
THE COVENANT OF WORKS

Doctrine of Man
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INTRODUCTION

- The Reformed tradition has spoken of the relationship between God and Adam as a covenantal relationship. This covenant has been known by several different names: Covenant of Works, Covenant of Life, Covenant of Creation, and Covenant of Nature.
- The Covenant of Works is an important theological principle.
 - Without it, we cannot rightly understand man's relationship to God in the Garden.
 - Neither can we understand the gospel, for the work of our Lord Jesus Christ was a redeeming work necessitated by the Fall into sin as a result of transgressing the Covenant of Works.
 - The covenant structure organizes all of God's relations to man.
- Introductory Textual Considerations
 - Gen 2:16–17—And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”
 - Hosea 6:7—But like Adam they transgressed the covenant; there they dealt faithlessly with me.
 - Romans 5:12–21
 - Gal 4:24a—Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants.

COVENANT CONDESCENSION

- Westminster Confession of Faith 7.1—The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God's part, which he hath been pleased to express by way of covenant (Job 9:32–33; 1 Sam 2:25; Ps 113:5–6; Ps 100:2–3; Job 22:2–3; 35:7–8; Luke 17:10; Acts 17:24–25).
- This elaborates a fundamental Creator/creature relationship. That boundary cannot be crossed.
 - Condescension itself is a grace—or at least an undeserved favor.
 - God is under no obligation to enter into such a relationship with his people. He does so of his own accord.
 - It is a benevolent and free act.
 - Creation is itself a sort of condescension. Still, it is helpful to note that creation is not *identical* with covenant.
 - The covenantal relationship is the voluntary condescension.
 - At no point is the ontological (pertaining to *being*) distance between Creator and creature closed within the covenantal relationship.

THE NATURE OF THE FIRST COVENANT

- Scriptural Support
 - Gal 3:12—But the law is not of faith, rather “The one who does them shall live by them.”
 - Rom 10:5—For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them.
 - Rom 5:12–20—¹² Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned . . .
 - Gen 2:17—but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”
 - Gal 3:10—For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.”
- Confessional Support
 - Westminster Shorter Catechism
 - Q. 12. What special act of providence did God exercise toward man in the estate wherein he was created?
 - A. When God had created man, he entered into a covenant of life with him, upon condition of perfect obedience; forbidding him to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, upon the pain of death.
 - Westminster Larger Catechism
 - Q. 20. What was the providence of God toward man in the estate in which he was created?
 - A. 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; instituting the Sabbath; entering into a covenant of life with him, upon condition of personal, perfect, and perpetual obedience, of which the tree of life was a pledge; and forbidding to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, upon the pain of death.
 - Westminster Confession of Faith 7.2—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 personal obedience.
- To gain a grasp of the nature of this covenantal relationship, we must recognize several basic features.
 1. Recognize the relationship between Adam and God. These are two parties.
 2. Within this arrangement, God imposes stipulations upon Adam. These are “perfect and personal obedience.”
 3. A reward is promised. The reward is life (eschatological life).
 4. Punishment is threatened for violating the stipulations.
 5. The relationship establishes a bond not only between God and Adam, but also between Adam and those whom he represents.

THE COMPREHENSIVENESS OF THE COVENANT OF WORKS

- God deals with his people through a federal head.
 - Adam was the representative. It is important to recognize that God *continues* to deal with his people through a federal head.
 - There are only two: Adam and the second and last Adam, Jesus Christ.
- God required perfect obedience.
 - Adam was made in the image of God. As the natural working out of that God-likeness, he was called to live like God, though always as a creature.
 - Adam was created “very good” and without sin. And he was called to *perfect* obedience because that is the nature of God’s righteousness.
- Given these two points and the historical reality of the Fall into sin, we can see our need of a Redeemer.
 - The Covenant of Works is comprehensive of our relationship to God. It is also comprehensive of all people.
 - After the Fall, we all have fallen into an estate of sin and misery. We also are subject to death as the wages of that sin.

