

**Historic Reflections on the Continuity  
between Sinai Covenant and New Covenant,  
and therefore between the Law of Moses and Christian Duty**

Presentation by T. David Gordon  
to the Advisory Committee (AC-10A) of the 70<sup>th</sup> GA of the OPC  
Re. the Irons Appeal

June 26, 2003

Continuity

Judaism

Catholicism (New covenant still has office of priest)

Theonomy (Civil code of Israel still obliges other nations)

John Murray? (Covenant theology "needs recasting;" no covenant of works)

O. Palmer Robertson (doesn't recognize a works-aspect at Sinai?)

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Westminster (Majority) (Decalogue in garden?, Sinai has a works-aspect, covenant of works, Christian sabbath the Jewish sabbath on a different day)

Patrick Fairbairn (Decalogue not in garden)

Westminster (Minority) (Decalogue not in garden, nor given to Christians by Moses, covenant of works, Sinai has a works-aspect)

John Owen (Lord's Prayer a Jewish Prayer; Jesus a minister of the Old Covenant)

Samuel Bolton (Decalogue given to Christians through the hand of Christ)

Calvin (covenant of works, Jewish sabbath not Christian sabbath)

Herman Bavinck (Decalogue not in garden)

American Presbyterianism (Magistrate neither responsible for well-being of church, nor to prevent false religion)

Robert Lewis Dabney (Lord's Prayer a Jewish Prayer because Jesus a minister of the Old Covenant)

Edwards (Program of biblical theology traces both continuity and discontinuity)

Vos (Program of biblical theology traces both continuity and discontinuity, Israel a type of coming eschatological kingdom, not a model for civil governments)

Kline (Program of biblical theology traces both continuity and discontinuity, Israel a type of coming eschatological kingdom, not a model for civil governments)

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Lutheranism (Law/Gospel contrast)

Dispensationalism (no clear single plan of redemption/kingdom)

**Reformed  
Views**

**Irons'  
View**

Discontinuity

## I. Observations on Continuity and Discontinuity in the Reformed Tradition

The parenthetical comments above attempt to summarize briefly some of the issues at stake regarding understanding continuities and discontinuities, especially between the Sinai Covenant and the New Covenant. Each view within the marginal bracket on the left is found within the reformed tradition, and the spaced underscore separates Mr. Irons' view from other reformed views. His views embrace important and relevant aspects of all those within the reformed tradition but he does not necessarily agree with every relevant aspect of the various parties within the tradition. The continental reformed tradition has ordinarily perceived more discontinuity than has the British/Puritan tradition; and the radical changes to the chapter on the magistrate in WCF (and less-radical but equally significant change to LC 109) by the American Presbyterians (permitted in 1729, formalized in 1787) reflect a substantially different understanding of the magistrate to the church and to enforcing God's laws in the culture.

On a spectrum, one would find greater and lesser degrees of continuity and discontinuity between the Sinai Covenant and the New Covenant. One could select other schools or individuals (this example is not intended to be comprehensive), but the point of this sampling is that there is a range on the spectrum. Further, there could be honest debate about my particular spectrum; some might choose to place Owen on the other side of Edwards, or make other adjustments. My point is not that others are to assume the validity of my rankings (though I would be happy to demonstrate the grounds for my decisions), but to demonstrate that there are many positions on the spectrum, not two (continuity and discontinuity).

Further, it should be noted that some views fall outside of the Reformed tradition (e.g. Catholicism on one end and Lutheranism on the other), and some within it. And, I would expect some honest disagreement with my judgments here (some think Theonomy is within the Reformed camp; I do not, and not only cannot find any evidence that it was embraced by the Reformed tradition before 1975, but positively find unambiguous evidence from both the Continental (Calvin) and British (Westminster) reformed traditions that it was expressly repudiated); but I doubt any would deny that some views of continuity/discontinuity are *outside* of the Reformed tradition, or that there is variety *within* the Reformed tradition.

Some comments on my individual choices may help clarify (if not convince of) some of my choices. John Murray, for instance, expresses some reluctance to embrace the historic covenant theology's articulation of a covenant of works as articulated by the Westminster standards. Murray said that the historic covenant theology "needs recasting." Palmer Robertson does not do this, but he does tend towards Murray's view that all covenants are "gracious,"

implying (though not expressing) discomfort with speaking of an aspect of a covenant of works at Sinai (affirmed, however, by everyone at the Westminster Assembly). Catholicism still calls its ministers "priests," and thus does not break from the Sinai covenant as historic Protestantism did, or as Westminster did by asserting that the ceremonial law is abrogated. Theonomy, similarly, attempts to turn Westminster's language regarding the civil law (WCF 19:4) on its head by its ingenious (and historically erroneous) interpretation of the exceptive clause regarding "general equity" in such a manner as effectively to deny what was twice earlier asserted (that the civil law of Israel had "expired together with the state of that people," and that it therefore was "not obliging any other now") and see the correction of such a view of "general equity" in the recent *Westminster Theological Journal* [vol. 64 (2002), pp. 307-18].

