

Chapter 7 – Of God’s Covenant with Man

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

- In the period of High Orthodoxy, covenant theology had become a defining feature of Reformed theology.
- The Westminster confession ‘is the first Reformed confession in which the doctrine of the covenant is not merely brought in from the side, but is placed in the foreground and has been able to permeate almost every point’.¹
- The covenant theology outlined in this chapter is what Warfield described as the ‘architectonic principle of the Westminster Confession’.²
- Torrance tried to argue that this represented a substantial departure from the thought of Calvin.³ But, as Selvaggio demonstrates, the historical development of covenant theology from Calvin to Westminster is actually one of ‘progressive and organic theological unity’.⁴ All the essential concepts of covenant theology are found in Calvin.⁵

Reformed Orthodoxy saw federal or covenant theology as a redemptive-historical way of expressing substantially the same Reformation theology taught in their dogmatic works and confessional symbols. Christ was as central to the federal theology of orthodoxy as he was to sixteenth-century Reformed theology.⁶

7.1 THE GENERAL NECESSITY OF GOD’S DEALING BY COVENANT

- The necessity for the relationship between God and man being covenantal predates the Fall and is grounded in the Creator-creature distinction. Even before the Fall, a covenant was necessary if Adam, ‘the creature’ (not the sinner) was to enjoy communion with God as his ‘blessedness and reward’ because the ‘distance’ between them was ‘so great’. As the confession has already affirmed,

¹ Geerhardus Vos, ‘The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology’, in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos* ed. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (1931, repr., Baker, 1980), 239. For a very helpful introduction to the covenant theology of the Westminster Standards see Jonty Rhodes, *Raiding the Lost Ark: Recovering the Gospel of the Covenant King* (Inter Varsity Press, 2013).

² B. B. Warfield, ‘The Westminster Assembly and Its Work’, in *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield* (Baker, 1981), 6.56.

³ James B. Torrance, ‘Covenant or Contract? A Study of the Theological Background of Worship in Seventeenth-Century Scotland’, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 23 (1970), 61-2; idem, ‘The Covenant Concept in Scottish Theology and Politics and its Legacy’, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 34 (1981), 225-43; idem, ‘Strengths and Weaknesses of the Westminster Theology’, in *The Westminster Confession in the Church Today* ed. Alasdair Heron (St Andrews, 1982), 40-53.

⁴ Anthony T. Selvaggio, ‘Unity or Disunity? Covenant Theology from Calvin to Westminster’ in *The Faith Once Delivered: Essays in Honor of Dr. Wayne Spear* ed. Selvaggio (Presbyterian & Reformed, 2007), 217ff.

⁵ Paul Helm, ‘Calvin and the Covenant: Unity and Continuity’, *Evangelical Quarterly* 55 (1983), 67-80.

⁶ R. Scott Clark, ‘Christ and Covenant: Federal Thought in Orthodoxy’, in *A Companion to Reformed Orthodoxy* ed. Herman J. Selderhuis (Brill, 2013), 404.

God is 'infinite in being and perfection, a most pure spirit, invisible, without body, parts, or passions; immutable, immense, eternal, incomprehensible'.

- Relationship with such a God is only possible because of God's 'voluntary condescension' by means of covenant (WLC 20). God did not *have* to initiate any covenant relationship – it was a free decision. Adam owed God obedience – but God owed Adam nothing.

7.2 THE COVENANT OF WORKS MADE WITH ADAM BEFORE THE FALL (WLC 20, 22, 93)

- During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Reformed theologians described the prelapsarian state of Adam in various ways.⁷
- The Confession clearly outlines a two-covenant structure with the first of these covenants being referred to as a covenant of works.⁸
- It is a sovereignly-determined relationship, with sanctions and promises
 - It is a covenant of works with regard to the *condition* of perfect obedience incumbent upon Adam.
 - Elsewhere, with respect to its *promise*, it is called the 'covenant of life' (WLC 20).⁹ God promised life to Adam and his posterity on condition of personal, perfect, and perpetual obedience. The escalated blessings that were promised would have been nothing but the fruit of God's voluntary condescension—Adam could never have said 'I earned this' (7:1).
 - God also delineated the curses that would follow disobedience.
 - In this probationary period, God had 'endued him with the power and ability to keep' this covenant (19.1).

