

Meredith Kline's *By Oath Consigned* Compared with *Kingdom Prologue*

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Introduction

The first two chapters of *By Oath Consigned* (hereafter “BOC”) are often thought to provide a concise introduction to Meredith Kline’s covenant theology.¹ Understandably, one would rather read 26 pages of relatively normal prose than labor through 406 pages of hyphenated neologisms in *Kingdom Prologue* (hereafter “KP”).² Nevertheless, it would be a big mistake to think the first two chapters of BOC are a convenient Cliff’s Notes version of KP. The reader of BOC needs to be aware that Kline revised his formulation of covenant theology at certain key points.

Sometime in the late 1990s, I mentioned to Dr. Kline that many people liked BOC as a concise introduction to his covenant theology, so much so that BOC was being circulated in various unauthorized forms. I was surprised at his reaction. He expressed his strong disapproval that people were circulating that book with the intent of consulting it as a summary of his covenant theology. He said he still stood by the main outline of his interpretation of circumcision and baptism, including his case for infant baptism. But ironically, he said,

¹ Meredith G. Kline, *By Oath Consigned: A Reinterpretation of the Covenant Signs of Circumcision and Baptism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968).

² Meredith G. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2006).

the passages on covenant theology were the ones that needed the most extensive revision. If people wanted to know his mature views on covenant theology, he said, they should read KP. Besides, he revisited his argument on circumcision and baptism in KP anyway, so nothing would be lost if people read KP only.

It would have been nice if he had issued a revised and updated version of BOC, but now that Dr. Kline has gone to be with the Lord, we who admire his theological insights will have to sort things out ourselves. Before I attempt to do that, though, let me mention two things at the outset that I know he wanted to change. As recounted above, both are related to covenant theology.

First, I know he would have wanted to revise the statements in BOC which imply that the New Covenant is a breakable covenant that includes blessings and curses just like the Mosaic Covenant. In 1995, I clearly heard Kline say in his “Prophetical Books” course at Westminster Seminary California that the New Covenant has no curses. When asked, “What about those who are members of the New Covenant for a time, but who later fall away?” he answered: “They are under a curse, but not the curse of the New Covenant. They are under the curse of the Adamic covenant of works.” He appealed to John 15:6 where the non-elect branches are cut off and then gathered up and taken somewhere else to be burned.

Second, he clearly changed his mind about what he wrote regarding the pre-fall Adamic covenant of works. In BOC he had written that grace is present in the pre-fall covenant and that the offer of eschatological consummation in that covenant “was a display of the graciousness and goodness of God to this claimless creature of the dust” (BOC 36). Kline changed his mind on this point and thought it better to restrict the word “grace” to its more specific meaning, viz., favor shown to those who have forfeited God’s blessings through sin.

It should be pointed out that BOC was published in 1968, before the Shepherd Controversy. As Kline saw it, Shepherd denied the concept of merit in the pre-fall covenant of works and then began reworking the doctrine of justification to obscure or deny the merit of Christ. Kline's concern was that if it is claimed the first Adam couldn't merit anything, it follows that neither could the second. Hence the danger of bringing grace into the pre-fall covenant. This controversy helped Kline to sharpen his thinking in this area.

So these are the two most important problems with BOC as expressed by Kline himself. In this paper, I will highlight other areas where I think Kline would have revised his formulations in BOC, based on what he said in his later work.

Covenant Theology: Continuities between BOC and KP

I will detail the areas where Kline would have wanted to revise BOC shortly. But lest it be thought that the later Kline would disown everything he wrote in BOC, I think it would be good to first point out the areas where he continued to agree with his earlier formulations. Here is a non-exhaustive list of some of the main continuities between BOC and KP:

(1) Definition of covenant

In BOC, Kline defines covenant as “a sanction-sealed commitment to maintain a particular relationship ... a relationship under sanctions ... characteristically expressed by an oath sworn in the solemnities of covenant ratification” (BOC 16). This is consistent with the more succinct definition he would later give: “oath-bound” or “divinely sanctioned commitment” (KP 2, 4).

(2) God's Lordship

In both BOC and KP, Kline appeals to the Ancient Near Eastern suzerainty treaties and uses them as a theological prism for interpreting the biblical covenants as administrative instruments by which God expresses his lordship or kingly rule. This is how he puts it in BOC:

God's covenant with man may be defined as an administration of God's lordship, consecrating a people to himself under the sanctions of divine law. In more general terms, it is a sovereign administration of the kingdom of God ... It is God's lordship that is the core and constant of the covenant (BOC 36).

Similarly, the very title (*Kingdom Prologue*) and subtitle (*Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview*) of KP convey the intimate connection between kingdom and covenant, "for to follow the course of the kingdom is to trace the series of covenants by which the Lord administers his kingdom" (KP 1). "Covenants function as administrative instruments of God's kingly rule" (KP 4).

(3) Critique of Murray

Kline's primary concern in the first two chapters of BOC is that the covenant concept must be defined comprehensively enough to include both law covenants (like the Mosaic) and promise covenants (like the Abrahamic). Although he only mentions John Murray in two brief footnotes (BOC 15 n5; 18 n10), it is important to recognize that Kline has Murray's definition of covenant in his sights. In a 1954 booklet, Murray defined covenant as "a sovereign administration of grace and promise."³ Kline thinks this is too restrictive since it fails to recognize that some covenants are not sovereign administrations of grace but conditional covenants with blessings promised for obedience and curses threatened for unfaithfulness. This

³ John Murray, *The Covenant of Grace: A Biblico-Theological Study* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1988; originally published by Tyndale in 1954), 29.

is a fundamental concern that remains unchanged in Kline's thought. Cf. his complaint against "improper restriction" of the covenant concept (KP 5).

(4) Two types of covenants

In BOC Kline distinguishes between "promise covenants" and "law covenants" (BOC 16). The classic example of a "promise covenant" is Gen 15 where God takes a self-maledictory oath thereby guaranteeing the bestowment of the promised blessings (BOC 16-17). The classic example of a "law covenant" is Exodus 24 where the oath is sworn by the people of Israel, thus proving that it "cannot be defined in terms of a unilateral promissory commitment from the divine side" (BOC 18). Kline makes the same distinction in KP, although he uses more traditional terminology, substituting "covenants of works/grace" for "law/promise covenants" (KP 5).

In both BOC and KP, Kline lays down the helpful rule that the party taking the ratification oath determines which type of covenant it is. This is how Kline explains this in BOC:

It is this swearing of the ratificatory oath that provides an identification mark by which we can readily distinguish the divine covenants of Scripture between a law covenant and one of promise. For it is evident that if God swears the oath of the ratification ceremony, that particular covenantal transaction is one of promise, whereas if man is summoned to swear the oath, the particular covenant thus ratified is one of law (BOC 16).

In KP, Kline takes the same general approach although he adds a bit more precision:

In postlapsarian history, where we encounter covenants both of works and grace, the identity of the party who takes the ratification oath is an indicator of which kind of covenant it is in a particular case ... More precisely, in the situation after the Fall it is the presence or absence of a human oath of ratification that provides the clue as to the governing principle ... If the covenant is ratified by divine oath alone, it is a covenant of grace ... But when the covenant-making includes a human oath of ratification, as in the case of Israel's oath in the Sinaitic Covenant (Exod 24), the arrangement is informed by the works principle (KP 5).

Either humans take the oath, or God alone takes the oath. If humans do not take the oath, but only God, it is a covenant of grace. If humans take the oath, whether or not God does as well, it is a covenant based on the works principle.⁴

Covenant Theology: Discontinuities between BOC and KP

We have looked at the continuities between the first two chapters of BOC and KP. Now I want to take a look at the discontinuities, that is, the areas where Kline revised his covenantal views. BOC was published in 1968. The final edition of KP was published by Wipf and Stock in 2006. So it should not be surprising that his views underwent development over 38 years.

(1) Terminology

I begin with the most obvious difference between BOC and KP—the use of different terminology for the main theological covenants. In BOC Kline expresses his dissatisfaction with the traditional terms “the covenant of works” and “the covenant of grace,” and proposes that we refer to them instead as “the covenant of creation” and “the covenant of redemption” (BOC 32, 36). In KP, Kline returns to the traditional labels. Again, I think the Shepherd Controversy may have played a role in this. He wanted to emphasize the concept of works in the pre-fall covenant in order to bring out the parallel with Christ as the second Adam whose obedience unto death (the works the Father gave him to do) won the Father’s approval and merited eternal life for his people.

⁴ For more on the above four points, see “What is a Covenant?” (= KP 1-6), which may also be found at www.upper-register.com/papers/what_is_covenant.html. It is a short read and I highly recommend it as an entry point into Kline’s covenant theology.

(2) Two or three covenants?

