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# THE CAVITY IN THE COVENANT: GEORGE WHITEFIELD'S USE OF THE *PACTUM SALUTIS*

Joel D. Houston

*George Whitefield argued that the covenant of redemption (the pactum salutis) was the best lens through which to view the doctrine of predestination. The present article examines the challenges inherent within the doctrine of the pactum salutis and seeks to demonstrate the way in which Whitefield received and made use of this aspect of Reformed Covenantal theology. While rhetorically effective, Whitefield's use of the pactum salutis led him to use non-orthodox trinitarian language.*

## Introduction

Amidst the *Sturm und Drang* of the *Free Grace* controversy in the early 1740s,<sup>1</sup> the theological problems inherent within the Calvinistic understanding of predestination seemed, to George Whitefield, easily solved.<sup>2</sup> In Whitefield's mind, the doctrine of the *pactum salutis* was the safe harbour amidst the storm over predestination (though Whitefield's preferred designation was the "covenant of redemption"). In the Reformed Covenantal tradition, the *pactum salutis* is, as Mark Jones described, "a pretemporal, intratrinitarian covenant between the Father, Son and Spirit

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<sup>1</sup> Dates for the end of the controversy range. Allan Coppedge dated the *Free Grace* controversy from 1739–1744, Allan Coppedge, *John Wesley in Theological Debate* (Kentucky: Wesley Heritage Press, 1987), 40. Herbert McGonigle dated the end of the controversy at 1745, Herbert McGonigle, *Sufficient Saving Grace: John Wesley's Evangelical Arminianism* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001), 175. Ian Maddock dated the conclusion at 1742, Ian Maddock, *Men of One Book: A Comparison of Two Methodist Preachers, John Wesley and George Whitefield* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011), 8.

<sup>2</sup> This is not to suggest a monolithic "Calvinism" in the eighteenth century. As David Ceri Jones has argued, "modern scholarship demands that we think in terms of multiple Calvinisms." David Ceri Jones, "'We are of Calvinistical principles': How Calvinist was early Calvinistic Methodism?" *The Welsh Journal of Religious History* 4 (2009): 39. Peter Toon's *The Emergence of Hyper-Calvinism in English Nonconformity: 1689–1765* (1967; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011) has long remained an accessible entry point into the discussion of the various factions of Calvinism.

that provides the eternal, inviolable foundation of the temporal covenant of grace.”<sup>3</sup>

In the early days of the revival, Whitefield was eager to expound on the glories of the covenant of redemption. Whitefield’s Sermon 44, *Christ the Believer’s Wisdom, Righteousness, Sanctification and Redemption* (1740),<sup>4</sup> opened with a meditation on the *pactum salutis*. Whitefield carefully qualified the ontic aspects of the Godhead before shifting to a predominantly economic mode of explaining the divine agreement:

Not as though Jesus Christ was not God also; but God the Father is the fountain of the Deity; and, if we consider Jesus Christ acting as Mediator, God the Father is greater than he; there was an eternal contract between the Father and the Son: “I have made a covenant with my chosen, and I have sworn unto *David* my servant;” now *David* was a type of Christ, with whom the Father made a covenant, that if he would obey and suffer, and make himself a sacrifice for sin, he should “see his seed, he should prolong his days, and the pleasure of the Lord should prosper in his hands.”<sup>5</sup>

Confident of the biblical basis for such a doctrine,<sup>6</sup> Whitefield marshalled scriptural support for the covenant of redemption from the source text for the sermon (1 Cor. 1:30), as well as from Matthew 25:34 and 20:23 (cf. Mark 10:40).<sup>7</sup> Whitefield believed that the *pactum salutis* was the best lens through which to view the doctrine of predestination, wishing that Christians everywhere would be “more studious of the covenant of redemption between the Father and the Son.”<sup>8</sup> Whitefield asserted that if this were indeed the case, there would be far less rancour over predestination and that the “dazzling” light of the doctrine would be

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<sup>3</sup> Mark Jones, *Why Heaven Kissed Earth: The Christology of the Puritan Reformed Orthodox Theologian, Thomas Goodwin, 1600–1680* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010), 123.

<sup>4</sup> Originally published in *Sermons by the Late Rev. George Whitefield* (Glasgow, 1740), Lee Gatiss, *The Sermons of George Whitefield Vol. 2* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 213. See also Lee Gatiss’ comments on Whitefield’s use of the *pactum salutis*: Lee Gatiss, *The Sermons of George Whitefield Vol. 1* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 32–34.

<sup>5</sup> George Whitefield, *The Works of the Reverend George Whitefield* (London: Edward and Charles Dilly, 1772), 6:188.

<sup>6</sup> Gatiss, *The Sermons of George Whitefield*, 1:33.

<sup>7</sup> Whitefield, *Works*, 6:188.

<sup>8</sup> Whitefield, *Works*, 6:187–189.

sufficient to quell argument and instil an abiding praise of God's mercy.<sup>9</sup> Whitefield's editorialising note in his sermon that even "good men" refer to predestination as "a doctrine of devils" is almost certainly a riposte to John Wesley's earlier homiletic attacks (the sermon "Free Grace," preached on April 29th, 1739) launched from Bristol.<sup>10</sup>

Whitefield's sentiments beg the question, of course. Did Whitefield's specific recourse to the *pactum salutis* sufficiently absolve him of the difficulties inherent in his paradigm of unconditional predestination? The ensuing discussion will examine George Whitefield's later (and less examined) use of the *pactum salutis* in Sermon 15. It will be argued that while the covenant of redemption may have mitigated some of the more deterministic elements of the Whitefield's understanding of predestination, the unintended side-effects generated substantial problems for Whitefield's doctrine of the Trinity, particularly with respect to encouraging tritheistic language when speaking of the economic aspects of the Godhead.

