

Protestant *Reformed* Theological *Journal*

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Editor's Notes

Thirty-nine years ago, in October of 1967, the inaugural issue of the *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal* made its appearance. That first issue was introduced by the editor of the new *Journal*, Professor Herman Hanko. In an editorial that explained the purpose of the *Journal*, Professor Hanko applied the words of Jude "... that ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints" (Jude 4). He pointed out that Jude's exhortation demands that the church "fight a defensive battle." But he also pointed out that the church "... cannot be content with a wholly defensive battle.... She must be positive as well as negative. She must not only protect what she already has, but she must also gain to herself new conquests. This means that the Church must move forward in the development of the truth." To both the negative defense and the positive development of the truth, Professor Hanko committed the *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*. And for the thirty years of his editorship, that purpose was achieved.

On Professor Hanko's retirement, beginning with the November 1997 issue, Professor Robert Decker assumed the editorship of the *Journal*. For the past nine years, Professor Decker has seen to it that the *Journal* faithfully adhered to the purpose of its founding. Under his capable leadership, the *Journal* continued to defend the Reformed faith against enemies within and without, as well as contributed to the positive development of the Reformed faith. We thank him for his years of service as editor.

The Protestant Reformed Synod of 2006 granted Professor Decker emeritation. In light of his retirement from active service in the Protestant Reformed Seminary, the undersigned has been appointed as his successor. We wish Professor Decker and his wife, Marilyn, the Lord's richest blessing in their retirement. We also expect that the Lord will continue to use our brother even in his retirement in the service of the churches.

This issue of the *Journal*, as well as the Spring 2007 issue, will be special issues. Both issues will be devoted to articles dealing with the vital truth of the covenant of God. There is renewed interest in the doctrine of the covenant in Reformed churches these days. That renewed interest is fueled in large part by covenant heresy, particularly the teaching of the men associated with the movement known as the Federal Vision. It is our hope that the articles appearing in this and the following issue of the *Journal* will expose the errors of this new covenant heresy, and at the same time serve the positive development of the truth of the covenant. We extend a special welcome to the pages of the *Journal* to the Reverend Eugene Case and the Reverend Angus Stewart. Pastor Case is a longtime friend of the Protestant Reformed Churches and well-known to much of the readership of the *Journal*. His contribution on the doctrine of the covenant in the Westminster Standards provides the insights of Presbyterianism to the doctrine of the covenant. Pastor Stewart is a 2001 graduate of the Protestant Reformed Seminary and current pastor of the Covenant Protestant Reformed Church of Northern Ireland. In this issue, he begins an examination of John Calvin's contribution to the development of covenant theology.

Let me take this opportunity to remind the readers of the *Journal* of our subscription policy. The *Journal* is sent *free of charge* to any individual or institution that requests it. If this issue is the first issue that you have received and you wish to be added permanently to our mailing list, please return the enclosed form to the address of the Protestant Reformed Seminary. That's all that we ask, and you will be assured of receiving future issues.

Our prayer is that this issue of the *Journal*, as well as all that follow, will serve the defense of God's truth, as well as its development, for His glory and the blessing of His church.

R.L.C.

The Covenant of Creation with Adam

David J. Engelsma

Introduction

Reformed theology has always regarded the special relation in which God stood to Adam, and Adam to God, in paradise, prior to the fall, as a covenant. Not only have all Reformed theologians taught a covenant in paradise, regardless whether they used the word “covenant,” but the truth of a covenant with Adam is authoritatively expressed by the Reformed confessions.

Although the Heidelberg Catechism does not use the word “covenant” in its account of man’s creation and fall in Lord’s Day 3, the language it uses to describe Adam’s relationship to God by virtue of his creation and its insistence that the disobedience of Adam was the fall into sin of the entire human race are, in fact, the teaching of a covenant relationship. That “God created man good and after his own image ... that he might rightly know God his Creator, heartily love him, and live with him in eternal blessedness, to praise and glorify him” is the language of the fellowship of friends, specifically the fellowship of Father and son. The fellowship of friends is the biblical covenant. The doctrine of the Catechism that the “depraved nature of man” comes “from the fall and disobedience of our first parents, Adam and Eve, in Paradise, whereby our nature became so corrupt that we are all conceived and born in sin” is the truth of the “federal headship” of Adam, that is, the headship of Adam regarding all his posterity in a covenant.¹

The Westminster Confession of Faith explicitly calls the relationship between God and Adam a covenant, naming it “a covenant of works.”²

1. The Heidelberg Catechism, Questions and Answers 6 and 7, in Philip Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker, repr. 1983), 309, 310.

2. The Westminster Confession of Faith, 7.2, in Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 3, 616, 617.

Although Reformed and Presbyterian theologians have agreed that the relationship between God the Creator and His creature Adam was a covenant, there has been controversy regarding the nature of that covenant. Until recently, the vast majority have viewed the covenant with Adam as a pact, or agreement, between God and Adam, which God and Adam hammered out some time after Adam's creation, at the time God gave the "probationary command" of Genesis 2:15-17. By obeying this command, concerning not eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Adam would have earned the higher, spiritual, eternal life for himself and the entire race that Jesus Christ has obtained for the elect church through His incarnation, atonement, and resurrection.

In keeping with this understanding of the covenant with Adam, many Reformed theologians called it a covenant of works. The chief characteristic of that covenant was human works, indeed, meritorious human works. That which those works could merit was nothing less than the life and glory that now the Son of God in human flesh has earned for the new human race by His perfect obedience.

Opposed to this explanation of the covenant with Adam, virtually alone, was the Protestant Reformed theologian Herman Hoeksema. Already in the early 1920s, in writings that were soon published in Dutch in the booklet *De Geloovigen en Hun Zaad* and that were later translated and published in English as the book *Believers and Their Seed*, Hoeksema subjected the prevailing notion, that the covenant with Adam was a conditional agreement by which Adam could have merited a higher life, to sharpest criticism.

Hoeksema was one with the Reformed tradition in viewing the relationship between God and Adam as a covenant. What he rejected were the teachings that that covenant was a conditional agreement and especially that Adam's obedience in the covenant was (or, would have been) meritorious.

Against the popular understanding of the covenant with Adam, Hoeksema proposed a radically different conception. This conception, while doing full justice to the biblical and confessional teaching of Adam's representative headship in the covenant, sees

the covenant with Adam in the light of Scripture's teaching that the fundamental idea of covenant is fellowship in love, not conditional agreement. It also sets the covenant with Adam, as also the covenant of grace in Jesus Christ, against the backdrop of the grand archetype of the covenant, the triune life of God Himself as communion in love. Some of the most moving passages in all of Hoeksema's writings are those that describe the blessed life of God as the fellowship of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, always in the context of the astoundingly gracious will of God to have us share, in a creaturely way, the bliss of His own life.³

In recent years, other notable Reformed theologians have been questioning what may be called the traditional doctrine of the covenant of works. With appeal to his fellow Dutch theologian S. G. De Graaf, G. C. Berkouwer criticized the doctrine of a covenant of works as commonly understood by Reformed and Presbyterian theologians.⁴ The Presbyterian theologian John Murray also expressed strong reservations about the traditional doctrine of a covenant of works. Murray preferred not to call the relationship between God and Adam a covenant, referring to it rather as "the Adamic Administration." Both Berkouwer and Murray, like Hoeksema before them, were troubled by the notions of compact and merit that lie at the heart of the traditional doctrine.⁵

Recently, the heresy known as the Federal Vision has thrust the doctrine of the covenant with Adam into the foreground. As

3. Herman Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed: Children in the Covenant*, rev. ed. (Grandville, Michigan: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1997), 57-84. See also his *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1966), 214-226. For Hoeksema's treatment of the basic idea of the covenant in Scripture in relation to the life of the triune God, see his *Reformed Dogmatics*, 318-330.

4. G. C. Berkouwer, *Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 207-209.

5. John Murray, "The Adamic Administration," in *Collected Writings of John Murray*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth, 1977), 47-59.

part of their development of the doctrine of a conditional covenant and following the lead of the Dutch Reformed theologian Klaas Schilder, Norman Shepherd and his disciples reject the covenant of works, as traditionally understood. In defense of this rejection, they will, on occasion, appeal to the rejection of the covenant of works by Herman Hoeksema.

This appeal is both misleading and mistaken. It is misleading because it leaves the impression that there is some agreement between the covenant theology of Herman Hoeksema and the covenant theology of the Federal Vision. In fact, the covenant theology of Herman Hoeksema is the sworn foe of the Federal Vision.⁶

The appeal to Hoeksema's rejection of the covenant of works by the men of the Federal Vision is mistaken because Hoeksema's fundamental objection against the covenant of works was different from that of the proponents of the Federal Vision. Hoeksema objected to the notion that Adam by his obedience could have earned a higher, heavenly, eternal life. Although Hoeksema couched his objection in terms of Adam's being incapable of *meriting* higher life, his objection held against Adam's obtaining higher life for himself and the human race in any manner whatever. Viewing the covenant with Adam in light of God's eternal decree to glorify Himself by realizing His covenant in Jesus Christ, Hoeksema insisted that only the Son of God in human flesh could obtain the higher and better heavenly and eternal life for Himself and elect humanity, in the way of His cross and resurrection.

Hoeksema denied that in the paradisaical covenant Adam could have merited with God. But this denial of the possibility of merit on Adam's part did not imply any rejection of Adam's legal headship. Even though he regarded the covenant with Adam as essentially fellowship, Hoeksema did full justice to the legal aspect of the relationship. Hoeksema taught that because of Adam's legal, representative headship—his "federal headship"—his disobedience was imputed to all his posterity, Christ only excepted.

6. See David J. Engelsma, *The Covenant of God and the Children of Believers: Sovereign Grace in the Covenant* (Jenison, Michigan: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2005).

Nor did Hoeksema's denial of the possibility of Adam's meriting imply a denial that the work of Jesus Christ was meritorious. There is in this respect a significant difference between the first Adam, who was a mere man, and the second Adam, who is personally the eternal Son of God. Hoeksema taught emphatically that Jesus Christ merited salvation for all His own by His obedience.

The objection against the covenant of works by the men of the Federal Vision is radically different. It is part of their rejection of the legal aspect of the Christian religion. Not only could Adam not merit with God, but also his disobedience was not imputed to all his posterity. In addition, Jesus Christ's work was not meritorious. Accordingly, justification for the Federal Vision is not a strictly legal act, the imputing of the obedience of Christ to the elect sinner by means of faith only.

Highlighting the difference between Hoeksema and the men of the Federal Vision is the fact that, although they deny that Adam could have *merited* higher, eternal life, the advocates of the Federal Vision allow that Adam might, nevertheless, have *obtained* the higher life for himself and the race by "maturing" into that life through his obedience. Hoeksema would have condemned this notion as heartily as he did the notion of earning. He would have charged that there is no difference between a mere man's *meriting* the higher, eternal life by his work and a mere man's *obtaining* the higher, eternal life by his work. Indeed, there is no difference. In both cases, mere man works his way into the higher life of heaven. He does not receive it as a gift of grace through Jesus Christ.

The Revelation of a Covenant with Adam

The first three chapters of Genesis do not explicitly state that the relationship between God and Adam before the fall was a covenant. It is clear, however, that there was a uniquely close relationship between the Creator and His creature, man. This is evident from man's wonderful creation in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26, 27). The special relationship comes out in God's speaking to Adam and Eve immediately upon His creation of them, blessing them, mandating them to be fruitful and to have domin-

ion over the earthly creation, and granting them the right to use and enjoy, not only the plants and trees, but also all of God's creation (Gen. 1:28-30). The relationship between God and Adam is presupposed in the command to dress and keep the garden, as well as in the prohibition against eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:15-17).

That there was an intimate relationship between God and man in paradise and, in fact, the nature of that relationship, the account of God's appearance to Adam and Eve after their disobedience makes plain. "And they heard the voice of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day" (Gen. 3:8). Jehovah God Himself would regularly make Himself present to His friends in some visible form, walking with them and speaking to them.

Even though the word covenant is not used in the history of paradise to describe that relationship, the rest of Scripture establishes that the unique, close relationship between God and Adam was a covenant. Scripture establishes that the relationship between God and Adam was a biblical covenant, a covenant ordained and instituted by God, a covenant reflecting His own nature and life, a covenant befitting a relationship between the sovereign Creator and the dependent creature.

There is, first, the obvious fact that after the fall God relates to the new human race in Christ only by covenant (Gen. 3:15; 6:18; 17:7; Ex. 2:24; Jer. 31:31-34; Heb. 8:6; Rev. 21:3).

Second, Hosea 6:7, rightly translated, expressly states that the relationship between God and Adam was a covenant. The Authorized Version translates, "But they [Ephraim and Judah] like men have transgressed the covenant: there have they dealt treacherously against me." In the original Hebrew, the word translated "men" by the Authorized Version is *adam*. The word can refer to humanity in general. It is also the proper name of the first man, Adam. Here it refers to Adam. It makes little or no sense for the prophet to have said that Israelite men have transgressed the covenant "like men." This would be similar to the statement that dogs bite like dogs. Building on the law—the first five books of Moses—as the prophets did, Hosea compared the transgression of Israel to that of Adam. Both were violations of covenant. Both were gross sin, indeed, the grossest iniquity. Both were acts of

treachery by which Adam and Israel betrayed their divine friend.

Putting the matter beyond any doubt is the teaching of Romans 5:12ff. Like Christ, of whom Adam was “the figure” (v. 14; the Greek is *tupos*, ‘type’), Adam was created by God as legal representative of the human race, so that “by the offence of one [Adam] judgment came upon all men to condemnation” and “by one man’s [Adam’s] disobedience many were made sinners” (vv. 18, 19). Just as Christ’s headship of the new human race is His headship in the covenant, so also Adam’s headship was a covenant, or federal, headship.

But what was that covenant with Adam?

The Covenant of Works

The prevailing view, indeed the nearly unanimous view, among Reformed theologians until recently has been that the covenant with Adam was a covenant of works. By this the tradition meant an agreement, or pact, or even bargain between God and Adam. Because it is very difficult to find even the semblance of an agreement in the passage that is basic to the notion of a covenant of works, Genesis 2:15-17, as it is difficult to find an agreement between the Creator and Adam anywhere in Genesis 1 and 2, advocates of the covenant of works often would acknowledge that the covenant was established by God alone (“unilaterally”). The maintenance of that covenant, however, they insisted, had the nature of a genuine pact. In its maintenance, the covenant was “bilateral.” The covenant was a real agreement between two contracting parties.

Herman Witsius defined the covenant of works as “an agreement between God and Adam, formed after the image of God, as the head and root, or representative of the whole human race; by which God promised eternal life and happiness to him, if he yielded obedience to all his commands; threatening him with death if he failed but in the least point: and Adam accepted this condition.”⁷

7. Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man: Comprehending a Complete Body of Divinity*, vol. 1 (Escondido, California: The den Dulk Christian Foundation, repr. 1990), 50.

As an agreement, the covenant was conditional. It depended upon both parties' fulfillment of certain stipulations. God required of Adam that he refrain from eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil as a condition of earning eternal life. Adam stipulated that, on the condition of Adam's obedience to the divine prohibition, God must give Adam the eternal life Adam would have earned by his obedience.

Johannes Heidegger made plain that by the conditions of the covenant of works the two contracting parties very really bound each other to their mutual obligations.

It is not God alone who prescribes and promises something to man; man also passes over into God's covenant, Dt. 29.12 (that thou shouldest enter into the covenant of the Lord thy God, and into His oath which the Lord thy God maketh with thee this day). He promises obedience to God, when He (God) imposes His conditions and he awaits a promise from Him. And so clinging to God in accordance with the terms of the Covenant he (man) so to speak binds Him (God) by his *homologia* or assent, with the force of a divine disposition, to bestow love and benefits upon him. So that in this way the conditions of man and God are distinct, their assent is distinct and in this sense the actual covenant is rightly termed mutual and two-way.⁸

Reformed theologians usually identified three main elements of the covenant with Adam. There was a divine promise to Adam of eternal life. This eternal life was not conceived as everlasting, earthly life in paradise and the first creation. Rather, the defenders of the covenant of works explained the eternal life promised to Adam as the qualitatively higher, heavenly life that Jesus Christ has, in fact, obtained for the new human race. This promise is supposed to be implied by the penalty threatened in Genesis 2:15-17.

A second element of the covenant of works was a condition. The condition was Adam's obedience to the command not to eat

8. Johannes Heidegger, in Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1950), 283.

of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil as a work of Adam by which he would merit eternal life.

The third element was the penalty of death in case of disobedience.⁹

Noteworthy about the traditional view was its teaching that God and Adam made the agreement sometime after Adam's creation. The covenant of works was struck when God came to Adam with the prohibition of Genesis 2:17. By, in, and with the word of God, "But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die," the agreement was made.

It was also an integral part of the doctrine of the covenant of works that it was merely a means to an end other than the covenant. It was a divinely appointed arrangement of the life of the first Adam that might enable him to achieve the end of a higher, heavenly, eternal life. Covenant was the means; immortal, heavenly life was the end. Titling the section in which he treated the covenant of works "Human Destiny," Herman Bavinck spoke of the means by which man would arrive at his destiny. The covenant of works was "the road to heavenly blessedness for the [first] human beings, who were created in God's image and had not yet fallen."¹⁰

Fundamental to the doctrine of a covenant of works is the notion of merit. By his conditional agreement with God, by his works, specifically the work of not eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Adam would have earned from God a great good that he did not presently possess, namely, eternal, heavenly life. If the notion of merit is stripped from the doctrine, the traditional doctrine of the covenant of works collapses.

Even if the Reformed theologians had not used the term "merit" to describe what Adam was capable of doing in the covenant of

9. See Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, repr. 1986), 117-120: "(1.) God entered into a covenant with Adam. (2.) The promise annexed to that covenant was life. (3.) The condition was perfect obedience. (4.) Its penalty was death."

10. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 572.

works, the idea of meriting was inherent in the doctrine itself. By the work of fulfilling a condition, Adam could obtain from God, as something due him, an eternal life that presently he lacked. This is merit, regardless that the term is avoided.

But, astoundingly, the theologians dared to use the term. Giving the consensus of the Reformed tradition, *after Calvin*, Heppe wrote: “On condition that Adam gave perfect obedience he was promised eternal life ... which he was to merit for himself *ex pacto*.”¹¹

Louis Berkhof observed that in the “purely natural relationship” in which Adam stood to God by virtue of creation Adam “could not have merited anything.” By virtue of the covenant of works, it is clearly implied, Adam could have merited something. In the covenant of grace, Adam “acquired certain conditional rights.” When Berkhof added, “This covenant enabled Adam to obtain eternal life for himself and his descendants in the way of obedience,” the meaning is that Adam *merited* eternal life for himself and his descendants.¹²

The contemporary Reformed theologian Cornelis P. Venema also uses the word “merit,” although with a noticeable timidity. His is a curious piece throughout. Venema intends to defend the traditional doctrine of the covenant of works, particularly the doctrine of the covenant of works in the Westminster Confession of Faith, against “recent criticisms.” The title of the article is, “Recent Criticisms of the ‘Covenant of Works’ in the Westminster Confession of Faith.”¹³ In his survey of critics of the covenant of works, Venema manages to overlook that Reformed theologian who more sharply and thoroughly than any other, and earlier than all those mentioned by Venema, rejected the covenant of works,

11. Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 294, 295.

12. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 215.

13. Cornelis P. Venema, “Recent Criticisms of the ‘Covenant of Works’ in the Westminster Confession of Faith,” *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 9, no. 2 (Fall, 1993): 165-198.

Herman Hoeksema. Thus he also overlooks Hoeksema's weighty criticisms of the traditional doctrine.

Then, although he purports to be defending the tradition, Venema consistently describes the covenant with Adam as "a covenant relationship of communion of fellowship with God."¹⁴ This is certainly neither the language nor the conception of the Reformed tradition. The Reformed tradition has always viewed the covenant with Adam as an agreement, a pact, a conditional contract, and even a bargain. To whom is Venema indebted for this radically different conception of the covenant with Adam? Or has he made a theological discovery regarding that covenant? Would he now repudiate the terms "agreement," "pact," "conditional compact," and "bargain"? He does not tell us.

That his difference with the tradition is only superficial becomes evident when he defends the use of the term "merit" to describe Adam's activity in the covenant of works, although his defense is hesitant, even ambiguous—which is certainly no way to defend the element of the covenant of works that is fundamental to the doctrine.

The fact is that God has, by entering into covenant with man, *bound himself by the promises and as well the demands/obligations of that covenant*. This means that Adam's obedience to the probationary command, though it were an outworking and development within the covenant communion in which he was placed by God's prevenient favor, would nonetheless "merit" or "deserve" the reward of righteousness God himself had promised.... The terms of the probationary command...warrant a *qualified use of the language of "merit" or "reward."*¹⁵

The employment of quotation marks around the words that are fundamental to the doctrine Venema is defending, "merit" and "deserve," indicates either the greatest uneasiness with the words, which ought to have stopped him from defending them, or deliberate ambiguity, which is unworthy of a theologian. And then to

14. Venema, "Recent Criticisms," 187.

15. Venema, "Recent Criticisms," 195, 196.

suggest that “merit” and “reward” are synonymous (“qualified use of the language of ‘merit’ or ‘reward’”) is inexcusable. As a Reformed theologian who subscribes to the Heidelberg Catechism, Dr. Venema knows very well that the Reformed faith sharply distinguishes between “merit” and “reward,” and that this distinction is basic to the Reformed controversy with Rome, the great advocate of human merit. To the Roman Catholic objection to the truth of justification by faith only, “How is it that our good works merit nothing, while yet it is God’s will to reward them in this life and in that which is to come?” the Heidelberg Catechism answers: “The reward comes not of merit, but of grace.”¹⁶ Reward, as graciously given, the Reformed faith confesses. Merit, with regard to mere men, the Reformed confessions reject, indeed abominate.

Whatever his quotation marks around “merit” and “deserve” may indicate, Venema does, in fact, teach that Adam could have merited in the full, real sense of the word. Without any quotation marks, and in italics for emphasis, he writes: “In the covenant itself, God bound himself to grant, *as in some sense a reward well-deserved*, the fullness of covenant fellowship into which Adam was called.”

“*Well-deserved*”!¹⁷

Confirming his defense of Adam’s robust meriting, Venema defends his doctrine of the ability of Adam to merit by appealing to the meritorious work of Christ.

This [namely, the affirmation that in the covenant of works Adam could merit—DJE] becomes especially significant, when we consider the work of obedience of Christ, the covenant Mediator and second Adam. Christ, by his obedient fulfillment of all that which the law required, can legitimately be said to have *merited* [no quotation marks—DJE] or *earned* [no quotation marks—DJE] the Father’s favor toward his people.¹⁸

16. The Heidelberg Catechism, Question and Answer 63, in Schaff, *Creeeds*, 327.

17. Venema, “Recent Criticisms,” 195.

18. Venema, “Recent Criticisms,” 196.

For Venema, as surely and really as Christ merited in the covenant of grace, so also could Adam have merited in the covenant of works.

This doctrine of a covenant of works received quasi-creedal status with Reformed churches in the seventeenth century by its incorporation into the Helvetic Consensus Formula (1675), although the creed was not so incautious as to use the word “merit.”