Kline's return in KP to the traditional labels "the covenant of works" and "the covenant of grace" is not merely terminological. It also reflects a conceptual shift. In BOC, Kline conceives of "the covenant of redemption" as a covenant that includes both the eternal, intratrinitarian *pactum salutis* and the postlapsarian covenant of grace. This is the two-covenant view (covenant of works and covenant of grace). In KP, Kline abandons this approach and adopts the three-covenant scheme (covenant of works, *pactum salutis*, and covenant of grace) in which the covenant of grace is distinguished from the pre-temporal *pactum salutis*.

Covenant theologians have long debated among themselves whether there are two or three theological covenants, that is, whether the *pactum salutis* should be separated from the covenant of grace. So Kline's early adoption of the two-covenant view, followed by his moving to the three-covenant view in his mature thought, should not be viewed as a major innovation. Both views can be documented in the Reformed tradition.

Although Kline returns in KP to the traditional labels for two of these covenants, he comes up with a new name for the *pactum salutis* and adds some additional terms to the names of the other two covenants. In this sense, Kline does bring some innovation to the table, but it is more in the area of clarifying the received covenant system in order to highlight the inter-relationships among the covenants. Here are his preferred names for the three main theological covenants:⁵

- The Creator's Covenant of Works with Adam (KP 62, 73)
- The Father's Covenant of Works with the Second Adam (the *pactum salutis*) (KP 138)
- The Lord's Covenant of Grace with the Church (KP 138)

⁵ See the handout "Kline's Covenant Theology" www.upper-register.com/papers/kline's_cov_theology.pdf for a schematic presentation of these three covenants based on his lectures at Westminster Seminary California ca. 1995.

Since this is such an important issue, I will return to it below, focusing specifically on the relationship between the *pactum salutis* and the covenant of grace.

(3) Grace before the fall

I mentioned in my introduction that Kline changed his mind about the notion of grace before the fall. In BOC, he writes:

Grace, in the specific sense that it effects restoration to the forfeited blessing of God, is of course found only in redemptive revelation. But in another sense grace is present in the pre-redemptive covenant. For the offer of a consummation of man's original beatitude, or rather the entire glory and honor with which God crowned man from the beginning, was a display of the graciousness and goodness of God to this claimless creature of the dust (BOC 36).

But in KP, Kline defines "grace" more narrowly as God's mercy shown to those who deserve wrath. On this definition, pre-fall "grace" would be an oxymoron:

Theologically it is of the greatest importance to recognize that the idea of demerit is an essential element in the definition of grace ... It is a granting of blessing, as an act of mercy, in spite of previous covenant breaking by which man has forfeited all claims to participation in the kingdom and has incurred God's disfavor and righteous wrath (KP 113).

He goes on to distinguish "grace" from the "love" or "beneficence" that God displayed in the act of creation:

Because grace cannot be defined apart from this context of covenantal stipulations and sanctions and is specifically a response of mercy to demerit, it must be carefully distinguished from divine love or beneficence. For God's love, though it may find expression in gospel grace, is also expressed in the bestowal of good apart altogether from considerations of the merits of man's response to covenantal responsibility. Such is the goodness or benevolence of God displayed in the act of creation. This marvelous manifestation of love seen in God's creational endowment of man with glory and honor had nothing to do with human merit (KP 113).⁶

⁶ For Kline's mature thinking on the covenant of works, see "Answering Objections to the Covenant of Works" (= KP 107-17) www.upper-register.com/papers/answering_objections.html.

(4) Priority of law

In Chapter 1 of BOC, Kline argues that the scriptural covenants can be subdivided into “law covenants” and “promise covenants.” However, in Chapter 2, he argues that this is not an absolute bifurcation since “promise covenants” are actually “law covenants” at a foundational level, with the only difference being that the law is fulfilled by Christ. He explains this concept by appealing to the vicarious obedience of Christ:

Even the promise alternate was itself ultimately a way of law – not the way of individual obedience to the law which was explicitly enunciated in the Mosaic covenants, but ... the way of vicarious law obedience and satisfaction by the Christ of promise (BOC 33).

In other words, “the promise covenant” (what we traditionally refer to as “the covenant of grace”) is ultimately a “law covenant” in which the legal conditions are fulfilled by a Substitute.

This does not seem too bad, does it? It is congenial with Kline’s later emphasis, in response to the Shepherd Controversy, on the notion that we are justified by works, not our works, of course, but the works of Christ in our place.

Kline never wavered on this fundamental point. In KP he clearly affirms the second Adam’s obedience under the eternal covenant of works (the *pactum salutis*). “The principle of works forms the foundation of the gospel of grace” (KP 108). But unlike in BOC, he restricts the application of the “priority of law” principle to the *pactum salutis*. The discontinuity between BOC and KP at this point is not the principle itself (that law is foundational to grace) but the sweeping application of the principle to all covenants. For example, in BOC he says:

The conclusion may now be stated that a truly systematic formulation of the theology of the covenant will define covenant generically in terms of law administration ... The satisfaction of the divine law underlies every administration of divine promise (BOC 33).

But Kline later changed his mind, saying only that “some biblical covenants are of the works variety” (KP 5). Kline no longer thought that every promise covenant is really a

law/works covenant with the law/works principle satisfied by Christ. Although the *pactum salutis* fits this description, the Noahic covenant and the covenant of grace (including its pre-Messianic administration, the Abrahamic Covenant, as well as its Messianic administration, the New Covenant) do not.

I realize that this last comment about the covenant of grace cries out for further explanation. This will become clearer as I work my way through BOC. For now, allow me to quote further from BOC. As long as the above qualification is kept in mind, the following quotes provide a little window into the heartbeat of Kline's passion for the gospel.

Was the covenant of law established by God at the beginning (Gen. 1 and 2) made of no effect by the subsequent introduction of the promise (Gen. 3:15)? Was the promise against the law of God? No one should hesitate to answer this question, as Paul did his, with a "God forbid." For if there were an annulling of the Edenic law covenant after it had been established by God and later broken by man, then the justice of God would be mutable and his threats vain. God remains just when he justifies the ungodly through his administrations of promise. Herein is the depth of his redemptive wisdom revealed, that in the very process of securing for his chosen the covenant's blessing of life, God honors his original covenant of law in its abiding demand for obedience as the condition of life and with its curse of death for the covenant breakers (BCO 30).

And a page later:

Galatians 3:18 must be stressed in Covenant Theology, but so too must Romans 5:18-21. It is by the obedience of the one that the many are made righteous unto eternal life. Though the many inherit the blessings not by law (in the Gal. 3:18 sense) but by promise, they are not heirs at all except they are heirs in and through Christ, joint-heirs with Christ. For the promises of the covenant are yea and amen only in Christ. And therefore the promises are made secure to the many according to the principle of inheritance by law after all. For Christ himself enters upon the inheritance as the forerunner, surety, and head of the many only when by his active and passive obedience he has fulfilled the constant *Hauptgebot*⁷ of the covenant and submitted to the demand of the curse sanction voiced in the covenant from the beginning. Now if it is the obedience of the one that is

⁷ The German term *Hauptgebot* is used in this context to refer to the "principal demand" of the ANE treaties, viz., the demand for loyalty to the suzerain. In the Mosaic Covenant, the *Hauptgebot* is the demand for exclusive monotheistic worship of YHWH (Exod 20:3; Deut 6:5). Christ fulfilled the *Hauptgebot* by loving his heavenly Father with all of his heart and perfectly devoting his entire being to the performance of his Father's will, even to the point of submitting to an accursed death (Phil 2:8). This is the obedience of Christ viewed from the active point of view.

the ground of the promise-guarantee given to the many, then clearly the principle of law is more fundamental than that of promise even in a promise covenant (BCO 31).

I cannot imagine that Kline would be ashamed of these two quotations. After all these years, and in spite of whatever refinements Kline thought necessary, these powerful quotes continue to resonate with the Pauline gospel of the God who is “both just and the justifier of the one who believes in Jesus” (Rom 3:26).

To summarize: Does the Kline of KP still affirm the priority of law? With respect to the *pactum salutis* and its implications for the justification of the elect on the basis of Christ's fulfillment of the law, yes. But with respect to the covenant of grace proper, he would not want to speak of the priority of law if this means that the covenant of grace itself is actually a law covenant with blessings and curses that have been fulfilled by Christ (as the earlier Kline of BOC Chapter 2 implied). Yet, in KP, Kline continues to affirm the priority of law even in connection with the covenant of grace in the sense that the *pactum salutis* (which is a law covenant) is the foundation of the covenant of grace.