Individuals such as Dabney and Owen are placed closer to discontinuity than Westminster because, e.g., whereas Westminster's catechisms affirm without qualification the value of the so-called Lord's Prayer as an example for Christian prayer, Dabney says "it is an Old Testament prayer: is intended as such, because that dispensation was still standing" (*Systematic Theology*, 721). Similarly, Owen said regarding this prayer: "Our Saviour at that time was minister of the Circumcision, and taught the doctrine of the gospel under and with the observation of all the worship of the Judaical church. He was not yet glorified ... That, then, which the Lord Jesus prescribed unto his disciples, for their present practice in the worship of God, seems to have belonged unto the economy of the Old Testament." (*Works*, xv:15. Others have referred to the "defect" in this prayer due to its location in the Mosaic economy, e.g. Samuel Miller, *Thoughts on Public Prayer*, pp. 51-53).

Similarly, individuals such as Samuel Bolton, Patrick Fairbairn, and Herman Bavinck have expressed dissatisfaction with WCF 19:1-2, and the apparent suggestion there of an identity between God's revelation of law in the state of innocence with his revelation thereof at Sinai (Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, Gaffin translation in *Festschrift for Meredith Kline*; Fairbairn, *The Revelation of Law in Scripture*, 35; Bolton, *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom*, identified three views at Westminster, and embraced himself one of the two minority opinions).

In terms of Mr. Irons' case, the point of this chart is simply to locate his views, where germane to the charge, within dogmatic history. Are his views *outside* of the reformed tradition, such as the views of Catholicism, Lutheranism, or Dispensationalism, or are they *within* both the reformed tradition and the Westminster tradition *as adopted and confessed by the American churches*? I believe the answer is clearly, and without exception, the latter. There is nothing in Mr. Irons' views on the law, the covenants, or the Decalogue, that is inconsistent with what other

orthodox reformed theologians have believed and taught.

Prosecution has only presented evidence that Mr. Irons' views, on some particular points, are different than those of some other reformed individuals. This is neither surprising, considering the divergence of opinion within the reformed heritage, nor germane to the charge. Prosecution has presented no evidence at all that is pertinent to the charge. Such evidence would need to demonstrate not merely that some individuals in the reformed heritage on some points *differ* with Mr. Irons; it would need to demonstrate that:

-His views are inconsistent with the American Presbyterian understanding of the matters at hand, as proven by confessional or ecclesiastical decision, or that

-Significant reformed theologians not merely held a different view on relevant points, but that they considered views such as those of Mr. Irons as being *outside* the pale of reformed orthodoxy. This is a very significant point, because, as Samuel Bolton has demonstrated, the Westminster Assembly itself recognized a number of different views, and considered two of those views to be acceptably reformed (that the Mosaic covenant was a covenant of grace administered in the form of a covenant of works, and that the Mosaic covenant was a subservient covenant of works).

## II. Brief Thoughts on Mr. Irons' Appeal: Three Grounds of Sustaining the Appeal

In my judgment, there are three grounds on which the appeal of Mr. Irons should be sustained: first, the charge is not a lawful charge; second, prosecution has not demonstrated, even *prima facie*, that his views are out of accord with the standards of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church or the reformed tradition in America; and third, the defense has presented a convincing *prima facie* case that Mr. Irons' views are well within the mainstream of the reformed tradition in America, and have never been deemed inconsistent with the reformed tradition by any part thereof.

### GROUND ONE: THE CHARGE IS NOT A LAWFUL CHARGE

Mr. Irons has been charged as follows: "with violating your ordination vows by teaching, contrary to the Scriptures and the Westminster Standards, that the Decalogue is no longer binding on believers as the standard of holy living." The operative (and wrong) qualification here is "contrary to the Scriptures and the Westminster Standards." Neither the scriptures, nor the

Westminster standards, ever refer to the Decalogue as "the standard of holy living." To the contrary, the Westminster standards tell us that "*The scriptures* principally teach what man is to believe concerning God and *what duty God requires of man*" (WSC 3, emphases mine). The Westminster standards do not reduce our duty to the Decalogue, but demand our compliance with nothing less than "the scriptures" in their entirety, and rightly understood. The standards merely affirm about the Decalogue that it is a place wherein the moral law "is summarily comprehended" (WSC 41, WLC 98) which Mr. Irons does not deny. Thus, totally apart from the truthfulness of the charge, is the question of whether the charge, as worded, constitutes a violation of one's ordination vow. In this case it does not. 1 Corinthians 13 is part of the standard of holy living, as is the Sermon on the Mount, the Golden Rule, Philippians 2, and the Upper Room discourses, to give several examples. To replace the whole of scriptures with the Decalogue, and assert (as the charge does) that the Decalogue is "the standard of holy living," is unChristian, unscriptural, unreformed, and contrary to what the Westminster standards themselves teach. Even without considering the other two grounds, General Assembly should sustain the appeal on the ground that the charge, as framed, is unlawful.

