CHRIST

COVENANT

THEOLOGY

Essays on Election, Republication,
and the Covenants

CORNELIS P. VENEMA

This collection of essays, attuned to pertinent issues and controversies surrounding classic Reformed covenant theology, beckons readers to enter the rich field of Reformed thought on the covenants. This book explores covenant theology in both its rudimentary formulations and its broad applications. As a leading Reformed theologian of our generation, Venema takes up debates that center on the covenant of works, assessing with care the case for the so-called republication of that covenant. He also tackles the important topic of the relationship between divine election and the covenant of grace; and not to be missed is his careful analysis of the election and salvation of believers' children who die before coming to faith. Likewise of relevance is Venema's engagement with advocates of the Federal Vision, in which their misapprehension of covenant theology is fairly explained and soundly debunked. This volume shows that covenant theology is still a lively topic, and integral to explaining the gospel of Jesus Christ.

—**J. Mark Beach**, Mid-America Reformed Seminary

Contemporary debate in covenant theology, particularly on the covenant of works, often pits biblical scholar against systematic theologian and both against historians. Not only is this not the way it should be, this valuable collection of essays models the integration of Scripture, history, and dogmatics, and sets forth a clear statement of the classic Reformed understanding of *covenant*. Along the way, we are treated to a thorough, accessible, and incisive critical overview of twentieth-century scholarship on the covenant, including the significant roles played by the neo-orthodoxy of Karl Barth and the more recent New Perspectives on Paul. Venema correctly points out that accepting or rejecting the Augustinian (!) distinction between humanity's pre-fall fellowship with God and the post-fall renewed fellowship with God in Christ is a key issue in the debate. On a subject as contentious as *covenant*, no one work will settle matters finally and satisfy everyone. While legitimate debates should continue (on *republication*, for example), Venema's even-tempered treatment provides a high standard of both form and content for this discussion.

—**John Bolt**, Jean and Kenneth Baker Professor of Systematic Theology, Calvin Theological Seminary

I have given the better part of thirty years of my academic attention to the formulation and development of covenant theology. A lot of voices out there are speaking on this subject—some very good, others very bad; some useful critics and interlocutors, others less so; some advocates with views worth entertaining, others with opinions best not given a second thought. Sorting those things out (which is which?) requires significant knowledge and judgment, even for rather advanced students of covenant theology. Cornel Venema possesses both, so he is an expert to whom I have often looked for analysis and assessment of important issues relating to classic covenant theology. In particular, matters relating to the Mosaic administration have long been acknowledged to be among the most difficult in articulating the unified covenant of grace, and have prompted the most substantial disagreements within the orthodox Reformed tradition. Venema is superb in his synopsis of and engagement with these kinds of issues. For these reasons and more, I warmly commend this book to all students of covenant theology, and I look forward to returning to it again and again as I seek to think biblically about the covenants.

—**Ligon Duncan**, Chancellor/CEO, Reformed Theological Seminary; John E. Richards Professor of Systematic Theology, RTS Jackson

No one today is better qualified to address the perennially important issues of covenant theology than Cornel Venema. In this volume he considers some of these issues in the context of current discussions and debates, doing so in a particularly instructive and helpful manner. I commend it highly.

—**Richard B. Gaffin Jr.**, Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology, Emeritus, Westminster Theological Seminary

This is a book full of insightful commentary from Professor Venema. In places I rejoiced to see him correct some misunderstandings with his usual clarity and incisiveness. Even those who might disagree with him will have to be at their best. I commend this wide-ranging study to all students of the Scriptures, and Reformed theology in particular.

—**Mark Jones**, Minister, Faith Vancouver, Vancouver, British Columbia

A number of significant contemporary controversies within the Reformed church are rooted in various understandings (and misunderstandings) of covenant theology. In this helpful and instructive collection of essays, Dr. Cornelis Venema sheds much-needed light on issues ranging from the doctrine of republication to the Federal Vision theology. Regardless of whether one agrees with all of Venema's specific conclusions, his arguments cannot be ignored. A must-read for those interested in the debates associated with covenant theology.

—**Keith Mathison**, Professor of Systematic Theology, Reformation Bible College

Covenant theology lies at the heart of Reformed theology. It often lies at the heart of controversies among theologians as well. Cornel Venema addresses key debates surrounding covenant theology with patience, gentleness, respect, and charity. His work is valuable for its tone, as much as for its content. If read prayerfully, this book has the potential to promote greater unity in Reformed churches, protect people from error, and increase our love for God in Christ.

—**Ryan M. McGraw**, Professor of Systematic Theology, Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary

No part of Scripture, either in its detail or overall perspective, can be rightly understood without the key of covenant theology. And, as the title suggests (and as Sinclair Ferguson's preface underlines), the focus of covenant theology is in its essence Christ himself. The title itself, therefore, is a compendium of theology! We have come to expect great things from Dr. Venema's writings and this volume does not disappoint. Treatments of three major issues currently troubling Reformed churches are done with masterful analysis. Quite frankly, these pages are necessary reading from one finest theologians of our time.

—**Derek W. H. Thomas**, Chancellor's Professor, Reformed Theological Seminary; Senior Minister, First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, South Carolina; Teaching Fellow, Ligonier Ministries

Reformed theologian Cornelis Venema's book *Christ and Covenant Theology* examines the comprehensive theme of God's eternal purpose to fellowship with his people. Stressing that God's covenant can be rightly understood only by keeping the person and work of Christ central, Dr. Venema clearly portrays the doctrine of the covenant as synthesizing the biblical understanding of God's purpose in creation and new creation. While addressing perennial issues in the Reformed understanding of covenant theology, Dr. Venema does not neglect recent debates swirling around a proper view of the covenant. Especially noteworthy is his refutation of the Federal Vision as well as N. T. Wright's harmful denial of the Reformation's biblical view of justification. *Christ and Covenant Theology* is compelling, comprehensive, and replete with pastoral implications. Here is a book to make the reader think, but also a book leading the reader to worship Christ, the origin and the end of God's loving and gracious purpose to dwell in everlasting communion with his covenant people.

—**David B. McWilliams**, Senior Minister, Covenant Presbyterian Church, Lakeland, Florida

Christ and Covenant Theology is necessary reading on the currently debated issues of covenant theology. Venema provides an excellent survey of the various modern critiques of covenant theology and of the current debates concerning the doctrine of the covenants in Reformed circles. He follows this with a carefully honed analysis and critique that respects both the biblical foundations of covenantal thought and the foundational arguments of the orthodox Reformed confessional and theological tradition. The volume also contains an exposition of related topics that serves to underline the importance of a well-formed understanding of covenant to the Reformed faith and to clarify the central core of traditional Reformed covenantal thought.

—**Richard A. Muller**, Senior Fellow, Junius Institute for Digital Reformation Research; P. J. Zondervan Professor of Historical Theology, Emeritus, Calvin Theological Seminary

CHRIST + COVENANT THEOLOGY

Essays on Election, Republication, and the Covenants

CORNELIS P. VENEMA

P&R PUBLISHING
P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

Chapters 1–7, and 12 are adapted from material previously published in the *Mid-America Journal of Theology*. Used by permission.

Italics within Scripture quotations indicate emphasis added.