(5) Folding the covenant of grace into the *pactum salutis*

In BOC, Kline folds the covenant of grace into the *pactum salutis*, creating a single covenant that he calls “the covenant of redemption” (BOC 37). This is a logical step that flows from his thesis that all promise covenants are fundamentally law covenants (see Discontinuity 4). If all promise covenants are law covenants at root, then the covenant of grace must ultimately be identical with the *pactum salutis*, the supreme law covenant which brings about redemptive blessings through Christ's fulfillment of the law on behalf of the elect. In accordance with his sweeping application of the “priority of law” principle to all covenants, in BOC Kline rejects the “separation” between the *pactum salutis* and the covenant of grace (BOC 35).

In KP, by contrast, Kline no longer sees law covenant as the generic form for promise covenants. As a result, he is free to argue that the covenant of grace (whether in its pre-Messianic/Abrahamic or Messianic/New Covenant administration) is conceptually distinct from the *pactum salutis*, even though it is intimately connected to it. In KP, Kline views the covenant of grace as an administration in which the benefits secured by Christ in the eternal *pactum salutis* are offered to all members of the covenant (the visible church) and are applied and sealed to the elect. Although the satisfaction of divine law through the mediatorship of Christ is certainly foundational to the covenant of grace, the covenant of grace itself is not a conditional law covenant that has been fulfilled by Christ. Rather, the covenant of grace is the historical, visible, covenantal instrument by which God administers the blessing secured by Christ under the eternal *pactum salutis*. These two covenants pertaining to the plan of redemption are “interlocking” and yet “to be clearly distinguished” (see quote below).

Here is how Kline describes the relationship between the *pactum salutis* (“The Father’s Covenant of Works with the Son”) and the covenant of grace in KP:

This second covenant of works is the eternal covenant, which we shall call “The Father’s Covenant of Works with the Son.” The series of temporal administrations of redemptive grace to God’s people are subsections of what we shall call “The Lord’s Covenant of Grace with the Church” (or, for brevity’s sake we may use the traditional “Covenant of Grace”). Preeminently the Covenant of Grace finds expression in the new covenant, but it also includes all those earlier covenantal arrangements wherein the benefits secured by the obedience of Christ in fulfillment of God’s eternal covenant with him were in part already bestowed during pre-messianic times, in each case according to the particular eschatological phase of covenant history.

Though interlocking, these two redemptive covenants, the eternal and the temporal, are nevertheless to be clearly distinguished from each other for they differ in several most basic respects. In the eternal covenant, (1) the Son is assigned the role of covenant servant; (2) the second party is the Son in his status as second Adam and thus, included along with him, the elect whom he represents, and them exclusively; and (3) the operative principle is works. Contrariwise, in the series of historical administrations of the gospel, (1) the messianic Son is Lord and mediator of the covenant; (2) the second

party is the church, the community of the confessors of the faith and their children, including others beside the elect; and (3) the operative principle is grace (KP 138).⁸

There are several advantages to Kline's mature view. First, it enables him to highlight more clearly the contrasting principles of works and grace. The operative principle of the *pactum salutis* is works, whereas the operative principle of the covenant of grace is grace. The *pactum salutis* is a covenant of works. It is not the Adamic covenant of works, since that covenant still stands in some sense; though broken by Adam's fall, its curse sanction is still operative and will be executed upon all who are not in the salvation-ark through faith in Christ. Thus the *pactum salutis* is a covenant of works, since it demands obedience as the ground of blessing. Christ as the second Adam is the federal representative of the elect, whose meritorious obedience is reckoned to their account as the ground for their reception of the blessings in forensic union with Christ. It is works for Christ, that it might be grace for us.

Second, the covenant of grace is not a covenant of works, with blessings promised for obedience. Rather it is a free offer of the gospel in which all who respond to the offer by extending the empty hand of faith receive the blessings in Christ. This is related to the long-debated question among covenant theologians as to whether the covenant of grace is conditional or unconditional, which in turn is related to the doctrine of justification. Kline would say the covenant of grace is conditional—but faith is the sole condition of the covenant. Not all who are members of the covenant of grace are elect, and therefore not all have faith. Those in whom the condition is not met—i.e., those who do not have faith—do not receive the blessings offered in the covenant of grace. On the other hand, those who do believe, do receive the blessings. So there is a sort of conditionality here. Yet Kline would also want to clarify the nature of this

⁸ For more on this, see Kline's "Comments on the A. A. Hodge One-Covenant Construction of the Redemptive Order" www.upper-register.com/papers/aahodge_onecov.html. Note that "the one-covenant construction" is Kline's label for what I have called "the two-covenant view."

conditionality. It is not the same sort of conditionality in a covenant of works, in which meeting the condition is the ground of receiving the blessings. Faith is not a meritorious condition but merely the instrument by which we receive the blessings that have been merited by Christ in the *pactum salutis*. Additionally, faith as the condition of the covenant of grace is itself a gift, one of the chief blessings that Christ has earned for his people in the *pactum salutis*. How great is that!

Third, the distinction between the covenant of grace and the *pactum salutis* is relevant to the argument for infant baptism. If the covenant of grace is folded into or equated with the *pactum salutis*, it is hard to avoid the implication that the covenant of grace is made only with the elect. Many covenant theologians have had difficulty trying to harmonize this with their view that the children of professing believers are also members of the covenant, even though we do not know if they are elect. Typically, the solution has been to distinguish between “internal” and “external” membership in the covenant of grace. Kline was not happy with this solution and argued rather that the membership of the covenant of grace is a larger circle than the circle of election.⁹ The membership roster of the covenant of grace is the same as the visible church, which consists of professing believers and their children (at least until they are put out of the visible church in cases of unbelief). The *pactum salutis*, on the other hand, has only the elect in view, since in that covenant Christ is the head, surety, and sponsor of the elect, serving as the federal representative who satisfies the terms of this covenant of works on behalf of his people. In the *pactum salutis*, not one of those for whom Christ died can be lost. In the covenant of

⁹ Of course, Kline acknowledged that there is a difference between receiving only the outward benefits of the administration of the covenant of grace (such as being set apart as covenantally holy from the unbelieving world; cp. Rom 11:16; 1 Cor 7:14) and receiving the soteric spiritual blessings of the covenant of grace. Only the elect enjoy the latter. So, although Kline was uncomfortable with the language of “external” vs. “internal” membership in the covenant of grace, he did use the metaphor of a larger circle (all baptized members) and the smaller circle or subset (the elect) within the larger circle (e.g., KP 307).

grace, while its “proper purpose” (BOC 74, 80; KP 145, 316) is the salvation of the elect, in the pre-consummation era it may contain those who are non-elect; and the branches that are not united to Christ by faith will eventually be cut off (John 15:6; Rom 11:17-22).

Obviously, all of this has relevance not only to infant baptism but to the debates surrounding the Federal Vision. Kline's formulations bring tremendous clarity by making important distinctions that the Federal Vision tends to obscure.¹⁰

Circumcision and Baptism

We have looked at the first two chapters of BOC which deal with covenant theology at a more abstract level, and we have seen the points of continuity and discontinuity between Kline's earlier covenantal formulations in BOC and Kline's later formulations in KP. We now come to the heart of BOC, in which Kline fulfills the promise of the subtitle: “A Reinterpretation of the Covenant Signs of Circumcision and Baptism.”

To begin with, it's important to note that the later Kline continued to hold the main outline of his thinking on circumcision and baptism as set forth in BOC. In KP, Kline refers to BOC seven times. All seven references are favorable, as in “see BOC for more on this topic,” although in one key reference (KP 312, quoted below) Kline makes a brief allusion to the fact that his treatment of the same topic in KP involves “some revision.” All seven references are to the treatment of circumcision and baptism in BOC Chapters 3-6. There are no references in KP to BOC Chapters 1-2.

Here are the seven references in KP to BOC:

¹⁰ For a more extensive exposition of covenant theology according to Kline, see “Two Adams, Two Covenants of Works” (= selections from KP) www.upper-register.com/papers/two_adams.pdf.

KP 217: Dealing with the Noahic flood and Israel's crossing of the Red Sea as judicial ordeals and types of the final judgment, Kline writes: "(cf. the comments on 1 Cor 10:1,2 in my *By Oath Consigned* 68)."

KP 312: This is the start of a new section titled "Circumcision Oath" (KP 312-18). Kline writes: "[On this subject see further my *By Oath Consigned* (1968), of which the present discussion is a résumé involving some revision.]" What exactly was involved in this "revision" will be addressed below.

KP 316: Later in this same section, Kline deals with "the circumcision of Christ" (Col 2:11) and adds: "[See *By Oath Consigned* 45-47,71]."

KP 317: On the next page, Kline sets out to argue that baptism corresponds to circumcision in its symbolic meaning, and adds: "(For a more extensive treatment see my *By Oath Consigned*.)"

