Gen. 23), Boaz and Kinsman-redeemer (Ruth 4).
2. Parity Covenants – This is a mutually beneficial agreement between two parties who may be of the same or less in status – Beersheba treaty between Abraham and Abimelech (Gen. 21:22-33), Jonathan and David (1 Sam. 18:3), Hiram and Solomon (1 Kings 5:12).
3. Covenant of Grant – This is initiated by the powerful for the benefit of weak – God's covenant with Noah (Gen. 9:8-17), Abraham and David (Gen. 15:18, 2 Samuel 7), God and Israel before and after the Golden Calf, God and Caleb (Jos. 14:13-14) Achish and David (1 Sam. 27:6).
4. Suzerainty Covenants: This is the opposite of Covenant of Grant. It is instituted by the powerful with weak for the benefit of the powerful. This is seen in the agreement between Israel and Gibeonites (Jos. 9), Rahab and the Spies (Jos. 2), Abner and David (2 Sam. 3:12-13).¹³

Burger summarised all these into two categories namely conditional covenants (suzerain-vassal type, that is, the covenant of works and covenant with Israel) and unconditional covenants (royal grant type that is, covenant with Noah, Abraham, David and the new covenant).¹⁴

The systematics in this article begins with an introduction that explains Klaas Schilder's concept of covenants. Then, reviews the significance of Yoruba and the concept of Covenants. Furthermore, the following discussion is about the Application of Schilder's Covenant of Grace to the Yorubas. This research will show the theological recovery efforts in contributing to knowledge as a space and place to experience God's presence on a social dimension, namely in an effort to care for community fellowship and hospitality.

¹³ Golding, *Covenant Theology: The Key of Theology in Reformed Thought and Tradition*, 67–71.

¹⁴ Burger, "The Story of God's Covenants: A Biblical-Theological Investigation with Systematic Consequences," 299.

Method

The research method used is descriptive qualitative conducted field research which sampled the opinion of some Yorubas based in Lagos. Five questions were posed. Where twenty-two people were sampled. Eighteen responded to the questionnaire. The detailed result of the field research is submitted along with this essay. Observation data collection techniques and literature studies. The participatory observation referred to here is the author's direct experience living in the Yorubas context. The data was analyzed anthropologically as cultural texts. As cultural texts, these data are interpreted to obtain their socio-religious-cultural meaning. The results of this study are then linked to Christian theological understandings and then constructed into a theology of the covenant in Klaas Schilder's thought. Primary and secondary literatures that contain data are used to obtain information about Yorubas culture and then be analyzed to understand its meaning and relationships.

Result and Discussion

Schilder On Covenant Theology

Klaas Schilder lived between 1890 and 1952. He was born and grew up in Kampen. He is an example of what the Yorubas call “Atapata dide” which means an important personality with a humble background. He studied Theology in Kampen between 1909 and 1914. He served in the Reformed Church as a minister between 1914 and 1928 and published his PhD dissertation in 1933.

In the same year, he was appointed a professor of Dogmatics at the Theological Seminary in Kampen. During the Second World War, he had a rough time with the Germans as he was strongly opposing the fascist national socialist ideology of Adolf Hitler. He was instrumental to the schism that led to the formation of the Reformed Churches (Liberated) in 1944 and unfortunately died just eight years after this schism.¹⁵ The implications of that schism remain until today.

¹⁵ Nathan Clay Brummel, *Dutch Reformed Covenant Theology in the 20th Century: An Analysis of Some of the Formulations of Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, Herman Hoeksema, and Klaas Schilder* (Create Space Independent Publishing Platform, 2016), 153-156.