To facilitate this discussion, the *pactum salutis* is defined, and the historic roots briefly examined. An extended analysis of George Whitefield's use of the *pactum salutis* in Sermon 15 follows, with special attention paid to Whitefield's adaptation of the works of Thomas Goodwin

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<sup>9</sup> Whitefield, *Works*, 6:189. Whitefield's belief that a greater understanding of the "Federal System" would ease the hostility towards a Calvinistic view of predestination seems to give credence to the often asserted belief that covenant theology, "from the outset, was considered a softening of Calvinism." George Fisher, "The Augustinian and the Federal Theories of Original Sin Compared," *New Englander and Yale Review*, 27.104 (July 1868): 489; Also, Berkouwer: "This doctrine is employed especially to oppose the idea that election was decreed completely apart from Christ, and that He was nothing but the executor of that decree." G. C. Berkouwer, *Divine Election* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 162.

<sup>10</sup> Whitefield, *Works*, 6:188; Gatiss, *The Sermons of George Whitefield*, 1:33–34. See Whitefield's letter to John Wesley, 28 September 1740: "What mean you by disputing in all your letters? May God give you to know yourself, and then you will not plead for *absolute perfection*; or call the doctrine of election a 'doctrine of devils.'" Whitefield, *Works*, 1:216–217. As Gatiss rightly noted, Wesley rejected the *pactum salutis* entirely (34). In his *Preface to a Treatise on Justification, Extracted from Mr. John Goodwin Wherein All that is Personal, in Letters Just Published, Under the Name of the Rev. Mr. Hervey, is Answered*, Wesley commented, "It is sure [Christ] did everything necessary; but how does it appear that he undertook this before the foundation of the world, and that by a positive covenant between him and the Father? ... I see not one word of the treaty itself. Nor can I possibly allow the existence of it, without far other proof than this." John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 3rd ed. (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1872), 10:325.

and Thomas Boston, particularly Boston's annotated reprint of Edward Fisher's *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*. Finally, a consideration of the possible reasons for Whitefield's foray into non-orthodox trinitarian language is conducted, with the argument asserted that a heightened emphasis of Whitefield's Christology resulted in generating an "appeal to emotion," or, *argumentum ad passiones*.<sup>11</sup>

## The Origins and Nature of the *Pactum Salutis*

In its simplest form, the *pactum salutis* is, as Michael Horton described, "an eternal pact between the persons of the Trinity. The Father elects a people in the Son as their mediator to be brought to saving faith through the Spirit."<sup>12</sup> Horton also noted that the *pactum salutis* has a particularly infralapsarian quality (the elect are "chosen out of the condemned mass of humanity") and sought to magnify God's divine attributes, especially "his justice and his mercy."<sup>13</sup>

An outworking of the eternal Son operating as "covenant surety of the elect [to] redeem them in the temporal execution of the covenant of grace,"<sup>14</sup> the *pactum salutis* trades in predominantly commercial language and "describes a relationship among the three trinitarian persons in a negotiated agreement ... in which these persons act as legal parties who are mutually obligated to each other."<sup>15</sup> The heightened language of "contract" and commerce undoubtedly contributed to the popularity

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<sup>11</sup> For a recent rhetorical critique of Whitefield's sermons particularly with regard to his "fear appeals," see, Frankie J. Melton Jr., "The Effect of Fear Appeals on George Whitefield's Auditors," *Puritan Reformed Journal* 5.1 (2013): 163–182.

<sup>12</sup> Michael J. Horton, *Introducing Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 78.

<sup>13</sup> Horton, *Covenant Theology*, 78–79. Horton's assessment of the *pactum salutis* is a suitable introduction. However, Horton tends to elide the notorious tendency of the *pactum salutis* to exclude the Holy Spirit. See W. J. van Asselt, *The Federal Theology of Johannes Cocceius (1603–1669)*, ed. Robert J. Bast, trans. Raymond A. Blacketer (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 233, as well as Joohyun Kim's overview of the critiques levelled against the binitarian tendencies of the *pactum salutis*: Joohyun Kim, "The Holy Spirit in David Dickson's Doctrine of the *Pactum Salutis*," *Puritan Reformed Journal* 7.2 (2015): 113–115.

<sup>14</sup> J. V. Fesko, *The Covenant of Redemption: Origins, Development and Reception* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2016), 15.

