

The Noahic Covenant as a religious covenant of grace not a common covenant of neutrality.

*Note: This is a part of a book I am writing on reformed theology and the issues with the R2K theology.

One of the key textual conversations that the R2K theology uses to promote their teachings is the Noahic chapters in the book of Genesis. They make a case for a non religious, neutral common/civil sphere due to their alleged claim that the Noahic covenant conveys this paradigm for the nations in general. The common realm is thus said to share common life in the supposedly neutral non religious Noahic covenant. Furthermore the R2K theology alleges that the Noahic covenant is not a part of the one administration of the covenant of grace but rather a common grace covenant. This is necessary for their claim that the world is not to be governed by distinctly Christian principles for distinct Christian ends. The logic is as follows. The Noahic covenant is with the whole world and is not particular to the church. The Noahic covenant is not religious nor part of the covenant of grace. Therefore the nations are religiously neutral and secularism is the Noahic paradigm. Therefore the Noahic covenant demands for believers and unbelievers to participate in public life in a manner that is not distinctly Christian.

Let us examine some key textual elements of the Noahic texts to see if the R2K claims of about the Noahic covenant as purely common hold weight.

Genesis 5:28 “And Lamech lived an hundred eighty and two years, and begat a son: ²⁹ And he called his name Noah, saying, This same shall comfort us concerning our work and toil of our hands, because of the ground which the LORD hath cursed. ³⁰ And Lamech lived after he begat Noah five hundred ninety and five years, and begat sons and daughters.”

Notice something key about how Noah is prophetically and Adamically described here. Noah is said to be described as a figure who will reverse and bring about redemptive effects to the sin cursed fallen world. Noah's life and ministry is about the curse of sin and the soteriological counter. This is important to note as it shows that even before we get to the events of Noah the text is setting up the Noah story in the frame of the covenant of grace. Noah is continuing and developing the soteriological conversation in the promise in Genesis 3:15 not taking a common grace detour. Noah is a figure who is presented as being central in the story of redemption (reversing the curse of the fall), not as one who is central in ordering the common realm non religiously for

the nations. The Noahic events and the covenant is being set up in redemptive-fall reversal terminology.

The next key text in understanding the essential issue (and thus the essential solution) in the Noahic events is in chapter 6 verses 3-4.

Genesis 6:3-4 “And the LORD said, My spirit shall not always strive with man, for that he also is flesh: yet his days shall be an hundred and twenty years. There were giants in the earth in those days; and also after that, when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bare children to them, the same became mighty men which were of old, men of renown. ⁵ And GOD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.”

There are many fanciful interpretations of this text but the consistent sound understanding of the text is as follows. The covenant community sought to deal with the effects of the fall by entering into political alliances (via marriage) with the powerful rulers in the world of the ungodly (Geneva Bible notes on Genesis 6). The issue in Genesis is about the consequential corruption when the covenant community seeks to deal with fallenness by collaboration with the powers of this age. Why is this significant as it pertains to the R2K perspective of the Noahic covenant? Simply in that the essential issue in the world is in reference to the syncretistic endeavors of the people of God. It is the line of Cain and the line of Seth joining spiritually that the whole world becomes virtually unlivable. Syncretism in the sacred realm led to the total undoing of the whole realm. The whole earth going to utter chaos was due to the dysfunction and disobedience in the covenant community (this theme of God’s people seeking to counter the effects of the fall with intermarriage recapitulates throughout Torah and the rest of the OT). Which thus means that if the issue that brings about the Noahic events is in reference to the covenant community (namely the interaction with the world) then the Noahic solution has to be centralized around the covenant community. The events of Noah are essentially about the covenant community and how their sin has in turn had global effects. The Noahic flood is thus seeking to remedy an ecclesiological issue (not a common one) that has in turn had global effects. The global issue in the days of Noah are essentially ecclesiological not common; they are only consequentially common. Therefore the R2K tendency to frame this covenant as essentially an issue of the common is unhinged from the events that precipitated the flood.

Genesis 6:6 “And it repented the LORD that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart. ⁷ And the LORD said, I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth; both man, and beast, and the creeping thing, and the fowls of the air; for it repenteth me that I have made them. But Noah

found grace in the eyes of the LORD. ⁹ These are the generations of Noah: Noah was a just man and perfect in his generations, and Noah walked with God. ¹⁰ And Noah begat three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth.”