Adam stood at the beginning of his 'career', not the end' (Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2.564)

- Adam is sinless and 'perfect' but he's just like the rest of creation – he is capable of being further glorified and he is also capable of being corrupted.

⁷ Richard A. Muller, 'The Covenant of Works and the Stability of Divine Law in Seventeenth-Century Reformed Orthodoxy: A Study in the Theology of Herman Witsius and Wilhelmus à Brakel', in *After Calvin: Studies in the Development of a Theological Tradition* (Oxford University Press, 2003), 175-89.

⁸ Andrew A. Woolsey in *Unity and Continuity in Covenantal Thought* (Reformation Heritage, 2012), 45. According to Woolsey, the main sources for this chapter of the Confession are James Ussher and John Ball.

⁹ The theology of the covenant of works is found in Calvin – although he does not use the term – see Peter Lillback, *The Binding of God: Calvin's Role in the Development of Covenant Theology* (Baker, 2001), 276-304. See also Cornelius P. Venema, 'Recent Criticisms of the Covenant of Works in the Westminster Confession of Faith', *Mid-American Journal of Theology* 9 (1993), 165-98.

- Had there not been a Fall, and instead had Adam faithfully obeyed then a wonderful future would have been in view in which humanity would have experienced even greater blessings than Adam had before his sin.¹⁰

Acquaintance with [the covenant of works] is of the greatest importance, for whoever errs here or denies the existence of the covenant of works, will not understand the covenant of grace, and will readily err concerning the mediatorship of the Lord Jesus. Such a person will readily deny that Christ by His active obedience has merited a right to eternal life for the elect ... Whoever denies the covenant of works, must rightly be suspected to be in error concerning the covenant of grace as well (Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*).

7.3 THE COVENANT OF GRACE (WLC 30-32)

- Adam's failure in the covenant of life rendered him and his posterity unable to attain life under that arrangement. Graciously, God made 'a second' covenant, 'commonly called the covenant of grace' – in it God offers salvation and life to sinners through Jesus Christ (WLC 30).
- Like the first, it is a sovereignly-ordained relationship between God and man that contains both promise and condition.
- In the Larger Catechism, the covenant of grace is said to have been made with Christ as representative of the elect (WLC 31).¹¹ The terminology of the covenant of redemption between the Father and Son 'did not become relatively common theological currency until the mid-to-late 1640s'.¹²
- The first manifestation of this covenant in redemptive history was in the promise to Adam, the *protoevangelium* (Gen. 3:15)
- Note how the divines do not think that the free offer of the gospel is in any way restricted because of the specific promise of the Holy Spirit effecting salvation in the elect.

7.4 THE TESTAMENTARY ASPECT

- The divines also affirm the close association of the terms 'covenant' and 'testament' noting that the latter speaks more particularly of the 'inheritance' received by the elect upon the death of the Testator, Jesus Christ (Heb. 9:16-17).

¹⁰ G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Baker, 2011), 442-3.

¹¹ Hence the standards do not distinguish a covenant of redemption and a covenant of grace.

¹² Carl R. Trueman, 'Reformed Orthodoxy in Britain', in *A Companion to Reformed Orthodoxy* ed. Herman J. Selderhuis (Brill, 2013), 283. See also Richard A. Muller, 'Towards the *Pactum Salutis*: Locating the Origins of a Concept' *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 18 (2007), 11-66.

Here the elect are not simply parties to a covenant; they are heirs of the everlasting inheritance, forfeited by Adam, but given by Christ.