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN 978-1-62995-251-2 (pbk)
ISBN 978-1-62995-252-9 (ePub)
ISBN 978-1-62995-253-6 (Mobi)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Venema, Cornelis P., author.
Title: Christ and covenant theology : essays on election, republication, and the covenants / Cornelis P. Venema.
Description: Phillipsburg : P&R Publishing, 2017. | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2016039116| ISBN 9781629952512 (pbk.) | ISBN 9781629952529 (epub) | ISBN 9781629952536 (mobi)
Subjects: LCSH: Covenants--Religious aspects--Reformed Church. | Covenant theology. | Election (Theology) | Reformed Church--Doctrines.
Classification: LCC BT155 .V38 2017 | DDC 231.7/6--dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2016039116

To all of my former and present students at Mid-America Reformed Seminary, with the hope that their teaching ministries will focus upon the glory of Christ's person and work as the Mediator of the covenant of grace.

Contents

Part 3: Covenant Theology in Recent Discussion

Foreword

Our God is a covenant-making and covenant-keeping God. That is who he is; it is how he reveals himself; it is how we are invited to come to know him in Jesus Christ. So whenever there is a rediscovery of biblical theology, the importance of God's covenant relationship with his people is also restored to its place of prominence in both systematic and practical theology. This, in turn, filters into the life of the people of God and anchors them in place in the unfolding of God's purposes. As it goes with the appreciation of God's covenant dealings with his people, so it goes with the church's perspective on Scripture, on history, and on the providence of God in the life of both the family of God and the individual Christian believer, and, ultimately, on the consummation of all things. This is so because the Bible is covenant oriented from beginning to end.

Not infrequently such a claim has been regarded as exaggerated on the one hand or demeaned as a systematic or dogmatic construction on the other—seen as not a reality rooted in the exegesis of Scripture. Thus, it is said, the term *covenant* is absent from the opening chapters of Scripture (not appearing before the Noah narrative in Genesis 6:18); and by the time of the New Testament it has almost entirely disappeared except when reference is being made to passages in the Old Testament. But this, it should be said, is in part to miss the fact that the promise to Noah is of covenant *recovery*, made by the Lord who is known from Genesis 2:4 as Yahweh, his quintessentially covenantal name. It is the God of exodus and redemption, the Lord of history, the *covenant* God who was active in creation and present with his people from the very beginning. And then the whole new epoch inaugurated by Christ falls under the rubric of the words "I

will make a new covenant." Thus just as B. B. Warfield noted that covenant is the architectonic principle of the Westminster Confession, so also the same may be said of Scripture. It is not its *only* governing theme, but it is fundamental to it. Indeed it is the framework within which God sets the scene for the coming of Christ and for the bringing in of his kingdom. Elsewhere, in connection with the deity of Christ, Warfield also shrewdly pointed out that it is not simply in "the big texts" that the strongest evidence is to be found. It is all-pervasive, it is the presupposition, the *sine qua non* of everything that is recorded of Jesus in the Gospels and all that is expounded about him in the Epistles.

The same is true of God's covenant—it is ubiquitous. True, it often goes unmentioned and the term does not constantly appear; but this is so only because it is the lens through which everything is to be seen clearly. For in one sense there is no such "thing" as a covenant. It is not an abstract *res* or commodity we can take out and examine. For it is not a reality that can somehow be separated from the person of the Lord himself—any more than a marriage covenant is an objectifiable *res*, a "thing" that can be abstracted from the man and the woman who are bound together in an unreserved commitment of love for and to one another. *Covenant* describes the relationship itself in all its multiple dimensions, both legal and existential. For that reason, it is present in their lives even when—perhaps for weeks, months, or even years—no verbal reference is made to the covenant into which they have entered. In this sense the covenant is much more than a "thing" that is somehow part of their relationship; it is the foundation and presupposition of the whole. In one sense it simply is the whole—one person binding himself or herself to another unreservedly "for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer . . . ." The marriage covenant is therefore not so much something that the couple looks at but the lenses through which they view the whole of their life together. They do not look at their marriage to find their covenant so much as look through that covenant at the privileges of their married life. It is no wonder then that marriage serves as such a prominent metaphor for God's covenant with his people.

At the end of the day this helps us understand why, when we turn over the blank page that separates the "Old Testament or Covenant" from the "New Testament or Covenant of our Lord Jesus Christ," we discover something that may at first surprise but on deeper reflection is seen to be inevitable. In the New Testament the term *covenant* virtually drops out of use. Indeed, apart from references to God's ancient covenant promises pointing forward to the Messiah, Jesus Christ, it could be argued that—apart from its use in Hebrews—it seems to disappear from circulation.

But this is to misunderstand. For ultimately God's covenant with his people is not only *found in* Jesus Christ; it is Jesus Christ. The new covenant, the final covenant, the covenant in which is experienced the fullness of God's promise "I will be your God and you will be my people" is made in him. In him all the (covenant) promises of God find their "yes!" So when we rightly speak of "Christ and the covenant," this is ultimately the same as speaking of the "Christ who *is* the covenant." In him we are given the final disclosure of the true inner nature of the covenant that God made with his people and unfolded in the succession and progression of covenants that punctuate the narrative of the whole Old Testament. The new covenant is "in my blood," he said. Now to be in covenant with God is to be "in Christ" who is himself the covenant of God. Indeed, Paul's staggeringly pervasive use of the *en Christō* phrase and its variants—peppering the pages of his letters—is simply another way of expressing the new covenant relationship. This is surely why the language employed in the former outworking of his earlier covenant promises in relation to faith and obedience or unbelief and disobedience *now* is employed to describe the effects of the responses of faith or unbelief in relationship to Jesus Christ. So to those who trust Yahweh the covenant Lord, blessings flow; to those who turn away, only curses remain. This is the covenant dynamic. These terms *blessing* and *cursing* represent covenant language and constitute a vocabulary inseparable from it. So for those who are in Christ, all spiritual blessings become their inheritance. From this point of view a passage like Ephesians 1:1–14, which describes these blessings without mentioning the word *covenant*, is

nevertheless covenantal through and through. Unless we appreciate this relationship between covenant and Christ, we will have a shallower view of what these blessings mean—in fact of what *blessing* itself means.

In this way, while it is a helpful analogy to say that covenant is like Old Testament scaffolding that, when taken down, leaves Christ fully revealed, it may also be said that the covenant revelation of the Old Testament provides us with the skeleton of which Jesus Christ is the body and soul. His coming does not involve jettisoning covenantal thinking but discovering its fullness embodied in him. For in his affirmation that he came not to destroy the Law and the Prophets but to fulfill them it is implicit that he did the same with the covenant. So just as the fulfilment of the former (Law and Prophets) means that we are to understand Jesus in terms of them, so too in order to appreciate the magnitude of his work we need a clear and full understanding of covenant.

All this being so, it should be clear that our covenant theology as such is bound to impact every aspect of our theology. Naturally that will be true of theology proper, the doctrine of God, since he is *Yahweh*, the Covenant Lord. But it will also be true of the nature of sin, since it makes us covenant-breakers (*asunthetoi*, Rom. 1:31); of the work of Christ, since in his blood the new covenant is constituted; and of the application and consummation of redemption, in which God becomes our God and we become his people; not to mention the covenantal import of baptism and the Lord's Supper and the final consummation in which covenantal language is employed to describe its ultimate reality: "I will be his God and he will be my son" (Rev. 21:7).

In the history of the church, the rediscovery of this whole-Bible, Christocentric, covenantal perspective—which is what biblical theology really is—leads, it seems inevitably, to questions about the nature and role of the law of God. This was true already in the days of Jesus and the apostles. Our Lord himself had to explain how the new covenant related to the nature and function of the law (Matt. 5:17–48). The apostle Paul was accused of demeaning it, and therefore in the context of his biblical-theological exposition

in Galatians 3 himself raises the question, "Why then the law?" (Gal. 3:19).