As the Noah narrative unfolds the R2K claim to its commonness and neutrality continues to be negated. Noah is said to have found grace in the eyes of the Lord which infers that the means by which the issues of apostasy in the covenant community are to be dealt with is by redemption (this is replayed again with Babel’s apostasy and Abraham’s election). The Noahic world apostasizes and yet Noah finds grace; the post Noahic world of Babel does the same and yet Abraham finds grace. The Noahic events are about the grace of election essentially not the preservation of creation. It is the covenantal grace that God bestowed upon Noah essentially that consequentially led to the common realm’s preservation (this will become clearer as the story unfolds). Furthermore in chapter 6 verses 13 to 16 Noah is given instructions to build the ark. What is interesting about the manner in which the dimensions of the ark are described is that they are comparable to the dimensions of the temple in Exodus and in the books of Kings and Chronicles (Davidic covenant). The Ark is described in temple like terms as it has an outer court, and inner court, and a holy of holies. Noah is thus a figure defined by grace and he is to build an instrument that somewhat of a mobile holy temple. The administration of grace via temple in the Mosaic covenant is inaugurated in the Noahic covenant (consider that Israel is reading this in the desert as they are to build the temple). The whole common world is preserved by being brought into sacred temple where Noah is in covenant with God by grace. Note that Peter in 1 Peter 3 sees the ark in this covenant of grace administration as well. The distinctions of clean and unclean in the Ark further strengthen this temple theme in Noah and the Ark. In the sacred Ark the sacred and the common realm find themselves connected in close proximity which counters the R2K claim that the Noahic events and covenant are setting up a perpetual dichotomous disjunction between the common and sacred realm. *The whole world, common and sacred, went into the ark and came out of the ark.*

The redemptive theme particular to the church then continues in 6:18 where Moses writes,

“But with thee will I establish my covenant; and thou shalt come into the ark, thou, and thy sons, and thy wife, and thy sons’ wives with thee. ¹⁹ And of every living thing of all flesh, two of every sort shalt thou bring into the ark, to keep them alive with thee; they shall be male and female. ²⁰ Of fowls after their kind, and of cattle after their kind, of every creeping thing of the earth after his kind, two of every sort shall come unto thee, to keep them alive. ²¹ And take thou unto

thee of all food that is eaten, and thou shalt gather it to thee; and it shall be for food for thee, and for them.”

Again notice that the Noahic Covenant is not a common covenant with all the world but rather it is said explicitly to be a gracious covenant with Noah and his household. Said another way the Noahic covenant is a redemptive one with the whole church (which includes Noah and all other believers and their children). The language here of covenant with believers and their seed is virtually parallel with the language of covenant in Genesis 12:1-3 and 17; meaning that the covenant language of Noah and His family is identical to the language of Abraham and His family. However it is important to note that this covenant of grace with the church *includes* common provisions for the rest of creation. This point also counters the R2K belief that sees the Noahic covenant as a common-secular one with all creation as totally distinct and separate from a redemptive covenant with the church. In the Noahic covenant God’s covenant of grace with the church is interconnected with the rest of creation; meaning that the covenant of grace with the church is cosmically interconnected in the Noahic covenant. Reformed theologian O Palmer Robertson sees this cosmic/creational theme intertwined in the covenant of grace in the Noahic covenant as well. “The explicit repetition of these creation mandates in the context of the covenant of redemption expands the vistas of redemption’s horizons. Redeemed man must not internalize his salvation so that he thinks narrowly in terms of a “soul-saving” deliverance. To the contrary, redemption involves his total life-style as a social, cultural creature. Rather than withdrawing narrowly into a restricted form of “spiritual” existence, redeemed man must move out with a total world-and-life perspective.”¹ “The covenant with Noah binds together God’s purposes in creation with his purposes in redemption. Noah, his seed, and all creation benefit from this gracious relationship.”² Palmer notices that the all creational elements of the Noahic are “expanding the vistas of redemptive horizons.” He then says that man’s redemption cannot be understood merely in “soul saving.” The redemptive Noahic covenant has an interconnectedness with the entire cosmos. God’s creational and new creational purposes are bound together in the Noahic covenant according to Palmer. While the R2K uses the Noahic covenant to radically separate the realm of sacred and redemption from the common/creational realm. The Noahic texts actually connect the two realms and intertwine them (while keeping their distinctions). Thus it is this interconnectedness of God’s redemptive covenant with all creation that demands that the common realm revolves unto and in accordance with and in cooperation with its covenantal-theocentric aims. The Noahic covenant is

¹ Christ of the Covenants, Robertson 119.