To a great extent, Schilder could be called a theologian of cultural engagement, who strived for cultural involvement of Christians. Marinus de Jong explained that Schilder promoted the idea that “the church needs to be in sync with modern culture.”¹⁶ Although, Schilder at a point warned against cultural compromise, since for him, at certain time cultural abstinence for the sake of the Kingdom of God could be required since the ‘church is not of’ but ‘in the world’. Nevertheless, he encouraged cultural engagement by advocating for the sustenance of *sunousia* which he defined as “a being-together, among all men”.¹⁷ Schilder as quoted by Mouw opined that “the Koinonia is given us by Christ; the sunousia comes from God the Creator.”¹⁸

This way, one can see the passion of Schilder in intercultural theology. It was his desire to see the expansion of the gospel to all cultures and in fact all strata of the society. He was quoted as stating that “We must serve God. Everyone in his own way, in apron or toga – that does not matter; everyone in his own way.”¹⁹ Hence, while the fellowship of believers (Koinonia) is important to him, he also views as equally imperative the evangelisation of the world through fellowship.

In general, Schilder’s theology was influenced by Karl Barth, Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck, his contemporaries at the time. Marinus de Jong stated that “in the evolution of Schilder’s thought, the covenant is one of the most remarkable developments. His theology is often characterised by its strong and particular emphasis on the covenant”.²⁰ To discuss Schilder’s theology of covenant is to discuss his passion; his core value and it is to discuss the Reformed Church (Liberated) as it was critical to the schism that gave birth to it.²¹

¹⁶ Marinus de Jong, “The Church Is the Means, the World Is the End. The Development of Klaas Schilder’s Thought on the Relationship between the Church and the World” (Theologisch Universiteit Kampen, 2019), <https://www.tukampen.nl/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/proefschrift-Marinus-de-Jong-final-3.pdf>.

¹⁷ Richard J Mouw, “Klaas Schilder as Public Theologian,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 38 (2003): 293.

¹⁸ Mouw, “Klaas Schilder as Public Theologian,” 293.

¹⁹ Jong, “The Church Is the Means, the World Is the End. The Development of Klaas Schilder’s Thought on the Relationship between the Church and the World,” 139.

²⁰ Jong, “The Church Is the Means, the World Is the End. The Development of Klaas Schilder’s Thought on the Relationship between the Church and the World,” 173.

²¹ Muriwali Yanto Matalu, “An Evaluation to the Polemical Idea of the RCN I in 1940s on the Covenant of Grace as Governed by Election : Its Impact to the Mission in Indonesia,” *Jurnal Teologi Reformed Indonesia* 10, no. 1 (2020): 2–3.

Schilder's views were documented by him in his book, *Heaven: What is it*,²² and his 1944 lecture among many others.

Brummel and Strauss have done a lot of work in the analysis of Schilder's theology of covenant. Brummel established that Schilder sees the covenant relationship between God and man as a historical reality and not conjecture. Schilder's 1944 lecture on "The Main Points of the Doctrine of the Covenant"²³ was very emphatic on the point that the theology of covenant is not an "abstraction"; it is not "figurative" but a reality. For Schilder, history plays a significant role in the understanding of covenant theology. Schilder's covenant theology is thus termed "Trinitarian-Historical" and played an important role in the evolution of the redemptive-historical exegetical approach of Biblical interpretation. Fundamentally, Schilder sees no break in history; sees no break in the story of Adam and Christ. For him, there is no difference between time and eternity in God's plan as in his view "protology defines eschatology". He was quoted by Strauss as stating that "Gen. 2, the beginning of the Bible, governs Revelation 22, the end of Scripture".²⁴ This position perhaps equally influenced his view of God's restraint of Satan in history so that the Gospel of Christ can advance among all cultures.²⁵

To concretise the position of no break in history, one can further allude to Schilder's emphasis on the involvement of God and humans as he discussed covenant theology. For him, God created humans and brought humans into a covenantal relationship with God out of God's benevolence not as equals.²⁶ When Schilder affirmed strongly that the covenant is bilateral, he was only calling attention to the fact that there cannot be a one-sided covenant; it must be between two parties. In this regard, God is not the sole party of the covenant; he brought man into a covenant relationship with him through his sovereign will. While

²² Klaas Schilder, *Heaven: What Is It? Translated and Condensed by Marian Schoolland* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950).