KP 361: This is a later section dealing with the nature of the Abrahamic covenant as a family-based covenant community. "From the beginning the institution of the family was consistently respected in determining the constituency of the covenant family. (See further on this topic my *By Oath Consigned* 84ff.)" Page 84 and following coincides with BOC Chapter 6 which is Kline's argument for infant baptism on the ground of parental authority.

KP 363: Dealing with the theological significance of baptism: "(cf. *By Oath Consigned* 63ff.)." Page 63 and following coincides with BOC Chapter 5: "Christian Baptism: Oath-Sign of the New Covenant."

KP 363-64: Again dealing with the topic of household baptism: "(Cf. *By Oath Consigned* 96f. See pp. 94ff. for a discussion of the question of the continuation of the broader household approach inclusive of 'servants.')"

The take-away from this is that Kline did not totally discourage people from reading BOC. He still thought it contained valuable insights, particularly related to his treatment of circumcision and baptism (BOC Chapters 3-5), as well as his argument for infant baptism on the basis of parental authority (BOC Chapter 6). However, he would have wanted readers of BOC to also read his treatment of the same themes in KP (312-18 and 361-65). These sections of KP were a briefer “resume” of BOC, so one would still need to consult BOC for the fuller argument. Nevertheless, the briefer resume did involve “some revision” of BOC at certain points.

Circumcision and Baptism: Continuities between BOC and KP

In Chapters 3-5 of BOC, Kline deals with circumcision and baptism. These chapters form the heart and soul of BOC. It is here that Kline makes his lasting contribution to the theology of circumcision and baptism. Here are the chapter titles:

Chapter 3: Circumcision: Oath-Sign of the Old Covenant

Chapter 4: John's Baptismal Sign of Judgment

Chapter 5: Christian Baptism: Oath-Sign of the New Covenant

In these three chapters, the burden of Kline's argument is that both circumcision and baptism, as signs of their respective covenants, are sacramental actions that symbolize God's judgment or curse. This crucial insight is the basis of several points of continuity between BOC and KP, i.e., points that Kline continued to endorse.

(1) Circumcision as a sign of judgment

Kline adduces three exegetical arguments for viewing circumcision as a sign of judgment.

The first argument is that the circumcision knife is a picture of the sword of divine judgment (Josh 5:13; Rev 19:15). Kline appeals to Joshua 5 which recounts the circumcision of the second generation of Israelites at Gilgal. Soon after the nation is circumcised, Joshua sees an angel, the captain of LORD's host, standing "with his sword drawn in his hand," prepared to lead the nation into its first major battle against the Canaanites, the battle of Jericho. Kline comments:

It is as if the sword of the captain of the host of the Lord had been turned away from the uncircumcised nation by their cutting the covenant-allegiance oath anew through circumcision, and only then could be directed against the Canaanites to cut them off from the land (BOC 43 n11).

The second exegetical argument for interpreting circumcision as a sign of judgment is the use of the verb "cut off" in Gen 17:14. Kline explains:

The meaning of circumcision as symbol of the oath-curse is actually expressed in so many words in verse 14. There the threat of the curse sanction sounds against the one who breaks the covenant by not obeying the command of circumcision: "(he) shall be cut off" ... In the cutting off of the foreskin the judgment of excision from the covenant relationship was symbolized (BOC 43).

The third argument is the offering of Isaac (Gen 22). Kline argues that the knife ritual in Gen 22 was a "perfecting" of the circumcision of Gen 17. He writes:

For Abraham the consecratory purpose of circumcision was brought home in another cutting ritual he was afterwards required to perform. When Isaac the son of promise was born, Abraham had circumcised him on the eighth day as God had commanded (Gen. 21:4). But later God summoned Abraham to take up the knife again and to perfect Isaac's circumcision by cutting him off altogether from among the living (Gen. 22:1ff.). The identification of this cutting off of Isaac as "a burnt offering" (v. 2), the form of sacrifice expressive of total consecration, illuminates the meaning of these knife rituals (BOC 44).

(2) Baptism as a sign of judgment

Just as circumcision is a symbolic action that signifies the concept of judgment, so is baptism. Specifically, baptism is a judicial ordeal. Kline appeals to the following pieces of evidence in support:

First, John's baptism was part of God's law-suit against Israel. Kline reminds us of John's warnings of impending judgment:

The voice in the wilderness cried, "Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 3:2). It warned of "the wrath to come" and of the vanity of reliance on external earthly relationships, even descent from Abraham. If the trees did not bring forth satisfactory fruit ... then they must be cursed as a cumbrance to the ground and cut off. The axe was even now "laid unto the root" to inflict this judgment of circumcision (cf. Matt. 3:7ff.; Lk. 3:7ff.). One would expect that the baptism of John as the sign of such a mission of ultimatum would portray by its own symbolic form the threatened ordeal of divine judgment ... the impending judicial ordeal which would discriminate and separate between the chaff and the wheat (BOC 54).

Second, Jesus' reception of John's baptism and his use of "baptism" imagery to refer to his death (Mark 10:38; Lk 12:50) reinforce this reading of baptism as a judicial ordeal. Kline writes:

As covenant Servant, Jesus submitted in symbol to the judgment of the God of the covenant in the waters of baptism. But for Jesus, as the Lamb of God, to submit to the symbol of judgment was to offer himself up to the curse of the covenant. By his baptism Jesus was consecrating himself unto his sacrificial death in the judicial ordeal of the cross. Such an understanding of his baptism is reflected in Jesus' own reference to his coming passion as a baptism: "I have a baptism to be baptized with" (Lk. 12:50; cf. Mk. 10:38) (BOC 58-59).

Third, Peter interpreted the flood (1 Pet 3:21) as a type of baptism, and Paul viewed the exodus (1 Cor 10:1-2) as a kind of baptism. Since the flood and the exodus were judicial ordeals, baptism must be a judicial ordeal as well:

That Peter conceived of Christian baptism as a sign of judicial ordeal is indicated by his likening it to the archetypal water ordeal, the Noahic deluge (I Pet. 3:20-22) ... Paul saw the nature of baptism displayed in another classic Old Testament water ordeal ... The exodus judgment was then an ordeal by fire-cloud and water, and it was this ordeal that Paul identified as a baptism (BOC 65, 67, 69).

Of course, Kline's interpretation of both circumcision and baptism as signs of judgment is not intended to be purely negative. The judgment involved is actually "redemptive judgment." For it is in union with Christ that we have been circumcised by the sword of divine

judgment and baptized in God's overwhelming flood of wrath. We have been judged in Christ and raised with him to eternal life, i.e., we have been justified. We will explore this further below.

(3) "The Circumcision of Christ" (Col 2:11-12)

The third continuity between BOC and KP is Kline's marvelous exegesis of Col 2:11-

12. Here is the passage, first in the Greek, then in English translation:

ἐν ᾧ καὶ περιετμήθητε περιτομῇ ἀχειροποιήτῳ ἐν τῇ ἀπεκδύσει τοῦ σώματος τῆς σαρκός, ἐν τῇ περιτομῇ τοῦ Χριστοῦ, συνταφέντες αὐτῷ ἐν τῷ βαπτισμῷ, ἐν ᾧ καὶ συνηγέρθητε διὰ τῆς πίστεως τῆς ἐνεργείας τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἐγείραντος αὐτὸν ἐκ νεκρῶν

"And in Him you were also circumcised with a circumcision made without hands, in the removal of the body of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ; having been buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised up with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead" (NASB).

Here are Kline's comments on the text:

In the Colossians 2 passage ... Paul affirms the union of the Christian with Christ in his crucifixion-circumcision ... That Paul here interprets circumcision as a dying or death is clear from the sequence of ideas: circumcision, burial, resurrection (cf. Rom. 6:3, 4). This is confirmed by the exposition of circumcision as a "putting (or stripping) off," the latter being in turn synonymous with "putting to death" (Col. 3:5-9). As a death in union with Christ, the representative sin-bearer, in his crucifixion, the Christian's circumcision-death is an undergoing of the wrath of God against sin, a falling under his sword of judgment. It is a judicial death as the penalty for sin. Yet, to be united with Christ in his death is also to be raised with him whom death could not hold in his resurrection unto justification. So it is that circumcision, which in itself as a symbolic action signifies the sword of the Lord cutting off his false servants, as a sign of the Covenant of Redemption takes on, alongside the import of condemnation, that of justification, the blessing that may come through the curse (BOC 46-47).