It should not surprise us, then, that whenever there is an awakening to the importance of covenant theology, Paul's question follows, and on occasion is compelled by the rejection of any ongoing role for the law for those who are *in Christ*. In turn this question may well lead on to serious discussion and debate about the nature of justification and also of the corporate and familial implications of the new covenant.

Proof of this is found in at least three of the centuries that have passed since the church fractured and fragmented in the sixteenth century. The recovery of a biblical covenant theology raised these questions for the magisterial Reformers of the sixteenth century. Similar "hot button" topics reemerged in the context of the covenant theology of the seventeenth century. Those familiar with this connection are therefore little surprised that, following the resurgence of interest in the idea of the covenant in scholarly writing some seventy years or so ago, these same old questions are being revisited: What is the function of the law of God? What does justification mean? What are the corporate implications of covenant-oriented theology?

For anyone abreast of the controversies of the day, it is altogether unnecessary for me to say all this. But it may be helpful for readers who casually pick up *Christ and Covenant Theology* and wonder whether it is an important book to read. In fact, its importance lies first in the cardinal importance of covenant theology; and then, in the importance of getting it right. This is a serious piece of work, for serious readers. But anyone willing to wrestle with the issues presented here will undoubtedly be informed but also will grow in understanding how the gospel works.

Professor Cornelis Venema needs no commendation from me, either personally or academically. He has served for many years now as the President of Mid-America Reformed Seminary. In addition to the gifts with which he fulfills a multitude of administrative responsibilities, he has also been able to find time and energy to devote his formidable intellect to some of the most important

doctrinal and pastoral issues of the day. In particular—as will become clear in these pages—he has given the good part of a lifetime to reflecting on the issues involved in both the development and the articulation of covenant theology. From time to time he has given us the fruits of his own rich reservoir of knowledge and scholarly understanding of this great theme in a variety of valuable articles that have helped to inform, challenge, and at times correct our thinking about God's covenants. Now in *Christ and Covenant Theology* many of these reflections are brought together into a coherent single volume in which he takes up a number of important issues that have arisen in the development of covenant theology from the Reformation period right through to the contemporary church. His contribution is both knowledgeable and incisive and should be welcomed on all sides.

In particular Dr. Venema treats three major issues. The first is the long-standing question of the nature of the relationship between God and man established in creation—which is coupled with the further question of the nature of the Mosaic covenant. The second is an issue that has perhaps surfaced most frequently in the Continental Reformed theological tradition, namely the relationship of God's election to his covenant, and then in the light of that the much-discussed and deeply sensitive question of the election, baptism, and salvation of children. The third question involves the relationship between covenant and justification, and indeed the very nature of justification itself—an issue that has surfaced in North America in relationship to what has been denominated "Federal Vision" theology, and in the broader theological world has been an important point of debate in the rise of what (following James D. G. Dunn) has come to be known as "the new perspective." This, for American evangelicals, has probably been most associated with the writing and teaching of N. T. Wright.

The issues Professor Venema discusses, then, are by no means simple, nor is the scholarly debate that surrounds them always straightforward or for that matter dispassionate. He deals with all this in a gracious but candid way. To some readers these issues may at first seem recondite, "in-house" scholastic discussions among learned

theologians with little relevance to the theology or life of the ordinary Christian. It is true that the issues themselves have often arisen in the formulations of learned theologians—and, admittedly, these formulations come and go. But underneath and behind the issues discussed here, concerning covenant, law, and justification, lies the biggest and most important question of all—the question of God. More pointedly, the double-edged question, "Who is God, really—and what is he actually like in his nature and character? Who *is* the God of the covenant?" For it is a fundamental axiom of all coherent theology that as God reveals himself to be, so he is in himself. And so while Dr. Venema conducts his side of the discussions in a scholarly, reasoned, learned, and footnoted manner, no one should doubt that the issues he discusses are of major personal, pastoral, and real-life theological significance.

Christ and Covenant Theology therefore deals with elements in Reformed theology that are both fundamental and pressing. Cornelis Venema is to be welcomed as a guide here, for he possesses enviable expertise in both Calvin and the Reformed theological tradition, as well as a detailed understanding of Scripture. His knowledge of the subject, his grasp of the literature, and his understanding of its ramifications and repercussions both in theological thinking and practical living well qualify him to help us. The material he handles is demanding. But since he deals with a great theme in a serious and responsible way, joining him to wrestle through these questions cannot fail to instruct our minds and illumine our understanding. In addition, it should help us to think more clearly about God, about Christ, about the ministry of the Spirit, about the nature of the gospel, about the life of the church, and, very near to home doubtless for many readers, the way in which the character and covenant of God relate to our children.

So *Christ and Covenant Theology* digs out a rich vein of gold from the mine of Scripture, seeking to understand it "together with all the saints" and to follow through on the implications and ramifications of the new covenant for the whole of the Christian life.

What is promised here, then, is a vigorous and exhilarating theological workout as well as an adventure in biblical theology for

every reader. No further comment is needed, except perhaps to reiterate the exhortation heard so long ago by Augustine (himself a covenant theologian) and to which he responded with such profound implications for the history of the whole church: *Tolle lege!* So, pick up this book, and read it.

Sinclair B. Ferguson
Teaching Fellow
Ligonier Ministries

Acknowledgments

I would be remiss if I were not to acknowledge a number of people who contributed in various ways to the preparation and completion of this book. I am deeply grateful for helpful discussions through the years with my faculty colleagues at Mid-America regarding many of the issues in covenant theology that have arisen recently among Reformed theologians and churches. I am especially thankful for the insights of my colleague, J. Mark Beach, whose dissertation offers a fine analysis of the covenant theology of Francis Turretin.[1] In Turretin's classic formulation of the doctrine of the covenants, we find a model of biblical exposition and systematic formulation that offers a consensus opinion on a number of issues long disputed among Reformed theologians. I am grateful as well for the assistance of Glenda Mathes and Ruben Zartman, who willingly edited the manuscript; Rachel Luttjeboer, who worked readily and patiently on the preparation of the select bibliography; and Daniel Ragusa, who helped with the preparation of the indexes. I am also grateful to P&R Publishing for agreeing to publish the volume, and for all the help John Hughes provided along the way. I am especially delighted and grateful that Sinclair Ferguson agreed to write the foreword.

1. *CCT.*

Introduction

"He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God." (Rev. 2:7)

"Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever." (Rev. 22:1–5)

In the biblical drama of the living God's works in creation and redemption, no theme is more lustrous than that of God's gracious intention to enjoy communion with humans who bear his image and whose lives have been broken through sin. The biblical story of creation and redemption, like a musical oratorio that has four distinct movements, begins with God's great work of creation, moves quickly to the fall into sin, then choruses God's gracious purpose of redemption, and crescendos in anticipation of the day when God's creative and redemptive purposes will reach their consummation in the new heavens and earth. Before and underneath the grand symphony recounted in Scripture, lies God's surprising, undeserved, and

invincible purpose to initiate and ultimately to consummate a relationship of mutual love and commitment between himself and those who belong to him through the work of his Son, Jesus Christ. At every note, the Scriptures represent the triune God as the sovereign Lord of history, who graciously condescends to enjoy fellowship with us. Despite the disruption and loss of the original fellowship with God that the human race once enjoyed in Adam before the fall into sin, God intends to grant the fullness of unbreakable fellowship with his people through the work of the "last" Adam, Jesus Christ (Rom. 5:12–21; 1 Cor. 15:42–49).