²³ Brummel book contains a translated version of the lecture. Translation done by T. vanLaar. See Brummel, 137-151.

²⁴ S. A. Strauss, *Alles of Niks: K Schilder Oor die Verbond* (All or Nothing: K Schilder on the Covenant), Diss. Unpublished translation by Nelson Kloosterman (Bloemfontein, South Africa: Patmos, 1986), 39. Also quoted in Brummel.

²⁵ Mouw, "Klaas Schilder as Public Theologian," 292.

²⁶ This view is also expressed by Rowland Ward who notes that "man cannot fulfil the purpose of his existence –to glorify God and enjoy him forever – apart from a gracious condescension on God's part." R S Ward, "Covenant Theology and The Westminster Confession," *Vox Reformata* (2004): 14.

Schilder agrees that the origin of the covenant is unilateral, its existence to him is bilateral.²⁷ This view tends towards conditional and unconditional nature of God's covenant. It has been hotly debated and is one of the marked differences between Schilder, Kuypers and Bavinck.

Bavinck quoted by Hanks opined that "the covenant of grace . . . is indeed unilateral: it proceeds from God; he has designed and defined it. He maintains and implements it. It is a work of the triune God and is totally completed among the three Persons themselves."²⁸ The view defines covenant as an unconditional bond between God and man. Some have attempted to mock Schilder as promoting Arminianism by holding to the bilateral view of the covenant. In their opinion, Schilder's bilateralism will suggest works and that conflict with election. Kersten quoted by Van Genderen opined that Schilder's covenant theology "opens the door to practical Arminianism which attributes to faith and obedience a certain power to continued membership in the covenant".²⁹ The detailed discussion of that argument is beyond the scope of this essay. Suffice to say that it will indeed be a mockery to make Schilder an opponent of Calvinism. He is not.

Brummel's analysis of Schilder's lecture also showed that Schilder believed the breaking of the initial covenant by man prompted a restoration of relationship by God through Christ. The restoration by God in his view was for the sake of man, not of God. To Schilder, "in the beginning, God and man stood in a relationship of friends without Christ as 'Christ'. Christ, with His shedding of blood appears for the first time after the fall. When God wishes, after the fall, to maintain the covenant that has been broken from man's side, He appears as Re-creator by restoring the covenant through Jesus Christ".³⁰ In this way, Schilder distinguished Christ of history from Christ of eternity. This distinction marked him out from Kuypers and Bavinck.

While Kuypers held that Christ was already appointed by Trinitarian agreement as head of the covenant of grace before his

²⁷ Brummel, *Dutch Reformed Covenant Theology in the 20th Century: An Analysis of Some of the Formulations of Abraham Kuypers, Herman Bavinck, Herman Hoeksema, and Klaas Schilder*, 164.

²⁸ Herman Hanks, "The History of Reformed Covenant Theology: Conditional or Unconditional," in *Covenant Evangelical Reformed Church's Reformation Day Conference*, 2014, <https://cprc.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/historyofcovenanttheology.pdf>.

²⁹ J. Van Genderen, *Covenant and Election* (Alberta: Inheritance Publications, 1995), 13.

³⁰ Schilder, *Heaven: What Is It? Translated and Condensed by Marian Schoolland*, 148.

incarnation, Schilder noted that the phase of the covenant of grace is a renewal of the one covenant of God with humanity in history. Hence, he asserted that “Christ was appointed to be Mediator of the covenant of grace not in eternity, but in time”.³¹ This position may be called a covenant in continuity.

In opposing the positions of Kuyper and Barth, Schilder did not downplay the foreknowledge of God in the salvation plan. He upheld this by calling it the covenant or counsel of peace. He was very emphatic that it differs from that made with man. According to Schilder “Even though the world has not fallen, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit would have bound themselves in covenant to maintain creation in its covenant relationship to God”.³² His opinion then is that the salvation plan of God is not an afterthought or a reaction to the fall of man but a response plan already in place in eternity. The fall of man is hence already known by God ahead and redemption plan in place.