Thoroughly congenial to the ordeal interpretation of the baptismal symbolism is the New Testament's exposition of baptism as a participation with Christ in the judgment ordeal of his death, burial, and resurrection (see Rom. 6:3ff.; Col. 2:11ff.; cf. I Cor. 1:13; Lk. 12:50) ... Earlier we followed the exegesis of "the circumcision of Christ" (Col. 2:11) that regards "of Christ" as an objective genitive and "the circumcision," therefore, as the crucifixion of Christ. "Without hands" would then mean that his circumcision was no mere human symbolization of the curse sanction of the law but the actual divine

judgment. “Putting off the body of flesh” would further contrast the crucifixion to the symbolic removal of the foreskin as being a perfecting of circumcision in a complete cutting off unto death, and that as an object of divine cursing ... If, then, Paul calls the Christian death-experience a circumcision it is only because he was first of all prepared to call Christ's death a circumcision (BOC 70-71).

Kline follows the same interpretation 32 years later:

Circumcision is in fact employed in the Scripture as an image for that redemptive judgment undergone by Christ. Paul referred to the crucifixion as “the circumcision of Christ” (Col 2:11), seeing it as antitype to the circumcision-sacrifice of Isaac (Gen 22), a “putting off” not merely of a token part but of the whole body of his flesh through death (cf. Col 1:22), a veritable perfecting of circumcision. [See *By Oath Consigned* 45-47,71.]

What was signified by circumcision was, therefore, the generic concept of the divine judgment in its twofold potential. It conveyed the threat of being cut off from God and life for the one who, disclaiming the grace of the covenant and thus breaking it, would undergo in himself the judgment due to Adam's fallen race. But circumcision also presented the promise of the Cross, inviting the circumcised to identify by faith with Christ, to undergo the judgment of God in him, and so find in his circumcision-judgment the way to the Father, to justification and life (KP 316).

Isn't the gospel great? Too often preachers explain the substitutionary atonement using the analogy of the convicted felon who stands before the judge, but the judge happens to be his father, so the father takes his son's place that the son can go free. This captures the substitutionary element of the atonement, but it misses the representative dimension. The great thing about the atonement is not that I do not have to die, but that I have died. And since this death was in union with Christ, I have also been delivered from the curse and ushered into resurrection life on the other side.

To summarize Kline's interpretation of Col 2:11-12:

a. Taking “of Christ” as an objective genitive, “the circumcision of Christ” (ἡ περιτομή τοῦ Χριστοῦ) means that Christ is the object of the divine “circumcision” action. On the cross, Christ himself was circumcised, cut off, accursed, and judged.

b. The sequence is “circumcision, burial, resurrection.” Normally, the sequence is “death, burial, resurrection.” Therefore, “circumcision” here is equal to “death.”

c. Baptism, like circumcision, is associated with death or judgment. Both circumcision and baptism, then, are symbolic actions that signify divine judgment.

d. All of this is Christocentric. The divine judgment has been undergone by Christ himself and we in him. Therefore, both circumcision in the Old Covenant and baptism in the New signify redemptive judgment. Blessing comes through curse.

e. It is not enough to speak of Christ's substitutionary death. It is substitutionary, but it is also representative. He not only died in our place. We also died in forensic union with him! This precious truth is not only found in Col 2:11-12 but in many other passages:

“Our old self was crucified with him” (Rom 6:6; cf. 7:4).

“One died for all, therefore all died” (2 Cor 5:14).

“I have been crucified with Christ” (Gal 2:20; cf. 6:14).

“You have died” (Col 3:3).

To quote Kline again, circumcision/baptism invites us “to identify by faith with Christ, to undergo the judgment of God in him, and so find in this circumcision-judgment the way to the Father, to justification and life.”

f. To say that we have been both judged and raised in (forensic) union with Christ is simply to say that we have been justified. I add the word “forensic” in order to clarify that, with regard to justification, union with Christ is legal. It is simply another way of stating that we are represented by Christ as our federal head and surety.

g. However, there is also a dimension of union with Christ that goes beyond the legal and includes an element of real participation and mystical transformation. Justification is

immediately and inseparably followed by sanctification. We are judged, then raised (justification), and now that we are raised, we walk in newness of life by the power of his Spirit dwelling in us (sanctification). Circumcision and baptism therefore signify both justification and sanctification in union with Christ.

Just in case you are wondering, Kline agrees that both justification and sanctification are symbolized in these oath signs:

Circumcision, properly experienced, means identification with Christ in his crucifixion—circumcision as a satisfaction of divine justice and it thus means safe passage through the death-judgment to the resurrection unto justification (Col 2:11ff.; Rom 4:11). To be circumcised in Christ involves further a dying to sin, a putting off of the old man not only in the forensic sense but subjectively in the spiritual transformation of sanctification (Col 2:11ff; 3:5ff.) (KP 316-17).

Central to Kline's interpretation of Col 2:11 is the exegetical decision to take "of Christ" in the phrase "the circumcision of Christ" as an objective genitive. On this reading, "the circumcision of Christ" is the circumcision that Christ received, not when he was eight days old, but when he was crucified. The context of Paul's argument makes clear that believers participate in Christ's circumcision-death by faith (as symbolized in baptism), so that in union with Christ we are also reckoned as having been circumcised or cut off under the wrath of God. Of course, this participation in the circumcision of Christ is not an end in itself but a means of salvation. Because of union with Christ, we are not only judged but also raised with Christ, with the result that salvation comes through judgment.¹¹

¹¹ Other commentators adopt the subjective genitive, and argue that "the circumcision of Christ" is the spiritual circumcision that Christ performs in us by cutting off our sinful nature and regenerating us to newness of life. Others take "of Christ" as a genitive of quality ("Christian"), so that "the circumcision of Christ" is Christian circumcision in contrast with the fleshly circumcision of the old covenant. This last view subdivides into those who take the phrase as a reference to baptism, and those who take it as a reference to regeneration. Although commentators are divided on this issue, Kline's interpretation is not idiosyncratic but finds significant support in mainstream biblical scholarship. The following commentators adopt the objective genitive as Kline does: Markus Barth and Helmut Blanke, *Colossians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 34B; New York: Doubleday, 1994), 318-20, 363-69; James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 157-58; Ralph P. Martin, *Colossians and Philemon* (NCB;

Circumcision and Baptism: Discontinuities between BOC and KP

We are still working our way through the middle section of BOC (Chapters 3-5), the chapters where Kline deals with the topic of baptism and circumcision as judicial ordeals. I have explained the three areas of continuity with KP. Now we turn to the areas of discontinuity, that is, the things that Kline would have wanted to revise in light of his mature thought.

(1) Description of the Abrahamic Covenant

The first thing in this section of BOC that Kline would have wanted to revise is his description of the Abrahamic Covenant as fundamentally or generically a law covenant, with a promise covenant core that applies only to the elect who experience the curse in Christ. It is important to recall Kline's rule that you know a covenant is a law covenant whenever the vassal takes the oath, binding himself to obedience to the suzerain under threat of a curse. Since, in BOC, Kline had viewed circumcision as the vassal's ratification oath, by this rule of interpretation (as applied to Gen 17), the Abrahamic Covenant seems to be a law covenant.

Since in this covenant [Gen 17] the Suzerain is also the divine Witness, the promissory obligations which Yahweh undertakes as Suzerain are also a blessing sanction which he will honor as the divine Witness when he beholds faithfulness in the covenant servant. Another element of the treaty pattern, viz., the sanctions, is thus included here among the stipulations. Curse sanction appears too, appended to the stipulation regarding circumcision (v. 14) ... In short, the transaction recorded in Genesis 17 may be identified as a covenant of the vassal type, an administration of the lordship of the covenant Giver, binding his servant to himself in consecrated service under dual sanctions, blessing and curse (BOC 40-41).

The broader import of circumcision is determined by the specific nature of that covenant of which it is declared to be a sign, and especially, since circumcision is a sanction sign, by the peculiar nature of the judgment in which that covenant issues. As for the covenant, it was a law covenant, not a simple guarantee of blessing but an administration of the

London: Oliphants, 1974), 82; C. F. D. Moule, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Colossians and to Philemon* (CGTC; Cambridge: CUP, 1957), 94-96; Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* (WBC 44; Waco: Word Books, 1982), 116-17.

lordship of God, a covenant therefore which confronted the servant with dual sanctions, curse and blessing (BOC 48).

In KP, Kline modifies his position and argues that the ratification ceremony of the Abrahamic Covenant is recorded in Gen 15 (not Gen 17), when God took the self-maledictory oath on himself. Circumcision as revealed in Gen 17 is merely a “supplementary seal” added to the already-ratified Abrahamic Covenant. Therefore, on this view, the Abrahamic Covenant is fundamentally a covenant of grace, not a law covenant.

It must be noted here that not all oaths of covenantal commitment function as ratification oaths. For example, the role played by the oath ritual of circumcision (Gen 17) is that of a supplementary seal added to the Abrahamic Covenant, which had been ratified by God's oath on an earlier occasion (Gen 15) (KP 5).