- Here the divines 'showed themselves to be well aware of the importance of the linguistic aspects of covenantal thought (although it is strange that they describe the language of a 'testament' as being used frequently).¹³

So is the covenant of grace a testament, because the same things which the covenant requireth from us as conditions to be performed on our part, the same things are bequeathed to us among Christ's goods, which by His testament and latter will He disposed and left to His people absolutely.¹⁴

7.5 THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE COVENANT OF GRACE, IN PARTICULAR THE COVENANT OF GRACE UNDER THE LAW (WLC 33-35)

- It is very important not to confuse the Old Testament with the covenant of works and the New Testament with the covenant of grace. The divines emphasise the *continuity* of redemptive history.
- Of course there are differences in the various administrations of the covenant of grace e.g. the Mosaic administration.
- 'The law was not an alternative way of salvation, but the means of administering the one and only way of salvation in Christ in the covenant of grace'.¹⁵
- Its various 'promises, prophecies ... types and ordinances' were 'sufficient and efficacious' to communicate the need for the promised 'Christ to come' to Old Testament believers (see also 9.6).
- This is something that had been brought out so clearly by Calvin (*Inst.* 2.9-11).

The differences between the two Testaments 'are such as pertain rather to the mode of administration, than to the substance. In this view, they will not prevent the promises of the Old and New Testament from remaining the same, and the promises of both Testaments from having in Christ the same foundation' (Calvin, *Inst.* 2.11.1).

7.6 THE COVENANT OF GRACE UNDER THE GOSPEL (WLC 35)

- Now that Christ, the 'substance' of the covenant of grace, has come we notice a change in the administration of the covenant. Under the gospel the 'ordinances'

¹³ Woolsey, *Unity and Continuity*, 59.

¹⁴ Patrick Gillespie, *The Ark of the Testament Opened* (1661).

¹⁵ Robert Letham, *The Westminster Assembly*, 234.

it speaks of are ‘the preaching of the Word and the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper’.

- Despite these very obvious differences, the divines are explicit that there are not ‘two covenants of grace’ (the antinomian position held by the likes of Tobias Crisp 1600-43).¹⁶
- There is a single order of salvation before and after the coming of Christ.
- The contrast the divines see is not between works and grace, nor that the old covenant was essentially conditional in contrast to an essentially unconditional new covenant – in both there must be faith, and that faith is shown in obedience.¹⁷ Rather, the difference lies in the move from promise to fulfilment – they are differences not so much in *kind* but in *degree*.

Under the Old (WLC 34)	Under the New (WLC 35)
Christ was promised	Christ the substance was exhibited
Christ was prefigured in sacrifices, sacraments (circumcision and the Passover), types and ordinances	Christ is set forth in the preaching of the Word and the sacraments (baptism and the Lord’s Supper)
	Less complicated with fewer and more simple ceremonies
‘For that time sufficient to build up the elect in faith in the promised Messiah, by whom they then had full remission of sin, and eternal salvation’	A fuller and clearer revelation – ‘grace and salvation are held forth in more fullness, evidence, and efficacy’
Given only to the Jews	Given to all nations and ‘held forth’ to all nations

- The Assembly’s missionary awareness is seen in its recognition that the gospel is to be directed to all nations.

¹⁶ According to Crisp, Hebrews 7-10 contrasted the two covenants of grace, the Mosaic and the New. Tobias Crisp, *Christ Alone Exalted* (1791), 241-59.

¹⁷ In the covenant of grace, those conditions are ultimately met by God himself – but this does not make the conditions irrelevant. The Catechism speaks of faith as a ‘condition’ (WLC 32) and the Confession describes faith as a requirement (7.3). We may distinguish between antecedent (causal) and consequent (attending) conditions – faith is an antecedent condition (uniting us to Christ and thus to all his saving benefits) and gospel obedience and good works are consequent conditions. Rutherford put it this way: ‘conditions wrought in us by grace, such as we assert, take not one jot or title of the freedom of grace away’. However, because the faith and obedience that is required in the covenant of grace is the ‘gift of God’ it may also be said that the covenant of grace is some sense unconditional. See the discussion by Scott Clark in ‘Christ and the Covenant’, 414-15.