Moreover that promise annexed to the Covenant of Works was not a continuation only of earthly life and happiness, but the possession especially of life eternal and celestial, a life, namely, of both body and soul in heaven—if indeed man ran the course of perfect obedience—with unspeakable joy in communion with God.... Wherefore we can not assent to the opinion of those who deny that a reward of *heavenly* bliss was proffered to Adam on condition of obedience to God, and do not admit that the promise of the Covenant of Works was any thing more than a promise of perpetual life abounding in every kind of good that can be suited to the body and soul of man in a state of *perfect* nature, and the enjoyment thereof in an *earthly* Paradise.¹⁹

It is doubtful whether one bound by the Westminster Standards is committed to the notion that Adam might have merited eternal life by his work of obedience. The Confession does describe the covenant with Adam as a “covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam, and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience.” But neither here nor in the Catechisms do the Westminster Standards speak of Adam’s being able to merit anything. Nor do they define the “life promised to Adam” as the higher, immortal, eternal life that Christ has now won for the new human race.²⁰

19. The Helvetic Consensus Formula (1675), canons 8, 9, in *Creeds of the Churches*, ed. John H. Leith, rev. ed. (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1973), 313.

20. The Westminster Confession of Faith, 7.2, in Schaff, *Creeds*, 616, 617; see also The Westminster Shorter Catechism, Question and Answer 12, in Schaff, *Creeds*, 678, and The Westminster Larger Cat-

“That Profane, Impious Word ‘Merit’”

The fundamental criticism of the doctrine of a covenant of works—a criticism leveled against the very foundation of the doctrine, so that the doctrine is demolished—is that a mere man—Adam—could never merit with God, not even in a state of sinless perfection. Meriting with God on the part of a mere man would be the performance of a work that deserves payment from God. Merit makes God a debtor to mere man. God now owes mere man something. God is obligated to mere man, and He is obligated by a work mere man has done. Because mere man owes God perfect obedience by virtue of his creation by God, merit implies a work on the part of mere man above and beyond the perfect obedience required of him as a creature. In the matter of meriting there ought to be a definite agreement between the worth of the meritorious work and the value of the payment that is earned by the work. One does not pay the surgeon who performed a successful heart transplant with a half bushel of home-grown tomatoes. The mere man who merits is not thankful to God for the good thing he has earned, nor should he be. He has the good thing coming. He deserves it. God owes it to him. It is payment. Indeed, he may legitimately boast of having got the good by his own (meritorious) work.

In the case of the relation between God and mere man, merit is diametrically opposed to God’s free favor and goodness. Paraphrasing the apostle in Romans 11:6, if eternal life was obtain-

echism, Question and Answer 20, in *The Subordinate Standards and Other Authoritative Documents of the Free Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood & Sons, repr. 1973), 55. The Larger Catechism leaves the impression that the covenant with Adam concerned earthly life in paradise and the perpetuation of that earthly life, not only by calling that covenant a “covenant of life,” but also by stating that God’s providence towards man consisted of “placing him in paradise,” bestowing on him various benefits that were enjoyed in paradise, and thus “entering into a covenant of life with him.” One would certainly never infer from the Larger Catechism that Adam could have earned a different, higher life than that which he enjoyed in paradise the first.

able by merit under the covenant with Adam, then it was no more of free favor.

Adam was incapable of meriting. As a mere man, he was obligated to God, obligated to love God with all his heart, mind, soul, and strength, and to love God perfectly. According to Jesus' teaching, if Adam did all that God commanded him to do, including the easy matter of abstaining from the fruit of one tree in the garden, he should have said, and would have said, "I am an unprofitable servant; I have done that which was my duty to do" (Luke 17:10).

Adam in his original righteousness was incapable of conceiving his relationship to God as one of merit. Had a proponent of the covenant of works stumbled into paradise (prior to the fall), to suggest to Adam that his service of God was meritorious, Adam would have run him out of the garden in indignation. "Shall I serve this gloriously good and wondrously beneficent Creator, my Father, with a spirit of earning, rather than a spirit of thankful love? Shall my Maker, the God of heaven and earth, in whom I live and move and have my being, from whom I have received the entire glorious earthly creation, upon whom I am dependent, not only for my next breath, but also for every good thought I think and every good desire I will, and whom it is a privilege to serve, be indebted to me?"

The seriousness of the error of attributing merit to mere man, whether unfallen Adam or the fallen children of Adam, is not only that this error ascribes too much to man, but also that it diminishes God. If mere man earns, God owes. His goodness towards man is no longer free and sovereign. God is dependent upon the deserving creature. And if that which is earned by man is nothing less than eternal life and glory—that which, in fact, it took the incarnation, atonement, and resurrection of Jesus Christ to obtain for the elect human race—merit diminishes, indeed denies, the free favor of God in the matter of the highest good. Man obtains the greatest good God can bestow upon man, not by the sheer, undeserved favor of God, but by man's own work. Eternally—such is the implication of the traditional covenant of works—God's relationship to the human race would have been that of divine debtor to human obligator.

It is to their credit that Reformed theologians sensed that merit was a foreign element in the Reformed confession of the truth, even as they were affirming merit as the foundation of the covenant with Adam. They were especially apprehensive concerning their own teaching of merit because of the great conflict with Rome over this very error. Attempting valiantly to escape the implications of their doctrine that Adam could have merited and to distance themselves from the Roman Catholic heresy of merit, they invented the distinction of “merit *ex pacto*.” That is, Adam’s meriting in the covenant of works was not the Roman Catholic meriting by the inherent worth of the work (“*ex condigno*”). But it was a distinctively Reformed meriting—a meriting by virtue of the pact, or covenant, God graciously made with Adam. By making the covenant of works, God graciously allowed Adam to merit with Him.

Bavinck was representative of the sounder Reformed theologians in his uneasiness with the notion of merit in the covenant of works and in his concern to distinguish this notion of merit from Rome’s doctrine of merit.

It is also possible, after all, to posit a connection forged by God between certain promises of reward and certain works such that the rewards are not in a strict sense merited *ex condigno* by those works. The promise of eternal life made to Adam in case of obedience was of such a nature as Reformed theologians taught in their doctrine of the covenant of works. There was a merit *ex pacto* (arising from a covenant), not *ex condigno*. The good works of man never merit the glory of heaven; they are never of the same weight and worth (*condignity*). Rome, however, by introducing the idea of the meritoriousness of good works both in the case of the believer and that of Adam, fails to do full justice to grace.²¹

This valiant effort to inject the notion of merit by mere man into Reformed theology by means of a distinction, namely, “merit *ex pacto*,” is a complete failure. First, the weakness and danger of the effort should be evident from the fact that such a distinc-

21. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 544.

tion is necessary in order to distinguish merit in the covenant of works from the Roman Catholic heresy. Rome also resorts to such distinctions to make merit palatable to the unwary. In addition to its merit *ex condigno*, Rome has invented a merit *ex congruo*, that is, the merit of a work that does not earn divine payment by inherent worth of the work, but only because the work pleases God. The Reformed merit *ex pacto* is essentially the same as the Roman Catholic merit *ex congruo*. All such distinctions are worthless and deceiving. Merit is merit is merit. All merit by mere men is earning with God so that payment is deserved.

Second, if the validity of merit *ex pacto* is granted in the covenant of works, what is to prohibit a similar merit *ex pacto* in the covenant of grace? Why cannot God who granted Adam the right to merit by virtue of the covenant of works also grant believers the right to merit with Him in the covenant of grace, of course, *ex pacto*? That this is no imaginary danger is plain from the fact that the defenders of the covenant of works are as enthusiastic about conditions in the covenant of grace as they are about a (meritorious) condition in the covenant of works.

Third, God Himself could not put the merely human creature in a position to merit with Him, whether *ex condigno*, *ex congruo*, *ex pacto*, or *ex* anything. The thing was impossible for two reasons. For one thing, it would have made man inhuman, or superhuman. To be merely human is to owe God perfect obedience, so that one is an unprofitable servant when he obeys perfectly. To be man is to be completely dependent upon God's free goodness and favor. By virtue of creation, man is always the debtor to God. For God to have enabled mere man to merit would have been for God to contradict the very humanity He Himself created.

For another thing, it was impossible for God to permit mere man to merit, be it *ex pacto*, because it is impossible for God to deny Himself (II Tim. 2:13). God cannot give up His sovereignty in His dealings with man. God cannot sacrifice His free favor in favor of man's earning in the matter of bestowing on man the highest good. God cannot put Himself in the position of being debtor to man. God cannot allow mere man to boast of his obtaining of eternal life. God cannot give away His glory to another. This would be to "un-God" Himself.

Besides all this, there are the insuperable difficulties connected with the teaching that that which Adam could have merited was the eternal life and glory that now Jesus Christ has won for the elect church. I have already pointed out that the Helvetic Consensus Formula defended this position. Bavinck agreed: “Christ not only acquired what Adam lost but also what Adam, in the way of obedience, would have gained.”²²

One objection is that there is no correspondence between the meritorious work and the payment it earns. All that a perfectly sinless Adam needed to do was refrain from eating a piece of fruit. By this deed he would have earned for himself and the entire race the far more glorious, eternal, heavenly life that Christ won for the church and the radical change of the entire universe into the new heavens and new earth.

Another more weighty objection is that the teaching that Adam might have merited eternal, heavenly life diminishes Jesus Christ and His work. The incarnate Son of God merely accomplishes what the mere man Adam could have done. All that Christ did by His incarnation, atoning death, and resurrection, Adam could have done by not eating a piece of fruit. Indeed, Adam could have done more: he could have brought the entire race into the highest, heavenly life. Christ only brings a remnant into glory. At least with regard to their powers and potential, Adam and Christ are equal.

Against this the Christian consciousness of every one who knows the unique person, position, worth, power, and work of Jesus Christ rebels. Christ has done what Adam could not do. Christ has taken us where Adam could never have brought us. Christ is as exalted above Adam regarding their powers as heaven is above earth.

This is the teaching of the apostle in I Corinthians 15:45ff. Adam was “of the earth, earthy: the second man [Christ] is the Lord from heaven” (v. 47). All that lay in Adam’s powers *in the covenant of which he was head* was to confirm himself and his posterity in the pleasant earthly life in which he was created: “As

22. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 543.

is the earthy, such are they also that are earthy” (v. 48). Only the Lord from heaven could bring the new human race into a higher, far better, spiritual, and heavenly life: “and as is the heavenly, such are they also that are heavenly” (v. 48).

We reject the traditional covenant of works theology with its fundamental notion of Adam’s meriting eternal life because we are determined to honor Jesus Christ.

With its teaching that Adam could have merited that which Christ has obtained for the church, the covenant of works posits a work of God in history that is unworthy of God. God’s work is largely a failure. Through the tremendous, costly work of incarnation, atonement, and resurrection and in the agonizing way of sin, suffering, struggle, and death, God brings a relatively few to glory, whereas He might have brought all mankind without exception to the same glory by the easy, cheap work of Adam’s obedience and without any misery whatever.

Herman Hoeksema was right in his devastating criticism of the doctrine of the covenant of works, which is no doubt the reason why defenders of the covenant of works prefer to ignore him altogether:

Nor is there anything attractive about it [the doctrine of a covenant of works]; nor does it open one’s eyes for the glorious work of God with respect to His covenant. It really always makes us stand nostalgically with our noses against the fence of Paradise, with the futile wish in our souls that Adam had not fallen! For after all, if it be true that Adam also was able to earn that which Christ now bestows on us, if only he had remained standing, then it remains eternally tragic that the first Paradise is no longer there and that we did not receive eternal life through the obedience of the first man. If only he had remained standing, then the entire present history of struggle and suffering could have been prevented, and then all men would have entered eternal life through him. But now there is not only the fearful history of struggle and sorrow and misery, with the cross of Christ at the center, but also the fact that at the end of history’s course thousands and millions sink away into an eternal night of misery and hellish suffering. Then it may be true that the Lord ultimately has the victory, but the fact remains that the devil succeeded through his temptation in striking a tremendous breach in the works of God. And thus

we arrive at the point of actually criticizing the counsel of the Lord Jehovah, who certainly conceived and willed all these things from before the foundation of the world.²³

We echo Luther: “Away with that profane, impious word ‘merit.’”

The notion of Adam’s earning eternal life, basic to the doctrine of works, is merely an assumption. There is nothing of the notion in the text in Genesis 2, whether by explicit statement or by inference. On the basis of the threat of a penalty of death in case Adam disobeyed, the theologians assumed a promise of meriting eternal life in case Adam obeyed. The only inference that can legitimately be drawn from the text is that in the way of the required obedience Adam would have continued to live the blissful earthly life into which he had been created and that, as head of the covenant, he would have confirmed himself and the race he represented in this life.

The Meritorious Work of the Last Adam

That the first Adam could not merit with God by no means implies that the last Adam, Jesus Christ, did not merit. This is the implication that the men of the Federal Vision like to draw from their denial of the covenant of works. With the offensive sarcasm characteristic of most of the men of the Federal Vision, and a levity unworthy of the gospel, Rich Lusk not only denies, but also disdains the truth that Christ by His obedience merited eternal life for His own people. Criticizing the doctrine of the meritoriousness of the work of Christ, Lusk writes:

Jesus is the successful Pelagian, the One Guy in the history of the world who succeeded in pulling off the works righteousness plan. Jesus covered our demerits by dying on the cross and provides all the merits we need by keeping the legal terms of the covenant of works perfectly. Those merits are then imputed to us by faith alone.²⁴

23. Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed*, 67.

24. Rich Lusk, “A Response to ‘The Biblical Plan of Salvation,’” in *The Auburn Avenue Theology, Pros and Cons: Debating the Federal*

The reader who is not familiar with the style of theological discourse of the men of the Federal Vision needs to be told that this is Lusk's way of flatly denying that the work of Jesus Christ was meritorious, that is, His earning eternal life for the elect church (although Lusk rejects an elect church as well). In addition, this is Lusk's way of denying also that there is a divine work of justification consisting of God's imputation of the merits of Christ to the elect sinner by faith alone. Betraying his spiritual kinship with the heretical theology of the "new perspective on Paul," Lusk criticizes the Reformers for teaching that the work of Christ was meritorious:

Unfortunately, the Reformers did not quite go the whole way in their rejection of a merit/works paradigm. Instead, they tended to relocate merit, removing it from the sinner's works and placing it in Christ's works.... A more drastic reworking of the medieval soteriological model is called for.²⁵

The rejection by this representative of the Federal Vision of the doctrine of the meritoriousness of the obedience of Jesus Christ is part of the Federal Vision's denial of the legal aspect of the Christian religion in its entirety. Lusk denies the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the elect sinner by faith alone, that is, the Reformed, creedal doctrine of justification: "God's righteousness is his own righteousness, not something imputed or infused"; "justification requires no transfer or imputation of anything. It does not force us to reify 'righteousness' into something that can be shuffled around in heavenly accounting books. Rather, because I am in the Righteous One and the Vindicated One, I am righteous and vindicated. My in-Christ-ness makes imputation redundant."²⁶

Lusk denies the imputation of Adam's disobedience to the human race, not directly but by assuring us that "Calvin did not believe in the immediate imputation of Adam's sin."²⁷

Vision, ed. E. Calvin Beisner (Fort Lauderdale, Florida: Knox Theological Seminary, 2004), 137.

25. Lusk, *Auburn Avenue Theology*, 144.

26. Lusk, *Auburn Avenue Theology*, 141, 142.

27. Lusk, *Auburn Avenue Theology*, 143.

It is significant that, in the context of the subject of imputation, Lusk can describe the work of Christ without stating that He satisfied the justice of God in the stead of guilty sinners whose sins were imputed to Him. No doubt, the imputation to Christ of the sins of others would also have been a senseless “shuffling around in heavenly accounting books.”

Denying that the obedience of Christ was meritorious, Lusk and the rest of the men of the Federal Vision contradict the Reformed confessions, to which all of them profess to adhere and many of them have solemnly subscribed. As though it had all Lusk’s and the Federal Vision’s grievous errors in view, including their denial that the work of Christ was meritorious, their denial that justification is the imputation of Christ’s merits, and their denial that Christ’s good works throughout His life are imputed to us, the Belgic Confession declares the following concerning justification in Article 22:

We do not mean that faith itself justifies us, for it is only an instrument with which we embrace Christ our Righteousness. But Jesus Christ, imputing to us all his merits, and so many holy works, which he hath done for us and in our stead, is our Righteousness.²⁸

The Canons of Dordt confess that the death of Christ “merited redemption”; that it is heresy to teach that “Christ, by His satisfaction, merited neither salvation itself for anyone, nor faith, whereby this satisfaction of Christ unto salvation is effectually appropriated”; and that in the new covenant “faith ... accepts the merits of Christ” for justification.²⁹

By denying the meritorious nature of the obedience of Christ, and with this the entire legal aspect of the gospel, the men of the Federal Vision clearly show themselves to be enemies of the Ref-

28. Belgic Confession, Art. 22, in Schaff, *Creeds*, 408.

29. Canons of Dordt, II, Rejection of Errors/1, 3, 4, in “The Three Forms of Unity” (n.p: Mission Committee of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America, repr. 1999), 57, 58. Schaff does not have an English translation of the Rejection of Errors section of the Canons.

ormation creeds, which many of them have sworn to uphold, and purveyors of another gospel.

Against them there need be, and may be, no argument concerning the meritorious nature of the obedience of Christ. They stand refuted and condemned by the Reformed confessions. If they had grave objection to the confessions (and denial of the meritorious nature of the obedience of Christ is a grave objection), it was their duty to bring their objection to the assemblies of the church for judgment. For those who have subscribed to the creeds, as Reformed and Presbyterian officebearers, public contradiction of the teaching of the creeds is the breaking of a solemn promise, if not an oath. For those who loudly profess adherence to the Reformed confessions, public contradiction of the confessions, and then regarding the confessions' teaching of the merits of Christ, imputation, and justification, is sheer duplicity.

Although it would be wrong to attempt to prove to the men of the Federal Vision that Christ's work was meritorious—a kind of complicity in their treacherous attack on the confessions—it is in order to demonstrate to defenders of the covenant of works that the denial that Adam could have merited by no means implies a denial of the meritorious nature of the work of Christ.

Jesus Christ merited with God, whereas Adam could not merit. Jesus Christ earned eternal life for Himself as a man and for His people as the just recompense of the work He performed. God owed Jesus Christ the eternal life and glory He gave Him for Himself and His people in the resurrection. Jesus Christ had a right to eternal life for Himself and His people on the basis of the perfect work He had accomplished. To deny that Christ merited is to deny that eternal life is a matter of right. This would be to remove the foundation from salvation, as well as to remove the foundation from the believer's assurance of salvation.

Jesus Christ merited with God, and could merit with God, because He is personally the eternal Son of God. He is no *mere* man. *Mere* man can never merit. God in the flesh can, and did, merit.

As God in the flesh, Jesus Christ merited in that He did something that was not required of Him. Freely, He, who is in the form of God, took upon Himself the form of a servant and was made in

the likeness of men (Phil. 2:5ff.). Freely, He, who is the lawgiver, subjected Himself to the law, to obey it perfectly (Gal. 4:4, 5). Freely, He, who is the one sinned against and the avenger of sin, took upon Himself the punishment due to sin.

Because the one who merited is God Himself in human flesh, it is no offense to the divine majesty or robbery of the divine honor that Jesus Christ earned with God. In Jesus Christ, God merited with God! Nor is this at odds with Jesus' being the beloved Son of God. According to the decree of the triune God appointing the eternal Son in human flesh as the Christ of the covenant and kingdom, the Son became the servant of Jehovah, who must establish the covenant with the elect church and renew the entire creation as the everlasting kingdom of God. A servant must work. He must work with a son's love and devotion, but He must work. And the servant-work of Jesus Christ, unlike that required of Adam, was not merely to maintain that which He had, but to restore that which He took not away (Ps. 69:4).

It belongs to the meritorious nature of the work of Jesus Christ, in contrast to the work required of Adam, that there was correspondence between the work and the recompense. That which Christ earned was not only the deliverance of the elect church out of all nations and of the creation from sin and the curse, but also the exaltation of the church and the creation into a new, eternal, heavenly life—life for the creature, especially man, in its highest, most glorious form, life that transcends the life of the first paradise as heaven transcends the earth.

Of this deliverance from the deepest misery into the highest bliss, the work of Christ was worthy. It deserved this deliverance. The worthy work of Christ was His lifelong, perfect obedience to the will of God, including His sustaining the wrath of God in body and soul against the sins of the elect human race, culminating in His willing satisfaction of the justice of God with regard to the sins of His people on the cross, as an act of perfect love toward God. Giving infinite worth and value to this obedience, as the Canons of Dordt point out, was the person of the one who obeyed: the person of God the Son.

The death of the Son of God is the only and most perfect sacrifice

and satisfaction for sin; is of infinite worth and value, abundantly sufficient to expiate the sins of the whole world. This death derives its infinite value and dignity from these considerations; because the person who submitted to it was not only really man and perfectly holy, but also the only-begotten Son of God, of the same eternal and infinite essence with the Father and Holy Spirit, which qualifications were necessary to constitute him a Saviour for us; and because it was attended with a sense of the wrath and curse of God due to us for sin.³⁰

Christ merited eternal life, as Adam never could have merited, according to the counsel of God. God never intended that Adam bring the human race and the earthly creation into a higher, heavenly, eternal life. It was indeed the “destiny” of man at his creation, as Bavinck put it, that he arrive at a higher, heavenly, eternal life. But God had decreed that man arrive at this goal, not in Adam, but in Christ. The way by which man must, and alone could, arrive at this goal was not the obedience of the first Adam but the obedience of the last Adam.

Those who teach that Adam could have merited what Christ has now won for His people, as also those who teach that Adam could have taken the race and the creation into eternal life by the faithful activity of “maturing,” tend to slight, or even ignore, God’s decree that Christ would bring the race and the creation into eternal, heavenly life, not Adam. The impression is left that God had originally in mind that Adam take the race into eternal life. When Adam failed, God fell back on Christ.

In Colossians 1:13-20, the Holy Spirit honors Christ by teaching that the triune God eternally purposed to “reconcile all things unto himself” by Jesus Christ, for whom He created all things in the beginning, so that Christ “might have the preeminence” in all things. In accordance with this decree, God made the first man “of the earth, earthy,” as the apostle expresses it in I Corinthians 15:47, capable only of maintaining himself and his posterity in earthly life. It is the exclusive prerogative and power of the second man, as the Lord from heaven, that, in the way of the redemp-

30. The Canons of Dordt, II/3, 4, in Schaff, *Creeds*, 586.

tion of the cross, He raise Himself, His church, and finally the whole creation into heavenly life (I Cor. 15:42-58).

If it were not that the men of the Federal Vision deliberately misrepresent the confessionally Reformed doctrine of the meritoriousness of the work of Christ, it would not be necessary to add that Christ did not merit the grace or love of God for God's people. Exerting himself to reduce the Reformed doctrine of the meritoriousness of the work of Christ to absurdity, Rich Lusk assures us that "Jesus *never* had to earn the favor of God." Lusk twists the words of Calvin concerning Christ's merit, which Calvin taught in so many words, in order to support Lusk's thesis:

If everything Jesus received from the Father was of grace, how much more is this is (*sic*) the case for sinners? But if that's so, then speaking of sinners—or even sinless creatures—meriting something from God is absurd. Later on Calvin makes it clear that Christ merited nothing for himself (2.17.6)... Calvin also makes it clear he did not believe the Son had to somehow condition the Father into being gracious towards us: The Father's grace sent the Son in the first place.³¹

Reformed theology does not need the Federal Vision to teach it that Christ's merit, indeed Christ Himself in His person and work, does not make God gracious to His chosen people. God is not gracious to us, because of Christ. But Christ came to us out of the eternal grace of God towards us. Christ did not cause God to love us, but Christ is the revelation of the eternal love of God for us. "God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8).