The beautiful imagery of the book of Revelation, which concludes the biblical story of redemption, offers a rich portrait of the fullness of human life when God's aim to enjoy fellowship with his people reaches its goal. Paradise lost has now become paradise regained. The "tree of life" in the garden of Eden, which was a kind of sacramental sign and seal of the fullness of human life in eternal communion with God, represents the fulfillment of God's work of redemption in Christ. Christian believers who overcome in the course of their earthly pilgrimage will one day "eat of the tree of life" in the world to come. Though Adam, and the fallen human race in union with him, forfeited the right to access the tree of life in the prefall state, believers are promised the fullness of life in the presence of the living God through union with Christ after his return. The imagery that Genesis uses to describe the original human privilege of fellowship with God and service under his lordship in the first creation, now portrays the renewal of creation in the consummation of God's kingdom. Through the triumph of the Lamb of God, believers anticipate a day when God's intention to dwell with his people is realized.

In that day, all of the people of God, drawn from among all the nations and people of the earth, will enjoy the promised rest of unbreakable fellowship with and service to God and others in his name. All the brokenness and trouble wrought by human sin and disobedience will be reversed. The curse of God upon the human race, and even upon the creation itself as it groans in expectation of the revelation of the sons of God (Rom. 8:18–25), will be redressed.

Life in communion with God will be an unending delight. To glorify God and to enjoy him forever will no longer be a wistful hope, but a blessed reality. Every way in which human sin has marred God's creation and handiwork will be undone. Human life in fellowship with God will finally be "the way it is supposed to be," an offering of unending worship and praise to God through Christ. The original calling of God—to subdue all of human life, even the creation itself, under his royal reign—will be achieved.

This grand narrative of the biblical history of redemption provides a framework for this book's essays. Though I deliberately avoided the term *covenant*, Scripture's main themes find their biblical-theological, even systematic coherence, in the idea of covenant. In the history of Reformed theology especially, the gracious condescension of God to enter into fellowship with human beings as his image-bearers has been expressed confessionally and theologically by means of the doctrine of the covenant. While it has been suggested, even by theologians within the Reformed tradition, that Reformed theology suffers from a kind of "covenant overload,"[1] a distinctive feature of this theology is its insistence that the doctrine of the covenant offers an appropriate synthesis of the biblical understanding of God's purposes in the creation of human beings according to his image in Adam before the fall and the re-creation of the new humanity according to the image of the last Adam, Christ, after the fall.

Though the emphasis upon covenant always needs to meet the test of scriptural examination, Reformed theology has historically met this test. Even the structure of the biblical canon, consisting as it does of an "old testament" and a "new testament," witnesses to the centrality of covenant in the biblical story of creation and redemption. Throughout the biblical story of redemption, language descriptive of the original relationship between the triune God and the human race in Adam is often present, explicitly or implicitly, in the way the work of redemption is characterized. The imagery of Revelation evidences that the original goal for human life in communion with

1. See, e.g., John H. Stek, "Covenant Overload in Reformed Theology," *CTJ* 29, 1 (1994): 12–41.

God, foreshadowed in the biblical account of creation in Genesis 1–2, finds its fruition in the renewed communion with God believers will enjoy in the fullness of life in God's new creation. While it is not my purpose in this volume to offer a biblical-theological exposition and defense of the centrality of covenant to the biblical story of redemption, these pages evidence my conviction that the inclinations of Reformed covenant theology are fundamentally correct and biblically defensible.

As will become additionally obvious throughout this book's chapters, the doctrine of the covenant has elicited considerable ongoing discussion, even controversy, within the North American Reformed and Presbyterian community. Some of these debates recall those in the period of Reformed orthodoxy during the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In contemporary discussions of the doctrine of the covenant, however, several issues have received special attention. These issues, which are addressed at various points throughout the chapters of this book, include: (1) whether we may speak of the original, prefall relationship between God and the human race in Adam as a covenant relationship, even though the express language of "covenant" is not ordinarily used to characterize it; (2) whether the original covenant relationship should be described as a "covenant of works" in distinction from the postfall "covenant of grace"; (3) whether in all of the distinct administrations of the covenant, before and after the fall into sin, the source of the covenant relationship lies in God's unmerited favor toward his image-bearers, who may never be regarded as strictly deserving God's promised blessing; (4) whether the covenant of grace, particularly during the Mosaic administration, includes the republication of the prefall covenant of works; (5) whether the doctrines of covenant and election, though intimately related, need to be distinguished in order to acknowledge the presence of nonelect persons within the covenant in its historical administration; (6) whether in all of the administrations of the covenant before and after the fall, the law of God remains a perpetual rule of righteousness and gratitude whose obligations must be met in order for human beings to enjoy the blessedness of unbreakable fellowship with God; (7) whether in the covenant of grace, Christ, the

"last" Adam, discharges all of the obligations of the law on behalf of his people in order to secure their inheritance of eternal life; and (8) whether the destiny of the new humanity in Christ includes not only the grace of free justification with God, but also the grace of sanctification in renewed obedience to the law of God. Throughout the course of the book, the significance of these issues will be addressed in respect to a number of contemporary debates regarding the doctrine of the covenant.

While it would be tempting to preview the resolution of these issues, doing so in an introduction would be premature. At this point, I will offer only this summary of the book's argument: the chapters, individually and in concert, aim to defend what might be termed a consensus opinion on these issues. The subtext of my treatment of older and newer debates in the history of covenant theology is that many of the controversies regarding them in the Reformed community would be diminished by avoiding one-sided, exaggerated formulations that do not enjoy the sanction of better reflection throughout the history of confessional Reformed theology. Although I am not interested in an approach to the doctrine of the covenant that merely aims at a repristination of older formulations, it is important to know enough about the history of Reformed covenant thinking to avoid repeating old missteps or detours along the way. While there is considerable room for diversity of formulation and emphasis within the boundaries of the historic Reformed confessions, it is important to remain adequately tethered to the consensus that is expressed in them.

The title of the book, *Christ and Covenant Theology*, captures the burden of my argument throughout. In the biblical story of God's fellowship with his people, the person and work of Christ are always central. The destiny of human life in unbroken fellowship with God, which was first promised to Adam before the fall into sin, was ultimately to be fulfilled within God's gracious purpose through the work of the eschatological or "last" Adam. The beginnings of life in communion with God, which human beings enjoyed in Adam before the fall, were unable to reach the fullness of unbroken communion with God apart from the work of Christ, in whom all the promises

of God, including eternal life, are fulfilled (Rom. 6:23; 2 Cor. 1:20). The story of creation and redemption that Scripture tells is a story leading to Christ. God's gracious purposes for covenant communion with his people are always fulfilled in Christ, through whom believers find their life and blessedness in fellowship with God. Though I argue at various points that it is necessary to distinguish the prefall covenant in Adam from the postfall covenant in Christ, these covenants, each in their own way, testify to the glory and blessing of human fellowship with God through Christ. The burden of my argument throughout is that Christ, and Christ alone, is always the One through whom God's gracious intention to enjoy fellowship with his people finds its beginning and end.