<sup>15</sup> Asselt, *The Federal Theology of Johannes Cocceius*, 230.

of the doctrine, providing fertile ground for theological reflection and lay comprehension.<sup>16</sup>

While the definition of the covenant is reasonably straightforward, tracing the historical development of the *pactum salutis* is a rather tangled affair.<sup>17</sup> Richard Muller argued that the *pactum salutis* likely “originated with [Johannes] Cocceius [1603–1669], but its roots are most probably to be found in the earlier Reformed meditation on the trinitarian nature of the divine decrees.”<sup>18</sup> Elsewhere, Muller exposed probable antecedents to these “Reformed meditations,” including Luther, Oecolampadius, Budaeus, Jacob Arminius (1603), William Ames (1623), Edward Reynolds (1632), and Thomas Hooker (1638).<sup>19</sup> Jonathan D. Moore noted that John Owen was keen to integrate Cocceius’ insights on the *pactum salutis* into his treatises dealing with covenant theology, most notably, *The Death of Death* and against Richard Baxter’s persistent critiques.<sup>20</sup>

The idea of an eternal council within the Godhead concerning the redemption of humanity has not been without its critics, however. While generally sympathetic, G. C. Berkouwer intimated that much of this criticism was beholden to the “speculation and scholasticism” involved in the early formulations of the doctrine.<sup>21</sup> Berkouwer directed the reader to Abraham Kuyper’s mediating position between unqualified acceptance and outright rejection of the *pactum salutis*. Kuyper argued that covenant language is appropriate to describe the inner workings of the divine plan of redemption but also emphasised that this language must also be an accommodation to human finitude in such matters.<sup>22</sup> Kuyper, however, also counselled deep caution concerning the doctrine of the *pactum*

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<sup>16</sup> Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), 55.

<sup>17</sup> Jones, *Why Heaven Kissed Earth*, 124.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Muller, *After Calvin: Studies in the Development of a Theological Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 187.

<sup>19</sup> Richard Muller, “Toward the *Pactum Salutis*: Locating the Origins of a Concept,” *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 18 (2007): 12.

<sup>20</sup> Jonathan D. Moore, “The Extent of the Atonement: English Hypothetical Universalism versus Particular Redemption,” in *Drawn into Controversie: Reformed Theological Diversity and Debates Within Seventeenth-Century British Puritanism*, ed. Michael A. G. Haykin and Mark Jones (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 130.

<sup>21</sup> Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, 162, and more generally 162–171.

<sup>22</sup> Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, 163, 168.

*salutis*, arguing that the door remained open for a descent into the heresy of tritheism.<sup>23</sup>

Other scholars have rejected what they believe to be the inherent tritheism in the *pactum salutis*, including Karl Barth's strident criticism in his *Church Dogmatics*. For Barth, the *pactum salutis* "is mythology, for which there is no place in a right understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity as the doctrine of the three modes of being of the one God."<sup>24</sup> Barth was incredulous that the language of divinity could be transposed to a legal register; such a shift jeopardises the unity of the divine will: "the question is necessarily and seriously raised of a will of God the father which originally and basically is different from the will of God the son."<sup>25</sup>

Perry Miller believed that even speculation into a supposed *pactum salutis* was an "audacious intrusion into the holy sanctuary of the Trinity" and "one of the more shocking exhibitions of Puritan effrontery" which resulted in the "blasphemous degradation of the tripartite divinity into a joint stock company."<sup>26</sup> The flaw of the common understanding of the *pactum salutis*, according to Miller, is that it employs commercial metaphors that are too rudimentary or familiar.<sup>27</sup> To over-simplify the doctrine in such a way may lend explanatory power, yet can create an inadvertent "cavity in the covenant," an understanding of the Trinity that is deficient in its perichoresis, and subsequently, its orthodoxy.<sup>28</sup>

Therefore, a responsible explication of the *pactum salutis* may utilise economic or contractual language to the benefit of the hearer, but must avoid the tendency to over-simplify the arrangement to the detriment of a robustly trinitarian understanding of redemption. What then, of Whitefield's usage of the *pactum salutis*?

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<sup>23</sup> Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, 163–164. See J. Mark Beach, "The Doctrine of the *Pactum Salutis* in the Covenant Theology of Herman Witsius," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 13 (2002): 115–118 for further analysis of Berkouwer and Kuyper's positions.

<sup>24</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV.I (Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 2010), 65.

<sup>25</sup> Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV.I, 65. This acknowledgment of Karl Barth's critique is indebted to Scott Swain's observations in "Covenant of Redemption," in *Christian Dogmatics: Reformed Theology for the Catholic Church*, ed. Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 121. Swain also helpfully noted the contribution of Robert Letham in this regard.

<sup>26</sup> Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1939), 407.

<sup>27</sup> See Helm's critique of Miller's argument: Paul Helm, "Calvin and the Covenant: Unity and Continuity," *EvQ* 55 (1983): 67.

<sup>28</sup> See Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century*, 405–409.

## Whitefield's Use of the *Pactum Salutis*

After his initial exposition of the *pactum salutis* in Sermon 44, Whitefield's fondness for the covenant of redemption continued to grow. Whitefield confessed his appreciation to the Rev. Mr. C \_\_\_\_\_ in Boston: "God hath blessed the reading of the prophecy of the prophet *Jeremiah* to my soul; as also the history of *Joseph*, and hath let me see more into the covenant of redemption between the Father and the Son: I am more and more in love with the *good old Puritans*;"<sup>29</sup> Similarly, on February 12th, 1741 on board the *Minerva*, Whitefield exhorted Mr. H. B. to "get acquainted more and more with electing love; study the covenant of redemption, and see how God loved you with an everlasting love."<sup>30</sup>

Whitefield's most dynamic expression of the *pactum salutis*, however, is found in Sermon 15, *The Righteousness of Christ, an Everlasting Righteousness* (1770).<sup>31</sup> After expounding the foundation for the righteousness of Christ (in Whitefield's estimation, a result of Christ's active and passive obedience) and a short explication of the covenant of works between God and humanity through their federal representative, Adam, Whitefield lamented the Adamic violation of the agreement.<sup>32</sup> This sorry state of affairs gave rise to a conflict between the attributes of God, and therefore, the necessity of the pre-temporal counsel of peace. Whitefield's lengthy exposition demonstrates the degree to which he felt at liberty to embellish and aestheticise his earlier presentation of the covenant of redemption:

<sup>29</sup> Whitefield, *Works*, 1:255.