Nor does the Federal Vision suppose for a moment that creedal Reformed Christianity is so stupid as to hold that God loves us and is gracious to us because Christ redeemed us. Attacking the Reformed doctrine of the merit of Christ in this guise enables the Federal Vision more effectively, because less openly and honestly, to undermine the truth that is its real object. This is the truth that the eternal grace of God toward His people can accomplish its

31. Lusk, *Auburn Avenue Theology*, 137, 145.

purpose of their salvation only by the perfect, lifelong obedience of the legal head of the covenant in the stead of the covenant people and by His accursed death as their substitute in order to satisfy the justice of God against their sins. Inseparably related, as the object of the attack of the Federal Vision, is the truth that God's grace could save His people only in the way of reckoning Christ's obedience in life and death to the account of God's people by means of faith alone. And the reason is that this gracious God is also just.

Because Christ, according to the will of the Father, willingly made Himself responsible for the guilt of His covenant people, Christ had to merit eternal life for Himself, as well as for the people. "Suffer it to be so now; for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness," Christ said in response to John the Baptist's objection against baptizing Christ with Christ's own blood (Matt. 3:15). Christ had to justify Himself (I Tim. 3:16). This is our Christ. So deeply did He humble Himself. For this, we will love Him, now and while the endless ages roll. This was His work on our behalf and in our stead. Therefore, we are determined to know nothing else except the obedient Christ, particularly, Christ crucified.

Ignorant of the meritorious Christ, the men of the Federal Vision do not know Christ.

Grace does not rule out justice, as the old liberalism contended, and as the Federal Vision now proposes as the Christian gospel. The grace of God harmonizes with the justice of God. Grace honors the claims of justice. Grace demands justice. Grace provides the justice it demands. Thus, the justice of God in Christ, that is, the meritorious nature of the work of Christ, extols the grace of God.

No Conditional Agreement

Our main objection to the covenant of works concerns its doctrine that Adam could have merited with God, could have merited nothing less than the eternal life that Christ has now merited for His covenant people.

We object also to the closely related teaching that the covenant with Adam was an agreement between God and Adam, a

mutual pact struck by the Creator and the creature, which was dependent upon the fulfillment of conditions. This has been the prevailing view of the covenant with Adam in the Reformed tradition. Proponents of the covenant of works have always identified the covenant with Adam in paradise with the command God gave to Adam in Genesis 2:17: “But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.” God established the covenant with Adam when He spoke these words. He established the covenant, therefore, sometime after He had created Adam. These words are supposed to express the nature of the covenant. The covenant was a conditional agreement. It was the means by which Adam could have merited eternal life.

There is absolutely nothing of all of this in the word of God in Genesis 2:17. Finding the essence of the covenant of God with Adam in the command of Genesis 2:17 and then defining that covenant as an agreement between the commanding God and the listening Adam have to be among the most egregious instances of what the Dutch call *inlegkunde* (reading something into a passage of Scripture, rather than drawing the truth out of the text; Greek: *eisegesis*, rather than *exegesis*) in all the proud history of the development of Reformed dogma.

In Genesis 2:17, the Creator sovereignly instructed the creature, man, as to his duty by virtue of his creation in God’s image and within the covenant God had established with him from the moment of his creation. That duty was specifically to abstain from eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, simply because the sovereign God commanded it. God warned man of the punishment for disobedience.

Adam never bargained with God. He did not hammer out a pact dependent upon mutual conditions. He did not even give assent with his will as the condition upon which the establishment of a covenant depended. Adam was willing, at least at the moment, but this willing was the fruit and effect of a covenant already existing, not the cooperation of a bargaining partner in the forming of a business-like compact. Adam simply received the prohibition of his sovereign Friend, as was the reasonable duty of a servant and son in his relationship with that sovereign Friend.

In the covenant of works lurks an incipient Pelagianism. God and man cooperate in the covenant. God and man work together to accomplish eternal life. God is ready to give eternal life, but His giving is conditional. Obtaining eternal life depends on man's will. It is not surprising that James Arminius taught a covenant of works.

That he might elicit from man [Adam] voluntary and free obedience, which, alone, is grateful to him, it was his will to enter into a contract and covenant with him, by which God required obedience, and, on the other hand, promised a reward, to which he added the denunciation of a punishment, that the transaction might not seem to be entirely one between equals.... If they [Adam and Eve] had persisted in their obedience ... we think it very probable that, at certain periods, men would have been translated from this [*animali*] natural life, by the intermediate change of the natural, mortal and corruptible body, into a body spiritual, immortal, and incorruptible, to pass a life of immortality and bliss in heaven.³²

One very real danger of conceiving the covenant with Adam as a conditional agreement by which Adam could have merited, or obtained, eternal life is that this conception leads to a doctrine of the covenant of grace as a conditional contract by which the sinner may likewise obtain, if not earn, eternal life by performing the condition. The seventeenth century Anglican bishop and English delegate to the Synod of Dordt John Davenant grounded his universalistic, conditional "evangelical covenant" on the prelapsarian covenant, which he conceived as a conditional contract between God and Adam.

Salvation was procurable by Adam and all his posterity under the condition of obedience to be paid to the law of nature, and to the express commandment of God; so in the covenant of grace ... salvation is also understood to be procurable for all men under the condition published in the Gospel, that is, of faith.³³

32. *The Writings of James Arminius*, tr. James Nichols, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1956), 71, 73.

33. John Davenant, cited in Jonathan David Moore, "*Christ is Dead*

In accordance with his doctrine of the covenant of works, also the Reformed theologian Louis Berkhof described the covenant of grace as a conditional agreement between God and man. The “points of similarity” between the two covenants, according to Berkhof, include “b. the contracting parties, which are in both cases God and man; c. the external form, namely, condition and promise; d. the contents of the promise which is in both cases eternal life.”³⁴

This is to transform the covenant of grace into a new covenant of works. In view of the notion of merit that is inherent in the covenant of works, it is to suggest that, in the covenant of grace, the sinner can merit eternal life, just as Adam could have merited eternal life in the covenant of works. It suspends the covenant of grace upon the work of the sinner fulfilling the condition, at least with regard to the continuance of the covenant and its salvation with the individual sinner. It is this element of the popular doctrine of the covenant of grace—a conditional promise and a conditional covenant—that Norman Shepherd and the other men of the Federal Vision are busily developing into a doctrine of justification by faith and works, with the accompanying denial of all the doctrines of grace.

Fellowship in Love

The covenant with Adam in paradise was intimate fellowship in love between God and Adam. It was the fellowship between the divine Father and the son whom God made in His own image. Made in God’s image, Adam was God’s son. Image was the resemblance of child to Father. That Adam’s being God’s image meant that he was God’s son is indicated in Genesis 5:3, where Adam’s son is described as Adam’s image and likeness. Luke 3:38 calls Adam God’s son.

By virtue of his creation in God’s image as a son of God, Adam knew God with the knowledge of love. He consecrated himself to

for Him”: John Preston (1587-1628) and English Hypothetical Universalism (Ph. D. diss., University of Cambridge, 2000), 175.

34. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 272.

God in holiness. He obeyed God in righteousness. He lived with God in the garden, where God was accustomed to walk with him and talk with him as his friend—his Father-friend (Gen. 3:8). God's covenant with Adam was the fellowship of family.

In this covenant of family-fellowship, God revealed His own triune life. The life of the triune God, from eternity to eternity, is the intimate communion of Father and Son in the Holy Ghost. It is significant that immediately preceding the account of His creation of man in His image, thus establishing the relationship between Himself and man that was the covenant in paradise, God reveals that He Himself is plural (in persons) and that this plurality involves the communion of communication and cooperation in the great work of creation. "And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness" (Gen. 1:26).³⁵

Of this covenant of fellowship with God, God instituted marriage and the family as the outstanding earthly symbol (Gen. 1:27, 28; 2:18-25). After the fall, marriage becomes the outstanding earthly symbol of the covenant between Jehovah and Israel in the Old Testament and between Christ and the church in the New Testament (Ezek. 16; Eph. 5:22-33).³⁶

It was not good for Adam to be solitary, because it is not good for man to live apart from God. Ultimately, it was not good for Adam to be solitary, because God is not solitary.

This close, warm relationship between Himself and man, God established unilaterally. He established it in and with His creation of Adam, as parents establish communion with their children at birth and as God in Christ establishes the covenant of grace with elect sinner at the moment of his re-creation in the image of Christ.

35. This is not the place to develop the relation of Trinity and covenant. I have done this in the book, *Trinity and Covenant: God as Holy Family* (Jenison, Michigan: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2006). See also Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 318-330.

36. On earthly marriage as the symbol of the covenant of grace, see my *Marriage, the Mystery of Christ & the Church: The Covenant-Bond in Scripture and History*, rev. ed. (Grandville, Michigan: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1998).

Adam's Part in the Covenant

God's words to Adam in Genesis 2:16, 17, concerning the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, were neither the establishment of the covenant with Adam nor expressive of the nature of the covenant. Rather, they were additional revelation to Adam concerning his part in the covenant, and the command that he faithfully carry out his part in the covenant. Adam had a part in the covenant. His part was to serve God, by obeying His word. The covenant was fellowship, but it was structured fellowship. In the covenant God was Adam's friend-sovereign—his Father; Adam was God's friend-servant—His son.

Similarly, in the covenant of grace the covenant people have a part—an important, necessary part. Their part, according to the Reformed "Form for the Administration of Baptism, is "that we cleave to this one God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost; that we trust in him, and love him with all our hearts, with all our souls, with all our mind, and with all our strength; that we forsake the world, crucify our old nature, and walk in a new and holy life." To this work in and on behalf of the covenant, we are "admonished and obliged."³⁷ The obedient work of the member of the covenant has a prominent place in the covenant of grace. From this viewpoint also, the name "covenant of works" for the covenant with Adam is unsatisfactory. The impression is left that, whereas works had a place in the covenant with Adam, they have no place, at least no important place, in the covenant of grace.

With regard to the prohibition against eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Adam's duty was sheer obedience to the positive command. He must obey, simply because God has commanded, thus proving his filial love and his reverence of the divine sovereignty.

In addition, the prohibition summoned him to serve God by rejecting what God had forbidden. Always, man's service of God is antithetical: he devotes himself to God in the way of opposing that which is opposed to God and is contrary to God's will. This

37. "Form for the Administration of Baptism," in *The Psalter* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1977), 55.

was twofold in paradise, according to Genesis 2:15-17. Adam must refrain from eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. It was the purpose of this tree that it be the occasion of antithetical obedience to an antithetical word of God.

Also, Adam must “keep” the garden. “Keep” in the original Hebrew refers to guarding the garden. Adam must keep the garden secure as the center of the kingdom of God, where man could live in peace with God and God could be glorified. This was both mandate and warning to protect the garden against the enemy, Satan, who would assail the garden, according to God’s purpose.

Naming That Covenant

To call that covenant a “covenant of works,” as many Reformed and Presbyterian theologians have done, is unsatisfactory at best. It may be that some, for example the Westminster divines, named it “covenant of works” without intending to affirm that Adam could have merited eternal life by his obedience. But, as Bavinck points out, this has come to be the understanding of the name: “[Covenant of nature] was preferentially replaced by that of ‘covenant of works’; and it bore this name inasmuch as in this covenant eternal life could only be obtained in the way of works.”³⁸

The Dutch Reformed theologian S. G. De Graaf, opposing the name “covenant of works,” with good reason, proposed instead the name, “*verbond van Gods gunst*” (covenant of God’s favor): “*In plaats van over ‘werkverbond’ ware dan ook beter te spreken over ‘verbond van Gods gunst’*” (“Instead of speaking of a ‘covenant of works,’ we should speak of a ‘covenant of God’s favor’”).³⁹ With all due allowance for the difference between the

38. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 567.

39. S. G. De Graaf, *Het Ware Geloof* (Kampen: Kok, 1954), 31, 32. The reason for rejecting the name, “covenant of works,” is that “*er is in het verbond Gods, ook in het zogenaamde werkverbond, nooit van verdienen en loon sprake. God is in Zijn verbond altijd de eerste, die liefde geeft. Door Zijn liefde moet Hij ons liefde leren; en onze liefde kan dan nooit anders zijn dan een antwoord op Zijn liefde. Door de wet heeft Hij ons liefdesverkeer met Him geregeld, het heeft niet een norm in zichzelf, maar God Zelf heeft daaraan een norm gesteld. Wel is het*

two Dutch words for grace, “*gunst*” (favor) and “*genade* (grace),” the name “covenant of God’s favor” does not distinguish the covenant with Adam sharply enough from the covenant of grace in Christ Jesus.

The best name for the covenant with Adam is “covenant of creation.” This name allows for recognition of the free favor and liberal goodness of God toward man in the first covenant, as well as for the important place of works, without blurring the boundary of the sharp difference between the covenant with Adam and the covenant with Christ, on the one hand, and without suggesting that Adam’s work would have been meritorious, on the other hand. It also protects Reformed theology from conceiving the covenant with Adam as a cold, business-like and workman-like contract, rather than the warm, living fellowship that it was. The name rests on the obvious fact that that covenant obtained in the humanity and world of the unfallen creation and on the equally obvious fact that Adam was head of the covenant by virtue of his creation.

The Full Reality of the Covenant of Creation

There was far more to the covenant of creation than only the fellowship between God and Adam. The covenant determined everything about man’s life in paradise and radically affected the life and history of the human race thereafter.

For one thing, man, male and female, had dominion over all the earthly creation as king and queen (Gen. 1:26, 28). Dominion was not the essence of the covenant, but it was an important aspect of the covenant. In the covenant, man was not only God’s friend. He was also God’s servant. He was to serve God by ruling the world as a kingdom of God. One purpose of the positive covenant command in Genesis 2:17 was to impress on Adam that his dominion was not absolute, but strictly subservient to the absolute kingship of God his Maker.

zo, dat we bij gehoorzaamheid aan die norm groeien in de gemeenschap der liefde Gods.”

Man was called to his service of God in the covenant by commands: “Be fruitful”; “subdue (the earth)”; “have dominion”; “dress and keep (the garden)”; “of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it” (Gen. 1:28; 2:17). There were demands of the covenant. Not eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was by no means the only law of God for His son and servant, Adam. Adam was also commanded to love God and his neighbor—Eve—with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength. This fundamental law for man was not written, but was revealed in Adam’s very nature, which was the image of God consisting of knowledge, righteousness, and holiness.

Such was the kingship of man over the earthly creation that if he fell, the entire kingdom would fall. The treacherous disobedience of the king would plunge all creation under the curse and turn the kingdom over to God’s great enemy (Rom. 8:19-22; II Cor. 4:4). Depraved, rebellious man would then head up the kingdom under Satan in order to fight against God.

Another essential aspect of the covenant of creation was Adam’s headship of the human race. The fellowship that was the essence of that covenant had a prominent legal component. Reformed theology has referred to this legal component as the “federal headship” of Adam, that is, his ‘covenant headship,’ from the Latin word “*foedus*.” As head of the race, Adam was not only the source of the race, so that he would transmit his own spiritual condition to all his posterity by physical generation (Ps. 51:5). But he was also the legal representative of the race, so that his act of disobedience would be reckoned, or imputed, to all his posterity, Jesus Christ only excepted. His obedience could not merit, but his disobedience would incur punishment, not only for himself, but also for all his children. This is the teaching of the apostle in Romans 5:12ff. “By one man’s disobedience many were constituted sinners” (Rom. 5:19; the literal translation of the Greek original).

The Canons of Dordt make the legal headship of Adam and the imputation of Adam’s disobedience a confessional matter for Reformed Christians. Accounting for the derivation of the corruption of the human race “from their original parent ... by the propagation of a vicious nature,” the Canons give as the ground,

“in consequence of a just judgment of God.”⁴⁰ The corruption of nature with which every human from Cain on has been conceived and born is God’s execution of the punishment of (spiritual) death upon him or her for his or her guilt in Adam’s act of eating the forbidden fruit.

The Breaking of the Covenant of Creation

The truth of Adam’s headship in the covenant of creation and the related truth of the imputation of Adam’s transgression of that covenant make plain that the covenant of creation is still in force in the following respects: All humans are guilty of transgressing that covenant in Adam; all humans suffer the misery of total depravity and of physical death in all its forms because of their transgression of that covenant in Adam; and all humans will suffer the misery of eternal death in hell on account of the imputation to them of the guilt of Adam’s disobedience, unless they are constituted righteous by the obedience of Christ in their stead (Rom. 5:19). The curse of the violated covenant of creation, which God threatened in the prohibition in Genesis 2:17, “in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die,” came upon all those whom Adam represented, as indeed upon the entire earthly creation.

The covenant of creation is also in force today in this respect, that in Adam all humans are still required to love God perfectly, worship Him alone, and serve Him, regardless that they are unable to do so. Through the creation, God reveals Himself and this demand to every human also, so that all are without excuse (Rom. 1:18-32; 2:14-16).

It is erroneous, however, to teach that the covenant with Adam was renewed and re-enacted in the covenant with Israel at Sinai.

40. The Canons of Dordt, III, IV/2, in Schaff, *Creeds*, 588. The original Latin phrase is “*justo Dei judicio*.” It is a serious flaw in the English translation of the Canons used by the Protestant Reformed Churches, as well as by other Reformed churches, that this phrase is omitted. The reason for the omission is undoubtedly that the translator, or the denomination that authorized the translation, opposed the doctrine of the legal headship of Adam and the immediate imputation of Adam’s transgression.

This notion has surfaced in the Reformed tradition. Mastricht held that in Galatians 4:24 (“these are the two covenants”) “the Apostle is speaking of the covenant in Paradise so far as it is re-enacted and renewed with Israel at Sinai in the Decalogue, which contained the proof of the covenant of works.”⁴¹

The covenant at Sinai was not a renewal or re-enactment of the covenant with Adam. Rather, the covenant at Sinai was an administration of the covenant of grace, which was first established by the promise of the seed of the woman in Genesis 3:15 and then with Abraham in Genesis 15 and 17. This is the apostle’s description of the Sinaitic covenant in Galatians 3:15ff. The law (the Sinaitic covenant) was added to the promise (the covenant of grace) as a “schoolmaster” in order to bring Israel to Christ, to be justified by faith (v. 24).

The covenant with Adam cannot be renewed or re-enacted. With regard to any renewal or re-enactment of it, it was broken, irreparably. As a manifestation, or form, of the covenant of God with man, it can be fulfilled, even as typical Adam can be fulfilled in Christ and as the earthly tree of life in the garden of Eden can be fulfilled in a heavenly, spiritual tree of life (Rom. 5:14; Rev. 2:7). But that specific covenant cannot be renewed, any more than the first Adam can be renewed in his state before the fall, or that the condition of the creation as it appeared at the end of the sixth day of creation week can be restored.

The covenant of grace in the last Adam, in all its administrations and forms, from its revelation in the promise of Genesis 3:15 to the perfection of it in the new heavens and new earth, does not renew the covenant with Adam. Rather, it delivers elect humanity and finally the creation itself from the misery of the broken covenant of creation, and brings them to a life and glory far above that of the covenant of creation.

God never purposed any renewal of the covenant of creation. In the way of the transgression of that covenant by the first Adam, God decreed the covenant of grace in the last Adam.

41. Petrus van Mastricht, in Hepppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 290.

But it pleased God, according to the riches of his unsearchable wisdom, to lay this breach of the legal covenant as a foundation for his stupendous works; for he took occasion to set up a new *covenant of grace*; in which he might much more clearly display the inestimable treasures of his all-sufficiency, than if every thing had gone well with man according to the first covenant.... For so illustrious an exercise of these perfections, there could have been no place under the covenant of works.⁴²

There is something dangerous about the teaching that the covenant of creation is renewed, especially when the theologian regards that covenant as a conditional covenant of works by which Adam could merit. The danger is the introduction into Reformed theology of the doctrine of salvation by works.⁴³

The gate to the lovely garden, to the pristine creation, and to the delights of life in the original paradise is forever closed to man. To the unbeliever, it is shut by the flaming sword of God's justice, wielded by the awesome cherubim. To the believer, it is closed by the promise of a garden, a renewed creation, and the delights of human life in communion with God that so excel the originals as the heavenly excels the earthly and as Christ excels Adam.

In this light must the question be answered, whether and in what respect the covenant of creation was abrogated by the disobedience of Adam and whether and in what respect it was maintained by the covenanting God.

As a distinct administration, or form, of God's covenant with man, the covenant of creation was broken by Adam's transgression, so as to be done away with forever, except for the effects of the violation of the covenant mentioned above and the abiding

42. Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants*, 164.

43. The Westminster Confession of Faith, 19.2 does not teach that the covenant with Adam was continued in the covenant of Sinai, only that the "law" that God gave Adam in paradise "continued to be a perfect rule of righteousness; and, as such, was delivered by God upon mount Sinai in ten commandments" (Schaff, *Creeds*, 640).

demand of that covenant upon all humans, that they be righteous and do righteousness, perfectly.

But Adam could not break that covenant ultimately, that is, regarding the essence of it, which was God's fellowship with His creature man and, through a faithful man, fellowship with the entire creation. The covenant of creation was a preliminary manifestation of the fellowship of God with the new, elect human race in Jesus Christ, as Adam was a "figure," or "type," of the coming Christ (Rom. 5:14). God unilaterally established that covenant of fellowship with man. It was an unconditional covenant. It depended upon God—upon His faithfulness and upon His grace. God will have the last word about that fellowship, not disobedient, faithless Adam.

Although Adam broke the covenant of creation, God maintained it, not as a distinct form of the covenant, but regarding His fellowship with man, which was the essence of that covenant. Indeed, God maintained His fellowship with Adam and Eve personally, and He did so at once, within minutes of their breaking the covenant of creation. He maintained His fellowship with them personally and with the human race consisting of the elect out of all nations by the promise of Genesis 3:15: "I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel." Enmity between the seed of the woman and the Serpent means the friendship of the seed of the woman with God.

But God did not only maintain fellowship between Himself and elect humanity. He raised fellowship to a higher, richer, closer, more delightful, and more glorious level. For this is fellowship in the Seed of the woman, who is Jesus Christ. This is the fellowship of the covenant of grace in Him. This is the fellowship that knows God as the God who loves us and gave His Son for us, forgiving our sins. This is the fellowship of a righteousness worked out by God in the atonement of the cross. This is the fellowship of a holiness that devotes itself to God in thankful love for the redemption of the cross. This is the fellowship of union with Him in whom the fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily.

God's faithfulness in the covenant despite Adam's unfaithful-

ness, the Reformed tradition has expressed in the confession “Adam fell into the arms of Christ.”

Thanks be to God whose counsel shall stand and who does all his good pleasure. He maintained his covenant, and he purposed to raise the blessed relation of friendship to the higher level of heavenly and eternal perfection. He did so in and through Christ Jesus our Lord, who is the friend-servant of God *par excellence*. Christ’s delight was to do his Father’s will, and he became obedient to death on the cross by his blood, thus laying the foundation of God’s eternal tabernacle, the basis of the eternal covenant with man.⁴⁴ ●

44. Herman Hoeksema, *Knowing God & Man* (Jenison, Michigan: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2006), 96.

Christ the Head of the Covenant

Herman C. Hanko

Introduction

The headship of Christ is, in the doctrine of God's everlasting covenant of grace, of crucial importance. Yet that Christ is the Head of the covenant is denied by those who hold to a conditional covenant, particularly by the followers of Dr. Klaas Schilder. It is not surprising that these churches should deny that Christ is the Head of the covenant, for their view of the covenant requires such a denial.

Dr. S. A. Strauss points out that Schilder's starting point in his development of the covenant of God is a distinction between God's works in eternity and God's works in time. While from a certain point of view God's covenant in eternity is according to the decree of election and is made in Christ with the elect alone, in time God's covenant is entirely different from God's eternal decree. Strauss writes: "We have to distinguish between the covenant of salvation (which was established with Christ and, in Him, with all the elect, from eternity) and the covenant of grace (which was established with the believers and their children in time)."¹ Because what God does in His eternal counsel belongs to the hidden things of God, and because God always deals with man historically, we have to do only with the covenant as it is realized in time.