The subtitle of the book, *Essays on Election, Republication, and the Covenants*, hints at its genesis. In the last two decades, I have written a number of essays on these topics. Many of these essays were first published in the *Mid-America Journal of Theology*, a publication of the faculty of Mid-America Reformed Seminary in Dyer, Indiana. Several chapters had their beginnings in essays written for a volume on the topic of covenant theology and baptism or as a draft document for a denominational study committee report on the so-called "Federal Vision," a revisionist form of covenant theology that has disturbed the peace of several Presbyterian and Reformed denominations in North America. Most of the essays have been significantly revised—and, I hope, improved—for inclusion in this volume. Since the book represents a collection of essays originally written to stand alone, the reader will find, as is often true of anthologies, that there is some overlapping in content of the chapters. At the same time, since many of the chapters discuss distinct issues in covenant theology, they can be read independently by readers with a specific interest. Though the chapters are ordered by theological and historical factors, they may be read in a different sequence that is governed by the readers' interests.

The first part of the book begins with three essays focusing upon a dominant feature of classic Reformed covenant theology, the bicovenantalism that is codified in the WCF. Though the early writers of the Reformed tradition during the sixteenth-century Reformation

do not expressly speak of the prefall relationship between God and the human race in Adam as a covenant relationship, by the time of the writing of the WCF in the mid-seventeenth century the distinction between a prefall covenant of works and a postfall covenant of grace was common. In the opening chapter, I offer a defense of the WCF's bi-covenantalism, and respond to recent criticisms against the doctrine of a prefall covenant of works. The second and third chapters offer a lengthy review of a recent book-length defense of the idea that the Mosaic administration, though an administration of the covenant of grace, included the republication in some sense of the covenant of works. Though the republication thesis has been advanced with considerable vigor by some in the Reformed community as an important emphasis in the Reformed theological tradition, I argue that it was a minority viewpoint among writers of the orthodox period, and that in its modern expression reflects the revisions of covenant theology associated with the name of Meredith Kline.

The second part of the book consists of five chapters addressing various dimensions of the relationship between the doctrines of the covenant and of election in Reformed theology. Though it is commonly acknowledged that Reformed theology is marked by a special emphasis upon each of these doctrines, there is considerable debate regarding how they are related. Do covenant and election represent two distinct, even incompatible, "central dogmas" in the history of Reformed theology? In recent years, a number of interpreters of the Reformed tradition have advanced the thesis that the doctrine of election served as a kind of organizing principle for Reformed theology in the orthodox period, and that all of its doctrinal themes were subordinated to an abstract and austere doctrine of divine sovereignty. According to this thesis, the doctrine of the covenant emerged in the Reformed theological tradition in two different forms. In one form, the doctrine of the covenant was articulated on the basis of the doctrine of election, diminishing the mutuality and conditionality of the covenants in their administration. In this trajectory of Reformed theology, a "monopleuric" or unilateral view of the covenant predominated. In the second form, the doctrine of covenant was stressed in order to give greater emphasis to history and the mutuality of

the covenant relationship between God and his people. Two of the chapters in this part of the book focus upon the treatment of covenant and election in the theology of Herman Bavinck. In my estimation, Bavinck's treatment of these doctrines and their interrelation represents well the classic Reformed view of the coherence and harmony between these two aspects of God's purpose and work in Jesus Christ. The subsequent two chapters treat an important article in the CD that addresses the confidence believing parents may have in the election and salvation of their children whom God calls to himself in their infancy. The last of the chapters in this part of the book examines the relation between covenant theology and the baptism of children of believing parents. All the chapters in this part of my book aim to illustrate the intimate interplay in Reformed theology between covenant and election.

The third part of the book enters more directly into the arena of recent controversies regarding the doctrine of the covenant. Three chapters summarize and assess what has come to be termed the "Federal Vision." These chapters are based upon a draft document originally written on behalf of a study committee commissioned by a synod of the United Reformed Churches in North America. Although the controversy regarding the "Federal Vision" has its roots in discussions within the Presbyterian churches in North America that subscribe to the Westminster Standards, my evaluation of the "Federal Vision" appeals especially to the Three Forms of Unity (BC, HC, and CD). In my assessment of the "Federal Vision," I show how some controversial formulations are as much at odds with the Three Forms of Unity as they are with the Westminster Standards. After these three chapters on the "Federal Vision," I address one further controversial reformulation of the doctrine of the covenant, especially in terms of its implications for the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone on the basis of Christ's work alone. This reformulation is associated with the writings of N. T. Wright, who redefines the meaning of justification from the vantage point of the so-called "new perspectives on Paul."

In order to identify the main themes of the essays throughout the book, and also to provide a synopsis of their conclusions with

respect to the doctrine of Christ and the covenants, I conclude the book with a summary chapter. In this chapter, I return to the principal issues that have emerged in recent discussions of the doctrine of the covenant in the Reformed community in North America and offer a synthesis of the implications of the book's essays for addressing them in a systematic fashion.

Abbreviations

ARC	Cornelis P. Venema, *Accepted and Renewed in Christ: The "Twofold Grace of God" and the Interpretation of Calvin's Theology*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007
BC	Belgic Confession (note that this and other confessional standards are cited from *ERCC*, referenced below)
CCT	J. Mark Beach, *Christ and the Covenant: Francis Turretin's Federal Theology as a Defense of the Doctrine of Grace*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007
CD	Canons of Dort
CNTC	*Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*. Edited by David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance. 12 vols. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1960
CO	John Calvin, *Ioannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia*. Edited by G. Baum, E. Cunitz, E. Reuss, et al. 59 vols. *Corpus Reformata*. Brunsvigae, Ger.: Schwetschke, 1862–1900
CTJ	*Calvin Theological Journal*
ERCC	*Ecumenical and Reformed Creeds and Confessions*, Classroom Edition. Orange City, IA: Mid-America Reformed Seminary, 1991
ESV	English Standard Version

GFA	Cornelis P. Venema, *The Gospel of Free Acceptance in Christ: An Assessment of the Reformation and New Perspectives on Paul*. Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2006
HBP	Cornelis P. Venema, *Heinrich Bullinger and the Doctrine of Predestination: Author of "the Other Reformed Tradition"?* Texts and Studies in Reformation and Post-Reformation Thought, edited by Richard A. Muller. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002
HC	Heidelberg Catechism
IET	Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*. Edited by James T. Dennison Jr. Translated by George M. Giger. 3 vols. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992, 1994, 1997
ICC	International Critical Commentary
Institutes	John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Edited by John T. McNeill. Translated by Ford Lewis Battles. 2 vols. Library of Christian Classics. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960
JETS	*Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*
JVN1	*Justification and Variegated Nomism*, vol. 1, *The Complexities of Second Temple Judaism*, ed. D. A. Carson, Peter T. O'Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001
JVN2	*Justification and Variegated Nomism*, vol. 2, *The Paradoxes of Paul*, ed. D. A. Carson, Peter O'Brien, and Mark A. Seifrid. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004
KJV	King James Version
MAJT	*Mid-America Journal of Theology*
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament

NIV	New International Version
NT	New Testament
ORF	Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith: A Survey of Christian Doctrine*. Translated by Henry Zylstra. 1960. Reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1977
OS	John Calvin, *Opera Selecta*. Edited by P. Barth and G. Niesel. 5 vols. München: Kaiser, 1926–52
OT	Old Testament
R&R	*Reformation and Revival*
RD	Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*. Edited by John Bolt. Translated by John Vriend. 4 vols. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003, 2004, 2006, 2008
Romans	N. T. Wright, *The Letter to the Romans*. Vol. 10 of *The New Interpreter's Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon, 2002
ST	L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*. 4th ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1939, 1941
TAAT	E. Calvin Beisner, ed. *The Auburn Avenue Theology, Pros and Cons: Debating the Federal Vision. The Knox Theological Seminary Colloquium on the Federal Vision, August 11–13, 2003*. Ft. Lauderdale, FL: Knox Theological Seminary, 2004
TFV	Steve Wilkins and Duane Garner, eds. *The Federal Vision*. Monroe, LA: Athanasius, 2004
TLNF	Bryan D. Estelle, J. V. Fesko, and David VanDrunen, eds. *The Law Is Not of Faith: Essays on Works and Grace in the Mosaic Covenant*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009

WCF	Westminster Confession of Faith
WLC	Westminster Larger Catechism
WSC	Westminster Shorter Catechism
WTJ	*Westminster Theological Journal*

Part 1

The Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace

1

The Covenant of Works in the Westminster Confession of Faith

> "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. 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." WCF 7.1–2.

