

An Introduction and Table of Contents to

David Dickson's

Sacred Therapeutics:

Showing briefly the method of healing the
diseases of the conscience concerning Regeneration

1656

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Introduction

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Often the small and weak faith of a person trusting Christ to save them from this world is shaken, rattled, and even sometimes, is overshadowed. David Dickson (1583-1663), the eminent Scottish preacher, professor and theologian, in *Sacred Therapeutics*² (which title means: holy or spiritual medicinal therapies) writes to apply the balm of the certainty of God's covenants to the tender consciences of troubled saints. We all have fears and doubts, but the saint is to remember that God 'has made with me an everlasting covenant ordered in all things, and sure: for this is all my salvation and all my desire.' (2 Sam. 23:5)

Sacred Therapeutics is divided into 3 books. The first book serves as an introduction and lays down the foundational truths of God's Word that will be applied in the rest. The first two chapters examine what the conscience is, so that we know what we are dealing with and how it is to be handled in light of the Word of God. The third chapter is about regeneration (the new birth, John 3:7); we need to know that it is wholly from God, and thus we can be sure of God's work in us. Chapters 4-6 are about the foundation of our hope: God's covenants. One chapter each is devoted to the Covenant of Redemption, the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace. Chapters 7-9 show us how to derive help from God's covenants for our life and salvation. The last two chapters of Book 1 treat the opposite conditions of persons that are likely to despair because they see no hope for themselves, versus those who presumptuously take for granted God's promises to

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² Originally titled in the Latin: *Therapeutica Sacra*.

themselves and yet have not the forgiveness of sins. Book 2 (in 30 chapters) seeks to build up doubting and wavering converts by helping them come to assurance of their salvation by rightly discerning God's promises, grace in their heart and the testimony of the Spirit to their souls. Book 3 (in 28 chapters) warns and exhorts us to use caution that we not fall not into numerous temptations of the Christian life, but to examine ourselves and ensure that our faith and walk before God is sound. We must take heed lest we fall.

Perhaps the most important section of the whole book (and all of Dickson's writings) is Book 1, chapters 4-6, where Dickson lays out his understanding of the divine covenants. Since the beginning of the Church, and especially since the Reformation, the teachers of Christ's Church had long recognized the Covenant of Grace in Scripture: whereby God the Trinity provides and proposes salvation from sin over the death of God the Son in the flesh to human sinners. We, upon entering into this binding covenant with God, receive all the joys of salvation and fellowship with God forever. While there was always seen to be a 'works' principle in Scripture, it was not until the late-1500's, but especially in the early 1600's, that this became better to be understood as a covenant between God and the human race through their federal head, Adam. This covenant, whereby the human race universally fell by sin under the curse of God, was given the name the Covenant of Works.

And yet, it appeared, especially through the Arminian controversy (of the early and mid-1600's) that the Covenant of Grace did not fundamentally hinge on man's power to accept God's terms of salvation, but upon a surer foundation: that of the ordained purpose and work of the Trinitarian God Himself. With time, there was more clearly seen in the nuances of Scripture an everlasting covenant between God the Father and God the Son for the salvation of his fore-loved people, a covenant which could not be broken. Thus the certainty of our salvation does not lie in our power or strength to enter into or keep the Covenant of Grace, but in the eternal purpose of Almighty God to save us in the Covenant of Redemption.

Dickson was one of the first systematic formulators of the Covenant of Redemption and Book 1, chapter 4 is his principal exposition and defense of it from Scripture in all of his works. Dickson³ briefly summarized the Covenant of Redemption in relation to the Covenant of Grace in the *Sum of Saving Knowledge* (1650, which has often been included in many editions of the Westminster Confession of Faith). For your help, an excerpt of this brief summary of the Covenant of Redemption immediately follows this Introduction. For the substance of Dickson's covenant theology in short compass, read the whole of the *Sum of Saving Knowledge* (which is easily accessible online).