Strauss puts it better when he concluded that “Kuyper took as his starting point the counsel of peace, the Inter-Trinitarian covenant between the Father and the Son, and he argued that Christ had been appointed Mediator already before his incarnation (thus, in eternity). Schilder did not deny that a covenant of peace existed from eternity, but wanted to distinguish this clearly from the covenant of grace which God established with people within time”³³

The implication of this is that Christ of history is not the head of the covenant of grace or the head of the elect but a mediator, a reconciler of the elect back to God. It is through Christ’s reconciliation that the covenant relationship of God with humans was restored. Christ in the opinion of Schilder is our “brother” not “ancestor” as Adam was. He sees the Covenant of grace as historical and mixed. (e.g. infant baptism) – All children are in the covenant and receive the promise of the covenant, but not all will be saved. One may allude that possibly this is why Schilder’s common grace equally differs from Kuyper’s common grace since grace, to Schilder, is restricted to the elect. As Mouw puts it, “For Schilder, grace is always a saving power, and the only sense in which it is

³¹ Sybrand Albertus Strauss, “‘Everything or Nothing’: The Covenant Theology of Klaas Schilder” (University of Pretoria, 1982).

³² Schilder, *Heaven: What Is It? Translated and Condensed by Marian Schoolland*, 97.

³³ Strauss, “‘Everything or Nothing’: The Covenant Theology of Klaas Schilder,”

“common” is that it is shared by all who truly belong to Christ”.³⁴ It is comforting to note however that both agree on God’s restraint of the devil and evil in the propagation of the gospel.

Schilder’s one covenant theory of three phases will now be further discussed. This one covenant is distinguished in three phases; the covenant of peace, works and grace. The covenant of peace is the eternal Trinitarian covenant of redemption. It precedes history and has been called “*pactum salutis*” or “pre or supra-historical”. One can call it a covenant behind covenant. Schilder in the opinion of Strauss will, in fact, emphasise that all decisions of God are Trinitarian pacts.³⁵ So he never opposed the idea that the covenant of peace was a covenant before time.

The covenant of works for him is that between God and humanity before the fall. The covenant of grace is a reaffirmation of the covenant through the promise of redemption. Simply put, one of works is before the fall that of grace is a renewal of the original covenant after the fall. They are both similar in that both require promise on God’s part and responsibility on man’s part. According to Schilder, “the covenant of grace adds depth and meaning to the covenant of works”.³⁶

The discussion on old and new covenants is also intertwined with that of the covenant of works and grace. In affirming the three covenant-phase position, Schilder opposed the idea of Christ as the head of the covenant of grace. He is of the view that a head in a covenant suggests a third party. For Schilder, someone may head covenant spheres but not be the transmitter of the covenant.³⁷ This view was reinforced by Strauss who noted that Schilder views Christ as a mediator, a reconciler of God and man; the two parties in the covenant. In Adam, humanity sinned, through Christ; humanity’s covenantal relationship with God was restored.

The Yorubas and Covenants

The Yorubas can be found in Nigeria, the Benin Republic, Republic of Togo and Brazil. Their homeland is in the Southwestern part of

³⁴ Mouw, “Klaas Schilder as Public Theologian,” 294.

³⁵ Strauss, “‘Everything or Nothing’: The Covenant Theology of Klaas Schilder,” 164.

³⁶ Schilder, *Heaven: What Is It? Translated and Condensed by Marian Schoolland*, 91.

³⁷ Brummel, *Dutch Reformed Covenant Theology in the 20th Century: An Analysis of Some of the Formulations of Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, Herman Hoeksema, and Klaas Schilder*, 185.

Nigeria called Ile-Ife. History has it that the tribe descended from *Oduduwa*. The twin historical myths of *Oduduwa* have been traced by Adetunmbi.³⁸ One myth state that *Oduduwa* descended from Phoenicia, another state that he originated from heaven. What both myths confirm however is that the Yorubas according to these myths trace their history to *Oduduwa*. The population of the people group stood at 28.28 million as of 2018.³⁹ The tribe is known by its language, Yoruba.