In his extensive study of the WCF, *The Westminster Assembly and Its Work*, Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield remarked that "[t]he architectonic principle of the Westminster Confession is supplied by the schematization of the Federal theology, which had obtained by this time in Britain, as on the Continent, a dominant position as the most commodious mode of presenting the *corpus* of Reformed doctrine."[1] Certainly, when the WCF is compared and contrasted with earlier Reformed confessions of the sixteenth century, it distinguishes itself by its full expression of federal or covenant theology, including this theology's characteristic distinction between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. No one reading the WCF can fail to detect the fruit of developments in the doctrine of

1. Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *The Westminster Assembly and Its Work* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1931), 56.

the covenant that occurred within the earliest period of Reformed theology in the first half of the sixteenth century. For example, the WCF's distinction between a prefall covenant of works and a postfall covenant of grace—a distinction which plays such a foundational role in covenant theology—is not found in the writings of John Calvin, and was only first expressed among the Reformed in the writings of Zacharias Ursinus, an author of the HC.

The development of covenant theology in the period between the early Reformation and the writing of the WCF has been much discussed in recent literature.[2] One of the disputed issues that has surfaced is the degree to which the later covenant theology is consistent with the earlier views of John Calvin. Those who maintain a divergence of viewpoints between Calvin and the later covenant theologians frequently note that Calvin nowhere mentions or develops a specific doctrine of a covenant of works. Calvin, these writers repeatedly point out, only knew a covenant of grace. It has also been argued that a significant divergence emerged within Reformed theology between, on the one hand, a "testamentary" or monopleuric view of the covenant shaped by the doctrine of election, and

2. See, e.g., Mark W. Karlberg, "The Mosaic Covenant and the Concept of Works in Reformed Hermeneutics: A Historical-Critical Analysis with Particular Attention to Early Covenant Eschatology" (Th.D. diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1980); Karlberg, "Reformed Interpretation of the Mosaic Covenant," *WTJ* 43, 1 (1980): 1–57; Karlberg, "The Original State of Adam: Tensions in Reformed Theology," *Evangelical Quarterly* 59, 4 (1987): 291–309; Ernest F. Kevan, *The Grace of Law: A Study in Puritan Theology* (1964; repr. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1976); Peter Alan Lillback, "Ursinus' Development of the Covenant of Creation: A Debt to Melanchthon or Calvin?," *WTJ* 43, 1 (1981): 247–88; Lillback, *The Binding of God: Calvin's Role in the Development of Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001); Michael McGiffert, "From Moses to Adam: The Making of the Covenant of Works," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 19, 2 (1988): 131–55; Geerhardus Vos, "The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology," in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), 234–67; David A. Weir, *The Origins of the Federal Theology in Sixteenth-Century Reformation Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990); *CCT*, esp. 13–77; 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," *CTJ* 29, 1 (1994): 75–100; Rowland S. Ward, *God & Adam: Reformed Theology and the Creation Covenant* (Wantirna, Australia: New Melbourne Press, 2003); and Andrew A. Woolsey, *Unity and Continuity in Covenantal Thought: A Study in the Reformed Tradition to the Westminster Assembly* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage, 2012).

on the other hand, a full or dipleuric covenant doctrine.[3] Reams of paper have been printed in evaluating these developments on the doctrine of the covenant in early and post-Reformation Reformed theology.

Rather than reviewing the history of the development of covenant theology or answering the questions that have arisen in the literature on this subject, I want to consider some criticisms that have more recently been registered against the formulation of the doctrine of the covenant of works in the WCF. Since this formulation expresses the dominant position of the covenant theology of the period in which the Confession was written (and indeed of subsequent Reformed covenant theology), these criticisms raise important questions regarding this doctrine's warrant or biblical propriety. My aim is to evaluate the validity of these criticisms and answer some of the objections that have been pressed against the WCF's understanding of the covenant of works.

It will become evident in what follows that there are two broad sources for such criticisms of the WCF. The first arises primarily within the framework of neoorthodoxy, that revision of classical Reformed theology associated with the theology of Karl Barth. The second arises within the quite different framework of Reformed orthodoxy, though it represents something of an adjustment and refinement of the classical Reformed doctrine of the covenant of works. After briefly summarizing the main lines of these criticisms of the WCF, I will conclude with a brief defense of the Westminster doctrine of the covenant of works.

3. Cf. Leonard Trinterud, "The Origins of Puritanism," *Church History* 20, 1 (1951): 37–57; Richard Greaves, "The Origins and Early Development of English Covenant Thought," *Historian* 31, 1 (1968): 21–35; J. Wayne Baker, *Heinrich Bullinger and the Covenant: The Other Reformed Tradition* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1980). This thesis of a twofold development in Reformed theology, or a divergence between two incompatible views of the covenant, has been subjected to vigorous criticism. See Lyle D. Bierma, "Federal Theology in the Sixteenth Century: Two Traditions?," *WTJ* 45, 2 (1983): 304–21; Bierma, "Covenant or Covenants in the Theology of Olevianus," *CTJ* 22, 2 (1987): 228–50; Bierma, "The Role of Covenant Theology in Early Reformed Orthodoxy," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 21, 3 (1990): 453–62; Woolsey, *Unity and Continuity*, esp. 336–43; and *HBP*.

Criticisms of the Westminster Confession of Faith

Before considering two writers who have expressed the gist of the Barthian criticism of the WCF's view of the covenant of works, it will be helpful to consider a few important themes in the theology of Karl Barth which find their echo in this criticism.

Karl Barth

To understand Karl Barth's antipathy to the distinction between a prefall covenant of works and a postfall covenant of grace, it is essential to grasp what he means by speaking of the creation as the "external basis of the covenant" and the covenant as the "internal basis of creation." Speaking of the former, Barth argues that

> [t]he existence and being of the creature willed and constituted by God are the object and to that extent the presupposition of His love. Thus the covenant is the goal of creation and creation the way to the covenant. Nor is creation the inner basis of the covenant. . . . The inner basis of the covenant is simply the free love of God, or more precisely the eternal covenant which God has decreed in Himself as the covenant of the Father with His Son as the Lord and Bearer of human nature, and to that extent the Representative of all creation. Creation is the external—and only the external—basis of the covenant.[4]

In Barth's theology of the covenant, God's free act of calling the creation into existence provides a context for him to enter into covenant with the creature. The creation constitutes the sphere within which God's gracious care for the creature in Jesus Christ can be expressed and realized. It is in this sense, then, that the creation constitutes the external basis of the covenant, the arena within which God's saving purpose toward humanity in Christ can be realized and effected.