<sup>30</sup> Whitefield, *Works*, 1:239. Whitefield's enthusiasm for the *pactum salutis* was by no means shared by even his closest Reformed contemporaries. See, for example, Ebenezer Erskine's refusal to endorse the covenant of redemption: "Erskine's rejection of a distinct covenant of redemption is so absolute that it almost invariably takes the form of curt dismissal rather than detailed refutation." Stephen G. Myers, *Scottish Federalism and Covenantalism in Transition: The Theology of Ebenezer Erskine* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2015), 54–56.

<sup>31</sup> Whitefield, Sermon 15, in *Works*, 5:235–250. This assertion, however, may seem contentious. Lee Gatiss, for example, omitted this homily from his list of Whitefield's sermons that employ covenant language (Gatiss, *The Sermons of George Whitefield*, 1:32). Indeed, Whitefield himself does not explicitly mention the words "covenant of redemption" in Sermon 15, leading to the possible rejoinder that Sermon 15 is *not* an expression of the covenant of redemption. However, given the surrounding context of the sermon (a discourse steeped in covenant theology), and the nature of Whitefield's source material (particularly that of Edward Fisher), such a claim appears untenable. See n.35 below.

<sup>32</sup> Whitefield, *Works*, 5:241–242.



Here *Calvin* represents God's attributes as struggling one with another; Justice saying to God, seeing Justice had framed the sanction, "Is the law broken, damn the offender, and send him to hell." The mercy of God, his darling attribute, cries out, "Spare him, spare him." The wisdom of God contrives a way, that justice might be satisfied, and yet mercy be triumphant still. How was that? The Lord Jesus interposes, the days-man, the dear Redeemer! he saw God wielding his flaming sword, and his hand taking hold of vengeance; the Lord Jesus Christ saw the sword ready to be sheathed in the blood of the offender; when no eye could pity, when no angel or archangel could rescue, just as God was, as it were, about to give the fatal blow, just as the knife was put to the throat of the offender, the Son of God, the eternal Logos, says, "Father, spare the sinner; let him not die; Father, Father, O hold thy hand, withdraw thy sword, for I come to do thy will; man has broken thy law, and violated thy covenant: I do not deny but man deserves to be damned for ever; but, Father, what *Adam* could not do, if thou wilt prepare me a body, I in the fulness of time will go, and die for him; he has broken thy law, but I will go and keep it, that thy law may be honoured; I will give a perfect unsinning obedience to all thy commandments; and that thou mayst justify ungodly creatures, I will not only go down and obey thy law, but I will go down and bleed; I will go down and die: here I am; I will step in between thee and sinners, and be glad to have thy sword sheathed in my heart's blood for them."<sup>33</sup>

Whitefield's garish presentation of the *pactum salutis* in this instance was undoubtedly motivated by a desire to draw his audiences into a deeper understanding of covenantal theology. Whitefield's enthusiasm in this regard however, appears to have led him into some questionable theological territory. If it is indeed granted that Whitefield described the covenant of redemption in this passage, the question must be asked: *why* did Whitefield choose to present the *pactum salutis* in this highly aestheticised manner? Before addressing Whitefield's motivations in this regard, the question of sources must first be answered. Clearly, Whitefield was not in any important sense the originator of the covenant of redemption and so understanding Whitefield's reception and augmentation of the *pactum salutis* will go a long way in understanding why, perhaps, Whitefield chose to err on the side of heterodoxy in this presentation of the covenant of redemption.

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<sup>33</sup> Whitefield, *Works*, 5:242.

## A Question of Sources

Contrary to Whitefield's assertion in Sermon 15, covenant theology does not find its predominant impetus in the thought of Calvin. Calvin's *Institutes*, as Paul Helm argued, "is not a work of covenant theology like those produced by Witsius or Ball or Perkins."<sup>34</sup> However, covenant themes may still be found in Calvin, particularly in his commentary on John 17.<sup>35</sup> Instead of this covenant theme generally, Whitefield expressly noted that Calvin portrayed God's *attributes* as "struggling." It is possible that Whitefield was referring to Calvin's statement, "in a manner which cannot be expressed, God, at the very time when he loved us, was hostile to us until reconciled in Christ."<sup>36</sup> It seems that Whitefield took it upon himself to express that very manner in vivid language, yet even this language is not original to Whitefield. It appears Whitefield drew his understanding of the *pactum salutis* from at least three primary sources: the writings of Thomas Goodwin (1600–1680), Thomas Boston (1676–1732) and most prominently, Boston's annotated reprint of the work of Edward Fisher (1627–1655).