RELATIONSHIP TO THE COVENANT OF GRACE

- WCF 7:3—Man, by his fall, having made himself incapable of life by that covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the Covenant of Grace, whereby He freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ, requiring of them faith in Him, that they may be saved; and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto eternal life His Holy Spirit, to make them willing, and able to believe.
 - In his fall into sin, Adam made himself “incapable of life.”
 - Because of that fact, God made a second covenant.
 - This latter covenant was to secure the originally intended and offered reward.
 - It brings to fruition the consummate union and communion God desired for Adam.
 - Yet after the fall, God offers sinners “life and salvation.”
 - The second covenant has the same focus and trajectory as the first.
 - Through it, Christ redeems us from the first covenant and gives us the life originally offered in that first covenant. We receive life *and* salvation.
 - WCF 8:5—The Lord Jesus, by His perfect obedience and sacrifice of Himself, which He, through the eternal Spirit, once offered up unto God, hath fully satisfied the justice of His Father; and purchased, not only reconciliation, but an everlasting inheritance in the kingdom of heaven for all those whom the Father hath given unto Him.
 - Again, the same reward offered to Adam is secured by Christ.
 - He *purchased* reconciliation and an eternal inheritance in the kingdom of heaven.
 - This came through his perfect obedience and sacrifice of himself.
 - This inheritance was secured for all whom Christ represents.

- This is the idea of federal representation once again.
 - Jesus satisfies the demands of the Covenant of Works vicariously for his people.
- There are many similarities between Adam and Jesus Christ in this covenant history. Still, there are several important differences.
 - Adam needed to obey the command of the Lord perfectly, conforming to his law as revealed.
 - Jesus needed also to obey the command of the Lord perfectly, but he also needed to bear the sanctions from the outset.
 - Through Christ's life *and* death, his people may be brought to the originally-intended destination, a heavenly inheritance (1 Pet 1:3–7; 1 Cor 15:47–58).
- A Transtestamental Gospel
 - WCF 8:6—Although the work of redemption was not actually wrought by Christ till after His incarnation, yet the virtue, efficacy, and benefits thereof, were communicated unto the elect in all ages successively from the beginning of the world, in and by those promises, types, and sacrifices, wherein He was revealed and signified to be the Seed of the woman, which should bruise the serpent's head, and the Lamb slain from the beginning of the world being yesterday and today the same, and for ever.
 - There is one savior—whether for people living after Christ's death and resurrection or before.
 - Although in the Old Testament, Christ had yet come in the flesh to accomplish his work of redemption, he is still the savior of all the elect, the only mediator between God and man.
 - This is possible, because Christ is present in the Old Testament.
 - Specifically, he is present in promises, types, and sacrifices. These find their fulfillment *and* substance in Christ.

OBJECTIONS TO THE COVENANT OF WORKS

- Some have rejected the Covenant of Works because they believe it introduces a meritocracy or places God in man's debt. Others fail to recognize sufficient Scriptural support.
- S. G. De Graaf
 - In *Promise and Deliverance*, De Graaf recognizes a covenant between God and Adam. He believes the absence of the term carries no weight.
 - However, he takes issue with the use of the term "works," because it was not the case that "man was expected to earn eternal life as a reward for doing good works as though eternal life was man's payment for services rendered." (*Promise and Deliverance*, 1.37?)
 - He prefers Covenant of Favor.
- G. C. Berkouwer
 - Berkouwer rejects the idea that an antithesis could exist between the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace—such that the Covenant of Works would be about working or achieving the law whereas the Covenant of Grace is purely by God's mercy.
 - Berkouwer misses the eschatology of the Covenant of Works by thinking (along with De Graaf) that the Covenant of Works was about obtaining God's favor, love, and/or communion.
 - Adam already possessed this. The Covenant of Works held out *eschatological* life.
- Herman Hoeksema
 - Hoeksema presents something of an interminable probation.
 - He views the doctrine of the Covenant of Works as wrongly supposing that there would have come a time when Adam's probation would have ended and he would have entered into some other estate.
 - He sees that the only purpose of God could be that of the eternal divine counsel. Therefore, there could be no legitimate offer of life in some fashion other than through Adam's fall and redemption in Christ.
 - He recognizes a relationship between God and Adam, but Hoeksema rejects that it is an agreement that consists of a condition, promise, and penalty.
- Cornelius Van der Waal and Clarence Stam
- James B. Torrance
- John Murray
 - Murray describes his objections to the Covenant of Works in "The Covenant of Works: Three Problems" found in *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2 of *The Collected Writings of John Murray*, pp. 47–59.
 - Murray takes issue with two parts of the "covenant of works" language.
 - First, he doesn't like the use of the word "covenant."
 - Second, he doesn't like the use of the word "works."
 - To elaborate, he identifies three problems in recognizing a covenant of works in Genesis 2.