However, Barth also insists that the creation has no independent

4. Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of Creation*, vol. 3.1 of *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1958), 97.

existence or meaning apart from the covenant of grace. The covenant of grace, eternally purposed in Christ and realized in all of God's dealings with the creation, is the "internal basis of creation."

> The covenant whose history had still to commence was the covenant which, as the goal appointed for creation and the creature, made creation necessary and possible, and determined and limited the creature. If creation was the external basis of the covenant, the latter was the internal basis of the former. If creation was the formal presupposition of the covenant, the latter was the material presupposition of the former. If creation takes precedence historically, the covenant does so in substance. If the proclamation and foundation of the covenant is the beginning of the history which commences after creation, the history of creation already contains, as the history of the being of all creatures, all the elements which will subsequently meet and be unified in this event and the whole series of events which follow; in the history of Israel, and finally and supremely in the history of the incarnation of the Son of God.[5]

For Barth the whole purpose of God's work of creation is the realization of communion and fellowship between God and his people in Christ. In the free bestowal of his favor and mercy upon the creature in Christ, God shows his glory and realizes his purposes of self-revelation and self-communication to the creature. In the covenant of grace, the triumphant "yes" of God to the creature of his favor resounds, and the essential purpose of creation is realized.

It is evident that Barth can find no place for a covenant of works in distinction from the covenant of grace, which precedes *in history* the fall into sin and that does not express the saving grace exhibited in the gospel. Not only does Barth regard the biblical account of creation and fall to be nonhistorical *saga*, but he also resists any suggestion of a *transition in history from wrath to grace subsequent to the fall into sin*. From the beginning, God's dealings with the creature

5. Ibid., 231–32.

are preeminently and exclusively *gracious*. There is no change that occurs in history in the relationship between God and the creature because of the fall into sin. Furthermore, consistent with his view of the covenant of grace as the internal basis of creation, Barth rejects any ordering of law and gospel in which the gospel does not have the first (as well as the last) word. At no point in God's dealings with the creature does the law precede the gospel. Not only in eternity, but also in history, the triumphant "yes" of God's grace is the first and definitive word. To suggest that, prior to God's gracious dealings with his covenant people in the history of redemption, there existed another covenant relationship, a covenant of works, is to introduce a concept that betrays the most fundamental feature of all of God's dealings with humanity—the free turning of God toward humanity in Christ.

From Barth's perspective, a doctrine of the covenant of works like that enunciated in the WCF threatens the gospel of God's grace in Christ. It rests upon a precritical view of biblical history, viewing the biblical account of the creation and fall of man as though it were a straightforward historical account and transition from favor to disfavor with God.[6] But more important, it permits the suggestion that humanity's covenant relationship with God, prior to the fall, might be construed as one contingent upon obedience to a probationary command of God. The latter idea would entail placing law before grace in God's prefall dealings with humanity. It would suggest that man's relationship to God, at least in the primal circumstances before the fall into sin, was founded upon and sustained by meritorious works done in obedience to the law.

Many of the objections to the WCF's understanding of the covenant of works stem from the influence of these themes in Barth's theology. Though there are other sources for similar criticisms, it is the theology of Barth that informs many of the arguments against

6. In this chapter and throughout, I will frequently use the term "man" rather than "human being/s" in order to express the generic and covenant unity of the human race in Adam, the representative and organic head of the human race. Though this terminology may not conform to contemporary sensitivities regarding inclusive language, it remains unavoidable for this purpose.

the *legalism* of the WCF's doctrine of the covenant, especially its formulation of the covenant of works. To illustrate the influence of Barth and the nature of this criticism, it will be useful to turn to the arguments of two critics of the WCF who follow this approach.

Holmes Rolston III

One of the most vigorous advocates that the WCF's doctrine of the covenant of works leads to legalism, is Holmes Rolston III.[7] Rolston believes that the Westminster's formulation represents a substantial betrayal of the original Reformation insight that man's standing before God is always founded upon *grace alone*. When the WCF describes the covenant of works as a covenant in which "life was promised to Adam; and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience," Rolston thinks it introduces into Reformed theology a concept of *merit* that militates against the genius of the Reformation rediscovery of the gospel of grace.

In Rolston's summary of the classic view of the covenant of works, he maintains that it begins with and always insists upon the "merit and ability of man."[8] In this first covenant, the Mosaic law's teaching that the promise of life is conditional upon man's obedience to the law (cf. Lev. 18:5) is read back into the original state described in Genesis 1 and 2. The condition of this covenant is not faith, but works, and the reward of life is earned by law-keeping. Thus, man's standing before God, his covenant fellowship with God, is founded upon and maintained by meritorious good works. Furthermore, there is a tendency in this older covenant theology, Rolston insists, to identify the obligation of obedience with the *natural law* which binds man's conscience perpetually as a creature and which is sharply

7. Holmes Rolston III, *John Calvin versus the Westminster Confession* (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1972); Rolston, "Responsible Man in Reformed Theology: Calvin versus the Westminster Confession," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 23, 2 (1970):129–56. Rolston's argument is most succinctly stated in the second of these sources, from which I will draw primarily for my summary of his criticism. The former source is an expanded version of the earlier article. Rolston clearly writes from a revisionist perspective, even regarding the Confession of 1967 of the United Presbyterian Church as marking the end of Presbyterianism's venture in covenant theology.

8. Rolston, "Responsible Man," 133.

distinguished from the sphere of God's grace toward his people in Christ. The extent to which this doctrine of the covenant is ruled by the idea of merit is evident also in its insistence that the saving work of Christ, the Mediator, involves a work of obedience, as the second Adam, in which the law is fulfilled on our behalf. This is a doctrine, accordingly, that is wholly colored by the themes of obedience and merit and that mutes the gospel testimony of God's prevenient grace in all of his dealings with his people.

Rolston finds all this in marked contrast with the *order of grace* that predominates and pervades the theology of John Calvin, and from which the WCF and its covenant theology is an obvious declension. Calvin knew nothing, Rolston argues, of the two-covenant doctrine of the WCF; in fact, he was not a covenant theologian at all, at least not in the normal use of these terms. For Calvin, "[a]ll things are ordered according to the movement of God's grace in creation and purpose in redemption."[9] All of God's dealings with the creature, whether before or after the fall, express this order of grace.

> Although Calvin does not use just that term, he speaks often of both the order and of the divine grace first instituted. The part given to man is reflexive of grace. From the start Calvin transcends the concept of order as primarily moral and legal and places this under the higher order of grace. What is paramount is that God is gracious and requires acknowledgement of his grace.[10]

Rolston believes that Calvin does not speak, therefore, of two covenants, a covenant of works and a covenant of grace, but of one order of grace, an order that may be either "inverted" through the fall into sin or "reestablished" through redemption. There are not two distinct covenants but one, the covenant of grace being a "reflection of and . . . restoration of . . . the original order."[11]

For Rolston there is no indication in Calvin's theology that man's relationship before God is sustained or maintained on the

9. Ibid., 137.
10. Ibid., 139.
11. Ibid., 141.

basis of meritorious good works. For Calvin, *grace always precedes the law*, even in paradise, and man's obedience never merits God's acceptance but only expresses man's grateful and responsible answer to God's gracious dealings with him. Life is always God's gift, never the achievement of the obedient creature. What man ought to do is always reflexive of grace, unlike in later covenant theology wherein what man ought to do is fundamentally reflexive of law. This also accounts for the superficial doctrine of sin in covenant theology. Whereas covenant theology identifies sin primarily with disobedience to the law, Calvin identified sin with "man's faithless rejection of the goodness of God in favour of his own self-willed efforts to seek his own happiness elsewhere."[12] Rolston finds the WCF, therefore, to depart seriously in its covenant doctrine from the theology of John Calvin and the Reformers. In this doctrine the grace of God in Christ is no longer the first or primary word. In its place has come an emphasis upon man's legal obligation to his Creator by virtue of the covenant of works.