² Ibid, 120.

harmonizing the covenant of Grace with the common realm rather than creating a dualistic dichotomy.

In Genesis 7 the redemptive nature of the Noahic covenant continues along with its interconnectedness of the common creational realm.

Genesis 7:1 "Then the LORD said to Noah, "Go into the ark, you and all your household, for I have seen that you are righteous before me in this generation. 2 Take with you seven pairs of all clean animals, 1 the male and his mate, and a pair of the animals that are not clean, the male and his mate, 3 and seven pairs 2 of the birds of the heavens also, male and female, to keep their offspring alive on the face of all the earth. 4 For in seven days I will send rain on the earth forty days and forty nights, and every living thing 3 that I have made I will blot out from the face of the ground." 5 And Noah did all that the LORD had commanded him."

The language of redemptive covenant in the Noahic continues in the opening verses of chapter 7. Noah and his family enter the ark by possessing a righteousness that the common world does not possess. The rest of Scripture (and the grace spoken of in chapter 6) makes it clear that this righteousness that enables the wrath of God to pass over us is the righteousness that comes from the covenant of grace. Notice that the creatures in the common creational realm are able to survive the coming judgment due to the covenantal righteousness that the covenant community possesses. The common creation is preserved due to the redemptive righteousness that the covenant community possesses (not due to some common non-religious covenant). The Noahic covenant is making a connection with the creation as a whole with the ethics and status in the covenant of grace in particular. Just as the whole world was effected negatively by the apostasy of the covenant community, the new world that would come from the waters of judgment would be effected positively by the covenant renewal of the covenant community. These themes of creation being effected positively or negatively in light of the actions of the covenant community would be the ongoing paradigm throughout the Mosaic, Davidic and New Covenant administrations of the covenant of grace. The Noahic sets the groundwork for how the creation as a whole is effected by the new creation covenant community in particular.

Furthermore, notice how all the animals are again described in clean and unclean terminology which is temple language. Which is to say that God is understanding all the creation in a way that is connected to the sacredness in the covenant temple community. Consider what is said in Genesis 7:11

“In the six hundredth year of Noah’s life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month, on that day all the v̄fountains of the great deep burst forth, and w̄the windows of the heavens were opened. 12 And rain fell upon the earth forty days and forty nights. 13 On the very same day Noah and his sons, Shem and Ham and Japheth, and Noah’s wife and the three wives of his sons with them entered the ark, 14 they and every beast, according to its kind, and all the livestock according to their kinds, and every creeping thing that creeps on the earth, according to its kind, and every bird, according to its kind, every winged creature.”

Consider the language of the flood events and the Ark being framed in the language of 40 days. 40 days is language that is part of the redemption motif which can be found with Moses, and Israel in Exodus, the repentant nation of Ninevah in Jonah, and the Lord Jesus Himself in the gospels. Why is this significant? Because the Noahic events involving the covenant community interconnectedness with creation are being framed in the redemptive motif in the language of 40. The Noahic covenant, the covenant community, and the creation are comparable to Moses on the mountain and Israel in the desert and Christ in the desert. The Noahic covenant is being presented as that which is in the covenant of grace from Abraham, to Moses, and unto Christ (note that the number 40 continues throughout chapter 7 and into 8). After Noah and his household leaves the ark the redemptive theme of the Noahic covenant continues.

Genesis 8:20 “Then Noah built an altar to the LORD and took some of every clean animal and some of every clean bird and offered burnt offerings on the altar. 21 And when the LORD smelled k̄the pleasing aroma, the LORD said in his heart, “I will never again l̄curse’ the ground because of man, for m̄the intention of man’s heart is evil from his youth. n̄Neither will I ever again strike down every living creature as I have done. 22 ōWhile the earth remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, p̄day and night, shall not cease.”

Noah is being presented in priestly paradigms as he is on a mountain (comparable to the Priests ascending Mt. Zion to offer sacrifices) offering a vicarious propitiatory sacrifice. The Lord then analogically smells the propitiatory aroma and consequentially promises to never bring the Noahic judgments on the earth. Note that one must understand the story of redemption and the doctrine of propitiation in order to understand the Noahic covenant. It is a priestly sacrifice anticipating Christ’s priestly ministry to the church that is connected to God’s common restraint on the total created realm. Said another way it is God’s saving grace to the whole church that involves his common kindness to all else. That which all creation benefits from is because of what the

covenant community receives in the covenant of grace. We again see two key components of the Noahic covenant. 1. That it is about redemptive grace in the sacred community of grace. 2. That covenant of grace has a connectedness to the totality of creation. Altar's, sacred mountains, and sacrifices are not about common irreligious things but rather things pertaining to the covenant of grace. The Noahic covenant is about how God's covenantal dealings with the church effect the whole creation and involve the whole creation contra R2K which uses the Noahic paradigm to radically separate the realm of the sacred from the common realm.