### Thomas Goodwin

The work of Puritan theologian Thomas Goodwin (1600–1680) reflects a continued development in Whitefield's usage of covenant theology.<sup>37</sup> Whitefield held "Dr. Goodwin" in high regard, citing him in sermons, letters, and even his preface to Bunyan's works.<sup>38</sup> Goodwin

<sup>34</sup> Helm, "Calvin and the Covenant," 68.

<sup>35</sup> Helm asserted: "both Calvin and covenant theology maintain that there is an eternal pact of salvation between the Father and Son." Helm, "Calvin and the Covenant," 69–70. However, Helm criticized "the extravagant language indulged in by later covenant theologians" (71), and made explicit mention of Edward Fisher's dramatic portrayal of the *pactum salutis* (see below): "it is hard to think of Calvin writing anything remotely similar" (71, n.20). Therefore, the protestation that Whitefield's Sermon 15 is *not* an articulation of the covenant of redemption is likely invalid.

<sup>36</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion Vol. 1*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), II:17:2, 454. Alternatively, and equally plausible, Gatiss suggested that the possible location is *Institutes*, II:16:1–4 (Gatiss, *The Sermons of George Whitefield*, 1:288, n.6); see especially §2, 434–435.

<sup>37</sup> The insights concerning Goodwin's use of the *pactum salutis* are indebted to Jones, *Why Heaven Kissed Earth*, 127–134.

<sup>38</sup> Whitefield, Sermon 23, *Works*, 5:344; *Some Remarks on a Late Charge of Enthusiasm*, in *Works*, 4:192; *A Recommendatory Preface to the Works of Mr. John Bunyan*, in *Works*, 4:306.

argued for a somewhat more sophisticated articulation of God's attributes, one where because of God's nature being one of "pure act," his attributes are fully expressed both simultaneously and harmoniously.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, God's "justice boil[s] within him against sin... [and] his bowels of mercy yearn towards the sinner."<sup>40</sup> Goodwin felt that the "plot of reconciliation" (as Jones noted, a synonym for the *pactum salutis*) was God's "masterpiece, wherein he means to bring all his attributes upon the stage."<sup>41</sup> The language of the theatre almost inevitably spoke to Whitefield, and it is plausible that this led Whitefield to render his own account from Goodwin's suggestive imagery.<sup>42</sup> Goodwin believed that the account of struggling attributes had antecedents in "the fathers" (though not Calvin specifically, as Whitefield suggested):

Wherefore some of the fathers have, after the manner of men, brought mercy and justice here pleading; the project of mercy was his delight, as mercy is, Micah vii.18. And he resolved above all to shew it. But then justice also is his sceptre, whereby he is to rule, and govern, and judge the world. Wherefore his wisdom, as a middle attribute, steps in, and interposeth as a means of mediation between them both and undertakes to compound the business, and to accommodate all, so as both shall have their desire and aims, their full demonstration and accomplishment.<sup>43</sup>

Many of the ingredients for Whitefield's own exposition are here. Most notably, the reference to "the fathers" in an attempt to legitimise the ancient roots of covenantal thought, the attributes of God in tension, each seeking to be perfectly actualized, and finally, the interposition of an intermediary (in this case wisdom) which successfully balanced the action of God. Goodwin is clear that such language is accommodationist, as it is "after the manner of men" and thereby attempts to avoid an oversimplification of the divine mind.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Thomas Goodwin, *Of Christ the Mediator*, vol. 5 of *The Works of Thomas Goodwin, D.D.* (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1863), I.iv, 16; Jones, *Why Heaven Kissed Earth*, 133.

<sup>40</sup> Goodwin, *Of Christ the Mediator*, I.iv, 16.

<sup>41</sup> Goodwin, *Of Christ the Mediator*, I.iv, 16; Jones, *Why Heaven Kissed Earth*, 133.

<sup>42</sup> This insight builds on Harry Stout's work on Whitefield and his relationship with the theatre, Harry S. Stout, *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991).

<sup>43</sup> Goodwin, *Of Christ the Mediator*, I.iv.16.

<sup>44</sup> Goodwin, *Of Christ the Mediator*, I.iv.16.

### Thomas Boston

Whitefield referred approvingly to Thomas Boston's work, *The View of the Covenant of Grace* in his sermon, *The Seed of the Woman the Seed of the Serpent*.<sup>45</sup> Boston was clearly in favour of a pre-temporal covenant and attempted to reflect a trinitarian harmony with respect to the *pactum salutis*.<sup>46</sup> Boston sought to demonstrate the "legal" obligations of the eternal covenant, and differentiated the covenant into respective parties.<sup>47</sup> The notion of God's struggling attributes is present, though not overt, in Boston's work. Boston argued that God the Father was the "party-proposer of the covenant," itself a reflection of the "good-will of the whole glorious Trinity towards the recovery of lost sinners."<sup>48</sup> Boston continued,

The God and *Father* of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, beholding a lost world, his *mercy* seeks a vent, that it may be shown to the miserable; but *justice* stands in the way of the egress and building of *mercy*, without there be a *covenant* whereby it may be satisfied. Then saith the *Father*, 'the first covenant will not serve the purpose of *mercy*; there must be a new bargain: but the lost creatures have nothing left, to contract for themselves; unless another take the burden upon him for them, and make the covenant with my *Chosen*.'... On man's side, then, is God's *Chosen*, or *chosen One*, in the type, the covenant of royalty, is *David*; but in the antitype, the covenant of grace, it is the Son of God, the *last Adam*, even *Christ the chosen of God*, Luke xxiii. 35.<sup>49</sup>