The Yoruba tribe came in touch with Christianity as early as the 15th century through the Portuguese who brought Catholicism along with their trade. This evangelistic effort died out very quickly due to a number of factors. It was through the mission efforts of protestant churches which began in 1842 that Christianity became revived among the Yorubas.⁴⁰ Interestingly, it was an Anglican Bishop, Samuel Ajayi Crowther that published the first Yoruba grammar book in 1843.⁴¹ In spite of this early exposure to Christianity, idol worship is still prevalent today amidst the tribe.

It has been observed that the Yorubas respect covenants a lot. As Ogunleye observes, "the whole of their person-to-person relations has its basis largely in the covenant".⁴² Whenever there is a binding covenant among the Yorubas, usually, both parties keep the agreement. Hence, Yoruba people do not rush to bind themselves to an oath of covenant. The popular adage among them is "whoever betrays a binding covenant suffers the consequence attached to the covenant". It is this strong covenantal relation that enhances communal loyalty. This is because people in the community have a covenant relationship with one another and with their god. As noted by Ogunleye as well as Olagunju, since the people are aware of the consequences of breaking the covenant that

³⁸ M. A. Adetunmbi, "Yoruba Spiritual Heritage and its implications for the Yoruba Indigenous Churches in Nigeria", Thesis submitted for the degree Philosophiae Doctor in Ethics at the Potchefstroom Campus of the North-West University, Promoter: Prof dr JM Vorster, May 2017, 27.

³⁹ <https://allafrica.com/stories/201909270036.html>. Accessed January 8, 2019

⁴⁰ David B. Barrett, George T. Kurian, and Todd M. Johnson, "Nigeria," *World Christian Encyclopaedia* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 550.

⁴¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel_Ajayi_Crowther. Accessed January 8, 2019

⁴² Richard A. Ogunleye, "Covenant-Keeping among the Yoruba People: A Critique of Socio-Political Transformation in Nigeria," *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 3, no. 9 (2013): 81.

binds them to one another and to their god, they run away from breaking covenants.⁴³

In order to obtain first-hand information on how the Yorubas stand as to their belief, belonging, behaviour and experience regarding covenant relationship, this research conducted field research which sampled the opinion of some Yorubas based in Lagos. Five questions were posed. Twenty-two people were sampled. Eighteen responded to the questionnaire. The detailed result of the field research is submitted along with this essay. The outcome is discussed below.

Belief

What does covenant mean to the Yoruba people? All respondents defined a covenant as an agreement between two parties which could be human to human, human to humans, or human to a deity. This shows that people are clear about what a covenant entails and confirm with the views of Olagunju and Ogunleye on human to human and human to deity covenants among Yorubas. Essentially, this view captures how both Christian and non-Christian Yorubas view covenant.

Furthermore, among the Yorubas, there are covenants between the community and the gods (orisas). This informs the kind of festivals that happen in that particular community. The new yam festival, for example, is a celebration rooted in a covenantal relationship with the gods in return for a bountiful harvest. Moreover, there could be a covenant between two parties before a god. Whenever any party goes against the oath taken, disaster usually follows. This idea in relation to the god of *Ayelala* is fully discussed by Ojo.⁴⁴

a. What are its traditional synonyms? Synonyms identified from sampled opinions are *majemu* (a treaty sealed without a sign), *imule* (a bond sealed with a sign involving many times exchange of blood), *adehun* (agreement) and *ileri* (promise). Out of these, *imule* and *majemu* occur most. This shows the metaphysical belief attached to covenant-making.

⁴³ Ogunleye, "Covenant-Keeping among the Yoruba People: A Critique of Socio-Political Transformation in Nigeria," 82. Olugbenga Olagunju, "Covenant Making in Genesis 15:9-18 In The Context Of Archeology And Yoruba World View", *Continental Journal of Arts and Humanities* 3, no. 2 (2011): 15.