In keeping with his later emphasis on Gen 15 (rather than 17) as the ratification ceremony, Kline argues that the Abrahamic Covenant is fundamentally equivalent to the gospel of grace. It is a pre-Messianic version of the New Covenant.

God's promise arrangement with Abraham is made synonymous with the gospel of grace ... By its identification with the gospel of Jesus Christ the Abrahamic Covenant is seen to be a promissory anticipation of the new covenant ... Considerable emphasis falls on the divine sovereignty in the revelation of God's grace in the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant (KP 294-95, 302).

However, a couple of qualifications must be added. First, this emphasis on the grace-character of the Abrahamic Covenant should not be taken as implying that all members of this covenant are elect. Membership in the Abrahamic Covenant is broader than the circle of election which is contained within it:

Not all who were of covenant status were children of the promise, chosen according to the purpose of grace. The eternal promise commitment to Abraham coincided not with the bounds of the community established by the Abrahamic Covenant but with the bounds of the Father's commitment to the Son as second Adam in the prior covenant in heaven, the commitment to give him the elect people for whom he should become surety ... Promise, in its true and final meaning, coincides with election and election is a narrower circle within the broader circle of the covenant as historically administered (KP 306-7).

Second, although it is a covenant of grace, there are stipulations in the Abrahamic Covenant, like the command to “walk before me and be blameless” (Gen 17:1), as well as the necessity of circumcision (Gen 17:14). Kline agrees that obedience is necessary, but not on the basis of the works principle:

Under the Abrahamic Covenant human obedience was indispensable ... Such indispensability of obedience did not, however, amount to the works principle. For in the Abrahamic Covenant, human obedience, though indispensable, did not function as the meritorious ground of blessing. That ground of the promised blessings was rather the obedience of Christ, in fulfillment of his eternal covenant with the Father. And man's appropriation of salvation's blessing was by faith ... Now, the obedience indispensable to reception of the ultimate blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant is the inevitable accompaniment of the faith through which the righteousness of God is appropriated. For it is included as a fruit of the same divine work of spiritual renewal from which springs faith ... And because of this inevitable connection of obedience with faith, obedience functions with respect to the acquisition of the promises as a criterion of the validity of confessed faith. It is a confirmatory witness of the presence of the genuine faith which appropriates the promised gift of grace. Absence of obedience would betray absence of faith (KP 319-20).

Thus, the Abrahamic Covenant is not a generic law covenant that happens to become a promise covenant for those who are elect. Rather, it is fundamentally a promise covenant. But this promise covenant is not equivalent to election, even though the salvation of the elect is its main purpose. The Abrahamic Covenant is not unconditional. It is conditional upon faith. And even obedience is necessary, neither as the ground nor as the instrument of receiving the blessings, but as the necessary fruit and evidence of the genuineness of one's faith. The necessity of obedience is consistent with its character as a promise covenant, since the blessings are received by faith alone. Nevertheless, because the Abrahamic Covenant is conditional, and not all members of this covenant are elect, apostasy is possible.

Here are the summary points from the Kline of KP regarding the Abrahamic Covenant:

- (1) The Abrahamic Covenant is not a law covenant but a promise covenant.
- (2) Circumcision is a supplementary seal, not the formal ratification oath of the Abrahamic Covenant.
- (3) The formal ratification oath of the Abrahamic Covenant is God's self-maledictory oath in Gen 15.
- (4) The Abrahamic Covenant is a promissory anticipation of the New Covenant.
- (5) The Abrahamic Covenant is synonymous with the gospel of grace, the blessings of which are received by faith alone.
- (6) The Abrahamic Covenant also demands obedience as the fruit of faith.
- (7) The Abrahamic Covenant establishes a visible community marked out by circumcision, thus making its membership larger than the circle of election.

(2) Description of the New Covenant

If the Abrahamic Covenant is a promissory anticipation of the New Covenant, and if Kline revised his description of the Abrahamic Covenant, then it should come as no surprise that he also revised his description of the New Covenant.

Here are some relevant quotes from BOC where he comments on the New Covenant. In BOC, he treats the New Covenant, like the Abrahamic, as a law covenant with dual sanctions (blessing and curses) conditioned on faithfulness.

For all its difference, the New Covenant of Jeremiah 31 is still patterned after the Sinaitic Covenant. In fact, Jeremiah's concept of the New Covenant was a development of that already presented by Moses in the sanctions section of the Deuteronomic renewal of the Sinaitic Covenant (Deut. 30:1-10). According to Jeremiah, the New Covenant is a writing of the law on the heart rather than on tables of stone (v. 33; cf. II Cor. 3:3), but it is another writing of the law. It is a new law covenant. Hence, for Jeremiah, the New

Covenant, though it could be sharply contrasted with the Old (v. 32), was nevertheless a renewal of the Mosaic Covenant (BOC 75).

Both blessing and curse are included in the administration of the true New Covenant ... We are bound to conclude, therefore, that the newness of the New Covenant cannot involve the elimination of the curse sanction as a component of the covenant ... So also the semi-eschatological phase of the New Covenant moves on towards a messianic ordeal which will bring for the justified meek the inheritance of the earth, but judicial exposure and the curse-sentence of excision for the apostates (BOC 77-78).

Unsurprisingly, Kline's revised description of the New Covenant in KP corresponds to his revised description of the Abrahamic Covenant. In other words, in KP he no longer defines the New Covenant as a renewal of the Old/Mosaic Covenant (i.e., as a law covenant) and instead stresses the contrast between the Old and the New Covenants. The Mosaic Covenant was a typological covenant of works, was breakable, and has been broken. The New Covenant is a covenant of grace and is fundamentally unbreakable (although the sense in which it is unbreakable must be carefully defined).

Paul was resuming Jeremiah's classic analysis of the covenants when he contrasted the new covenant to the old (the old viewed in the restricted but distinctive terms of its typological dimension). In contrast to the new covenant which could not be broken, founded as it was on God's sovereign, forgiving grace in Christ, the old covenant, according to Jeremiah, was breakable (Jer 31:32). Individual members of the new covenant community might prove false and be broken off as branches from a tree while the covenant tree remained intact, pruned and flourishing. But the old covenant's typological kingdom order as such could be and was terminated. The axe of God's judgment was ultimately laid unto the roots of the tree and the tree itself was felled. Jeremiah's identification of the old covenant as breakable was the equivalent of an assertion that it lacked the guarantee afforded by the grace principle and was instead based on the principle of works (KP 322).

Note that Kline defines "breakability" as "the tree itself was felled," as opposed to individual branches being broken off while the covenant tree remains intact. The New Covenant is unbreakable in the sense that the covenant itself cannot be terminated, not in the sense that apostasy of individuals within the covenant is impossible.

Kline further wants to affirm that the discontinuity between the Old/Mosaic Covenant and the New Covenant is not total, since there is an underlying continuity between the Abrahamic substratum that underlay the Mosaic Covenant and the New Covenant.

The new covenant is not a renewal of an older covenant in the sense of confirming the continuing validity of the old. If we speak of the new covenant as a renewal of the old it must be to express their continuity as two administrations of the Covenant of Grace or, more specifically, the continuity of the new covenant with the underlying, foundational stratum of the old covenant, the substratum of gospel-grace as the way to the ultimate heavenly hope in Christ. But with respect to the old covenant as a typological realization of the promised kingdom realm, the new covenant does not confirm the continuing validity of the old but rather announces its obsolescence and end.

Necessarily so. For, as the Jeremiah 31:31-34 prophecy indicated, the old covenant in its typological kingdom aspect was not a permanent order of the grace-guarantee kind but a probationary arrangement informed by the works principle, hence breakable. And having been broken, it was perforce terminated (KP 345).

Kline affirms that the New Covenant can be “broken” at the level of individual members who fail to believe in the gospel and who are thus branches to be cut off. The classic Baptist objection must be raised at this point: How does Kline deal with Jer 31:34 (“They shall all know me”) which seems to imply that all members of the New Covenant are elect and regenerate? Kline would still stand by what he wrote back in BOC to explain this. It is a matter of the prophet’s eschatological perspective. What we see as two mountain ranges (the already and the not-yet), Jeremiah saw overlapping as one:

The aspect of New Covenant consummation that Jeremiah does deal with he views from the limited eschatological perspective of an Old Testament prophet. He beheld the messianic accomplishment in that perfection which historically is reached only in the fully eschatological age to come, as the ultimate goal of a process which in the present semi-eschatological age of this world is still marked by tragic imperfection. But the theologian of today ought not impose on himself the visionary limitations of an Old Testament prophet. By virtue of the fuller revelation he enjoys (cf. Lk. 10:24; I Pet. 1:10, 12) he is able to distinguish these two distinct stages in the history of the New Covenant and to observe plainly that the imperfection of the covenant people and program has continued on from the Old Covenant into the present phase of New Covenant history. It is in accordance with this still only semi-eschatological state of affairs that the administration of the New Covenant is presently characterized by dual sanctions, having in particular, anathemas to pronounce and excommunications to execute (BOC 76-77).