Boston argued that it was against God's nature (indeed, impossible) to "erect a throne of grace on the ruins of his exact *justice*, nor to shew mercy in prejudice of *it*."<sup>50</sup> Which is to say, God's divine justice must be satisfied in order for mercy to be shown to the offending party within the understanding of a legal agreement.<sup>51</sup> Boston, in tandem with Goodwin, seems to have contributed to Whitefield's understanding of God's attributes in conflict, but, perhaps even more so, may have provided the

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<sup>45</sup> Whitefield thought Boston an "excellent Scots divine", Whitefield, Sermon 1, in *Works*, 5:16.

<sup>46</sup> Thomas Boston, *View of the Covenant of Grace from the Sacred Records* (Edinburgh: John Gray, 1776), 2.

<sup>47</sup> Boston, *View of the Covenant*, 4.

<sup>48</sup> Boston, *View of the Covenant*, 5.

<sup>49</sup> Boston, *View of the Covenant*, 5.

<sup>50</sup> Boston, *View of the Covenant*, 12.

<sup>51</sup> Boston, *View of the Covenant*, 12.

impetus for Whitefield to emphasise the contractual dimensions of the *pactum salutis*.

### Edward Fisher

The clearest example of an influence on Whitefield's understanding of the *pactum salutis* is found in the work of Edward Fisher, as revised and annotated by Thomas Boston in a reprinted edition of *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* (1645).<sup>52</sup> Whitefield's usage of the *pactum salutis* in Sermon 15 is almost certainly from Boston's annotated re-print.<sup>53</sup> Of note is Fisher's referral not to Calvin, nor the Fathers as advancing the *pactum salutis* but rather, simply "the learned." Such an attribution deepens the mystery as to why Whitefield selected Calvin as the dubious source for his quotation.

Whitefield's adaptation of Boston's usage of Fisher highlights both the nature of Whitefield's source material for the *pactum salutis* and his considerable augmentation of it. Fisher was careful to distinguish between the attributes of the Godhead that were in tension with respect to the redemption of humanity and the persons of the Godhead. Fisher was also comfortable "personifying" the attributes of God through the usage of personal pronouns ("justice replied, If I be offended, I must be satisfied and have my right").<sup>54</sup> however, when it comes to the actual consolidation of the *pactum salutis* the Son participates in a harmonious outworking of the redemptive plan: "therefore [Christ], by his Father's ordination, his own voluntary offering, and the Holy Spirit's sanctification, was

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<sup>52</sup> Boston annotated and re-printed *The Marrow* in 1718. For more information on James Hog's republishing of *The Marrow* as well as Boston's notes, see David C. Lachman, *The Marrow Controversy 1718–1723: An Historical and Theological Analysis* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 1988).

<sup>53</sup> Evidence for this assertion is garnered from a letter Whitefield wrote to Ralph Erskine while Whitefield was on the *Minerva*, February 16th, 1741. Whitefield wrote, "I have been much helped by reading the 'Marrow of Modern Divinity.' I have just perused 'Boston on the Covenant;'...Thanks be to rich and sovereign grace! I have experienced much of the Spirit's influences in making nine sermons." Whitefield's letter is quoted in Luke Tyerman, *The Life of the Rev. George Whitefield, Vol 1*. (New York: Anson D. F. Randolph & Company, 1877), 461. See Appendix A for Fisher's lengthy quotation.

<sup>54</sup> Edward Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity...With notes, by the late eminent and faithful servant of Jesus Christ Mr. Thomas Boston, minister of the Gospel at Ettrick* (Glasgow: Printed by John Bryce and David Paterson, for Robert Smith, and sold by him at his Shop at the sign of the Gilt Bible in the Salt-Mercat: 1752), 31–35.

fitted for the business.”<sup>55</sup> Contrast this with Whitefield’s adaptation of the Boston/Fisher formulation: Whitefield incautiously interjected the person of Christ into what initially appeared to be a dialogue between the *attributes* of the Godhead. Whitefield’s use of the verb “interposes” suggests that the person of Christ disrupts, or at least interrupts what was to be the execution of divine justice, which was seemingly the outworking of the *simplicitas Dei*. By shifting the register of tension from the *attributes* of God to the *persons* of God, Whitefield employed language that portrayed the persons of the Trinity at odds with one another, with the Son embodying the attributes of mercy and grace, the Father justice and wrath, and the Spirit playing a negligible, if non-existent role. This language was almost certainly tritheistic and indeed, charged with highly emotive imagery, reminiscent of the binding of Isaac (Gen. 22).<sup>56</sup>

### Conclusion: Why the *Pactum Salutis* at All?

As noted, the question about the orthodoxy of the *pactum salutis* is beyond the scope of the present investigation. It is clear, however, given the aforementioned criticism of the *pactum salutis* in tandem with Whitefield’s questionable usage of it in Sermon 15 that critique and concern are certainly warranted. A fitting question to conclude with is why did Whitefield find it so effective as it related to the predestinarian confusion in the mid-eighteenth century?