- First, Murray is surely not alone in believing that “works” does not accurately describe the relationship God established with Adam.
 - Remember, God was free to enter into such a relationship.
 - He voluntarily condescended to Adam.
 - He is not obligated to give Adam anything.
 - As a result, Murray believes grace informs this relationship.
 - And therefore, the term “works” is incompatible with this arrangement.
- Second, Murray also argues that Scripture does not explicitly identify this relationship as a covenant.
 - For Murray, if it’s not called a covenant explicitly in Scripture, it must not be a covenant.
 - He believes the absence of such language is sufficient to establish this point.
- Third, Murray insists that covenants are strictly postlapsarian arrangements.
 - A covenant can exist after the fall but not before. They are specifically *redemptive*, and without sin, there is no need of redemption.
 - This is related to his second point regarding the arrangement between God and Adam ever being called a “covenant” explicitly in Scripture.
- Therefore, this arrangement is not a *covenant* much less a *covenant of works*.
- Nonetheless, Murray argues for an Adamic Administration that is unique as a relationship between God and man.
 - This relationship is unique even when compared to the Mosaic Covenant or the New Covenant.
 - Murray rejects the notion that the Mosaic Covenant includes a republication of principles of the Adamic Administration.
 - For one, he recognizes that the Mosaic Covenant is redemptive (for Murray all covenants are redemptive).
 - The Mosaic Covenant is an extension of the Abrahamic Covenant.
 - But for Murray, the Adamic Administration has no redemptive quality or provision.
 - Murray recognizes similarities between Adam and Christ, most notably in Romans 5:12ff and 1 Cor 15:22ff.
 - Both are representative heads.
 - The obedience of each is sufficient to secure eternal life for everyone they represent.
 - Still, he recognizes differences—as we already have—between them.
 - Christ had to die in order to secure life for his people.
 - Christ, therefore, had to redeem his people first.
- Characteristics of the Adamic Administration

- This administration is sovereignly administered by God. And under it, Adam is the head of the human race.
- The condition for this administration is perfect obedience. He must resist temptation for a time of probation.
- God gave Adam a promise, which we can infer from:
 - The threat of death. A reward is implied.
 - The parallel with Romans 5:12ff.
 - The symbolism of the Tree of *Life*.
- Perfect obedience does not *merit* the reward, since this administration is informed by grace at a fundamental level.
 - He could expect his present life on the basis of continued obedience.
 - But eternal life—confirmed righteousness and blessing—would be given by God’s grace.
- God threatened spiritual, judicial, and physical death upon disobedience.
- Response to Murray
 - Murray takes issue with “covenant” and “works” as they might be applied to God’s relationship to Adam.
 - However, he has identified two parties, stipulations, a reward, and threats of punishment for violating the terms, and representation.
 - It seems he has just defined a covenant according to our definition.
 - Murray claims that Scripture nowhere explicitly calls the Adamic Administration a covenant.
 - First, Hosea 6:7 seems to do just this.
 - Second, the Davidic covenant was not called a covenant at the time it was administered.
 - Third, the absence of precise terminology does not necessitate the absence of the reality to which it would point. For example, the language of “Trinity” is never used in Scripture.
 - All the features of a covenant are present. The terminology is not be present in Gen 2:15–17, but the elements of a covenant certainly are.
 - Perhaps Murray would be content with the language of “Covenant of Creation” at this point.
 - Still, we must recognize that the “works” language is not used to imply that God was somehow obligated to enter into this arrangement with Adam.
 - “Works” refers to the operative principle, which was established of God’s own free will based on an already accomplished voluntary condescension.