For a further and more detailed Biblical-theological analysis and defense of the Covenant of Redemption, see Travis Fentiman's article '[The Covenant of Redemption: A Covenant Distinct from the Covenant of Grace](#)' (2014, 20 pp.). The most exhaustive Biblical treatment of the Covenant of Redemption is the 1677 work by Patrick Gillespie,⁴ *The Ark of the Covenant Opened: or, a Treatise of the Covenant of Redemption* (477 pp.). To further read about the history and development of the Covenant of Redemption through the Reformation era, along with a comprehensive analysis of Dickson's covenant theology, see Carol Williams' dissertation, *The Decree of Redemption is in Effect a Covenant: David Dickson and the Covenant of Redemption* (2005, 287 pp.).

The Table of Contents here provided of Dickson's *Sacred Therapeutics* is sorely needed. Before the recent springing up of online internet libraries, only the first third of Dickson's work was available in his two volume *Select Practical Works*, if you were fortunate enough to come across this very scarce 1800's work. Today, though, all of *Sacred Therapeutics* is online for free in English. The most readable edition however, from vol. 1 of Dickson's *Select Practical Works*, only contains the first four chapters and has no table of contents. Book 1, chapters 4-6 have been helpfully edited and re-typset in HTML online. The table of contents (and the whole book) of the 1600's edition is available but

³ It is likely that Dickson and James Durham were the co-authors of *The Sum of Saving Knowledge*.

⁴ Patrick Gillespie (1617-1675) was also a Scottish covenanter along with Dickson. Gillespie was a theological professor and younger brother to the more well-known George Gillespie.

is a bit more difficult to read. The Early English Books Online transcription of *Holy Therapeutics* is in some ways clearer, but not much easier to read. The table of contents there provided, again, is not very helpful. In the Table of Contents below links are provided to the most readable editions online.

It is hoped that this Introduction and Table of Contents will fill the previously existing gap and make Dickson's healing therapeutics more easily perused and treasured again to the everlasting good of our souls.

'The secret of the Lord is with them that fear Him,
and He will show them his covenant.'

Ps. 25:14

The Sum of Saving Knowledge

David Dickson and James Durham

1650

[A Summary of the Covenant of Redemption]

Head II

I. Albeit man, having brought himself into this woeful condition, be neither able to help himself, nor willing to be helped by God out of it, but rather inclined to lie still, insensible of it, till he perish; yet God, for the glory of his rich grace, hath revealed in his word a way to save sinners; viz., by faith in Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God; by virtue of, and according to the tenor of the Covenant of Redemption, made and. agreed upon between God the Father and God the Son, in the council of the Trinity, before the world began.

II. The sum of the Covenant of Redemption is this: God having freely chosen unto life a certain number of lost mankind; for the glory of his rich grace, did give them, before the world began, unto God the Son, appointed Redeemer; that, upon condition he would humble himself so far as to assume the human nature, of a soul and a body, unto personal union with his divine nature, and submit himself to the law, as surety for them, and satisfy justice for them, by giving obedience in their name, even unto the suffering of the cursed death of the cross, he should ransom and redeem them all from sin and death, and purchase unto them righteousness and eternal life, with all saving graces leading thereunto, to be effectually, by means of his own appointment, applied in due time to every one of them. This condition the Son of God (who is Jesus Christ our Lord) did accept

before the world began, and in the fullness of time came into the world, was born of the Virgin Mary, subjected himself to the law, and completely paid the ransom on the cross: But by virtue of the foresaid bargain, made before the world began, he is in all ages, since the fall of Adam, still upon the work of applying actually the purchased benefits unto the elect; and that he doth by way of entertaining a covenant of free grace and reconciliation with them, through, faith in himself; by which covenant, he makes over to every believer a right and interest to himself, and to all his blessings.

III. For the accomplishment of this Covenant of Redemption, and making the elect partakers of the benefits thereof in the Covenant of Grace, Christ Jesus was clad with the threefold office of Prophet, Priest, and King: made a Prophet, to reveal all saving knowledge to his people, and to persuade them to believe and obey the same; made a Priest, to offer up himself a sacrifice once for them all, and to intercede continually with the Father, for making their persons and services acceptable to him; and made a King, to subdue them to himself, to feed and rule them by his own appointed ordinances, and to defend them from their enemies.

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