Many options present themselves, all of which carry a risk of speculation and psychologising. Nevertheless, it seems that three principles appear to have guided Whitefield’s usage of the *pactum salutis*. To begin with, as an heir to seventeenth-century Puritan theology, Whitefield may have been persuaded by the move to envision Christ as “prince” and champion of the people, over and against the notion of God the Father

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<sup>55</sup> Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* (1752), 34.

<sup>56</sup> For a suggestive parallel, the interested reader might consult Whitefield’s Sermon 3, *Abraham’s Offering up His Son Isaac*, in *Works*, 5:38–51. See also Emma Salgård Cunha, “Whitefield and Literary Affect” in *George Whitefield: Life, Context, and Legacy*, ed. Geordan Hammond and David Ceri Jones (Oxford: OUP, 2016), 200–206. Whitefield’s incautious statement could be seen to undermine J. I. Packer’s assertion that covenant theology circumvents the “the tritheistic fantasy of a loving Son placating an unloving Father and commandeering an apathetic Holy Spirit in order to save us.” J. I. Packer, “On Covenant Theology,” in *Celebrating the Saving Work of God: Collected Shorter Writings of J. I. Packer, Vol. 1* (Carlisle: Paternoster 1998), 15.

as “benign and abstract.”<sup>57</sup> Emory Elliot, in his analysis of the Puritan Sermon discourse in the seventeenth century observed,

In rich and ornate imagery the preachers presented Christ as the hero who had interceded with the Father to win a covenant of redemption for His people in New England. The ministers explained that in the past there had been “a controversy” between the people and God and “no possibility on our part to pacify the anger of God,” but “Christ interposed Himself as our mediator...to reconcile and make peace between God and us.” The ministers also frequently imagined Christ as a princely lover who actively courted His people .... In the sermons of the late 1680s the image of God the Father was nearly eclipsed by the beauty and mercy of His Son.<sup>58</sup>

It is conceivable that, in Whitefield’s desire to articulate a robust doctrine of predestination, the concomitant risk was instilling the spectre of determinism in the mind of the listener. The *pactum salutis*, by emphasising the agreement between the Father and Son, allowed Whitefield to preserve his high doctrine of the sovereignty of God replete with the theological corollaries of preterition (passive reprobation) and limited atonement. However, in light of the obvious theological difficulties this doctrine could engender, the *pactum salutis* also gave Whitefield a means through which he could champion his characteristic Christological emphasis, arguing for the portrait of Christ as the cornerstone of God’s redemptive initiative, the incarnate One who fights *for*, and passionately pursues, his quarry.<sup>59</sup> Incidentally, this is the very strength and weakness spoken of the *pactum salutis* in the introduction to this article. Reinforcing the antipathy between the attributes of God, and worse, ascribing the same attributes to *persons* of the triune Godhead creates an instability within Whitefield’s presentation of the covenant of redemption that risks a basically tritheistic interpretation.

Secondly, it is undeniable that the language of divine drama appealed to Whitefield’s theatrical sensibilities. Not only is Whitefield’s “early affinity for the stage ... well known and recounted in virtually every

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<sup>57</sup> Emory Elliot, *Power and the Pulpit in Puritan New England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 176–177.

<sup>58</sup> The sermon quoted here is John Higginson, “Our Dying Savior’s Legacy of Peace” (Boston: 1686), 11, cited in Elliot, *Power and the Pulpit in Puritan New England*, 176–177.

<sup>59</sup> For a recent example exploring Whitefield’s distinctive Christology, see Jeongmo Yoo, “George Whitefield’s Doctrine of Christ,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 18.2 (2014): 43–68.

biography,”<sup>60</sup> but Whitefield’s desire to communicate what he believed to be biblical truths with rhetorical and artistic flair was, arguably, the overarching principle of his homiletical method. As Harry Stout observed, “Passion would be the key to his preaching, and his body would be enlisted in raising passions in his audience to embrace traditional Protestant truths.”<sup>61</sup> The *pactum salutis* was a doctrine primed to depart from the realm of dusty scholasticism and transcend into the bright and shining imagination of Whitefield, where through rhetorical alchemy he transformed the complex concept of pre-temporal redemption into the drama of God, Father and Son, striving to reconcile wrath and peace. The accessibility of the commercial metaphor inherent within the *pactum salutis*, coupled with the immediacy of the dramatic mode ensured a captivating explication of theology, even if some of the finer points (and particularly those elements meant to safeguard the orthodoxy of the doctrine) were overlooked.

Thirdly and finally, the *pactum salutis* and the inherent deontological aspect of covenant theology may have appealed to Whitefield in that it compelled his hearers to respond to Christ’s atoning work for them by compelling them to work in response—not in a meritorious sense, but a gratuitous one.<sup>62</sup> Whitefield was eager to demonstrate the extremities of Christ’s mediating efforts, and in so doing, generate affections and convictions amongst his audience about how they were best to respond.<sup>63</sup> Further evidence of this rhetorical strategy may be seen in such sermons as *Christ the Believer’s Husband* (Sermon 12) wherein Whitefield endeavoured to show “the duties of love which they owe to our Lord, who stand in so near a relation to him.”<sup>64</sup> Similar also is Sermon 5, “Christ the best Husband: Or an earnest Invitation to Young Women to come and see Christ.”<sup>65</sup> Whitefield compelled his audience to *respond* to Christ’s work by receiving him—itself an aspect of Duty. To disobey, to reject Christ was to “chuse dishonour before a crown, death before life, hell before heaven, eternal misery and torment before everlasting joy and glory,”<sup>66</sup> for indeed, Christ was the one that first chose them:

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<sup>60</sup> Stout, *The Divine Dramatist*, xviii–xix.