The only thing that Kline would edit in the above paragraph is the statement that the New Covenant itself has “duals sanctions” and “anathemas to pronounce.” In his mature view, Kline affirms that the New Covenant has “excommunications to execute” on apostates, but that is not quite the same thing as anathemas or curses. The curse of divine judgment comes from the Adamic covenant of works. Any baptized member of the New Covenant “disclaiming the grace of the covenant and thus breaking it, would undergo in himself the judgment due to Adam’s fallen race” (KP 316).

Summary:

(1) The New Covenant is not a renewal of the Mosaic Covenant but the fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant.

(2) It is not a new law covenant but a promise/grace covenant.

(3) As a covenant of works at the typological level of Israel’s retention of the land, the Old/Mosaic Covenant was breakable.

(4) As a covenant of grace founded on the *pactum salutis*, the New Covenant is unbreakable in the sense that it can never be terminated.

(5) Although the New Covenant itself does not pronounce the curse of the Adamic covenant of works, it is possible for individuals to fall away from the New Covenant through unbelief, to be cut off from the covenant tree, and thus to become subject to the curse of the Adamic covenant of works.

I have said that Kline in his mature thought did not believe that the New Covenant threatened any curses. In response someone may object, “But is not excommunication a covenant curse?” The mature Kline would say, “No, because the New Covenant is not a covenant of works in which blessings and curses are conditioned upon obedience or disobedience.” The

church's act of putting someone outside of the visible church is not itself a punitive act, or a covenant curse, or the exercise of the wrath of God. It is merely a fallible judgment that a particular community of believers does not regard this person as a fellow believer. If the church's judgment is correct, the person in question will indeed face covenant curse and divine wrath at the day of judgment — but not from the New Covenant per se.

I think it is helpful to remember that the New Covenant in Kline's thinking is tied very closely to the *pactum salutis* (the Father's covenant of works with the Second Adam). The New Covenant is an earthly, visible administration of the *pactum salutis*. The *pactum salutis* clearly threatens no curses. The curse has been borne by Jesus, 100%, with no remainder. All who are in view in the *pactum salutis* (i.e., the elect) are guaranteed to be eternally saved and glorified. The New Covenant, of course, differs from the *pactum salutis* in that, prior to the consummation, it embraces both elect and non-elect. This is so because it is an earthly, visible community and we cannot read people's hearts. The membership roll of the New Covenant, in this present age, does not correspond perfectly to the roster of the *pactum salutis*. The church sometimes makes mistakes in who it lets in and who it puts out. Only God knows the heart.

But in spite of these administrative features, the New Covenant is the principal means that God uses to gather and perfect the elect who are envisioned in the *pactum salutis*. The “proper purpose” (BOC 74, 80; KP 145, 316) of the New Covenant is the salvation of the elect. This happens through the preaching of the gospel and the outward means of grace in the context of the covenant community. Given the close connection between the *pactum salutis* and the New Covenant, the latter cannot be a covenant with blessings offered for obedience and curses threatened for disobedience. The New Covenant is merely the earthly, temporal, visible outworking of the *pactum salutis*, and since Christ has fulfilled the *pactum salutis* by his perfect

obedience, no curse remains to be administered by the New Covenant. The meritorious obedience of Christ as the Second Adam under the terms of the Father's covenant of works with him (= the *pactum salutis*) is the ground of the blessings that are administered, applied, and sealed to the elect members of the New Covenant (and to all the elect in all epochs of redemptive history). True, there may be non-elect members in the New Covenant prior to the eschatological consummation when "they shall all know the Lord" (Jer 31:34), but they are temporary branches that do not properly belong and they will be excised. The New Covenant itself is the administration of the eternal soteric blessings of justification, sanctification, and glorification. It is an administration of blessing, grace, and life, not an administration of curse, judgment, and death.

The non-elect who are temporarily members of the New Covenant fail to believe in Christ and thus fail to receive the soteric blessings purchased by Christ under the *pactum salutis*. But their failure to receive the blessings of the New Covenant does not mean they are cursed by the New Covenant. When they are finally removed from the New Covenant by excommunication, they are taken out to be judged by God. But then the curse comes from God himself according to the terms of the broken Adamic covenant of works, not from the New Covenant per se.

Excommunication from the church of the New Covenant is not a covenant curse. It is merely an administrative act of being removed from the New Covenant by the officers of the visible church. Barring repentance and restoration, such apostates will indeed suffer an eschatological curse, but the curse comes from a separate covenant, the Adamic covenant of works. The New Covenant has Christ as its mediator and surety (Heb 7:22; 8:6); therefore, properly speaking, it threatens no curses, but offers nothing but blessings. Even an

excommunicated person may repent and return to the covenant fold, lay hold of Christ and his righteousness, and receive the blessings. In a covenant of works, by contrast, restoration is impossible once the covenant has been terminated. In the New Covenant, the message is grace, grace, infinite grace. It is ever and always a message of blessing offered freely to all who will believe — even to the poor, the wretched, the repeat offender, and yes, even to the apostate:

“The one who comes to me I will certainly not cast out” (John 6:37).

“We beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God!” (2 Cor 5:20).

“Let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost” (Rev 22:17).

Indeed, so far from being a covenant curse, excommunication may even be the means that God uses to reclaim the offender and bring them to faith and repentance and back to the fold.

Kline's Case for Infant Baptism

Chapter 6 is the final chapter of *By Oath Consigned*. In it, Kline ties everything together and makes his case for infant baptism. Aside from a few phrases related to issues that I have already covered (e.g., identifying the New Covenant as a law covenant), there is little in Chapter 6 of BOC that Kline would have wanted to revise. For this reason I will only be examining the continuities between BOC and KP in this section.

(1) The principle of vassal authority in the Abrahamic Covenant

Kline's argument for infant baptism begins by appealing to the ANE suzerainty treaties. He quotes a number of these treaties and shows that they were covenants that were made not merely between individuals but between a great king (or suzerain) and a servant king (or vassal),

together with his subjects and descendants. For example, one treaty states that Esarhaddon “has made you take an oath that you will relate [the treaty provisions] to your sons and to your grandsons, to your seed, to your seed’s seed which shall be (born) in the future” (BOC 85).

On the basis of such statements in the ANE treaties Kline makes the following observation:

It is of course obvious from the whole purpose of these treaties that the vassal king in taking the ratificatory oath did so in his capacity as king and thus brought his kingdom with him into the relationship of allegiance to the suzerain. Moreover, from express statements in the treaties we know that the vassal king assumed responsibility for his sons and more remote descendants, consigning them with himself in his covenant oath. Consequently, these descendants are mentioned in the curses as objects of divine vengeance if the covenant sworn by the vassal king should be broken (BOC 85).

Kline then shows the principle of vassal authority was also at work in the administration of circumcision under the Abrahamic Covenant:

We conclude, then, that the principle of vassal authority was integral to the administration of circumcision as sign of entrance into God’s redemptive covenant. Confession of Yahweh’s lordship as a matter of personal faith constituted the necessary nucleus and historical beginning for the administration of the rite, and thus for the formal establishment of the covenant community for which circumcision was (paradoxically) the sign of inclusion. There had to be an Abraham. But Abraham could not enter into this oath and covenant simply as an individual. It was Abraham the parent householder, Abraham the patriarch, to whom God gave the covenant of circumcision. In keeping with the nature of the covenant as that may be discerned in the light of the most relevant biblical and extra biblical data, covenantal incorporation into the kingdom of God did not proceed exclusively in terms of individual confession. The formation of the ancient covenant community was rather a process of incorporating households which were under the authority of a confessing servant of the Lord (BOC 89).

(2) The principle of vassal authority in the New Covenant

The next step in Kline’s argument for infant baptism is to show that the principle of vassal authority is also present in the administration of baptism under the New Covenant. Specifically, the principle of vassal authority is expressed in the form of parental authority. Kline rejects the theory of presumptive regeneration as the basis for infant baptism (BOC 90), and

argues for infant baptism by appealing to the principle of parental authority, a principle of covenant administration which he sees as continuing from the Abrahamic Covenant into its fulfilled form, the New Covenant.