In keeping with Schilder's emphasis on the temporal nature of the covenant, Schilder defines God's covenant in time as consisting merely of God's promise to be a God to believers and their baptized children. That promise is sealed to every baptized child without distinction. Hence, that promise is conditional and, because the idea of the covenant is limited to the promise of God

1. J. Geertsema, editor, *Always Obedient: Essays on the Teachings of Dr. Klaas Schilder* (Philipsburg, New Jersey: P & R Publishing, 1995), 30. By "believers and their children," Strauss means all the children of believers without exception.

made at baptism, the covenant itself is conditional, bilateral (two-sided), and sealed only as an agreement between God and man as a consenting party.²

In such a construction of the covenant there is no room for Christ as the Head of the covenant. Jelle Faber makes this explicit in his book *American Secession Theologians on Covenant and Baptism*.³ Faber is intent on demonstrating that American theologians who stand in the tradition of the Secession of 1834 all hold to a conditional and bilateral covenant – and that Schilder’s views are within that tradition.

After insisting that Secession theologians never identified covenant and election⁴ and admitting that Gerhardus Vos “does not want to speak of an eternal covenant of grace but he maintains the expression ‘Christ as Head of the covenant,’ and thus teaches that ‘the covenant of grace is established with the elect sinner in Christ as the Covenant Head,’”⁵ Faber goes on to say that “Hulst, Beuker, Ten Hoor, and Heyns on the other hand make a clear distinction between the expression ‘Christ as Head *of* the covenant’ and ‘Christ as Mediator *in* the covenant.”⁶ Faber goes on to say,

As Gerhardus Vos they emphasize Christ’s Mediatorship but they do not want to speak of Christ as “Head of the covenant.”

Let us first listen to Ten Hoor in his *Compendium of Reformed Dogmatics*. Nowhere in Holy Scripture – says Ten Hoor – is it taught that the covenant of grace is established with Christ as second party. Nowhere in Holy Scripture is Christ called Head of the covenant of grace. Since Christ is Surety and Mediator of the covenant, He cannot be the second party of it. Both concepts of Surety and Mediator presuppose the two parties of the covenant of grace. And these two parties are God and the sinner.⁶

2. Geertsma, *Always Obedient*, 28-31.

3. Jelle Faber, *American Secession Theologians on Covenant and Baptism* & Klaas Schilder, *Extra-Scriptural Binding – a New Danger* (Neerlandia: Inheritance Publications, 1996).

4. Faber, *Secession Theologians*, 35.

5. Faber, *Secession Theologians*, 35.

6. Faber, *Secession Theologians*, 35.

Faber then goes on to say,

[Heyns] maintained that the covenant of grace does not have a representative Covenant-head.

Rightly so, for it is certainly good to abandon the concept of Christ as Head of the covenant of grace, as the six American Secession theologians did. It excludes any identification of covenant and eternal election or any confusion of God's covenant and His eternal counsel of peace.

Christ is not Head *of* the covenant but He is Head *in* the covenant. We profess in Canons of Dort I, 7 that God not only has chosen in Christ a definite number of persons but that He also from eternity appointed Christ to be the Mediator and Head of the elect and the foundation of salvation.

Let me summarize the insights of the six American Secession theologians on covenant and Christ as follows: The triune God established the covenant of grace with the believers and their children in Christ as Mediator of the covenant and Head of the elect. Although Christ is Mediator *in* the covenant, he is not the Head *of* the covenant.⁷

Before I proceed with the discussion of the Headship of Christ in the covenant, a few remarks concerning the above quotes ought to be made.

While it is true that the expression "Christ, the Head of the covenant" is not found in Scripture, nevertheless, the idea is found there, as we shall see presently.

7. Faber, *Secession Theologians*, 37. There is some confusion here. Faber seems not only to be making a distinction between Christ the *Head* of the covenant and Christ the *Mediator* of the covenant, but he also makes a distinction between Christ as Head and Mediator *of* the covenant and Christ as Head and Mediator *in* the covenant. While his distinction between Head and Mediator is not clear to me, Faber is clear on his distinction between Christ as Head and Mediator *of* the covenant and *in* the covenant. The former Faber denies because the view that Christ is Head and Mediator of the covenant connects the covenant with election, a view which Faber denies. The latter he affirms because in his judgment such a conception allows room for a conditional covenant.

The distinction between Christ, the Head of the covenant, and Christ, the Mediator and Surety of the covenant, is in my judgment a false distinction. As Head of the covenant, Christ is the Mediator and Surety of the covenant.

Dr. Faber implies a wrong conception of Mediator when he speaks of Christ as the Mediator of the covenant. He implies that Christ as Mediator comes between two warring parties, namely God and man, and brings about reconciliation. This is not Scripture's idea of Christ as Mediator, although such a conception of mediator is true of human relationships. God is His own Mediator in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ.⁸

It is this erroneous conception of Christ as Mediator that enables Faber to make the distinction between Christ as Head and Mediator *of* the covenant and Christ as Head and Mediator *in* the covenant. Faber, of course, denies the latter and believes the former. The point is that the doctrine of Christ as Head and Mediator of the covenant necessarily refers to the eternal counsel and will of God in election⁹; while the idea of Christ as Head and Mediator in the covenant allows room (especially with a wrong view of mediator) for all baptized children to be a part of the covenant and for faith to be a condition to the realization of the covenant in its inward reality.

Finally, the reference to Canons I, 7 surely is to the point. But let it be noticed that Canons I, 7 gives no justification whatsoever for making the distinction between Christ as Head of the covenant (affirmed by Faber) and Christ as Head in the covenant (denied by Faber). The Canons are explicit. This article reads,

Election is the unchangeable purpose of God whereby, before the foundation of the world, He hath out of mere grace, according to the sovereign good pleasure of His own will, chosen, from the whole human race, which had fallen through their own fault from their primitive state of rectitude into sin and destruction, a certain number of

8. I shall have more to say about this further in the discussion.

9. This would limit the covenant to believers and their *elect* seed and would make the covenant unconditional, a truth that the followers of Schilder abhor.

persons to redemption in Christ, whom He from eternity appointed the Mediator and Head of the elect, and the foundation of salvation.

The same article proceeds to connect the actual salvation of the elect with the decree of election.

This elect number, though by nature neither better nor more deserving than others, but with them involved in one common misery, God hath decreed to give to Christ, *to be saved by Him, and effectually to call and draw them to His communion by His Word and Spirit, to bestow upon them true faith, justification, and sanctification; and having powerfully preserved them in the fellowship of His Son, finally to glorify them for the demonstration of His mercy and for the praise of His glorious grace* (emphasis mine, HH).

This one article rings the death knell to Faber's denial of Christ's Headship in the covenant. Even from Faber's point of view, salvation in Christ is identical with the covenant. If what the article says about salvation is applicable to the covenant of grace, then there is absolutely no room for excluding Christ as Head of the covenant, for making the covenant a work of God for the elect alone, for insisting that the covenant is unilateral (one-sided – both in its establishment and in its preservation and maintenance), and for holding firmly to an unconditional covenant of grace.

The Biblical Teaching

While it is true, as Faber contends, that nowhere does Scripture call Christ "the Head of the covenant," we must not conclude from this that we do wrong when we insist that Christ is indeed our covenant head. Christ is called "Head" in relation to the church and, indeed, in His position in relation to all things.

In Ephesians 1, where Paul is extolling the riches of God's grace in Christ, he says, "And what is the exceeding greatness of his power to usward who believe, according to the working of his mighty power, Which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality, and power, and might, and do-

minion, and every name that is named, not only in this world, but also in that which is to come: And hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be *the head* over all things to the church, Which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all” (1:19-23).

In what is one of the most beautiful and at the same time most profound descriptions of the glory of Christ in all Scripture, we read concerning the one “in whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins,” that he “is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature: For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him: And he is before all things, and by him all things consist. And he is *the head* of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence” (Col. 1:14-18).

It is undoubtedly true that Faber would object to our use of these passages as proof for the Headship of Christ in the covenant. He would answer my argument by pointing to the fact that both passages speak of Christ as the Head of the church, and he would even admit, I think, that Colossians teaches that Christ is the Head over all. But that, in his judgment, would be insufficient to prove that Christ is the Head of the covenant.

There is good reason, in Faber’s theology, for his objection. Faber makes a distinction between the covenant and salvation. He defines the covenant strictly in terms of the promise; and, while he would admit that salvation is the content of the promise, his argument is that the covenant is not the content of the promise, but the promise itself—a promise that is given to all who are baptized and that is conditioned on faith and obedience. And so the debate comes down once again to the biblical idea of the covenant. I am sure that other writers in this issue of the *Journal* will prove from Scripture that the biblical concept of God’s everlasting covenant of grace is to be identified with salvation. That is, while the covenant is indeed the content of the promise, it is not the promise itself. That promise from a formal point of view is

defined in Hebrews 6: “For when God made promise to Abraham, because he could swear by no greater, he swore by himself, Saying, Surely blessing I will bless thee, and multiplying I will multiply thee...” (Heb. 6:13, 14; see also the following verses). From a formal point of view, the promise of God is an oath that He swears by Himself. From a material point of view, that is, as far as the contents of the promise are concerned, the promise is “Surely blessing I will bless thee....” That blessing is God’s covenant promise.

If, therefore, salvation is in Christ alone, then Christ, through whom the church receives God’s blessing as the Head of the church, is also the Head of the covenant.

The truth that Christ is the Head of the covenant is also evident from the fact that Reformed theology has consistently held to a twofold Headship of Christ in relation to the church. Christ is the *federal Head* of the church, and is also the *organic* Head of the church. That Christ is the federal Head of the church means that Christ, in all His work, *represented* the church. He stood in the place of all His people so that what He did for them is truly their own work. Christ occupied, in relation to His people, the same position that Adam occupied in his relation to the human race.¹⁰ The Form for the Administration of the Lord’s Supper, obviously referring to the federal Headship of Christ, puts it beautifully in the section that deals with self-examination:

The true examination of ourselves consists of these three parts:
...That every one examine his own heart, whether he doth believe this faithful promise of God that all his sins are forgiven him only for the sake of the passion and death of Jesus Christ, and that the perfect righteousness of Christ is imputed and freely given him as his own, yea, so perfectly as if *he had satisfied in his own person for all his sins and fulfilled all righteousness* (emphasis is mine, HH).

Christ is also the organic Head of the church. Scripture compares the church to a body, in which body Christ is the Head and

10. See Romans 5:12-21; I Corinthians 15:21, 22.

all God's people are the members. That is, Christ and His church constitute one living organism, with Christ the Head the principle of the life of the body. That organic union between Christ and His church is worked by the Holy Spirit through faith, so that all the blessings of salvation flow from Christ to the church. Christ lives in the church, and the church lives in Christ. They are one body.

This twofold Headship of Christ in relation to the church is the fundamental idea of Christ's Headship in the covenant.

The Way in Which Christ's Headship in the Covenant Is Accomplished

For a correct understanding of Christ's Headship in the covenant of grace, we must begin with God's eternal purpose. Although I can only briefly outline the main ideas, they are essential for our understanding of the subject.

God is in Himself a covenant God. That is, God lives His own eternal, self-sufficient, and infinitely blessed life in fellowship with Himself. He is the triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The three persons of the holy Trinity live together in unity of essence in fellowship with each other. The prototype of the covenant of grace lies in God's own eternal life. Because God is three in person, God has fellowship with Himself. Because God is one in essence, His fellowship is perfect unity, harmony, communion, and blessed enjoyment of Himself.

God is all-sufficient in Himself and needs nothing to enrich Him, to make His glory great, or to enhance in any way His blessedness. He is the infinitely perfect God; He is the overflowing fountain of all good; He cannot receive anything that is not His to begin with; He is full and complete in all perfection. Nevertheless, God, sovereignly and freely, from all eternity, chooses to reveal Himself in all His perfections as a covenant God. But He chooses to reveal Himself through Christ, His own Son, who becomes flesh to accomplish the Father's purpose. The Headship of Christ in the covenant rests in the doctrine of revelation: God's purpose to reveal Himself as a covenant God through Christ. Such a revelation of Himself through Christ is the highest, the best, the

most wise way in which God's blessed covenant life can be revealed.

Yet Christ cannot be spoken of except in connection with, and as the Head of, His people. Say "Christ," and you have said "the church." Say "church," and you have said "Christ." There is no Christ apart from the church, and there is no church apart from Christ; for "we are chosen in him from before the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1:4). Christ as the Head of His church is the Head of the covenant.

There are many implications of the truth that God chooses to reveal His own covenant life through Christ. God chose His elect eternally in Christ. That is, election is election of Christ and His people. This is the teaching of Canons I, 7, an article that I quoted above. God chose His people in Christ according to the decree of election that Christ might be the federal and organic Head of the church. Christ is Head of the church by divine appointment. God gave the elect to Christ that Christ might assume all responsibility to do for His people that which was necessary to make His people God's covenant people. That responsibility included all the work of redemption while Christ walked among us, died on the cross, rose from the dead, and ascended to the position of highest glory at God's right hand. All salvation was earned by Christ, but for His people, for as their federal Head He performed His work. But Christ is also the organic Head of His people, and so bestows on them, through His Spirit, all He earned for them. He does this great work by making His people one with Him through faith.

As the Head of His people, Christ is the Mediator and Surety of the covenant.

Christ is called Mediator in only four passages in Scripture. I Timothy 2:5 reads: "For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." The other three passages specifically call Christ the Mediator of the covenant; these are all found in the epistle to the Hebrews. In Hebrews 8:6 we read: "But now hath he obtained a more excellent ministry, by how much also he is the mediator of a better covenant, which was established upon better promises." In Hebrews 9:15 Christ is

called the Mediator of a new covenant: “And for this cause he is the mediator of the new testament, that by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first testament, they which are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance.”¹¹ The same language is used of Christ in Hebrews 12:24: “And to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel.”

We must be certain that we understand correctly the biblical concept of a mediator. In human relationships, a mediator is one who is summoned to arbitrate differences between two parties who are in disagreement with each other. Mediators are used in marriages that are in trouble and in labor-management disputes over working conditions and wages. Two opposing sides cannot agree and a mediator is called in to try, by way of compromise on the part of both parties, to bring about agreement and restore former cordial relationships.

But this is not the idea of a mediator in Scripture. We must not view the broken relation between God and His people as if God is opposed to His people and His people opposed to God. If such were the case, Christ as Mediator would be summoned to step between these two warring parties and bring about reconciliation by placating God’s wrath and by removing man’s sin. Such is not the case. Christ is the eternal Son of God, God Himself in our flesh, sent by God to accomplish redemption. God’s love for His people is an everlasting love that knows no change. While His people sin against Him and earn everlasting punishment by their sin, God maintains His covenant and never changes in His attitude towards His elect. God Himself, according to His eternal purpose, gives Christ as Mediator to accomplish reconciliation by way of removing the sin of His people in Christ’s suffering and death. God needs no placating in the sense that His hatred must be turned to love and His anger eased by His Son’s work.

11. While the AV uses the word “testament” in this text, the word is the same as is translated elsewhere “covenant.” Note, however, that the text identifies God’s covenant, of which Christ is the Mediator, with “redemption of the transgressions,” that is, with salvation.

Paul is triumphant in his shout: “And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation; To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them...” (II Cor. 5:18, 19).¹²

Only one passage in Scripture calls Christ the Surety of the covenant. This passage reads: “By so much was Jesus made the surety of a better covenant” (Heb. 7:22). The context speaks of the superiority of the priesthood of Christ. That superiority of Christ’s priesthood is evident, the author of Hebrews says, from the fact that Christ is a priest after the order of Melchisedek and not after the order of Aaron. The apostle makes two points concerning Melchisedek’s and Christ’s priesthood. The first is that, while the priesthood of Aaron was established without an oath, the priesthood of Christ, a high priest after the order of Melchisedek, was established with an oath. That oath may be found in Psalm 110: 4: “The Lord hath sworn, and will not repent, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchisedek.” The second reason why Christ’s priesthood is superior to that of Aaron is that Melchisedek, alone in the Old Testament, was both priest and king. Christ’s priesthood, after Melchisedek’s order, made Him also both priest and king.

Because Christ is priest forever after the order of Melchisedek, Christ is the Surety of the new covenant. That is, the covenant of grace between God and His people in Christ is an everlasting covenant, which is absolutely sure. The covenant does not rest on the uncertain grounds of the fulfillment of conditions on the part of people to whom certain promises are made. But the covenant’s surety rests on the perfect work of Christ as priest forever after the order of Melchisedek.

12. The meaning of a mediator outlined here is probably the meaning of that difficult and often-discussed text, Galatians 3:20: “Now a mediator is not a mediator of one, but God is one.” The apostle means to say that while in human relationships a mediator does not do his work on behalf of one party but always two at odds with each other, Christ is God’s Mediator and only needs to reconcile us to God, for God is one. God is one because Christ is Himself the eternal Son of God.

The Implications of Christ as Covenant Head

Christ, as the Head of the covenant of grace, is the one with whom that covenant is first of all established. He is the one through whom God has eternally determined to reveal His own covenant life; Christ is the one eternally appointed to be both Mediator and Surety of the covenant of grace; Christ, therefore, as Head of the covenant, is the one with whom God establishes His covenant.

That Christ is the Head of the covenant brings me to a discussion of the so-called *Pactum Salutis*, sometimes called either the “Counsel of Peace” or the “Counsel of Redemption.” It is not my purpose to discuss this aspect of my subject in this article. The subject has been discussed at length by Herman Hoeksema in his *Reformed Dogmatics*.¹³ The point that I need to make now is the validity of the distinction Hoeksema made between the triune God and our Lord Jesus Christ. Most frequently, when Reformed theologians spoke of the *Pactum Salutis*, they referred to a relationship between the first and second persons of the Trinity. This view is criticized by Hoeksema, and in its place Hoeksema shows that the Scriptures require that we distinguish between Christ the Mediator and the triune God.

Christ is not to be distinguished *personally* from the triune God, for Christ is personally the second person of the holy Trinity and, in the words of the Nicene Creed, “very God of very God.” But our Lord Jesus Christ unites in His divine person the whole of the divine nature and our human nature, which He took on at His incarnation. In other words, what the triune God is in Himself He reveals in Christ. As within the Trinity the first person is the Father of the second person through the third person, so is the triune God the Father of Christ through the Holy Spirit. The angel Gabriel makes this truth clear to Mary when he informed Mary that she was to be the mother of the Lord: “The Holy Ghost shall

13. Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2nd edition, Volume 2 (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2003), 401-480. For a summary of Hoeksema’s entire covenant view, see my book *For Thy Truth’s Sake* (Grand Rapids, Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2000), 316-381.

come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God” (Luke 1:35). The triune God was, at the incarnation, the Father of Christ by means of the Holy Spirit.

This relationship of Christ to God as Son to Father is behind all the references in the gospel narratives to Christ’s use of the word “Father” when He was speaking of God or to God. This Father-Son relationship came out poignantly on the cross. At the hour of Christ’s most intense suffering, His sense of abandonment was so great that He did not dare call God His Father, but cried out in His anguish, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Mark 15:34). How moving then, that when our Lord could say, “It is finished,” He could also at the moment of His death, serenely say, “Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit” (Luke 23:46).

The Scriptures tell of another sense in which our Lord, the Mediator of the covenant, was Son in relation to the triune God. This Father-Son relationship is expressed in the work of the Mediator, a work that forms the basis for the covenant of grace and our sonship with the covenant.

In Psalm 2:7 we read: “I will declare the decree: the Lord hath said unto me, Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee.” Although historically this verse was fulfilled in the appointment of David to sit on the throne of Israel on Mt. Zion (2:6), it has also been quoted, correctly, as referring to the inter-trinitarian relationship of the first and second persons within the Godhead. To refer this to the relation between the first and second persons of the holy Trinity is legitimate because God never becomes outside of Himself, in His works, what He is not, first of all, within His own triune life. Hence, we are told by the apostle Paul that Psalm 2:7 was fulfilled at the time of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In his sermon in Antioch of Pisidia, Paul says: “God hath fulfilled the same [the glad tidings of the promise, v. 32] unto us their children, in that he hath raised up Jesus again; as it is also written in the second psalm, Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee” (Acts 13:33).

Thus the Scriptures tell us that Psalm 2:7 was fulfilled at the time of the resurrection. In fact, the idea is that God said to Christ,

“Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee,” and those words of God were the power of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Just as David, by these same words, was made king of Israel with his throne on Mt. Zion, but typically, so Christ, by these words, was raised from the dead and made King in David’s royal line forever on the Mt. Zion that is the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God (Heb. 12:20-24).

But the resurrection of Christ could be the fulfillment of Psalm 2:7 only in the light of the cross. Christ’s suffering on the cross is to be explained in terms of the fact that He became a curse (Gal. 3:13) for us. He was hung on a cross, the symbol of the curse, because He hung between heaven and earth, not wanted by God in heaven where God dwells or on earth in God’s creation. He was the Outcast, the Pariah, the one for whom there was no place in all God’s creation. He was, in His own bearing of the wrath of God, no longer Son.¹⁴

In His suffering, Christ accomplished the perfect atoning sacrifice for sin and so fulfilled all that God had given Him to do to save His people. Nothing more needed to be done. Salvation was accomplished and the basis laid for the realization of God’s covenant. But in raising Christ from the dead, God not only brought Christ from the abandonment of the cross, but made Christ His own Son in whom He was forever well pleased. Or, to put it now

14. This is the great mystery of the incarnation and the suffering of our Savior. Christ bore the wrath of God against sin all His life. The very experience of the wrath of God spoke to Christ of His abandonment by God. Yet, also throughout His life, Christ had the sentence from heaven: “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.” But it seems as if, as the shadow of the cross hung darker over Him, gradually the consciousness of God’s favor upon Him as Son faded, and the consciousness of God’s wrath increased, until those awful moments in the depths of hell’s sufferings when Christ knew only wrath and nothing but wrath. But at that very moment (I speak as a man) God was never so pleased with His Son, whose perfect obedience brought the perfect sacrifice for sin.

in the context of our discussion, Christ was restored to covenant friendship with God as a Son in God's house.

This great truth is emphatically asserted by God in Psalm 89, in which David sings (prophetically) of the establishment of the covenant with him. It is well to quote the entire passage.

Then thou spakest in vision to thy holy one, and saidst, I have laid help upon one that is mighty; I have exalted one chosen out of the people. I have found David my servant; with my holy oil have I anointed him: With whom my hand shall be established: mine arm also shall strengthen him. The enemy shall not exact upon him; nor the son of wickedness afflict him. And I will beat down his foes before his face, and plague them that hate him (Ps. 89:19-23).

So far, although this part of Psalm 89 is also prophetic, God's promise to David stands on the foreground. But then, all but unnoticed, the emphasis begins to shift from David to Christ—although still the words are spoken to and of David.

But my faithfulness and my mercy shall be with him: and in my name shall his horn be exalted. I will set his hand also in the sea, and his right hand in the rivers. He shall cry unto me, Thou are my father, my God, and the rock of my salvation. Also I will make him my firstborn [see Col. 1:15], higher than the kings of the earth. My mercy will I keep for him for evermore, and my covenant shall stand fast with him (Ps. 89:24-28).

The things that are said in this Psalm can be said, in their full sense, only of Christ. Christ is God's firstborn (not David); Christ is higher than all the kings of the earth, and David only typically. God's covenant is established forever with Christ alone.