<sup>61</sup> Stout, *The Divine Dramatist*, xix.

<sup>62</sup> Yoo, “George Whitefield’s Doctrine of Christ,” 60.

<sup>63</sup> As Jeongmo Yoo has noted “Christ the Son is depicted as the accomplisher of *what should be done*.” Yoo, “George Whitefield’s Doctrine of Christ,” 61.

<sup>64</sup> Whitefield, *Works*, 5:173.

<sup>65</sup> Whitefield, *Works*, 5:65.

<sup>66</sup> Whitefield, *Works*, 5:71.



It is freely of his own mercy, that he brings you into the marriage covenant: You, who have so grievously offended him, yet, the Lord Jesus Christ hath chosen you; you did not, you would not have chosen him; but when once, my dear sisters, he hath chosen you, then, and not till then, you make choice of him for your Lord and Husband.<sup>67</sup>

It is not difficult to see the way in which Whitefield adapted his high Christology—Christ as partner in the pre-temporal covenant, mediator, and Saviour—to also include an aspect of Christ as lover and friend; an intimate portrait that embraced both the transcendent and immanent reflection of the second person of the Trinity, but perhaps emphasised the nearness of Christ in an appeal to his audience's affective side. It is this *argumentum ad passiones* that the *pactum salutis* so ably facilitated in Sermon 15; upholding the sovereignty of the electing Father and glorifying the loving, saving, Son.

In sum, for Whitefield an unclouded knowledge of the *pactum salutis* would silence those who proclaimed that election was a diabolical doctrine. The *pactum salutis* was the ideal doctrinal structure to house Whitefield's ardent belief in God's predestining will as well as the grounds from which Whitefield could argue that Christ actively sought to save the lost, and that his atoning work was worthy indeed of a personal response. However, in the inspiration of the moment and the heat of the stage light, Whitefield was at risk of confusing his audience, mistaking the God who elects his people to salvation within the mysteries of his secret council with the God who is divided amongst himself, warring with the Son over the souls of the lost.

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<sup>67</sup> Whitefield, *Works*, 5:66.

**APPENDIX A: EDWARD FISHER, THE MARROW OF MODERN DIVINITY,  
WITH NOTES BY THE REV. THOMAS BOSTON**

Evan. Why, here the learned frame a kind of conflict in God's holy attributes; and by a liberty, which the Holy Ghost, from the language of holy Scripture, alloweth them, they speak of God after the manner of men, as if he were reduced to some straits and difficulties, by the cross demands of his several attributes. For Truth and Justice stood up and said, that man had sinned, and therefore man must die; and so called for the condemnation of a sinful, and therefore worthily accursed creature; or else they must be violated: for thou saidst, [said they to God], "In that day that thou eatest of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt die the death." Mercy, on the other side, pleaded for favour, and appeals to the great court in heaven: and there it pleads, saying, Wisdom, and power, and goodness, have all manifest in the creation; and anger and justice have been magnified in man's misery that he is now plunged into by his fall: but I have not been manifested. O let favour and compassion be shown towards man, woefully seduced and overthrown by Satan! Oh! Said they unto God, it is a royal thing to relieve the distressed; and the greater any one is, the more placable and gentle he ought to be. But justice replied, If I be offended, I must be satisfied and have my right; and therefore I require, that man, who hath lost himself by his disobedience, should, for remedy, set obedience against it and so satisfy the judgment of God. Therefore the wisdom of God became an umpire, and devised a way to reconcile them; concluding, that before there could be reconciliation made, there must be two things effected; (1.) A satisfaction of God's justice. (2.) A reparation of man's nature: which two things must needs be effected by such a middle and common person that had both zeal towards God, that he might be satisfied; and compassion towards man, that he might be repaired: such a person, as, having a fullness of God's Spirit and holiness in him, might sanctify and repair the nature of man. And this could be none other but Jesus Christ, one of the Three Persons of the blessed Trinity; therefore he, by his Father's ordination, his own voluntary offering, and the Holy Spirit's sanctification, was fitted for the business. Whereupon there was a special covenant, or mutual agreement made between God and Christ, as is expressed, (Isa 53:10), that if Christ would make himself a sacrifice for sin, then he should "see his seed, he should prolong his days, and the pleasure of the Lord should prosper by him... Thus Christ assented, and from everlasting struck hands with God, to put upon him man's person, and to take upon his name, and to enter in his stead in obeying his Father,

and to do all for man that he should require, and to yield in man's flesh the price of the satisfaction of the just judgment of God, and, in the same flesh, to suffer the punishment that man had deserved; and this he undertook under the penalty that lay upon man to have undergone.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Edward Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity...With notes, by the late eminent and faithful servant of Jesus Christ Mr. Thomas Boston, minister of the Gospel at Ettrick* (Glasgow: Printed by John Bryce and David Paterson, for Robert Smith, and sold by him at his Shop at the sign of the Gilt Bible in the Salt-Mercat: 1752), 31–35.