For us the pertinent question is whether the covenant for which baptism serves as oath sign of incorporation is, like the divine covenants of the Old Testament and the parallel vassal covenants of the ancient world, a relationship of authority spheres rather than simply of individuals ... The pattern of authority is not peripheral but central in the vassal covenant form, and therefore the whole weight of the historical case for identifying the New Covenant as a continuation of the earlier Suzerain vassal covenants presses for the conclusion that this New Covenant is administered to confessors not just as individuals but as heads of authority units (BOC 91).

Kline appeals to four pieces of New Testament evidence in support of his thesis that the sign of entrance into the New Covenant (baptism) is administered not only to adult confessors, but also to their children on the principle of vassal or parental authority.

The first piece of evidence that Kline appeals to is Paul's statement, in the context of dealing with the problem of (religiously) mixed marriages: "For the unbelieving husband is sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified through her believing husband; for otherwise your children are unclean, but now they are holy" (1 Cor 7:14 NASB). The problem that must first be addressed is what kind of "holiness" is in view here? Kline argues that it is cultic/covenantal holiness, not internal sanctification of heart that applies only to the elect:

Treating first the case of the children of the mixed marriages under discussion by the apostle, there does not seem to be any way to construe the holiness ascribed to them other than as a holiness of status ... In what, then, does the holiness of the children's status consist? In accordance with the biblical concept of holiness it will have to involve some sort of dedicatory separation unto the name of God, a consecration to his service and glory. Clearly it is not the holy consecration of subjective-spiritual condition ... Since I Corinthians 7:14 provides evidence that the cultic corollary of the authority principle was operative in the apostolic church, this passage may be cited in support of the thesis that the authority principle is still in effect in the administration of the New Covenant, at least in the form of parental authority (BOC 91-93).

In other words, the holiness of covenant children here must be understood in a sense that could apply to both regenerate and unregenerate. It must be understood in a cultic sense as a holiness of status and separation unto God, not in the sense of internal holiness via regeneration. The cultic concept of holiness in the Old Testament applied even to the furniture of the tabernacle and the priests, without indicating salvific status. Therefore, holiness here is tantamount to covenant membership. And Paul clearly says that the children of at least one believing parent are “holy” in that sense.

The Baptist objection to the paedobaptist use of 1 Cor 7:14 is that if one wants to use this passage to prove that the child of at least one professing believer is to be regarded as a member of the visible church, then to be consistent one must include the unbelieving spouse as well. Here is Kline's counter to the Baptist objection:

While the similarity of terminology in verse 14a and 14b of I Corinthians 7 requires that the sanctification be of the same kind (i.e., cultic) in the case of the unbelieving parents and of the children, it is an unjustifiably wooden approach to the apostle's words that insists that this cultic sanctification must apply in exactly the same manner in the two cases. Rather than think of sanctification of status in the case of the unbelieving parents it is possible and, it seems, preferable to understand that their holiness, which Paul describes as possessed in the believing spouse, is a sanctification of these unbelievers in the functioning of the marriage relationship and particularly in that role which fulfills the central and distinctive purpose of marriage. In effect, the force of the language is then that the marriage relationship itself was sanctified by virtue of the presence of the believer unto the service of the holy covenant of God and specifically unto the securing of a holy seed (BOC 93).

The second piece of evidence that the principle of parental authority continues in the New Covenant is the parents who brought their children to Jesus to be blessed. Kline's comments here are brief but telling:

In the discussion of infant baptism the episode of the bringing of the children to Jesus (Matt. 19:13-15; Mk. 10:13-16; Lk. 18:15-17) has been the source of considerable contention. But in support of the point we would make we need gather no more from that episode than that our Lord heartily approved when those with parental authority over

these children exercised it to bring them to him and place them under the authority of his ministry. And that much at least would seem to be beyond debate (BOC 93-94).

The third piece of evidence is Paul's instructions concerning parents and children.

Continuing in the same paragraph, Kline writes:

Another significant fact is that Paul instructed the children of various congregations to obey their parents in the Lord, and in support of his charge cited the pertinent stipulation of the Sinaitic Covenant together with its accompanying covenantal sanction (Eph. 6:1-3; Col. 3:20; cf. Ex. 20:12). Clear confirmation is also found in Paul's directive to covenant parents to bring their children under the nurturing and admonishing authority of the Lord (Eph. 6:4). In this exhortation the apostle takes for granted that it is the very authority of Christ as covenant Lord that reaches and claims children through the authority of their parents.¹²

It is therefore a matter of express scriptural teaching that the disciple of Christ is bound to bring those who are under his parental authority along with himself when he comes by oath under the higher authority of his covenant Suzerain. From this it follows that the Scriptures provide ample warrant for the administration of baptism to the children of confessing Christians, for baptism is the New Covenant rite whose precise significance is that of committal to Christ's authority and of incorporation within the domain of Christ's covenant lordship (BOC 94).

The fourth piece of evidence that baptism is administered on the principle of vassal or parental authority is the *oikos* (household) formula used frequently in the New Testament with reference to baptism. Kline appeals to the New Testament accounts of household baptisms where the household is baptized or brought into the church on the basis of the confession of faith of the parent (Acts 2:38-39; 10:2, 47-48; 11:14; 16:15, 33-34; 18:8; 1 Cor. 1:16; 2 Tim. 1:16; 4:19).

The "*oikos* formula" refers to the recurring statement that "he/she and his/her (whole)

¹² The text reads: "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (ἐν παιδείᾳ καὶ νοουθεσίᾳ κυρίου)" (Eph 6:4). Kline appears to take κυρίου as a subjective genitive. This is the view taken by Ernest Best in his commentary on Ephesians: "The Lord [is] seen as the ultimate instructor who works through the father ... The father mediates the Lord's instruction." Ernest Best, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ephesians* (ICC; Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998), 569-70.

household” believed and were baptized. This paedobaptist argument was famously articulated by Joachim Jeremias in the late 1950s and early 1960s.¹³

Kline thinks the *oikos* formula supports the paedobaptist view that the principle of parental authority carries forward into the New Covenant. Of course, there are difficulties with using these texts: (a) we do not know whether small children were actually present in any of these cases, and (b) since slaves were also members of the Greco-Roman *oikos* (household), the paedobaptist appeal to the *oikos* formula may lead to the conclusion that slaves should also be baptized. Kline recognizes these difficulties, but wishes to make the following point:

We would simply observe that for the purpose of substantiating the authority principle of covenant administration the precise constituency of the households involved would not need to be determined. Whether or not there were infant children in one case or the other, or slaves in this or that household, households are mentioned along with the central authority figures in these instances, and these households had to consist of somebody in the category of household subordinates. Even with respect to the narrower question of whether parental authority is honored in the administration of the New Covenant, it would not matter whether conclusive evidence could be adduced proving that there were no children in any of these households; for if there were no children, then surely the households consisted of servants; and if it could be shown that servants were received into the church on the basis of the authority principle, it would follow *a fortiori* that the continuity with Old Testament practice included infants too

The recurring mention of the household along with the central figure, whether in description of an existing God-fearing community, or in an invitation to salvation, or in an account of the acknowledgment of faith, or in a record of the administration of baptism, can very naturally be interpreted as the terminological reflex of a standard missions policy according to which the covenant community would regularly be enlarged through the accretion of household authority units (BOC 96-97).

To summarize Kline's argument for infant baptism:

(1) Kline avoids the notion of presumptive regeneration and relies on the principle of parental authority.

¹³ Joachim Jeremias, *Infant Baptism in the First Four Centuries* (trans. David Cairns; London: SCM Press, 1960), 19-24; idem, *The Origins of Infant Baptism: A Further Study in Reply to Kurt Aland* (trans. Dorothea M. Barton; London: SCM Press, 1963), 12-32.

(2) Kline appeals to the principle of vassal authority, that is, the principle that when a vassal takes an oath of loyalty to his suzerain, he brings not only himself but also his family under the covenant lordship of the suzerain.

(3) Kline sees this principle of vassal authority in the Abrahamic Covenant.

(4) Kline sees this principle of vassal authority continued from the Abrahamic Covenant (the pre-Messianic administration of the covenant of grace) into the New Covenant (the fulfilled, Messianic administration of the covenant of grace). Although Kline sees discontinuity between the Mosaic/Old Covenant and the New Covenant, he sees fundamental continuity along the underlying substratum of the one covenant of grace as it moves from promise (Abrahamic Covenant) to fulfillment (New Covenant).

(5) The case for New Covenant continuity in the administration of the sign of the covenant on the basis of parental authority rests on the following pieces of evidence:

- a. Paul's teaching that our children are "holy" (1 Cor 7:14)
- b. The parents who brought their children to be blessed by Jesus
- c. Paul's instructions to parents and children (Eph 6:1-4)
- d. The *oikos* formula¹⁴

¹⁴ For more on the *oikos* formula, see my paper summarizing Jeremias's argument, available at www.upper-register.com/papers/oikos_formula.pdf.