Genesis 9:1 "And God blessed Noah and his sons and said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. 2 "The fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth and upon every bird of the heavens, upon everything that creeps on the ground and all the fish of the sea. Into your hand they are delivered."

This phrase is very important in the conversation as it also conveys that graciousness of the Noahic covenant. The WCF on covenant says this.

WCF 7.2 The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works,¹ wherein life was promised to Adam, and in him to his posterity,² upon condition of perfect and personal obedience. WCF 7.3 Man, by his fall, having made himself incapable of life by that covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second,¹ commonly called the Covenant of Grace, whereby He freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ, requiring of them faith in Him, that they may be saved;² and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto eternal life His Holy Spirit, to make them willing, and able to believe.

Note that according to the Westminster Standards after the fall, the mandate to Adam and furthermore all of God's mandates must come in a covenant of grace. Noah cannot be told to obey the creation mandate in verse 1 in the framework of the original covenant. Noah is a sinner and cannot hear the Adamic mandate lest it be framed in a covenant of grace. This is why the blessing of God in Genesis 8:20-21 via sacrifice must precede the creational charge in chapter 9. It is because Noah is in covenant with God by grace, because the Noahic covenant is a covenant of grace, that the Adamic creational call can be restated and placed upon him. Consider what God says in 9 verse 8.

“Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, ⁹ “Behold, ^zI establish my covenant with you and your offspring after you, ¹⁰ and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the livestock, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark; it is for every beast of the earth. ¹¹ ^aI establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.”

The same phrase of I will establish my covenant with Noah and His household is restated outside of the ark after hearing the creation mandate. The covenant language with the covenant community before the flood is restated after the flood in the recreated earth. The covenant of grace with the church is also restated in language that shows connection and interconnectedness with all creation. Consider verses 12 to 17.

“And God said, ^b“This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: ¹³ I have set ^cmy bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. ¹⁴ When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, ¹⁵ ^dI will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh. And the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. ¹⁶ When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember ^ethe everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.” ¹⁷ God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.”

There are some developments here that are key to bring out. 1. The Noahic covenant continues to be framed in a way which states that it is between God and the covenant community. 2. The Noahic covenant with God’s people is interconnected with the earth and all flesh. 3. This covenant is said to be an everlasting covenant. Note that the Noahic covenant is said to be an everlasting covenant in a way that is identical to the way in which all the administrations of the covenant of grace are described (Exodus 31:16; Hebrews 13:20; Ezekiel 16:60; Isaiah 55:3; 1 Chronicles 16:17; Genesis 17:19). Contra the R2K theology, the Noahic covenant is not only said to be redemptive but it is said to be eschatological (everlasting). The Noahic covenant is not a common covenant for a temporal realm (though it involves temporal preservation), it is an everlasting covenant (as all the covenants of promise are) with the eschatological covenant community. However this eschatological covenant is very much connected and concerned with the creational realm as a whole. If you ever wonder why the consummate state will involve the whole created creaturely realm you have your answer in the stipulations of the Noahic covenant. It is for this reason that Hosea 2:14 says,

“Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak comfortably unto her. ¹⁵ And I will give her her vineyards from thence, and the valley of Achor for a door of hope: and she shall sing there, as in the days of her youth, and as in the day when she came up out of the land of Egypt. ¹⁶ And it shall be at that day, saith the LORD, that thou shalt call me Ishi; and shalt call me no more Baali. ¹⁷ For I will take away the names of Baalim out of her mouth, and they shall no more be remembered by their name. ¹⁸ And in that day will I make a covenant for them with the beasts of the field, and with the fowls of heaven, and with the creeping things of the ground: and I will break the bow and the sword and the battle out of the earth, and will make them to lie down safely. ¹⁹ And I will betroth thee unto me for ever; yea, I will betroth thee unto me in righteousness, and in judgment, and in lovingkindness, and in mercies. ²⁰ I will even betroth thee unto me in faithfulness: and thou shalt know the LORD.”