#### GROUND TWO: PROSECUTION HAS NOT MADE A *PRIMA FACIE* CASE

Prosecution's well-written case is informative and helpful, as an expression of what some reformed people believe. Not one of its citations of reformed thinkers, however, even remotely addresses the point that prosecution had the burden of proving, to wit: That Mr. Irons' views are *outside* of what the reformed tradition considers to be *acceptably reformed*. Prosecution has merely presented evidence that *some* reformed individuals have a different view of the matter than Mr. Irons, which has never been denied by Mr. Irons and is entirely irrelevant.

By analogy, suppose Mr. Irons were on trial for holding a particular view of Romans 7, and suppose further that prosecution presented evidence that other reformed individuals held a different view of Romans 7. Would this prove either that Mr. Irons' views were un-reformed, or even that those who disagreed with him deemed them so? No. Several interpretations of Romans 7 exist in the reformed community, as do at least two views of the state of infants dying in infancy, and of whether the imputation of Adam's sin is mediate or immediate. But while a substantial literature exists on each of these points, those who argue for one position or the other do *not* argue that the alternatives are un-reformed, or a violation of the teaching of the Westminster standards. One is not un-reformed because his opinions on some matter differ with others who are reformed. One is only un-reformed when his views contradict the consensus of the reformed community, or the necessary logic of its other tenants, neither of which prosecution has even remotely demonstrated.

Even without considering Mr. Irons' defense, General Assembly should sustain the appeal on the ground that Prosecution, whose burden it is to demonstrate that the views of Mr. Irons are out of accord with the scriptures and the Westminster standards, as our tradition has understood both, has simply failed to produce a *prima facie* case to this end.

GROUND THREE: DEFENSE HAS MADE A COMPELLING *PRIMA FACIE* CASE THAT MR. IRONS' VIEWS ARE IDENTICAL WITH THOSE OF OTHER ORTHODOX REFORMED THINKERS SINCE THE WESTMINSTER ASSEMBLY

I do not believe this third ground needs to be entertained by the Assembly. Since the charge itself is unlawful, and since the prosecution has not met its burden, Mr. Irons should not even be required to make a defense. Mr. Irons, however, understandably desires to have his beliefs and teaching vindicated by the highest court, and therefore desires that this third ground be considered.

Defense has demonstrated, with quotations ranging from the seventeenth century to the twenty-first, from those who were commissioners to the Westminster Assembly (e.g. Bolton) to those who are its current students (e.g. Sinclair Ferguson), that on every point where prosecution has found Mr. Irons' views to be objectionable, the reformed tradition has recognized such views to be acceptable. Defense has demonstrated:

-that though there were several views of the works-aspect of the Sinai covenant held by commissioners to the Assembly, every view recognized in some way that such a works-aspect existed in a manner that it does not exist in the New Covenant (e.g. Bolton, Karlberg, Deuteronomy 27ff.);

-that the Assembly's near identification of the Decalogue and the moral law (WCF 19:1-2) is only apparent (Fairbairn), and would be wrong if actual (e.g. Bavinck, Fairbairn, and Romans 5:13);

-that though the Decalogue is subjectively "God's law" (insofar as God is its author), it is objectively "Israel's law" (insofar as Israel is its recipient), and only obligatory on Christians insofar as Christ the Lord of *our* covenant, reveals it to be so. Since "*all* authority in heaven and on earth" is given to the ascended Christ, his followers must do "whatsoever" *he* commands (Bolton et al. refer to this as receiving the Decalogue "from

the hand of Christ," rather than from the hand of Moses).

-that while Westminster recognized that the Decalogue was "commonly called moral," neither Westminster nor the tradition that flowed from it has demanded an equation of the moral law and the Decalogue (Fairbairn et al.)

On every pertinent point, Mr. Irons has defended his views with careful, persuasive exegesis of relevant passages, and with germane citations from the reformed tradition. He has not asked that his view be the only permissible view within the OPC; he has merely desired that his view *remain* permissible in a tradition that has always hitherto deemed it to be so.