But then the Psalm introduces another note in its glorious music. While still speaking of David typically and Christ fully, it now begins to speak of David's seed (typically) and of Christ's seed in reality.

His seed also will I make to endure forever, and his throne as the days of heaven. If his children forsake my law, and walk not in my judgments; If they break my statutes, and keep not my command-

ment; Then will I visit their transgression with the rod, and their iniquity with stripes. Nevertheless my lovingkindness will I not utterly take from him, nor suffer my faithfulness to fail. My covenant will I not break, nor alter the thing that is gone out of my lips. Once have I sworn by my holiness that I will not lie unto David. His seed shall endure for ever, and his throne as the sun before me. It shall be established for ever as the moon, and as a faithful witness in heaven. Selah (Ps. 89:29-37).

God established His covenant with David prophetically as a type of Christ. God established His covenant with Christ as the Mediator of His people through the deep and dark way of the cross. Through Christ's perfect sacrifice (Christ, the Head of the covenant and God's own Son), the covenant is established with all Christ's sons and daughters in the one elect family of God.

The Historical Reality of God's Covenant in Christ as Head

God's covenant with His people through Christ as the Head of the covenant was revealed to Israel in typical form in the tabernacle and temple. The inner sanctuary was composed of two distinct rooms: the holy place and the most holy place. When the tabernacle was completed, and when the temple was dedicated by Solomon, the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle (Ex. 40:34-38) and the temple (I Kings 8:10, 11; II Chron. 7:1-3; Ex. 15:17, 18). The cloud that filled the temple and the tabernacle was the visible sign of God's presence among Israel (Ex. 34:5). In fact, the cloud was, at the time of the dedication of the tabernacle, the same cloud that led the people of Israel through the wilderness; it was, therefore, a revelation of God *in Jesus Christ*, for the Angel of the Lord, the Old Testament revelation of Christ, was in the cloud (Ex. 23:20; 32:34; 33:2). In addition to the Angel of Jehovah, the ark itself was a picture of Christ. This is clear from Psalm 68, a Psalm written at the time David brought the ark to Jerusalem. The ascent of the ark to Jerusalem was a type of the ascension of Christ to His position of sovereignty at God's right hand—as Psalm 68 tells us.

While God dwelt in the inner sanctuary, the people of Israel assembled in the outer court. Thus the temple was a type and

picture of God dwelling with His people. This dwelling together of God and His people is the essence of the covenant. It is the typical fulfillment of God's covenant promise that He would be the God of Abraham and his seed and that they would be His people. No more beautiful picture of covenant fellowship can be found than in the temple, where God and His people lived together under one roof, in one building—as husband and wife.

But the temple was only a picture, and could be only a picture, for Christ had not yet come. And so, although God and His people lived together under one roof, they were kept at a distance from each other, so that the true joys of fellowship could not yet be fully enjoyed. The situation was similar to a young man and young woman living in the same house, but, because they are only engaged, are kept apart in different parts of the house with locked doors between them. In the temple, between God and His people were the veil that separated the most holy place from the holy place and its furniture, including the altar of incense, the altar of burnt offering in the outer court on which were made daily the sacrifices for sin, and the entire Aaronitic priesthood, which itself was not permitted entry into the most holy place, except once a year on the Great Day of Atonement when the high priest could enter the most holy place, with blood, to make atonement for the sins of the people and the sins of the priesthood itself (Heb. 9:6-9).

David, in Psalm 84 (a Psalm of ascent—that is, a song that the Israelite pilgrims sang as they traveled in companies on their way to Jerusalem from all parts of Canaan to the temple to worship God), expresses jealousy of the sparrows that, nesting under the eaves of the sanctuary, were able to come closer to God than the psalmist was able to come: “Yea, the sparrow hath found an house, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, even thine altars, O Lord of hosts, my King, and my God” (v. 3).

The reality is to be found in Christ Himself, for the temple itself was a picture of Christ's body. That the temple is a picture of Christ's body is clear from John 2:14-25, which passage records the first cleansing of the temple. After the Jews had collected their wits from the shock of being chased from the temple, they

came to the Lord with the question, “What sign showest thou unto us, seeing that thou doest these things?” (v. 18). Christ’s answer was a complete surprise: “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up”—that was His authority! The Jews chose to misinterpret His words, although at the same time these words made them extremely uneasy. Their uneasiness was shown by the fact that they never forgot these words. When the Sanhedrin could discover no charges against Christ at the time of His trial, they twisted His words and charged Him with wanting to destroy the temple (Matt. 26:60-61). And when Jesus hung on the cross, the mob mocked Him by calling Him “temple destroyer” (Matt. 27:40).

John tells us, however, that Jesus was referring to the temple of His body (John 2:21, 22). In other words, Jesus possessed the authority to cleanse the temple because the temple was His own portrait. Any man has a right to be angry at the mutilation of his portrait. So Jesus possessed the right to cleanse the temple.

But the point is that Jesus becomes the temple of God only through His cross and resurrection. Jesus never said that He would destroy the temple, but He did say to the Jews that they themselves would destroy the temple. They would do this terrible deed when they would crucify the Lord. To destroy Christ by killing Him was to destroy their own temple in Jerusalem, for at the time of Jesus’ death, the veil of the temple was rent from top to bottom, and the temple itself was destroyed in A.D. 70. But Christ built the true temple by the resurrection of His body from Joseph’s tomb three days after His death. This is the clear meaning of Psalm 34 as quoted in Hebrews 10:5-10.

That Christ is the true temple of God is evident, on the one hand, from the fact that God dwells in Christ’s body. Paul teaches us this as being a literal truth: “For in him dwelleth the fulness of the godhead *bodily*” (Col. 2:9). That is, the exalted Christ, through the way of His cross and resurrection, is now the means whereby God reveals Himself in all His infinite blessedness, for the invisible God is made visible through the body of Christ (John 14:9). God dwells in Christ *bodily*, because Christ is God—true God of true God, united in the second person of the Son of God with our human flesh—united so

perfectly that seeing Christ in His majesty and glory is to see God Himself who dwells in Christ.

At the same time, the church is the body of Christ. Scripture uses that expression in Ephesians 5 and in I Corinthians 12. The church is grafted into Christ by faith and becomes one with Christ by the Spirit, who dwells in Christ as our Head and in us as His members (Heidelberg Catechism, q. & a. 76). Paul, in Ephesians 5:30, dares to say that we are so united to Christ that we are “members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones.”¹⁵

If God is in Christ *bodily* and the church is itself the body of Christ, then God and His people have come so close to each other in Christ that it is impossible to come any closer. Christ is indeed the Head of the covenant, in whom the blessedness of the covenant is fully realized in all its perfection and glory. Then the covenant of grace is perfectly fulfilled, for then God is the God of His people and they are His sons and daughters. The tabernacle of God is with men, and He dwells in them and is their God, and they are His people. ●

15. Critical editions of the Greek New Testament omit the last part of this verse from the text. The result is that many translations do the same: the RV and the NIV, to name a few. Nevertheless, both the AV and question and answer 76 of the Heidelberg Catechism include it, as well they should. The reading has very good support, including some important uncials, the Majority Text, and several translations.

John Calvin's Integrated Covenant Theology (1)

Angus Stewart

While Calvin is neither the originator of Reformed covenant theology nor the author of the first book on the covenant—these honors falling to Zwingli and Bullinger respectively—he is, as Peter Lillback states, “the first ... to integrate the covenant concept extensively into his theological system.”¹ Calvin’s longest and most detailed treatment of the covenant is found in book 2, chapters 10 and 11, of his *Institutes*, his greatest and most systematic work.²

The Unity of the Covenant

It is striking that Calvin’s first point, and that which he spends the whole of chapter 10 proving, is the “similarity—or rather unity” of the covenant of God, that it is one in all ages: “The covenant made with all the patriarchs is so much like ours in substance and reality that the two are actually one and the same. Yet they differ in the mode of dispensation [or administration]” (2.10.2, p. 429).³ Saints in the Old and the New Testaments share “the same law,” “the same doctrine,” “the same inheritance,” and the “common salvation” by the grace of the “same Mediator” (2.10.1, pp. 428, 429). Calvin avers, “It is very important to make this point,” adding later that the unity of the covenant is also “very profitable for us” (2.10.1, pp. 428, 429).

1. Peter A. Lillback, *The Binding of God: Calvin's Role in the Development of Covenant Theology* (Baker: Grand Rapids, 2001), p. 311.

2. All citations of the *Institutes* are from John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960). All citations of Calvin’s commentaries are from the 22-volume Baker (repr. 1993) edition.

3. Cf. *Westminster Confession* 7:5-6; *Westminster Larger Catechism*, Q. & A. 33.

Calvin names the heretics he is opposing, giving them none too flattering titles: “that wonderful rascal Servetus and certain madmen of the Anabaptist sect” (2.10.1, p. 429). Their error was that they thought the Jews to have been partakers only of a “carnal covenant,” as Calvin dubs it (2.10.19, p. 446), consisting of “carnal prosperity and happiness” (2.10.2, p. 429) for a “carnal folk” (2.10.15, p. 441). They present “the Israelites as nothing but a herd of swine ... fattened by the Lord on this earth without any hope of heavenly immortality” (2.10.1, p. 429). The Anabaptist doctrine “that the Lord promised the Jews, or that they sought for themselves, nothing but a full belly, delights of the flesh, flourishing wealth, outward power, fruitfulness of offspring, and whatever the natural man prizes,” Calvin calls an “insane and dangerous opinion” (2.10.23, p. 448; cf. 4.16.10, p. 1333).

Against the “carnal covenant,” Calvin asserts the “spiritual covenant” (2.10.7, p. 434; 2.10.15, p. 441; etc.).⁴ Calvin’s doctrine of one, spiritual covenant rests upon “three main points,” upon which “we must take our stand.” First, Old Testament revelation proclaimed, and the elect Jews aspired to, “the hope of immortality” and not merely earthly riches. Second, the covenant was not of human merit but “solely” of God’s “mercy.” Third, believing Jews “had and knew Christ as Mediator, through whom they were joined to God and were to share in his promises” (2.10.2, pp. 429, 430).

Calvin identifies the first of these three as “the chief point in this controversy” (2.10.10, p. 436), requiring “closer attention” (2.10.3, p. 430), and so he spends most of book 2, chapter 10 treating it, especially in sections 3, 7-23. First, sections 7-9 argue that the fathers had everlasting life because (1) they had the quickening Word, (2) they fellowshiped with the living God, and (3) God’s goodness is stronger than death. Second, Calvin describes the lives of the patriarchs in Genesis—Adam, Abel, Noah,

4. Calvin often refers to the “spiritual covenant” in his writings (e.g., 3.20.45, p. 910; Comm. on Gen. 17:8). For him, the “spiritual covenant” is synonymous with Christ’s “spiritual kingdom” (cf. Comm. on Isa. 60:2), and the “carnal covenant” is synonymous with an “earthly kingdom” (cf. 2.10.23, p. 449).

Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph (2.10.10-14, pp. 436-441)—as so miserable that they were thereby “taught by the Lord as to perceive that they had a better life elsewhere; and disregarding the earthly life, to meditate upon the heavenly” (2.10.10, p. 436).⁵ Here Calvin notes Scripture’s description of the fathers as “strangers and sojourners” (cf. Gen. 47:9) and quotes at length that famous passage in Hebrews 11:9-10, 13-16 as “very beautifully” proving his point (2.10.13, p. 440). Third, he shows that in the Psalms, Isaiah, Job, Ezekiel, Daniel, etc. (2.10.15-22, pp. 441-448), “eternal life and Christ’s kingdom are revealed in fullest splendor” (2.10.15, p. 441). Calvin rightly believes that he has “blazed a trail for the moderately discerning reader” to understand the Old Testament Scriptures (2.10.20, p. 446).

Only sections 4-6 of book 2, chapter 10, are directly concerned with proving that God’s covenant, even in Old Testament days, was by God’s mercy through Christ. Calvin practically equates the one everlasting gospel of grace with the covenant by speaking of “the covenant of the gospel”:

... the Old Testament was established upon the free mercy of God, and confirmed by Christ’s intercession. For the gospel preaching, too, declares nothing else than that sinners are justified apart from their own merit by God’s fatherly kindness; and the whole of it is summed up in Christ. Who, then, dares to separate the Jews from Christ, since with them, we hear, was made the covenant of the gospel, the sole foundation of which is Christ? Who dares to estrange from the gift of free salvation those to whom the doctrine of righteousness by faith was imparted? (2.10.4, p. 431).

Calvin then quotes John 8:56 and Hebrews 13:8, before not-

5. Note Calvin’s striking summary of Abraham, “the father of all them that believe” (Rom. 4:11): “In short, throughout life he was so tossed and troubled that if anyone wished to paint a picture of a calamitous life, he could find no model more appropriate than Abraham’s” (2.10.11, p. 438). “As for Jacob,” Calvin continues, “he is a notable example of nothing but extreme unhappiness” (2.10.12, p. 438). How different from the facile view of the Christian life proclaimed by much of Pentecostalism!

ing that Christ came in fulfillment of the covenant promise (Luke 1:54-55, 72-73; 2.10.4, pp. 431-432).

Not only is the gospel of God's mercy in Christ essentially the same in both testaments but also the old covenant "sacraments" (Israel's baptism at the Red Sea, the water from the Rock that followed them in the wilderness, and the manna) were also "truly spiritual sacraments" (2.10.6, p. 433). Thus "the apostle [in I Corinthians 10:1-6, 11] makes the Israelites equal to us not only in the grace of the covenant but also in the signification of the sacraments" (2.10.5, p. 432).

It ought, however, to be noted that Calvin proves the unity of God's covenant in book 2, chapter 10, of his *Institutes*, in order to establish the unity of the Scriptures. Thus this chapter is entitled, "The Similarity of the Old and New Testaments." Moreover, Calvin thereby also demonstrates the unity of the covenant people of God in all ages, for "all the saints whom Scripture mentions as being peculiarly chosen of God from the beginning of the world have shared with us the same blessing unto eternal salvation" (2.11.10, p. 459). All three—one covenant, one Bible, and one church—are basic and essential aspects of covenant theology.

Different Administrations of the Covenant

In book 2, chapter 11, of the *Institutes*, Calvin is not simply comparing the Mosaic covenant with the new covenant. Rather he explains the differences between God's revelation of the covenant in the Old Testament Scriptures and in the New Testament Scriptures. Before listing and discussing the five differences that Calvin identifies, he underscores the fact that none of them individually, nor all of them together, "detract from [Scripture's] established unity" (2.11.1, pp. 449-450). Instead, the "additions," "appendages," "accessories," and "accidental properties of the covenant" (2.11.5, p. 454) all "pertain to the manner of dispensation [or administration] rather than to the substance" of the covenant (2.11.1, p. 450). The Genevan Reformer's Christological concern is evident: "In this way there will be nothing to hinder the promises of the Old and New Testament from remaining the same, nor from having the same foundation of these very promises, Christ!" (2.11.1, p. 450).

With this reiterated and understood, Calvin turns to the five differences. First, the Old Testament differs from the New in that it contains physical, earthly, and temporal benefits that foreshadowed and mirrored spiritual, heavenly, and eternal blessings (2.11.1-3, pp. 449-453). Second, the Old Testament “in the absence of the reality ... showed but an image and shadow in place of the substance [whereas] the New Testament reveals the very substance of truth as present” (2.11.4, p. 453).

The third and fourth differences particularly pertain to the Mosaic covenant under which the law was given. Here Calvin, following Jeremiah and Paul in Jeremiah 31 and II Corinthians 3 respectively, “consider[s] nothing in the law except what properly belongs to it” (2.11.7, p. 456). He explains,

For example: the law here and there contains promises of mercy; but because they have been borrowed from elsewhere, they are not counted part of the law when only the nature of the law is under discussion. They ascribe to it only this function: to enjoin what is right, to forbid what is wicked; to promise a reward to the keepers of righteousness, and threaten transgressors with punishment; but at the same time not to change or correct the depravity of heart that by nature inheres in all men (2.11.7, pp. 456-457).

The third difference is that while the Old Testament law is literal (considered as in its own nature and engraved on stone), the New is spiritual, written in our hearts by the Holy Spirit (2.11.7-8, pp. 456-457). The fourth difference, as Calvin notes, “arises out of the third” (2.11.9, p. 458). The Old Testament, considered from the distinctive idea of “law,” is one of “bondage,” whereas the New Testament is one of “freedom” through the gospel (2.11.9-10, pp. 458-460).

The fifth and last of Calvin’s differences applies to the covenants with Abraham, Moses, and David, and not to those in Genesis 1-11: in the Old Testament God’s covenant of grace was with one people, the Jews, but in the New Testament, the church is catholic, embracing believing Jews and Gentiles (2.11.11-12, pp. 460-462). In former days, God “lodged his covenant, so to speak, in [Israel’s] bosom; he manifested the presence of his majesty to

them; he showered every privilege upon them," but in the fullness of time elect Jews and Gentiles are "reconciled to God and welded into one people" by the blood and Spirit of Christ (2.11.11, pp. 460, 461).

For centuries Reformed Christians have agreed with Calvin's evaluation in this chapter of his *Institutes*: "In these four or five points I think that I have explained faithfully and well the whole difference between the Old and the New Testaments as far as a simple statement of doctrine demands" (2.11.13, p. 462). Over against the objections of some as to why God should have ordered such variations in the administration of His covenant, Calvin rightly affirms the freedom and wisdom of God's sovereign will (2.11.13-14, pp. 462-464).

Covenant Hermeneutics

Calvin's treatment of the unity and the differences between the two testaments leads him to set forth what may be called a "covenant hermeneutic." This, Calvin believes, provides us with the "key" for understanding the Old Testament:

Nevertheless, I shall warn my readers beforehand to remember to open up their way with the key that I previously put into their hands [cf. 2.9.1-4, pp. 423-427]. That is, whenever the prophets recount the believing people's blessedness, hardly the least trace of which is discerned in the present life, let them take refuge in this distinction: the better to commend God's goodness, the prophets represented it for the people under the lineaments, so to speak, of temporal benefits. But they painted a portrait such as to lift the minds of the people above the earth, above the elements of this world [cf. Gal. 4:3] and the perishing age, and that would of necessity arouse them to ponder the happiness of the spiritual life to come (2.10.20, p. 447).

Calvin speaks of the Old Testament "lineaments" or "portraits" that portray spiritual, heavenly, and eternal blessings in various ways. For example, in book 2, chapter 11, he speaks of "signs," "symbols," "figures," "images," "shadows," and even a "mirror." But the word he uses most is "type" or "typify." Since God has "imprinted" "analogy and congruity" between the type and the antitype (2.11.3, p. 452), Old Testament exegesis must interpret

the types that are given by God (but not invented by the exegete) typologically and not merely literally.

... the prophets more often represent the blessedness of the age to come through the type that they had received from the Lord. In this sense we are to understand these sayings: “The godly will possess the land” by inheritance [Prov. 2:21], but “the wicked will perish from the earth” [Job 18:17 p.; cf. Prov. 2:22 ...]. In many passages in Isaiah we read that Jerusalem will abound with all kinds of riches, and Zion shall overflow with plenty of all things [cf. Isa. 35:10; 52:1ff.; 60:4ff.; ch. 62]. We see that all these things cannot properly apply to the land of our pilgrimage, or to the earthly Jerusalem, but to the true homeland of believers, that heavenly city wherein “the Lord has ordained blessing and life forevermore” [Ps. 133:3] (2.11.2, p. 452).⁶

Calvin repeatedly explains the need for ceremonies and types in Old Testament days as being rooted in the “childhood” of the church, when “God confined them to rudimentary teaching commensurate with their age” (2.11.13, pp. 462-463; cf. 2.11.5, pp. 454-455; 2.11.9, p. 459).

The Progressive Revelation of the Covenant

Calvin’s comparison between the Old Testament (usually taking it as a unit) and the New Testament in book 2, chapters 10 and 11, of his *Institutes* does not mean that he is ignorant of the various covenants within the Hebrew Scriptures. In these very chapters, Calvin speaks of the orderly, progressive revelation of the covenant of grace from post-fall Adam (Gen. 3:15) to the coming of Jesus Christ. The attractive imagery in this justly celebrated passage is that of increasing light.

The Lord held to this orderly plan in administering the covenant of his mercy: as the day of full revelation approached with the passing

6. Here Calvin’s hermeneutic opposes not only the Anabaptists and the dispensationalists but also the “health and wealth gospel,” Christian Reconstructionism, and postmillennialism.

of time, the more he increased each day the brightness of its manifestation. Accordingly, at the beginning when the first promise of salvation was given to Adam [Gen. 3:15] it glowed like a feeble spark. Then, as it was added to, the light grew in fullness, breaking forth increasingly and shedding its radiance more widely. At last—when all the clouds were dispersed—Christ, the Sun of Righteousness, fully illumined the whole earth [Mal., Ch. 4] (2.10.20, p. 446).⁷

Elsewhere, Calvin identifies the covenants with Abraham, Moses, and David:

He calls them “the mercies of *David*,” because this covenant, which has now been solemnly confirmed, was made in the hand “of David.” The Lord indeed entered into a covenant with Abraham (Gen. 15:5; 17:7), afterwards confirmed it by Moses (Ex. 2:24; 33:1), and finally ratified this very covenant in the hand of David, that it might be eternal (II Sam. 7:12). Whenever, therefore, the Jews thought of a Redeemer, that is, of their salvation, they ought to have remembered “David” as a mediator who represented Christ; for David must not here be regarded as a private individual, but as bearing this title and character (Comm. on Isa. 55:3).

Again, Calvin is quick to add that the various manifestations of the covenant do not make “void” the earlier covenants: “the covenant into which God entered with the fathers was firm, sure, and eternal, and not changeable or temporary” (Comm. on Isa. 55:3). In Christ, the one and eternal covenant is “ratified,” “confirmed,” and “proved”:

By calling [David's antitype] “a witness,” [Isaiah] means that the covenant into which he entered shall be ratified and confirmed in Christ ... for he clearly shows that this covenant shall be proved in Christ, by whom the truth of God shall be made manifest (Comm. on Isa. 55:4).

7. “Nothing surpasses” this quotation from Calvin on the progressive revelation of God's covenant, according to John Murray (“Covenant Theology” in *Collected Writings of John Murray* [Great Britain: Banner, 1982], vol. 4, p. 224).

Similarly, the covenant with Noah, including the promise not to destroy the world with water, is a manifestation of God's everlasting and universal covenant:

Moreover, there is no doubt that it ... was not therefore a private covenant confirmed with one family only, but one which is common to all people, and which shall flourish in all ages to the end of the world.... Wherefore, relying on this promise, let us look forward to the last day, in which the consuming fire shall purify heaven and earth [II Peter 3] (Comm. on Gen. 9:8-9).

Thus Calvin highlights the heavenly implications of the Noahic covenant:

For although this be an earthly promise, yet God designs the faith of his people to be exercised, in order that they may be assured that a certain abode will, by his special goodness, be provided for them on earth, until they shall be gathered together in *heaven* (Comm. on Gen. 9:10-11).

Calvin even observes that God “promises salvation to a thousand generations,” and so the covenant with Noah refutes “the ignorance of the Anabaptists ... who deny that the covenant of God is common to infants” (Comm. on Gen. 9:10-11).