⁴⁴ Mattaias O. D. Ojo, "Incorporation of Ayelala traditional religion into Nigerian criminal justice system: An opinion survey of Igbesa community people in Ogun State, Nigeria." *Issues in Ethnology and Anthropology* 9, no. 4 (2014): 1025.

b. How does this conform to or antagonise the biblical concept of the covenant? The view of the Yorubas as established from this field research conforms to the Biblical position on what a covenant means. As discussed earlier, biblical covenants involve two parties and consist of promise and responsibility.

Belonging

What is the place of fraternity in covenant relationship among the Yorubas? All respondents agree on the fact that the Yorubas do not joke with covenant relationship. They stated that Yorubas are usually very loyal to the party they enter into covenant with. Many times, this covenant relationship enhances a closer relationship among covenant parties. This view does not antagonise the scriptures. People in covenant relationship belong to each other and are expected to be loyal to each other.

It should be pointed out that the practice of covenant renunciation is common among the Yorubas. This happens when a party to the oath is no longer interested in the relationship. Often times, many Christians who were members of *Ogboni* Cult have publicly renounced their membership so as to be free from the consequences of the oath they entered into.

Behaviour

a. Why is it difficult for the Yorubas to violate covenant? It was established through the respondents that Yorubas find it difficult to break covenants because of the fear of the consequence attached to such action. The view of these respondents corroborated with that of Ogunleye, Olagunju and Ojo mentioned *inter alia*.

In the Yoruba cosmology, the enmity between humans and animals is traceable to covenant violation. The story goes that there was a time that plants, animals and humans were in covenant of harmony. Both humans and animals cohabited after creation without enmity because there exists a covenant of peace among them. Harvey stated that “when all the species of plants, animals and birds arrived on earth, a covenant was made which stipulated that no species should wantonly or greedily exploit the other. A similar covenant was also made with human beings . . . The verses of Ifá tell us that in those ancient times some animals and birds understood and spoke the languages of human beings and some

humans also spoke and understood the languages of birds and animals.”⁴⁵ Humans broke this covenant by turning some animals away from a party organised by Olofin to celebrate a miracle hence the enmity between humans and animals.

b. How can this help enhance commitment to Jesus and can it also better their understanding of syncretism? The idea of commitment to covenant can help the Yorubas understand what it means to be a Christian. It is not something to be taken for granted or with levity. It should be treasured since covenant according to Schilder starts unilaterally: God's choice and election, not because of human decision. To be in covenant relationship through Christ presupposes total devotion to him alone (cf. Mat. 16:24-26). Incidentally, most of the respondents are of the view that Yoruba Christians are as committed to covenant relationship with Jesus as they are to an interpersonal covenant relationship. This goes against the initial hypothesis that Yoruba Christians are not as committed to the covenant relationship in Christ as they are to the interpersonal covenant.

Experience

The keeping or breaking of the covenant causes security or insecurity, fear, trust or happiness. How can the Yorubas receive trust and assurance of faith in and through the Covenant of grace? As discussed, the covenant of grace is that which Christ mediated by the shedding of his blood. Among the Yorubas, the idea of trust plays a role in their understanding of the covenant. Yoruba Christians particularly are bold to call Christ their God because of the assurance that He will never betray them as covenant keeper. The song “covenant keeping God, there is none like you” exemplify this.

Application of Schilder's Covenant of Grace to The Yorubas

As Schilder, Yorubas believe in the reality of covenant between God and man. This is why they are very careful about breaking covenants. Moreover, as Schilder, they held onto the bilateral nature of covenants. This is why a covenant is referred to as *imule*, meaning

⁴⁵ Marcus Louis Harvey, “Deity from a Python, Earth from a Hen, Humankind from Mystery,” *Estudos de Religião* 29, no. 2 (2015): 263–264, <https://doi.org/10.15603/2176-1078/er.v29n2p237-270>.

exchange of blood. It is imule because two parties come together to agree on a pact and exchange their blood as a token of their agreement. The covenant of grace as discussed by Schilder provides a platform of hope for the Yorubas in that it emphasises the renewal of the original covenant. Hence there is no need to fear any god anymore since God has restored man's relationship immediately after the fall. The punishment due to man in breaking the first covenant has been borne by Christ Jesus, the mediator; the reconciler of man to God.