Consider the following: 1. Hosea connects the Mosaic covenant people in the wilderness with Noahic language (v.18). 2. The covenantal language of redemption is intertwined and connected with Noahic covenant language. 3. The covenant renewal of the people of God will positively effect the created common realm (v.18). 4. The redemptive covenant stated in Mosaic and Noahic language is said to be everlasting (v. 19). The prophets hundreds of years later speak about the Noahic covenant in the language of redemptive and eschatological (not temporal and common as R2K claims).

It is also important to note the the events at the end of chapter 9 also have theological bearing on the Noahic covenant and narrative.

Genesis 9:18 “The sons of Noah who went forth from the ark were ¹Shem, Ham, and Japheth. (Ham was the father of Canaan.) ¹⁹ These three were the sons of Noah, and ²from these the people of the whole earth were dispersed. Noah began to be a man of the soil, and he planted a vineyard.³ ²¹ He drank of the wine and became drunk and lay uncovered in his tent. ²² And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father and told his two brothers outside. ²³ Then Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid it on both their shoulders, and walked backward and covered the nakedness of their father. Their faces were turned backward, and they did not see their father’s nakedness. ²⁴ When Noah awoke from his wine ⁴and knew what his youngest son had done to him, ²⁵ he said, ⁵“Cursed be Canaan; ⁶a servant of servants shall he be to his brothers.” He also said, “Blessed be the LORD, the God of Shem; and let Canaan be his servant.⁷ ²⁷ May God enlarge Japheth,⁴and let him dwell in the tents of Shem, and let Canaan be his servant.”

Noah is being described in Adamic like terms as the cultivator of an inaugurated Garden of sorts. And like the original Adam he similarly ends up sinful and naked and ashamed (v.21-22). Shem and Japheth reflect Yahweh covering Adam and Eve in their sins (Genesis 3:21) and then Noah prophesies in accordance with their actions of faith. It is here where the promises of the gospel in the covenant of grace are stated in ways that anticipate the New Covenant in the Jew and Gentile paradigm. Shem connects God's promises to Abraham and the Hebrew people (Genesis 11:10-27). Japheth is spoken of as being representatives of all the gentiles who identify with the line of Shem and the Abrahamic promises. Canaan is spoken of as the representative of all apostates and unbelieving people groups that do not identify under the covenantal cover of Shem. Why is all this significant in the R2K theology conversation? The Noahic covenant continues to be told in a way that speaks about God's redemptive covenant of grace. In the story of Shem and Japheth we learn that the Noahic covenant will administer redemption through the particularity of Shem (Abraham) and the enfolding in (Japheth and let him dwell in the tents of Shem) of Japheth. The Noahic covenant of grace will bring universal redemption through the bringing all the nations (Japheth) into the Noahic promise administered through Israel. The prophetic declaration of Noah's father about Noah in chapter 5 and the prophetic statement of Noah concerning Shem bracket the whole narrative in redemption in the covenant of grace. The whole narrative of Noah from Genesis 6 to 9 constantly frames the Noahic covenant as a redemptive covenant with the eschatological church not a common temporal covenant with non religious and non eschatological facets. However it is important to note that the covenant of grace with the whole church in all generations has a consequential connectedness in the creational realm as a whole. *New creation covenants involve all creation temporality.* What the Noahic covenant teaches us is that the entire created common realm exists because of the covenant of grace and for the purpose of the covenant of grace. Noah frames all creation as being ordered unto and for the covenant of grace. Furthermore the covenant community is to see all creation as relevant and connected to their eschatological purpose. The R2K theology seeks to radically disconnect the creational common realm from the sacred new creational realm via the Noahic covenant to make a so called biblical case for principled pluralism. Let us conclude this conversation in this manner:

1. The Noahic covenant is not a common covenant with all creation but a covenant of grace with the church.
2. The Noahic covenant of grace with the church is connected with preservation in the common realm. The Noahic covenant connects and combines new creation with creation rather than radically separates them (distinctions remain however).
3. The common real is ordered unto and for the Sacred not unto and for itself. The common is connected to the sacred not unhinged from it.
4. The Noahic covenant is

framed in language that is parallel to all the covenants of promise and so one cannot separate the Noahic from the Mosaic or any other covenant to make a case for some other standard for the world. 5. The R2K premise that the non religious common covenant of Noah is a biblical case for public life to be devoid of the sacred and defined by principled pluralism is false. 6. The Noahic covenant, biblical understood, becomes the covenant that destroys R2K radical separation claims.