Calvin scholars have found only one passage in which the Reformer speaks explicitly of God's covenant with pre-fall Adam. In the *Institutes*, he writes of the “covenants” (plural) with Adam and with Noah and their respective sacraments or signs:

One is when [God] gave Adam and Eve the tree of life as a guarantee of immortality, that they might assure themselves of it as long as they should eat of its fruit [Gen. 2:9; 3:22]. Another, when he set the rainbow for Noah and his descendants, as a token that he would not destroy the earth with a flood [Gen. 9:13-16]. These, Adam and Noah regarded as sacraments. Not that the tree provided them with an immortality which it could not give to itself; nor that the rainbow (which is but a reflection of the sun's rays opposite) could be effective in holding back the waters; but because they had a mark en-

graved upon them by God's Word, so that they were proofs and seals of his *covenants* (4.14.18, p. 1294).⁸

Thus Calvin refers once to a pre-fall covenant with Adam, whereas he develops "the covenant of his mercy" (2.10.20, p. 446), manifested progressively in the covenants with post-fall Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David, and "ratified," "confirmed," and "proved" in Christ (Comm. on Isa. 55:4).⁹

... to be continued. ●

8. "The term 'sacrament'" in this context, explains Calvin, "embraces generally all those signs which God has ever enjoined upon men to render them more certain and confident of the truth of his promises." In this broad category, Calvin includes Gideon's fleece and Hezekiah's sundial going back ten degrees. Thus Calvin is not referring to the tree of life as if it were the equivalent of baptism or the Lord's Supper (4.14.18, pp. 1294, 1295).

9. For a succinct treatment of Calvin on God's covenant with Adam before the fall, see Angus Stewart, "The Covenant with Adam—A Brief Historical Analysis," *Standard Bearer*, vol. 81, pp. 36-39.

The Doctrine of the Covenant in the Westminster Standards

Eugene C. Case

Arthur C. Cochrane, in the introduction to his collection of *Reformed Confessions of the 16th Century*, clearly did not intend to give a complimentary assessment of the Westminster Standards when he wrote that they “do not belong to the Reformation but are products of Puritanism and post-Reformation scholasticism.” Indeed, he goes on to characterize the Westminster Symbols as reflective of “a legalism, moralism, and rationalism that is foreign to the Confessions of a century earlier. They lack the spontaneity, freshness, and joyfulness of the Reformation.”¹

Old Princeton stalwart Benjamin B. Warfield, on the other hand, viewed the Westminster Standards as “the final crystallization of the elements of evangelical religion, after the conflicts of sixteen hundred years...the richest and most precise and best guarded statement ever penned of all that enters into evangelical religion and of all that must be safeguarded if evangelical religion is to persist in the world ... a notable monument of spiritual religion.”²

Though obviously from two very different perspectives, these men—Cochrane the modernist, and Warfield the adherent to “the old paths, where is the good way”—acknowledge the significant position of the Westminster Symbols in the history of the development of Christian doctrine. The one may look upon the Westminster theology as the Reformation gone to seed, while the other views that theology as the Reformation in full bloom; but both recognize in Westminster a certain maturity in the expression of Reformed Christianity.

1. Arthur C. Cochrane, *Reformed Confessions of the 16th Century*, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1966, p. 30.

2. Benjamin B. Warfield, *Selected Shorter Writings*, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, Nutley, New Jersey, 1973, p. 660.

One point at which this mature development is evident is in the rather full treatment given to the doctrine of the covenant in the Westminster Symbols. Indeed, the Confession of Faith in particular is unique among Reformed confessions in terms of the conspicuous attention given to this doctrine. The Reverend Henry Beets was referring specifically to the Netherlands Confession when he wrote: “In the days when the Confession was written, the ‘doctrine of the covenants’ was not clearly developed.”³ But it is true, generally, of the earlier confessions that there is not the sort of focus given to the doctrine of the covenant in them that is found in Westminster. Gordon Clark, in fact, is bold to assert that “The Westminster Assembly gave it [i.e., the doctrine of the covenant] confessional status,”⁴ thus indicating that the earlier Reformed confessions, for all their “spontaneity, freshness, and joyfulness,” may have been lacking just a bit in this area. This is not to disparage those earlier symbols. After all, Westminster was written in vastly different circumstances than most of them, and it certainly built upon what the church had previously declared in those earlier statements of faith. But in none of them do we find the specific focus on the doctrine of the covenant that is set forth in the Westminster Standards.

Of course, not everyone is completely comfortable with the doctrine of the covenant that is found in the Westminster Symbols. This has been especially evident for some time, in some circles, in regard to the idea of the covenant of works as taught by the Standards. But lately the whole doctrine of the covenant has come in for some radical reinterpretations—significant departures, actually, from the historic understanding of Westminster teaching—by those who hold to what is known as the “Federal Vision.” While a full engagement of these issues is beyond the scope of this article, it should be evident from an examination of the teaching of the Standards, that they certainly do not support the no-

3. Henry Beets, *The Reformed Confession Explained*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1929, p. 139.

4. Gordon H. Clark, “Dispensationalism,” *Against the World: The Trinity Review, 1978-1988*, The Trinity Foundation, Hobbs, New Mexico, 1996, p. 31.

tions of covenant conditionalism or of election in relation to the covenant that are being advocated in some circles.

A Summary of References to the Covenant in the Standards

Principally, in the Confession of Faith the doctrine of the covenant is addressed in Chapter VII, “Of God’s Covenant with Man.”⁵ In section one, the necessity of the covenant is explained. Section two deals with the “Covenant of Works.” And sections three through six take up various aspects of the “Covenant of Grace.” Additionally, in Chapter IV (“Of Creation”), section two, though the term “covenant” is not used, there is reference to what are generally regarded as the terms of the “Covenant of Works.” And, in Chapter XIX (“Of the Law of God”), section one, the “Covenant of Works” is described as “a law” given by God to Adam; and, again, the terms of this “law” are such as are associated with the “Covenant of Works.” Moreover, in section two of this chapter, it is indicated that what “was delivered by God upon Mount Sinai, in ten commandments,” was essentially a republication of the law as given to Adam. In section six, however, it is explained that believers are not under this law as a “covenant of works.”

In the Larger Catechism, question and answer 20, the “Covenant of Works” is referred to with the terminology “a covenant of life.” Adam’s federal headship is the subject of question and answer 22. Question and answer 30 deals with the transition from “the first covenant” (the covenant of works) to “the second covenant, commonly called the Covenant of Grace.” Question and

5. Dr. J.B. Green, late professor of systematic theology and homiletics at Columbia Theological Seminary (Presbyterian Church in the United States, aka the Southern Presbyterian Church), in his *Harmony of the Westminster Presbyterian Standards*, raised the question whether it would not have been more proper to have entitled this chapter “Of God’s Covenants with Man,” inasmuch as the chapter pretty clearly speaks of two covenants—a first and a second. He does not pursue the matter, however; and his view of the number of covenants may be indicated by the fact that he treats the covenant of works in a separate chapter from his treatment of the covenant of grace in his *Harmony*.

answer 31 addresses the matter of with whom the covenant of grace was made, and number 32 tells how the grace of God is manifested in “the second covenant.” The questions and answers 33 through 35 take up particulars of the administration of the covenant of grace. In question and answer 36 the Lord Jesus Christ is identified as “the only Mediator of the Covenant of Grace.” And in question and answer 97, parallel to WCF XIX:6, it is asserted that those who are regenerate and believe in Christ are “delivered from the moral law as a covenant of works.”

Shorter Catechism question and answer 12 employs the terminology “covenant of life” to describe what elsewhere is defined as the “Covenant of Works.” And in question and answer 20 the terminology “covenant of grace” is used with reference to God’s deliverance of His elect from the estate of sin and misery to that of salvation.

Perspective

There is a slight difference in the way in which the doctrine of the covenant is dealt with in the Confession of Faith as compared to the catechisms. The Confession addresses the covenant of works and the covenant of grace primarily in one chapter—chapter seven—which is placed after the chapter having to do with “The Fall of Man, of Sin, and of the Punishment Thereof.” The catechisms, on the other hand, follow the sequence of history, and deal first with the covenant of works, then the fall and sin, and then with the covenant of grace.

The subject that we have undertaken in this article is one about which long books have been written. Obviously, therefore, some limitations are in order. The principal limitation that we have imposed upon the subject as taken up in this article is that we will be looking at the various issues involved from the perspective of Southern Presbyterianism, in which tradition this writer was educated and has conducted his ministry.

With this understanding, then, we will be considering the teaching of the Westminster Standards on the covenant, particularly in the light of Southern Presbyterian theology, as having to do with man’s estate as created, the arrangement known as the covenant of works, objections to the idea of the covenant of works,

and the covenant of grace. In connection with the latter, we will also be dealing with certain aspects of the language of the Standards (“offer” and “condition”), the important issue of with whom the covenant of grace was made, and the administrations of the covenant of grace.

Man’s Estate as Created

The estate of man as created is described in the Confession of Faith, Chapter IV, section two, in these words:

After God had made all other creatures, He created man, male and female, with reasonable and immortal souls, endued with knowledge, righteousness, and true holiness, after His own image; having the law of God written in their hearts, and power to fulfill it....

In this estate, according to the WCF, VII:1, man, as a reasonable creature, was obliged to render obedience to God as the Creator. Nevertheless, man, even by rendering such obedience, “could never have any fruition of Him in terms of blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God’s part.”

Historically—and particularly in Southern Presbyterian circles—the estate thus described was generally considered as one in which man was “under the conditions of pure moral government, apart entirely from all reference to any sort of covenant arrangement.”⁶ There are, however, some differences of understanding as to the physical circumstances in which Adam lived prior to the introduction of this covenant arrangement. Dr. Stuart Robison, for example, makes a distinction between what he calls “man’s *primal* estate at his creation and his *subsequent* estate in Eden”:

This distinction is very plainly brought out in the record. For having given an account of man’s creation and the peculiar endowments of his nature, it proceeds to declare that *after* that—we know not how long, it may have been a century—Jehovah having planted a garden,

6. Francis R. Beattie, *The Presbyterian Standards*, Southern Presbyterian Press: Greenville, South Carolina (Reprint of the 1896 edition), p. 89.

with its tree of life and tree of knowledge, TOOK the man and PUT HIM into the garden. And subsequently, after the fall, it is particularly said,—he drove out the man to till the *ground from which he was taken*. That this is no overstraining of the language is made evident also, by the fact that the sacred writer, in beginning the history of the Eden transaction, begins with it to apply a new title to God. Before, the title is simply “*Elohim*” God; now it is the title which is ever afterwards used to express his covenant relation to man, “*Jehovah Elohim*” the Jehovah God.⁷

Dr. Francis Beattie, on the other hand, considers that the fact “Man at first was placed in what is called Paradise, which consisted in what is known as the garden of Eden ... [where] His pleasant task ... was to till and dress the ground, and so keep it in order,” belongs to the “circumstances of man’s primitive condition.” Beattie also mentions that in this “primitive condition,” man was “given full liberty to eat of all the fruits of the earth, for at first there seems to have been no prohibition such as the subsequent covenant presented.” Moreover, it is his view that marriage was instituted in these circumstances, and the Sabbath, as a day of rest and as a season for worship, was appointed. “By this means,” he writes, “the great creative process was kept in memory, and special opportunity given to man for communion with God. For this communion, no mediator would be needed in this holy, unfallen state, for therein man would have direct access to his Maker.”⁸ This explanation would appear to be, on the face of it, more agreeable than that given by Robinson in terms of the statement of the Larger Catechism, question and answer 20, that,

The providence of God toward man in the estate in which he was created, was the placing him in paradise, appointing him to dress it, giving him liberty to eat of the fruit of the earth; putting the creatures under his dominion, and ordaining marriage for his help; affording him communion with himself; [and] instituting the Sabbath.

7. Stuart Robinson, *Discourses of Redemption*, Presbyterian Committee of Publication: Richmond, Virginia, 1866, pp. 59, 60.

8. Beattie, *The Presbyterian Standards*, pp. 90, 91.

Beattie goes on to assert:

Man in this state was possessed of a completely endowed mental, moral, and religious nature. God's law was, so to speak, written in his heart so that he had thereby an immediate knowledge of that law in relation to the divine moral government under which he, by the very fact of his creation, was placed. Hence, man had not to await instruction and experience in order to constitute him an intelligent, moral, and religious being.⁹

Dr. James Henley Thornwell, perhaps the most highly esteemed of all the Southern Presbyterian theologians, deals with this "primitive" condition of man in two lectures—one on "Man," the other on "Moral Government"—that are found in the first volume of his *Collected Writings*. Thornwell, after a discussion of those characteristics that distinguish man as man (reason and will)—characteristics that placed him at the head of the creation—and the condition in which man came forth (mature and civilized, holy and happy, but mutable), proceeds to deal with the end of man's creation.¹⁰ This, of course, as even a casually catechized Presbyterian knows, is "to glorify God, and to enjoy Him forever" (Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q&A 1).

He was to render to the Almighty in his own name, and in the name of all the creatures over whom he had been constituted the head, the tribute of adoration and gratitude which the Divine goodness demanded. He was the high priest of nature.... He stood as the head of an immense family of worshippers. Creation was a vast temple. Every living and lifeless thing brought its offering to the altar, and man was to present the grateful oblation to the Maker and Preserver of them all. It was a noble, a sublime position. To know was to love, and to love was to enjoy.¹¹

9. Beattie, *The Presbyterian Standards*, pp. 90, 91.

10. James Henley Thornwell, *Collected Writings: Volume One: Theological*, edited by James B. Adger, Presbyterian Committee of Publication: Richmond, Virginia, 1893, pp. 223-263.

11. Thornwell, *Collected Writings: Volume One*, pp. 247, 248.

Man's relation to God, however, was only that of a servant, and obedience to the will of God, though a perpetual obligation, could never bring the servant to a state in which he would be secure in his standing before God.

He was a creature; a servant under the moral law as the rule and guide of his obedience; bound to glorify God in perfect conformity with its requisitions, and authorized to expect the continuance of his present happiness in the sense of God's approbation as long as he persevered in the way of faithfulness.... As long as he was faithful to his Master, he had a right to expect that his Master would protect him and bless him. There could be no death while there was no sin. But the servant must obey from himself. As a servant, man could never look to any interposition of God that should destroy the contingency of his holiness.... There could never come a period in which he could have any claim upon God to render his integrity indefectible, or to draw him into any closer relations with himself. Whatever arrangements might be made with reference to these ends must spring from the pure benevolence of the Creator; they must be the offspring of grace and not of debt. Man must always stand or fall by his own obedience in the exercise of his own free-will. Through the law of habit a constant course of obedience would considerably diminish the dangers of transgression, but the possibility would always remain; and whatever security man might compass through the energy of will in fixing the type of character, he must always stand in that relation to God which measures his expectations by his service.¹²

Had it been the case that many offspring of our first parents had been born into the world under this arrangement, each would have stood in precisely the same relation to the Creator as Adam. Moreover, each would have been responsible only for himself, there being no federal headship involved. Any failure in perfect conformity to the moral government under which each and all would have lived would have brought the delinquent into condemnation with no provision for restoration, but would not have affected the legal status of any other person. On the other hand,

12. Thornwell, *Collected Writings: Volume One*, pp. 248, 249.

each and all would have lived under a perpetual possibility of moral lapse and consequent condemnation.

This, then, is the understanding of the teaching of the WCF (VII:1) that the distance between God as Creator and man as creature is so great that, though man, as a reasonable creature, owed obedience to God as his Creator, yet he never could have experienced any realization of God as his “blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God’s part, which He hath been pleased to express by way of covenant.” This covenant, which the Confession refers to as “The first covenant made with man,” is styled, as we have seen, as either “a covenant of works” (WCF VII:2 and XIX:1 and 6; Larger Catechism 97), or a “covenant of life” (Larger Catechism Q&A 20; Shorter Catechism Q&A 12).¹³ But regardless of the terminology involved, this is, unquestionably, one of the more controversial aspects of the doctrine of the covenant in the Westminster Standards.

The Covenant of Works

The statement of the Confession of Faith regarding the covenant of works, found in the chapter “Of God’s Covenant with Man,” is brief and to the point:

The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam; and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and perpetual obedience (VII:2).

13. The Scottish theologian John Dick, whose *Lectures on Theology* drew commendation from Archibald Alexander of Princeton as being the best book of systematic theology then published in the English language, and was widely used in Presbyterian circles in the early nineteenth century, objected to the terminology “covenant of life,” asserting that “this designation does not express its peculiar character, and points out no distinctive between it and the Covenant of Grace, the same blessing being promised in both. It is more commonly called the Covenant of Works, and this denomination is evidently appropriate; shewing us at once what is its nature, and in what respect it differs from the other covenant which bestows its reward not upon him who works, but upon him who believes” (*Lectures on Theology*; Philadelphia: W.G. Wardle, 1844, p. 455).

This is enlarged upon somewhat in chapter nineteen (“Of the Law of God”), where it is taught that,

God gave to Adam a law, as a covenant of works, by which He bound him and all his posterity, to personal, entire, exact, and perpetual obedience, promised life upon the fulfilling, and threatened death upon the breach of it, and endued him with power and ability to keep it (XIX:1).

And in WCF IV:2, though neither the terminology “covenant of works” nor “covenant of life” is employed, the Confession refers to what is obviously comprehended under that terminology:

Beside this law written in their hearts [cf. the first portion of this section of chapter four], they [i.e., man created as male and female] received a command, not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; which while they kept, they were happy in their communion with God, and had dominion over the creatures.

The Larger and Shorter Catechisms, as noted before, employ the terminology “covenant of life”; but the reference clearly is to the covenant of works. In Larger Catechism Q&A 20, it is asserted that “The providence of God toward man in the estate in which he was created,” culminated in God’s “entering into a covenant of life with him [man], upon condition of personal, perfect, and perpetual obedience, of which [i.e., this covenant of life] the tree of life was a pledge; and forbidding to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, upon pain of death.” With only slight changes in the wording, and the omission of any mention of the tree of life, substantially the same language is used in Shorter Catechism, Q&A 12.

For the most part, those who have held to the idea of the covenant of works have maintained also the view that a covenant is (to quote the aforementioned Francis Beattie) “a compact, a bargain, an arrangement, a constitution or a treaty ... [and] its essential features are certain promises made upon certain conditions.”¹⁴

14. Beattie, *The Presbyterian Standards*, p. 94.

Both the Confession of Faith and the Catechisms, of course, use the term “condition” with reference to the covenant of works. Neither, however, uses words such as “compact,” “bargain,” “arrangement,” or “agreement” in connection with the covenant of works. The *Catechism for Young Children* (Q&A 22) does define a covenant, generally, as “An agreement between two or more persons.” But while this catechism is widely used to instruct children too young to master effectively the Shorter Catechism, it is neither a product of Westminster nor an official standard of the churches. And in terms of the nature of this “compact,” or “constitution” (which term probably more closely fits the conception of the covenant of works held by those in the tradition of Southern Presbyterianism), it is definitely stated by Thornwell that this “was not a covenant in the sense that man was at liberty to decline its terms.... He had no stipulations to make; he was simply to receive what God enjoined.”¹⁵

Unquestionably, the Standards, in their teaching on the covenant of works and the covenant of grace, view “covenant” as unto a certain goal. Dr. Thornwell refers to this in his lecture on “The Covenant of Works.”

Though God in justice might have left man to the operation of a pure moral government, conducted by the rules of distributive justice, and might have forever retained him in the attitude of a servant, yet the Divine goodness seems to have contemplated from the very beginning a nearer and tenderer relationship, and a destiny of inconceivably greater dignity and glory than mere justice would or could have awarded.¹⁶

This introduces the note of graciousness into the contemplated arrangement—a consideration that pervades the discussion of the covenant of works. Robert Lewis Dabney asserts, for example, that “God’s act entering into a covenant with Adam, if it be substantiated, will be found to be one of pure grace and condescen-

15. Thornwell, *Collected Writings: Volume One*, pp. 268, 269.

16. Thornwell, *Collected Writings: Volume One*, p. 264.

sion.”¹⁷ Francis Beattie states that “The covenant relation, even in its first form, was gracious in its nature. While its condition was legal and required obedience, still the constitution itself and the result which it aimed to secure were gracious.”¹⁸ And Stuart Robinson describes the institution of the covenant of works in these words:

Now, the record proceeds to inform us that, by special act of *God's grace* [emphasis ours], this second order of constitution was appointed for man. Instead of leaving the Adam race under the original and natural law of his existence to stand or fall, irrecoverably, on the myriads of trials of each one of all the generations; God entered into a covenant of life with him conditioned upon one special act of obedience. He placed him under a special dispensation; that is, he changed the original moral constitution under which he, simply as a creature, stood towards his Creator. He surrounded him with every element of blessedness: taking away all temptation to disobedience: and, laying upon him the obligation of abstinence from a single tree of all the thousands that surrounded him, he put him to the test whether he was indeed willing to perform all duty.¹⁹

More specifically, the graciousness of the covenant of works is maintained as having been manifested in the purpose of elevating man from the status of servant to that of son. Beattie brings this out in his discussion of the graciousness of the covenant of works.²⁰ Dabney conceives this as the promised reward for the probationary obedience provided for in the covenant of works, a reward that, “while a reward for right works, was far more liberal than the works entitled to; and this was an adoption of life, transferring man from the position of a servant to that of a son.”²¹ And Thornwell, who treats of this matter very fully in his lecture on

17. Robert Lewis Dabney, *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, Zondervan Publishing House: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1972 (Reprint of the 1878 edition), p. 302.

18. Beattie, *The Presbyterian Standards*, p. 93.

19. Robinson, *Discourses of Redemption*, p. 63.

20. Beattie, *The Presbyterian Standards*, pp. 93, 94.

21. Dabney, *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, p. 302.

“The Covenant of Works,” characterizes the graciousness of this covenant in these words:

The ground of a son’s right to the blessings he enjoys is the love of the father, and the principle on which he possesses it is that of inheritance and not of debt. To be a subject in whom God may express the infinite goodness of His own nature, to be an heir of Him who is fulness of joy and at whose right hand there are pleasures for evermore, is certainly to be exalted to the highest excellence of which a creature can be possessed . . . a son has unlimited access to his father’s presence. His communion with him is full and rich and free. The conception of such a purpose, so far transcending all the demands of justice, is a conspicuous display of the grace and goodness which have characterized all the dispensations of God in relation to our race.²²

It will be noted from the above Dabney quote, that he introduces into this discussion the matter of adoption and appears to equate this with the transferring of Adam from the status of servant to that of son. Dabney does not further pursue this. Thornwell, however, does:

In order that the change from the condition of a servant to that of a son might take place, it was necessary that the man should prove himself faithful in the first relation. Adoption was to be a reward of grace, but still it was to be a reward. It was not a favour to be conferred in defiance of the relations that naturally subsisted betwixt God and His creature. Man was not to be arbitrarily promoted. His dignity was to come as the fruit of his obedience. It was much more than he deserved, much more than he could deserve. But in the plenitude of His own bounty, God proposed to add this boon of adoption over and above all that man was entitled to receive for his service if he should prove faithful to his trust. The purpose, therefore, to adopt the servant into the family and make him an heir, introduces an important modification of the general principles of moral government in the limitation of the period of probation, and this limitation introduces a new feature in the Divine economy, even that of justification....

22. Thornwell, *Collected Writings: Volume One*, pp. 264, 265.

The very essence of justification is to produce as its effect indefectibility of holiness.... The essential notion of justification is, that obedience for a limited time shall place the subject beyond the possibility of guilt.... Adoption is grounded in justification. The state of a son in which man is placed in such relations to God as to secure him from the possibility of defection is founded upon that limitation of obedience which gathers up the whole immortality in its probationary character into a brief compass, and then makes its real complexion depend upon the fidelity or infidelity displayed in the trial. Adoption, in other words, depends upon justification, and justification is unintelligible without the contraction of the period of trial. The very moment trial ceases the attitude of a servant ceases, a new relation must necessarily supervene; and God has constituted that new relation according to the riches of His grace.²³

This, substantially, is what is understood as being that “life” promised “to Adam; and in him to his posterity” (cf. WCF VII:2), under the terms of the covenant of works. “Confirmed in holiness; admitted into the closest communion with God; treated as a child; honoured as an heir; what more could God have done for him?” asks Thornwell.