As this study shows, the Yorubas consider imule as a covenant to be respected. This is the way Schilder also sees the covenant. The gospel message comes alive much more for a Yoruba person when this understanding dawns that through Christ as a mediator, he or she is brought into a deeper covenantal relationship to God. It will be difficult for a Yoruba person to be unserious with his or her relationship with Jesus when by the mediation of Jesus Christ, he has become the "imule" of God. While fear of consequences is involved in a covenant relationship that is not through Christ, faith prevails in Christ. It is this faith that helps a Yoruba man's commitment to Christ and not fears any longer.

While it may be difficult for the Yorubas to see Christ as "brother" as propounded by Schilder, the attention of the Yorubas should be focused on the sacrifice of Christ through the shedding of his blood to reconcile man back to God. This is the emphasis of Schilder and that is what counts. It was God in his sovereign will that brought man into covenant relationship with him not by works but by grace. As Van Genderen observed, "What is a covenant of grace without grace?" What is specific for the biblical idea of the Covenant is that it is unilaterally initiated by God. This makes the biblical covenant special. (Genesis 15 and 17). Abraham had 'no choice' (he was asleep when God made the covenant), just as Adam had no choice too. Moreover, it should be emphasised that the covenant of grace exists only because of grace. By nature, all people will break the covenant. Thus, without the Mediator of the Covenant and his permanent intercession, the covenant will never remain in place. In other words, if it would depend on our faithfulness then covenant would have no chance for by nature humans will break covenant. It is Christ as the mediator of the covenant that makes biblical covenant unique.

Since the Yorubas as Schilder hold unto the bilateral view of the covenant, it should be easy for them to embrace the covenant of grace

mediated by Christ Jesus through faith in the redeeming work of Christ. As noted by Golding, “faith in Jesus Christ is accordingly the embracing of the covenant.”⁴⁶ and Schilder will affirm that this faith is also of God not of man! This writer is not oblivious of the controversy that the issue of man’s responsibility in the covenant of grace has generated.⁴⁷ This study focuses on engaging the Yoruba thought on breaking of covenant in engagement with Schilder. It is thus within scope to affirm the conditional position of Schilder regarding the covenant of grace.

Conclusion

This essay discussed covenant theology in engagement with Schilder and the Yoruba thought. The point of investigation is the fruitfulness of Schilder’s covenant of grace among the Yorubas. Klaas Schilder’s covenant theology no doubt remains a watershed in the development of reformed theology. He emphasises that there is only one covenant in history since the consummation of history is envisaged by God. The point of convergence with Schilder in the Yoruba culture is captured by the term “imule” which emphasises bilateral responsibility. The understanding of covenantal relationship by the Yorubas explained why most respondents sampled agree to the fact that Yorubas Christians are as committed to the Christian faith as they are to the interpersonal covenantal relationship.

The Yorubas can understand the gospel better in the light of Schilder’s covenant of grace. The punishment due to the human race as covenant breakers have been atoned for through Jesus Christ and man’s relationship with God is restored. To be shouted on the rooftop is grace alone through Jesus Christ.

⁴⁶ Golding, *Covenant Theology: The Key of Theology in Reformed Thought and Tradition*, 187.

⁴⁷ Peter Golding discussed the controversy in detail in his book. He argues forth and back showing various positions of reformed theologians on the issue. The compromise he sees in both stands is that faith in Christ is required to come into a renewed covenant relationship with God. See Peter Golding, *Covenant Theology*, 121-175.

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