This was life, eternal life; and this life in both its elements would have accrued from his justification. Temporary obedience, being accepted as perpetual innocence, would have secured perpetual innocence; and probation being closed by a full compliance with the conditions—which is justification—would have rendered man a fit subject for receiving, as he was able to bear it, from the infinite fullness of God. To sum up all in a single word, the promise to Adam

23. Thornwell, *Collected Writings: Volume One*, pp. 266, 267. It should be noted that the view that the status of man, under what Thornwell and others term “moral government,” prior to the institution of the covenant of works, was no more than servant, and not a son of God, was not universally held by Southern Presbyterians. Dr. John L. Girardeau, who gave particular attention to the doctrine of adoption, differed with Thornwell on this point (cf. John L. Girardeau, *Discussions of Theological Questions*, The Presbyterian Committee of Publications: Richmond, Virginia, 1905, pp. 429, 430).

was eternal life; and eternal life includes the notions of indefectible holiness and of adoption, which are inseparably linked together.²⁴

The whole of this, of course, is founded upon Adam's position as the representative, or federal head, of the race. Adam's federal headship is explicit in WCF VII:2, in the wording, "and in him to his posterity," speaking of the promise to Adam; as well, in Larger Catechism, Q&A 22: "The covenant being made with Adam as a publick person, not for himself only; but for his posterity, all mankind descending from him by ordinary generation, sinned in him, and fell with him in that first transgression." Additionally, in WCF VI:3, what Beattie refers to as "the natural rootship"²⁵ of Adam is referred to:

They [i.e., our first parents] being the root of all mankind, the guilt of this sin was imputed; and the same death in sin, and corrupted nature, conveyed to all their posterity descending from them by ordinary generation.²⁶

The ultimate importance of Adam's covenant headship, though, is to be found in the analogy that Scripture makes between him and our Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Romans 5:12-19; I Corinthians 15:21, 22, 45-47). Thornwell draws that analogy in these words:

From the nature of the dispensation under which the second Adam was placed, we may learn that which pertained to the first; and the result of the comparison will be the confirmation of every doctrine we have stated in relation to our first father's posture. *First*, Christ was a public person; so was Adam. Each represented his seed. *Secondly*, Christ's probation was limited; it was confined to the period of

24. Thornwell, *Collected Writings: Volume One*, p. 290. (Cf. also, Dabney, *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, pp. 303, 304.)

25. Beattie, *The Presbyterian Standards*, p. 95.

26. The nature of the relationship between Adam and the race of mankind is a matter of some controversy. A brief discussion, including a description of the various views, of this may be found in Dr. Robert L. Reymond's *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, Thomas Nelson Publishers: Nashville, 1998, pp. 434-439.

his humiliation. Adam's, to preserve the analogy, must have been limited also. *Thirdly*, Christ had the promise of justification to life as the reward of his temporary obedience; the same must have been the case with Adam.²⁷

The Confession of Faith (XIX:2) maintains that the “law,” which “God gave to Adam ... as a covenant of works” (WCF XIX:1), “after his fall, continued to be a perfect rule of righteousness; and, as such, was delivered by God upon Mount Sinai, in ten commandments. This law, commonly called moral” (XIX:3), “doth for ever bind all, as well justified persons, as others, to the obedience thereof.” WCF XIX:6 and Larger Catechism Q&A 97 state that those who are regenerate and true believers in Christ, are “delivered from the moral law as a covenant of works.” Nevertheless, “besides the general uses thereof common to them with all men”—i.e., “as a rule of life informing them of the will of God, and their duty ... discovering also the sinful pollutions of their nature, hearts, and lives; so as, examining themselves thereby, they may come to further conviction of, humiliation for, and hatred against sin, together with a clearer insight of the need they have for Christ, and the perfection of His obedience”—besides all this, the law is of special use to believers in Christ “to shew them how much they are bound to Christ for his fulfilling it, and enduring the curse thereof in their stead, and for their good; and thereby to provoke them to more thankfulness, and to express the same in their greater care to conform themselves thereunto as the rule of their obedience.”

Dr. Robert Reymond refers to this as “The Covenant’s Continuing Normativeness,” and asserts that “The covenant of works reflects the fact that the most fundamental obligation of man the creature to God his Creator always has been, is now, and always will be obedience to the will of the Creator. As *covenant* creature (and therefore always as either covenant *keeper* or covenant *breaker*), man is always ultimately related to God on a *legal* (covenantal) basis.”²⁸ And R.L. Dabney warns:

27. Thornwell, *Collected Writings: Volume One*, pp. 288, 289.

28. Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, p. 439.

Let us then beware of how we speak of the covenant of works as in every sense abrogated; for it is under that very covenant that the second Adam has acted, in purchasing our redemption. That is the covenant which He actually fulfills, for us. Again, it is that covenant under which the sinner out of Christ now dies, just as the first sinner was condemned under it. . . . Some, even of the Reformed, have been so incautious as to conclude, that by the rule that “a compact broken on one side, is broken for both sides,” transgression abrogates the legal covenant wholly, as soon as it is committed. One plain question exposes this: By what authority, then, does the Ruler punish the transgressor after the law is broken? If, for instance, a murder abrogated the legal covenant between the murderer and the commonwealth, from the hour it was committed, I presume that he would be exceedingly mystified to know under what law he was going to be hung! The obvious statement is this: The transgression has indeed terminated the sinner’s right to the sanction of reward; but it has not terminated his obligation to obey, nor to the penal sanction.²⁹

The Confession of Faith (XIX:7) deals with the matter thus:

Neither are the forementioned uses of the law contrary to the grace of the Gospel, but do sweetly comply with it; the Spirit of Christ subduing and enabling the will of man to do that freely, and cheerfully, which the will of God, revealed in the law, requireth to be done.

Objections to the Covenant of Works

As noted previously, the Westminster teaching on the covenant of works has been, and continues to be, a matter of some controversy. As is doubtless well known to any reader of this journal, Reverend H. Hoeksema raised a number of objections against this doctrine in the chapter of his *Reformed Dogmatics* entitled “The Covenant with Adam.”³⁰ Some of these objections we find to be less weighty than others. We, for example, do not believe that the characterization of the Westminster view of covenant as “an es-

29. Dabney, *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, p. 636.

30. Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, Reformed Free Publishing Association: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1966, pp. 214-226.

tablished *agreement* between Adam and his Creator”³¹ is altogether warranted. As pointed out previously, neither the Confession of Faith nor the Catechisms use the language of “agreement.” And some of the terms used by adherents to Westminster in this connection—“constitution,” for instance, or, “arrangement”—are capable of being interpreted without resort to the idea of a bargain or agreement. As to the objection that “the covenant of works teaches that Adam could merit something more, something special, by obeying the commandment of the Lord,”³² this seems to be a misunderstanding of the emphasis of the Westminster Standards and of most of what has been taught on the basis of the Standards concerning this doctrine. The circumstances, after all, were not that Adam proposed this arrangement. Adam was placed in the arrangement of the covenant of works by Divine fiat. And for God to have bestowed a promised blessing upon Adam when the terms of the arrangement were fulfilled would have resulted only from God’s faithfulness to the performance of an obligation that He had imposed upon Himself. We will grant that the language of the Standards in WCF VII:2 and XIX:1, which speak of a promise of life made to Adam upon the fulfillment of the condition of “perfect and personal obedience,” goes beyond what is “expressly set down in Scripture” (WCF I:6); but we believe that it falls within the bounds of that which “by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture.” Nor is it our understanding of the references made by expositors of the Westminster system to “eternal life” as the substance of the promise, that this would have involved the translation of Adam and Eve “to a kind of immortal, heavenly glory,” of the sort described by Reverend Hoeksema.³³ Thornwell writes:

The term [i.e., “life”] in Scripture not only indicates existence, but also the property of well-being; it is existence in a state of happiness. Eternal life is the same as eternal well-being or happiness.³⁴

31. Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, p. 217.

32. Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, p. 218.

33. Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, p. 219.

34. Thornwell, *Collected Writings: Volume One*, p. 289.

One aspect of Reverend Hoeksema's criticism of the idea of the covenant of works that we do find compelling is that which objects to the notion of "the covenant relation as something incidental and additional to man's life in relation to God."³⁵ This writer, since first becoming acquainted with Hoeksema's writings many years ago while in seminary, has had especially a strong affinity for his development of the idea of the covenant as a bond of "living fellowship and friendship," which is not a means to an end, but an end in itself—a fundamental and essential relationship that is perfectly realized in the final revelation of the tabernacle of God with men in the new heaven and the new earth. Whether this conception of the covenant is so completely at odds with the doctrine of the Westminster Standards as to be incapable of reconciliation is a question that goes beyond what we conceive as our task in this paper.

Of greater concern is the fact that some aspects of the views of those who are partisan to what is known as the "Federal Vision" almost appear to have been lifted from Reverend Hoeksema (though they do not seem to be giving him credit; not that he would want it, given where they are going with their teachings).³⁶ This is not an issue we conceive as being within the scope of this paper, though it would be interesting to see this matter engaged by someone from the perspective of the Protestant Reformed Churches.

The Covenant of Grace

"The scheme of redemption, otherwise called the Covenant of Grace, is the answer which God gives to the question, How shall a sinner be justified and established in holiness forever? As the Covenant of Works was the answer to the question, How shall a moral creature be justified and confirmed?"³⁷

35. Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, p. 219.

36. The views of several men involved in the Federal Vision movement are taken up, in some detail, in Dr. Guy Prentiss Waters' recent book, *The Federal Vision and Covenant Theology* (P&R Publishing: Phillipsburg, New Jersey, 2006).

37. Thornwell, *Collected Writings: Volume Two*, p. 18.

As mentioned previously, while the Larger and Shorter Catechisms trace the sequence of events from the covenant of works, through the fall and its consequences, to the covenant of grace, the Confession of Faith deals with the covenant principally in one chapter without regard to the historical sequence. The transition in the Confession of Faith from VII:2 to VII:3, therefore, is rather abrupt. Nothing is said, in Chapter VII, about the circumstances of the fall. It is simply stated that

Man, by his fall, having made himself incapable of life by that covenant [i.e., the Covenant of Works], the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the covenant of grace; wherein He freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ; requiring of them faith in Him, that they may be saved, and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto eternal life His Holy Spirit, to make them willing, and able to believe (WCF VII:3).

The Larger and Shorter Catechisms, on the other hand, after having dealt with the fall, sin, and its consequences (LC Q&A 21-29; SC Q&A 13-19) introduce the covenant of grace with the question, “Doth (or, ‘Did’ in SC 20) God leave all mankind to perish in the estate of sin and misery?” To this question, the Larger Catechism gives the reply:

God doth not leave all men to perish in the estate of sin and misery into which they fell by breach of the first covenant, commonly called the Covenant of Works; but of his mere love and mercy delivereth the elect out of it, and bringeth them into an estate of salvation by the second covenant, commonly called the Covenant of Grace.

Shorter Catechism, Q&A 20, gives substantially the same answer, but with emphasis on the fact that the election of some to everlasting life is “from all eternity,” and making specific mention that their deliverance from sin and misery and their incorporation into an estate of salvation is accomplished through a “Redeemer.”

Larger Catechism, Q&A 31, asks the critical question, “With whom was the covenant of grace made?” And the answer is that

“The covenant of grace was made with Christ as the second Adam, and in him with all the elect as his seed.”

Larger Catechism, Q&A 32, addresses the manner in which the grace of God is manifested in the second covenant:

The grace of God is manifested in the second covenant, in that he freely provideth and offereth to sinners a Mediator [who is specifically identified in LC Q&A 36 as the Lord Jesus Christ, the only Mediator of the Covenant of Grace], and life and salvation by him; and requiring faith as the condition to interest them in him, promiseth and giveth his Holy Spirit to all his elect, to work in them that faith, with all other saving graces; and to enable them unto all holy obedience, as the evidence of the truth of their faith and thankfulness to God, and as the way which he hath appointed them to salvation.

There are some significant differences among theologians as to the nature of what is in view in these portions of the Standards. Dr. R. A. Webb, representing one of these points of view, maintained that,

The parties to this covenant of grace are the three persons of the Godhead.... This covenant is made between them, *about sinful men*. Sinners are not contracting parties. They are neither metaphysically nor morally capable of contracting with Almighty God.... The party of the first part in this covenant of grace is the Father, and the parties of the second part are the Son and the Holy Spirit. It is an inter-trinitarian agreement concerning the salvation of sinful men.³⁸

R.L. Dabney, on the other hand, insisted that there should be a distinction made between what he and others referred to as the “Covenant of Redemption,” and the “Covenant of Grace.” The former, according to Dabney’s understanding, exists from eternity between the Father and the Son. The latter is the “Gospel promise of salvation on terms of true faith offered to sinners

38. Robert Alexander Webb, *Christian Salvation: Its Doctrine and Experience*, Presbyterian Committee of Publication: Richmond, Virginia, 1921, p. 18.

through Christ.” Of the former, “Christ is the principal party”; but in the latter, “He is surety.” The former “was conditioned, on Christ’s meritorious work.” The latter “is unconditioned: its benefits are offered to believers without price.” In the former, believers were not parties. In the latter, they are parties in their Surety, Christ.

The Covenant of Redemption between the Father and the Son, I hold to be the real covenant transaction, being a free and optional compact between two equals, containing a stipulation which turns on a proper, causative condition, and bearing no relation to time, as it includes no mutable contingency or condition based on the uncertain will of creatures. The Covenant of Grace (so called) is a dispensation of promise to man, arising out of and dependent on the Covenant of Redemption.³⁹

Whether this distinction can be drawn from the language of the Confession and Catechisms—particularly LC Q&A 31—is doubtful. Beattie, while recognizing that the distinction between a “covenant of redemption” and the covenant of works is made by theologians, stated that “The Standards do not distinctly recognize this twofold aspect of the Covenant.”⁴⁰ We would agree. Question and Answer 31 of the Larger Catechism clearly makes Christ party to what it calls the covenant of grace, and not simply the Surety. And though *all the elect* are included, it is only as *in Him*, and as *His seed*.

Also clear, from the Confession of Faith and the Catechisms alike, is that this covenant and the promise attached are to do only with those who have been, from all eternity, elected to everlasting life in Christ – “those that are ordained unto eternal life” (WCF VII:3). The covenant of grace is made with Christ and the elect in Him, period.

39. Dabney, *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, pp. 432-434.

40. Beattie, *The Presbyterian Standards*, p. 113.

Of Free “Offers” and Conditions

The language of WCF VII:3, which says that God “freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ; requiring of them faith in Him, that they may be saved,” and that of LC Q&A 32, which says that God “freely provideth and offereth to sinners a Mediator, and life and salvation by him; and requiring faith as the condition to interest them in him, etc.,” has been stretched, of course, to turn the gospel itself into a general, well-meant, or sincere, offer of salvation to all men upon condition of faith.⁴¹ That this notion cannot be honestly formulated from the language of the Confession and Catechism needs no more convincing proof, however, than the fact that the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States in 1942 (in the midst of the long slide to apostasy that at length overtook the church of Thornwell, Dabney, and Beattie) added to the Confession of Faith a chapter—“Of the Gospel”—that makes the “free offer” theology explicit. This chapter was removed from the Confession as adopted by the Presbyterian Church in America at the time of the separation from the PCUS in 1973 (though, unfortunately, the theology, in the judgment of this writer, not only remained, but prevailed). We here reproduce this chapter in its entirety to demonstrate that it was adopted exactly to make up perceived deficiencies in the original Westminster Symbols.

1. God in infinite and perfect love, having provided in the covenant of grace, through the mediation and sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ, a way of life and salvation, sufficient for and adapted to the whole lost race of man, doth freely offer this salvation to all men in the gospel.

41. Alas, even the revered Thornwell appears to have been guilty of this, and his writings, in this respect, give evidence of the same kind of confusion that one finds amongst the “free offer” crowd at The Banner of Truth. They have turned this dogma of the “free offer” into a fetish, consigning those who refuse to rub their beloved talisman to the outer darkness of hyper-Calvinism. (Cf. Thornwell, *Collected Writings: Volume Two*, particularly the article on “Election and Reprobation,” pp. 103-201.)

2. In the gospel God declares his love for the world and his desire that all men should be saved; reveals fully and clearly the only way of salvation; promises eternal life to all who truly repent and believe in Christ; invites and commands all to embrace the offered mercy; and by his Spirit accompanying the word pleads with men to accept his gracious invitation.

3. It is the duty and privilege of everyone who hears the gospel immediately to accept its merciful provisions; and they who continue in impenitence and unbelief incur aggravated guilt and perish by their own fault.

4. Since there is no other way of salvation than that revealed in the gospel, and since in the divinely established and ordinary method of grace faith cometh by hearing the word of God, Christ hath commissioned his church to go into all the world and to make disciples of all nations. All believers are, therefore, under obligation to sustain the ordinances of the Christian religion where they are already established, and to contribute by their prayers, gifts, and personal efforts to the extension of the kingdom of Christ throughout the whole world.⁴²

Dr. Morton Smith is, perhaps, a bit too generous in his observation that “The tone of these two chapters [note: another, equally objectionable, chapter, ‘Of the Holy Spirit,’ was adopted at the same time] is certainly less Calvinistic than is the rest of the *Confession of Faith*.” Dr. Smith does assert, however, that “They compromise the distinctive position of the rest of the *Confession of Faith*.”⁴³ E.T. Thompson, one of the leading modernist voices in the PCUS, in recounting these changes, noted, approvingly, that

One well-known minister in the church had pled: “Let us take down the picture of God which Calvinism has hung in [the Standards], presenting to our view a God who has unchangeably elected some men to eternal life and unchangeably ordained the rest of mankind to eternal death.” This, he now felt, the addition of the two new chap-

42. Green, *A Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, pp. 72, 73.

43. Morton H. Smith, *How Is the Gold Become Dim: The Decline of the Presbyterian Church, U.S., As Reflected in Its Assembly Actions*; Premier Printing Company: Jackson, Mississippi, 1973, p. 53.

ters to the Confession had done. “Glory be to God! Amen! And Amen!” he exclaimed....⁴⁴

Dr. J.B. Green attempts to argue that the change wrought through the addition of the chapter on the gospel was meant to make explicit what is only implied in the Westminster Standards. This argument, however, will not wash, as is obvious from what Green himself went on to write:

The Westminster Assembly emphasized the love of God for the elect. This chapter was not designed to correct that emphasis but to supplement it. The fact of the love of God for all mankind underlies the whole statement of the Calvinistic creed (sic). The revisers thought that this general love of God and His call to all men should have clear recognition. Hence this chapter.⁴⁵

We have taken this little side trip to demonstrate what is the fruit of the “free offer” theology and the type of covenantal conditionalism that often goes along with it. The revision of the Confession of Faith adopted by the PCUS in 1942 explicitly links a universal, well-meant offer of salvation to the doctrine of the covenant of grace. And whatever else one may think of this statement, or of those who adopted it, there is found here ample proof of the fact that only by reading into the original language of the Standards something that is not there is one able to build a theology of the covenant of grace that embraces a well-meant offer of salvation to all men conditional upon repentance and faith. Green’s claim that the revision was intended to make explicit what is implicit in the Standards is disingenuous. What the revision did make explicit, however, was the cumulative effect of an imputation to the Standards of what the Standards do not teach, particularly in the “offer” language used in WCF VII:3 and LC Q&A 32.

In terms of the idea of conditionalism, anyone attempting to construct the theology of a conditional covenant on the basis of

44. Ernest Trice Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South: Volume Three: 1890-1972*, John Knox Press: Richmond, Virginia, 1973, p. 492.

45. Green, *A Harmony of the Westminster Standards*, p. 71.

Westminster has precious little ground upon which to take a stand. Indeed, there is not even what could be considered a toehold. The sole reference to any condition in connection with the covenant of grace is in Larger Catechism, Q&A 32. In the answer to the question, “How is the grace of God manifested in the second covenant?,” Catechism speaks of “faith as the condition to interest sinners” in the Mediator, Christ. But the clear emphasis of the answer is that, inasmuch as God requires “faith as the condition to interest them in him,” He also “promiseth and giveth his Holy Spirit to all his elect, to work in them that faith.” And this is consistent with WCF XIV:1, which states:

The grace of faith, whereby the elect are enabled to believe to the saving of their souls, is the work of the Spirit of Christ in their hearts....

Thornwell made this observation concerning the meaning of the word “condition” as used in the Standards:

By a *condition* is meant that for sake of which the blessing is bestowed, that to which it is promised, and without which it would not be bestowed. It is not a value received for the blessing, or a strict and literal equivalent; the blessing becomes due it only by the grace and sovereign appointment of God. The term *condition* is sometimes employed to express that which is prior in the order of nature or of time. In this sense it is what Boston calls a *condition of connection*; it denotes that one of them must take place before another in consequence of their connection in the scheme of grace. Thus, in this sense, faith is a condition of justification; not that it is something to be done, for the sake of which we are justified, but we must be united to Christ before we can become partakers of his everlasting righteousness.⁴⁶

Dabney notes the contention over whether faith may properly be called a “condition”:

The question has been keenly agitated between Calvinists, whether Faith itself should be spoken of as a condition of the cov-

46. Thornwell, *Collected Writings: Volume Two*, p. 393.

enant. One party has denied, because they supposed that the language which represented man as performing a condition of his own salvation would make an inlet for human merit. But it is most manifest that there is a sense in which Faith is the condition, in all such passages as John iii:16; Acts viii:37; John xi:26; Mark xvi:16. No human wit can evade the fact, that here God proposes to man something for him to do, which if done, will secure redemption; if neglected, will ensure damnation—and that something is in one sense a condition. But of what kind? Paul everywhere contrasts the condition of works, and the condition of faith. This contrast will be sufficiently established, and all danger of human merits being intruded will be obviated, if it be observed that Faith is only the appointed instrument for receiving free grace purchased by our Surety. It owes its organic virtue as such, to God's mere appointment, not to the virtue of its own nature. In the Covenant of Works, the fulfillment of the condition on man's part earned the result, justification by its proper moral merit. In the Covenant of Grace, the condition has no moral merit to earn the promised grace, being merely an act of receptivity. In the Covenant of Works, man was required to fulfil the condition in his own strength. In the Covenant of Grace, strength is given to him to believe, from God.⁴⁷

In some respects, this language is not such as we might be inclined to use. Nevertheless, there is nothing in this language, as such, that gives support to the idea of a conditional covenant in which the grace of God is extended to the reprobate, or that the works of sinful men are savingly efficacious in any respect whatsoever. Certainly, this is not the teaching of the Larger Catechism, Q&A 32.

With Christ and His Seed

By faith, an interest is gained in Christ, the “only Mediator of the covenant of grace” (LC Q&A 36). Thus, an interest is gained in Him with whom the covenant of grace was made. In this connection, Question and Answer 31 of the Larger Catechism is explicit and its meaning is absolutely clear: “The covenant of grace

47. Dabney, *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, pp. 438, 439.

was made with Christ as the second Adam, and *in him* with all the elect as his seed.”

Equally clear is what theologians in the Westminster tradition historically have made of this teaching. “In this covenant,” says R.A. Webb,

the Father agrees to equip the Son with a human nature necessary to perform his redeeming task, to plentifully sustain him in his undertaking and give him a people for his reward, organized into a kingdom. In it the Son engaged to become incarnate, to obey perfectly both the penal and preceptive requirements of that moral law which men had violated—in short, to make an atonement. In it the Spirit engaged to convict, convert and sanctify sinful men and present them to the Father a holy people, without any moral spot, or blemish, or wrinkle, or any such thing. In short, the issues of this transaction hang upon the *obedience* of the Son and the Spirit to the conditions under which they are to be sent into the world upon this saving mission.⁴⁸

As to how sinful men become participants in this covenant, Webb asserts that they “need two things in order to become partakers of this covenant: (1) a legal right and (2) a conscious experience.”

The first is given by *election*, and the second by *conversion*. No man, and especially no sinful man, has a natural right—a right that inheres in and arises out of the very nature of the case—to be a beneficiary of this covenant. Such a legal title must be given him by grace. He must be appointed, or designated, an heir. The act of appointment Calvinistic soteriologists call *election*.... But an heir must have not only a title to his estate; he must also actually enter upon his inheritance and consciously enjoy it. It is *conversion* by the Spirit that makes a legal Christian a *conscious* Christian. No sinful man has the power to enter upon the blessings of this covenant of grace even if he had the legal right to do so.... The Spirit converts him and leads to unite himself to Christ by faith. It is, therefore, by

48. Webb, *Christian Salvation*, p. 19.

election and conversion that the sinful man becomes a beneficiary of this covenant of grace between the three persons of the Godhead.⁴⁹

Beattie basically recasts the formulation of the Catechism:

The covenant was made with Christ for himself, and in him on behalf of the elect, or those whom the Catechism says were ordained unto life. The Catechisms both clearly teach that Christ stood and acted for the elect in a direct covenant relation with God, in order to deliver them from an estate of sin and misery, and to bring them into an estate of salvation and glory.⁵⁰

“Hence by the provisions of the covenant of grace,” Beattie writes in another place, “whose conditions Christ has fulfilled, there is deliverance for the elect who believe in Christ from the sin, guilt, and misery, which the failure of the first covenant entailed.”⁵¹

Not only, therefore, is there no support for the idea of covenant conditionalism in the Standards, but it is abundantly evident that the covenant of grace, according to the teaching of the Standards, is to be understood within the framework of election. Professor David Engelsma is absolutely correct when he declares that “This binds all Presbyterians to a rejection of covenantal universalism and to a defense of covenantal particularism.”⁵²

Thus does Dr. Guy Waters charge, against partisans of the Federal Vision, that they “jeopardize the confession integrity of the doctrine of election” when they “effectively supplant decretal election with a doctrine of covenantal election and fail to establish criteria that enable biblical readers to distinguish the two types of election,” and when they “challenge the confession doctrine of unconditional election through formulations that speak of elec-

49. Webb, *Christian Salvation*, pp. 19, 20.

50. Beattie, *The Presbyterian Standards*, p. 116.

51. Beattie, *The Presbyterian Standards*, pp. 118, 119.

52. David J. Engelsma, *The Covenant of God and the Children of Believers*; Reformed Free Publishing Association: Grandville, Michigan, 2005, p. 205.

tion as a process and that make one's election a function of his covenantal obedience."⁵³

Administrations of the Covenant of Grace

In addition to the sections of WCF VII that we have dealt with at some length (as well as parallel questions and answers from the Larger and Shorter Catechisms), there are three additional sections of the Confession and three Larger Catechism questions and answers (33-35) that deal with the doctrine of the covenant.

WCF VII:4 refers to the fact that the covenant of grace is sometimes "set forth in Scripture by the name of a testament." This, it is asserted, is "in reference to the death of Jesus Christ the Testator, and to the everlasting inheritance, with all things belonging to it, therein bequeathed." This is simply to give emphasis to the idea that the promise of the covenant is in respect not only of salvation from sin and the consequences of sin, but also of a divine heirship (cf. WCF VIII:5).

WCF VII: 5 and 6, as well as LC Q&A 33-35, have to do with the different administrations of the covenant of grace under the law and the gospel (or, as the Catechism has it, under the Old Testament as over against the New Testament). Under the economy of the Old Testament, the covenant of grace was administered "by promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the paschal lamb, and other types and ordinances delivered to the people of the Jews, all foreshadowing Christ to come." These ordinances were, "for that time, sufficient and efficacious, through the operation of the Spirit, to instruct and build up the elect in faith in the promised Messiah." It was not in these ordinances, however, but this Messiah, "by whom they had full remission of sins, and eternal salvation." Under the economy of the New Testament, and the terms of the gospel, "when Christ, the substance, was exhibited," the covenant of grace is administered through the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, "in which grace and salvation are held forth in more fulness, evidence, and efficacy, to all nations" (LC Q&A

53. Waters, *The Federal Vision and Covenant Theology*, p. 124.

35). “There are not therefore two covenants of grace, differing in substance, but one and the same, under various dispensations.” The point of these sections is to demonstrate that believers were as truly saved by faith under the economy of the old dispensation as is now the case under the gospel.

Conclusion

In reading various Southern Presbyterian theologians, it becomes clear that, in certain areas, they did not always express themselves in ways with which we may be comfortable. Our feeling is that, in some respects, they formulated their doctrinal elaborations on the teaching of the Standards in ways that provided the basis for the wholesale abandonment of confessional Calvinism that was evident in the Southern Presbyterian Church beginning in the middle third of the twentieth century. But no one can legitimately claim to stand in their tradition who embraces covenant conditionalism or who attempts to reinterpret the covenant of grace in such a way as to deny that this covenant is to be understood other than through the lens of God’s sovereign decree of election. Their views on these issues were those of the Westminster Symbols—and not as corrupted and debased by later additions—but as drawn up by that Assembly of which Richard Baxter wrote: “As far as I am able to judge, the Christian world, since the days of the apostles, had never a synod of more excellent divines than this.” ●

Book Reviews

The Federal Vision and Covenant Theology: A Comparative Analysis, by Guy Prentiss Waters. Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R, 2006. Pp. xvi+397. \$20.99 (paper). ISBN: 1-59638-033-0. Reviewed by David J. Engelsma.

With the publication of this widely distributed critique of the covenant theology calling itself the “federal vision,” the reputedly conservative Reformed community is rendered further inexcusable. When the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC), the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), the United Reformed Churches, and other denominations tolerate, and even officially approve, the Federal Vision, they do so knowing that this covenant doctrine denies the gospel of salvation by sovereign, particular grace as set forth in the Canons of Dort and in the Westminster Standards.

The Federal Vision denies sovereign grace *in the sphere of the covenant*—within the visible church and particularly among the baptized children of godly parents.

Waters, himself holding a degree from the OPC-dominated Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia and a theologian in the PCA, exposes the Federal Vision as Arminian in its doctrine of salvation, Roman Catholic in its doctrine of the church and sacraments, and irrational in its theological method.

Wilkins’ teaching of the apostasy of those who were once “truly renewed and in full possession of Christ and all his benefits” is an affirmation of the “Arminian doctrine that one may have the reality of redemptive grace and yet truly lose it” (239).

Of John Barach’s doctrine of conditional election, Waters states that “Barach has not escaped the charge that his doctrine is Arminian” (120).

Peter Leithart’s doctrine of baptism “commits us to a mechanistic doctrine of sacramental efficacy that counters the Scripture’s teaching on the sovereignty of the Spirit (John 3:8) and the sovereignty of divine grace (John 1:14-18)” (192). Leithart “offers us many

of the same problematic affirmations of sacramental efficacy that we have encountered in the history of the church.” His doctrine of the sacraments is not “compatible with the sacramental theology of the Westminster Standards” (197).

Like Rome, Rich Lusk teaches and defends “baptismal regeneration,” albeit, in the words of Norman Shepherd, a “covenantal form of baptismal regeneration” (220f.). In the foreword to Waters’ book, E. Calvin Beisner, who is sluggishly coming around to a critical view of the Federal Vision, charges that “in ecclesiology the Federal Visionists are more nearly Roman Catholic than Reformed” (ix).

Regarding the Federal Vision’s method of interpreting Scripture, Waters notes that it is deliberately illogical. The men of the Federal Vision promote the “paradoxical” character of biblical truth. Rightly, Waters charges that the embrace of the paradox, that is, sheer contradiction, in theology “undercuts the whole purpose of revelation, which is to reveal and not to conceal or to cloak.” He adds that “God’s Word is propositional and therefore subject to the laws of logic, those prin-

ciples whereby valid arguments are distinguished from invalid arguments” (272).

Repeatedly, Waters penetrates to the heart of the Federal Vision’s heresy: the universalizing of (saving) grace in the sphere of the covenant. This is the error that I have elsewhere called “covenantal universalism.” Waters speaks of the Federal Vision’s doctrine of “undifferentiated understanding of covenant membership”; of an “undifferentiated grace of God [in the covenant]”; and of “undifferentiated covenant membership.”

Waters opposes the covenantal universalism of the Federal Vision by insisting that the grace of salvation in the covenant is for the elect only. For example, against Wilkins’ teaching that baptism unites every baptized child to Christ in covenant union, Waters objects that according to the Westminster Confession of Faith baptism extends redemptive benefits “only to some [the elect]” (239).

In its broad examination of the leading spokesmen for the Federal Vision, in its documentation of the teachings of the Federal Vision, and in its exposure of the many, related, grave

errors of the movement, Waters' work is praiseworthy and helpful.

The serious weaknesses of the book are two. Waters fails, or refuses, to analyze the Federal Vision as the natural, necessary development of a doctrine of the covenant that divorces the covenant from God's eternal decree of election and therefore teaches a (saving) grace of God toward every baptized person, particularly every baptized infant of believing parents. This universal covenant grace depends for its efficacy, however, on the child's performing the condition of faith and obedience. This is the doctrine of a conditional covenant taught by K. Schilder, the American and Canadian Reformed Churches, and the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands ("liberated"). It is also the doctrine of the covenant that prevails in all the reputedly conservative Reformed and Presbyterian churches in North America where the Federal Vision is spreading unchecked.

When he traces the Federal Vision to its "sources," Waters says not one word about the conditional covenant, of which the Federal Vision is the con-

temporary development. He rather points to theonomy. It is true that most of the men of the Federal Vision are theonomists of one stripe or another. It is also true that the covenant universalism of the Federal Vision serves the postmillennial and reconstruction dreams of the visionaries. But the source of the Federal Vision is the doctrine of a covenant of universal, conditional, resistible grace.

That Waters ignores the real source of the heresy he examines is inexcusable. First, Norman Shepherd, whom Waters recognizes as a father of the movement, openly espouses the conditional covenant and freely describes his covenant doctrine as development of the conditional covenant confessed by Schilder and the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands ("liberated").

Second, the men of the Federal Vision themselves *claim* to be disciples of Schilder and advocates of his doctrine of the covenant. At one point in his examination of the Federal Vision, Waters takes note of this claim.

Third, the name of the heretical doctrine that Waters is criticizing reveals the source

and nature of the movement: “*federal* vision,” that is, “*covenant* vision.” The name, which the teachers of the doctrine have themselves given to their teaching, is not “theonomic vision,” or “reconstruction vision,” but “covenant vision.” Whatever else the movement may be, it is, at its very heart, a doctrine of the covenant, a development of a certain longstanding doctrine of the covenant. As such, it demands to be analyzed. And if it is not examined as the development of the doctrine of a conditional covenant, it cannot be refuted and condemned.

If the Reformed community stubbornly refuses to address the challenge of the Federal Vision at the root of this covenant theology, the battle is lost. And if the battle is lost, the gospel of sovereign grace as clarified and defended at Dordt and as systematized at Westminster is lost.

Here is the issue and, despite his strange reluctance to discuss the doctrine of the covenant, Waters indicates this issue clearly and repeatedly: Does election—the eternal, discriminating decree of the Canons of Dordt, I/7, not the historical, universal, changeable

decision of the Federal Vision—determine the gracious promise, covenantal union with Christ, every saving benefit, salvation, and the perseverance of saints in the sphere of the covenant, particularly among baptized children of godly parents?

Answer no, and you are one with the Federal Vision.

Answer yes, and you damn the Federal Vision for what it is: sheer God-dishonoring and saints-discomfiting Arminian heresy in the covenant.

This points to the second serious weakness of Waters’ book. His criticism of the heresy of the Federal Vision and of its popular, influential teachers is mild and muted. The heretics merely *seem* to differ with the confessions. Their doctrine is *similar* to Rome’s. Positions of the men of the Federal Vision are *unsatisfactory*. Waters has a “number of concerns about explicitly articulated FV statements” (299). Concluding, he hopes “that FV proponents will recognize this discord [in their mind] and return to their first love” (300).

The promotional blurb on the front cover by David Calhoun is accurate: “We are indebted to Waters for advanc-

ing the discussion along biblical lines ‘in the bond of peace.’”

“Advancing the discussion?”

“In the bond of peace”?

When enemies within the camp are violently attacking every one of the doctrines of the grace of God in Jesus Christ as confessed by the Reformed church in the Canons of Dordt?

No Reformed or Presbyterian officebearer is at liberty to “advance the discussion” with

the Federal Vision “in the bond of peace.” Having subscribed to the Reformed confessions and having been charged by Christ to contend for the faith, he must do battle with the men of the Federal Vision, with the trumpets of war blaring, so that their mouths are shut and so that whatever remnant God may have left in the Reformed community are warned and preserved. ■

A Denomination in Denial: An Evaluation of the Report of the Committee to Study the Doctrine of Justification of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, by Paul M. Elliott. Westminster, Maryland: Teaching the Word, 2006. Pp. 130. \$8.95 (paper). Reviewed by David J. Engelsma.

Former Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) ruling elder Paul M. Elliott follows up on his large book, *Christianity and Neo-Liberalism: The Spiritual Crisis in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and Beyond* with this short examination of the report on justification presented

to the 2006 General Assembly of the OPC. Elliott demonstrates that, with the connivance of the 2006 General Assembly, which tacitly approved it, the report attempts to cover up the presence in the OPC of the false gospel of justification by faith and works, and the OPC’s toleration of the heresy.

Indeed, Elliott shows that the OPC has promoted, and still does promote, the false doctrine, by its defense of the teaching of Prof. Norman Shepherd, by its recent exoneration of an officebearer who taught justification by works, and by the ongoing teaching of justification

by faith and works on the part of its seminary professors at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia.

Regarding the report on justification, one familiar with Chicago politics would say, “The fix is in.”

For years, the neo-liberals and their enablers have continually pleaded for brotherly love, understanding, and toleration, while gaining ever-greater control. Today, neo-liberals and their enablers clearly hold the upper hand. Satan has won his war of attrition against the one true Gospel in the OPC (113).

The OPC long ago ceased to proclaim the one true Gospel to the exclusion of all false gospels (115).

Elliott calls those in the OPC who still love the gospel of grace to come out.

If you are still in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church—whether you are a minister, elder, deacon, or general member—and you are still loyal to the unique authority of God’s Word, and to the one true Gospel the Bible proclaims, then it is time for you to “come out from among them, and be separate” (2 Corinthians 6:17) (118, 119).

The Orthodox Presbyterian Church has abandoned the marks of a true church of Jesus Christ (118).

This book ought to be read by every member of the OPC, as well as by those in the Reformed community who still harbor the illusion that the OPC is a bulwark of orthodoxy.

The book is required reading also for all those in ecumenical relation with the OPC, thus making themselves responsible for the OPC’s sins. ■

Keeping God’s Covenant, by Herman Hanko and David J. Engelsma. British Reformed Fellowship, 2006. Pp. vi + 95. \$4.00 (paper). [Reviewed by Ronald L. Cammenga.]

This small volume is an excellent introduction to the doctrine of the covenant. The six chapters of the book were originally six lectures presented at the 2004 British Reformed Fel-

lowship (BRF) Biennial Family Conference at High Leigh, Hertfordshire, England. Convinced of the value of the speeches, the BRF has now published them in the hope that they will be of benefit to a wider audience.

“The Covenant We Are Called to Keep,” “Keeping God’s Covenant in Marriage,” and “Keeping God’s Covenant & the Exercise of Discipline” are the three chapters authored by David Engelsma. “Keeping God’s Covenant in the Church,” “Keeping God’s Covenant in the Home,” and “Keeping God’s Covenant & the Antithetical Life” are the three chapters authored by Herman Hanko. In the first chapter, Engelsma lays the groundwork for the keeping of the covenant with which the rest of the book is concerned. In that chapter he deals with the nature of the covenant. He sets forth the essence of the covenant as a “unique relationship of intimate fellowship in mutual love” (p. 3). He repudiates the notion that the covenant is to be conceived as a “... bargain struck between businessmen, dependent upon stipulated conditions, for the purpose of the advantage of them both” (p. 3).

He defends this warm covenant conception from Scripture and, building on the nature of the covenant, concludes with a treatment of what is involved in broad lines in keeping the covenant. In harmony with the nature of the covenant, he argues that “Keeping the covenant is not a work of man upon which the covenant depends, or that cooperates with God’s work, to make the covenant promise effectual, or to bring the covenant to perfection” (p. 9). Rather, keeping the covenant is the thankful, holy life of the redeemed sinner. “Love for God in the heart and obedience to all the commandments are not a work of the sinner upon which the covenant depends. Rather, they are the gift of God to the elect church and her members in His great work of making His covenant with them. Obedience to the law is not a condition unto the covenant, but a privilege and blessing of the covenant” (p. 9).

The rest of the book is a vigorous defense of the calling of the members of the covenant within the covenant. With great care, the believer’s part in the covenant is set forth, so that virtually every area of his life is viewed from the perspective of

the covenant and is set forth in terms of keeping the covenant. The implications for keeping the covenant in our life in the church, the covenant community, are set forth in chapter 2. What is involved in keeping God's covenant in marriage and the home, the two great earthly types of the covenant, are explained in chapters 3 and 4. In chapter 5 the calling of covenant parents in the discipline of their children is the focus. That our children are covenant children is not a disparagement to discipline, but the motivation to discipline. As members of the covenant, the children and young people must receive the discipline of their covenant parents. The last chapter deals with the antithetical calling of the members of the covenant. As the friends of God they are called to live over against all

that is contrary to God. This is the negative aspect of keeping the covenant.

Keeping God's Covenant is an excellent primer on the doctrine of the covenant and a good resource for those who are in the process of becoming acquainted with covenant theology. For younger students and new converts to the Reformed faith the book will be especially helpful.

The book is published by the British Reformed Fellowship. We commend them for this publication and encourage them in future publications. Any who are interested in more information about the BRF, in particular their biennial family conferences and the other literature that they make available, will do well to go to their website: www.britishreformedfellowship.org.uk. ■

The Covenant of God and the Children of Believers: Sovereign Grace in the Covenant, by David J. Engelsma. Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2005. Pp. x + 239. \$23.95 (cloth). ISBN: 0-916206-91-2. Reviewed by Ronald L. Cammenga.

This book is a stirring defense of God's sovereignty in the covenant, which is to say, God's sovereignty in salvation. The book sets forth the biblical doctrine of the covenant, as that doctrine has been confessed and developed within the Protestant Reformed Churches. From

Scripture, Prof. David Engelsma demonstrates that “The covenant is the relationship of friendship between the triune God and his chosen people in Jesus Christ” (p. 4). Engelsma rejects the view that considers the covenant a contract consisting of mutual obligations of God and the believer. And he rightly grounds God’s covenant of grace with believers in the triune covenant life of God Himself. God is a covenant God in His relationship to His people because God is a covenant God within Himself. God is a covenant God within Himself.

Because the book’s focus is on the place of the children of believers in the covenant, Engelsma concentrates on that very important aspect of the truth of God’s covenant. By appeal both to Scripture and the Reformed confessions, Engelsma sets forth what is the proper Reformed conception of the place of the children of believers in God’s covenant of grace. Of special interest, in this connection, is the author’s treatment of Article 17 of Canons of Dordt, I. This has always been a controversial article in the Canons. The article reads:

Since we are to judge of the will of God from His Word, which testifies that the children of believers are holy, not by nature, but in virtue of the covenant of grace in which they, together with the parents, are comprehended, godly parents have no reason to doubt of the election and salvation of their children whom it pleaseth God to call out of this life in their infancy.

Engelsma’s explanation of this article of the Canons is altogether convincing and refreshing. On the one hand, he rejects the understanding of the article, and of I Corinthians 7:14 quoted in the article, that makes the holiness of covenant children only their formally being set apart from other children as outward members of the visible church. On the other hand, he argues against the position that reduces the “comfort” of Article 17 to the likelihood of the salvation of the children of believers who die in their infancy, inas-much as according to His covenant promise God gathers His children from among the children of believers. This was the view of Herman Hoeksema, a view with which Engelsma respectfully differs. Doing justice

to the language of Article 17, and understanding the article to give real comfort to grieving Reformed parents, he explains the article properly to teach that “Grieving godly parents do not stand at the graveside doubting with regard to the particular infant who has died” (p. 33). Behind this article and its rejection of a particular Arminian calumny is “The thinking of the fathers of Dordt . . . that God has the reprobate children of godly parents come to the age of discretion, so that they render themselves guilty of transgression of the covenant by their own wicked unbelief and disobedience. The outstanding examples of reprobate children of godly parents in the Bible—Cain, Esau, Absalom, and Judas—support this reasoning. Never does Scripture teach the reprobation and damnation of children of godly parents who die in infancy” (p. 33). Only the Reformed faith and its doctrine of the covenant can give real comfort to parents grieving over the death of an infant.

But not only does Engelsma set forth covenant truth positively in *The Covenant of God and the Children of Believers*, he also is polemical, as the gos-

pel always is. He is first of all polemical against the Baptists, whose covenant view has ever been inimical to that of the Reformed faith. But Engelsma’s polemics reaches closer to home, directed as it is against wrong covenant conceptions within the Reformed churches themselves. Over against the Netherlands Reformed view and its leading proponents, Engelsma argues for the proper view and treatment of covenant children. Over against the Canadian Reformed Churches (“liberated”) and their leading proponents, Engelsma argues against the conditional covenant conception. Appealing to the struggle over the conditional (Heynsian) view of the covenant fought out within the Protestant Reformed Churches themselves, he demonstrates from Scripture and the Reformed confessions the unbiblical character of this popular view of the covenant and champions a view of the covenant that is unabashedly controlled by election.

The last two parts of *The Covenant of God and the Children of Believers* are concerned with a fairly recent development within Reformed and Presbyterian churches. This develop-

ment is the rise of the teaching known as the “Federal Vision.” The Federal Vision is a heresy that, among other things, distinguishes itself by denying justification by faith alone. The advocates of the Federal Vision insist that the Reformers and the Reformed creeds have it wrong in their insistence on justification by faith alone, apart from works. Instead they impudently insist that justification is by faith and by works. Engelsma demonstrates that the root of the Federal Vision heresy is the false teaching of the conditional covenant. The Federal Visionaries are only consistently working out, as they themselves steadfastly insist, the implications of a conditional covenant view. The only possibility, therefore, of demolishing the grand image of the Federal Vision is demolishing the legs of clay upon which the image has been erected. This is what the proponents of the conditional covenant must recognize. Opposition to the Federal Vision can be successful only if it is acknowledged that this heresy is

rooted in the false teaching of the conditional covenant.

That is the clarion call of *The Covenant of God and the Children of Believers*. It is a call to Reformed Christians everywhere to recognize what is the biblically and confessionally consistent view of the covenant. It is a call to Reformed Christians to repudiate once and for all the false teaching of a conditional covenant. It is a call to Reformed Christians to embrace the teaching of the one, everlasting, unilateral covenant of grace. Only this teaching honors the God of the covenant. Only this teaching is consistent with the doctrines of sovereign grace. And only this teaching gives to believers and their children their proper place in the covenant, calling them to thankful, holy living out of gratitude to the covenant God. Our prayer is that *The Covenant of God and the Children of Believers* receives a wide audience and is used by God for the promotion of the truth, *the* truth of the covenant of God’s grace. ■

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