James B. Torrance

A second critic of the WCF who follows a similar line to Barth is James B. Torrance.[13] Torrance also regards the federal theology of the seventeenth century, especially as this is set forth in the WCF, to be a "rationalistic" departure from the early Scottish tradition of Knox, the Scots Confession, the pre-Westminster confessions, and the theology of John Calvin. It is evident that Torrance believes the source for a growing legalism in Scottish theology and practice, confirmed in the so-called "Marrow Controversy,"[14] lay in an increasing

12. Ibid., 150.

13. James B. Torrance, "Covenant or Contract? A Study of the Theological Background of Worship in Seventeenth-Century Scotland," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 23, 1 (1970): 51–76; Torrance, "Calvin and Puritanism in England and Scotland—Some Basic Concepts in the Development of 'Federal Theology,'" in *Calvinus Reformator: His Contribution to Theology, Church and Society* (Potchefstroom, South Africa: Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education, 1982): 264–77; Torrance, "Strengths and Weaknesses of the Westminster Theology," in *The Westminster Confession*, ed. Alisdair Heron (Edinburgh: St. Andrews, 1982), 40–53. In what follows I will trace Torrance's argument primarily as it is found in the first of these articles.

14. The "Marrow Controversy" refers to an ecclesiastical dispute within the Scottish

emphasis upon the federal scheme and the *conditional* character of the covenant between God and his people. According to Torrance, the idea of "conditional grace" was introduced into Scottish theology through the route of federal theology.

Torrance claims that while the original, biblical idea of covenant expresses an *unconditional binding* of two parties in covenant loyalty and faithfulness, the federal theology shifted the emphasis from this concept of covenant to that of a *legal contract*. Whereas a covenant is rooted in mutual promises and commitments, freely given and received, the federal theology, by distinguishing between a covenant of works and a covenant of grace, reconfigured the covenant as a contractual relationship. This theology "is built upon a deep seated *confusion* between a covenant and a contract, a failure to recognise that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is a Covenant-God and not a contract-God."[15] In this understanding, God appears as a Sovereign Employer and man as a servant-vassal. No longer is the covenant relationship rooted in the gracious condescension of God to the creature, in which the creature stands as a beloved child or graciously embraced friend. Everything in the covenant of works has the color of a contractual relationship between employer and employee, master and servant.

Torrance claims that a number of deleterious consequences follow from this reconceptualization of the covenant. In the federal theology there is the reemergence, for example, of the older, medieval view that

---

Presbyterian church in the early eighteenth century. In 1718 James Hog of Carnock republished *The Marrow of Modern Divinity*, thought to be a work of Edward Fisher, an English Calvinist of the seventeenth century (E[dward] F[isher], *The Marrow of Modern Divinity, with a Recommendatory Preface by James Hog*, 9th ed., corrected [Edinburgh: John Mosman and William Brown, 1718]). This two-volume work criticized "neo-nomianism," the reintroduction of an inappropriate understanding of the believer's obligation to fulfill the law's demands in order to obtain or be maintained in the way of salvation. Though the book pleased such notables as Thomas Boston, it met with considerable hostility within the Scottish Presbyterian church. Torrance regards this chapter in the church's history to be an instance of the growing influence of a legalism, earlier introduced by means of the WCF's doctrine of the covenant of works. On the Marrow Controversy, see Joseph H. Hall, "The Marrow Controversy: A Defense of Grace and the Free Offer of the Gospel," *MAJT* 10 (1999): 239–57; and Sinclair Ferguson, *The Whole Christ: Legalism, Antinomianism, & Gospel Assurance—Why the Marrow Controversy Still Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016).

15. Torrance, "Covenant or Contract?," 66.

grace presupposes nature and *grace perfects nature*.[16] Contrary to the Reformation insight that nothing precedes God's gracious turning to the creature, this theology treats grace as a remedial measure, secondary to the original circumstance in which man stood before God under the obligation of the law of nature in a covenant of nature. The priority of God's grace in all his dealings with the creature is thereby imperiled. Furthermore, in a criticism especially reminiscent of the theology of Karl Barth, Torrance regards the doctrine of *limited atonement* to be an extension of this covenant scheme. The federal theology knows only one solidarity of all human beings and that is their solidarity with the first Adam, whose fall into sin alienated the whole human race from God. It does not know of that fundamental solidarity taught in the Scriptures in which all human beings are united in Christ, whose headship extends over all creation and whose solidarity is inclusive of all human beings since he is the head of the human race. This means that you cannot say to all human beings, "Christ died for you," though you may and even must say to all, "You are all guilty and under judgment." But according to Torrance, this betrays the triumphant note of joy that must resound in all gospel preaching—"you are what you are by God's grace in Christ!"[17] All of this moves the accent from what God has done for us already in Christ to what we have to do for ourselves, if we would benefit from his saving work.

For these and other reasons, Torrance insists that the federal theology of the WCF is the primary culprit in stimulating—even reintroducing—a doctrine of meritorious good works into Reformed theology. The grand themes of the Reformation, *sola gratia, solo Christo, sola fide*, find in this theology their demise.

S. G. De Graaf and G. C. Berkouwer

The two previous critics of the federal theology whom we have considered generally express a Barthian rejection of any distinction between a prefall covenant of works and a postfall covenant of grace. In their theological conception, there is ultimately but *one order of*

16. Ibid., 67.

17. Ibid., 69. In this aspect of his argument, Torrance is also following Barth's lead in denying a transition from wrath to grace in history, subsequent to the fall into sin.

grace that defines *all* of the triune God's dealings with his covenant creature, whether before or after the fall (assuming that this distinction has historical significance). This is not true, however, of the position of S. G. De Graaf and G. C. Berkouwer, two Dutch theologians who criticize the WCF's formulation of a covenant of works, but nonetheless admit a prefall covenant of "creation" or of "favor," as they prefer to term it, that must be carefully distinguished from the postfall covenant of grace. Consequently, though they criticize the WCF's formulation for its alleged "legalistic" implication, they do not deny the fundamentals of covenant theology or the distinction between two covenants, the one before, the other after the fall into sin.

The concern expressed by De Graaf and Berkouwer is that "[m]an's original life under God's rule cannot be regarded, for even a moment, apart from God's love and communion."[18] The covenant of works formulation suggests that there is a legal order above or before the order of grace in God's dealings with his covenant creature. In this understanding, the law and its obligation are easily separated from the life and fellowship with God that precede it. Thus, the relationship between God and his covenant partner is misconstrued in the original circumstance before the fall into sin; it becomes the relationship between a servant and his master, not that, for instance, between a child and his father or between a wife and her husband. The bond of communion and fellowship, within which the law has its rightful place as a rule of life, is made secondary to the obligation or demand of obedience, on the basis of which God's favor is obtained. As Berkouwer puts it,

> [w]e err if we interpret this distinction as though God's original covenant had to do with *our* work or *our* achievement or *our* fulfillment of his law, while the later covenant of grace has reference to the pure gift of his *mercy* apart from all *our works*. If we assume this we are compelled to say that God's original relation to man was strictly "legal," or that the structure of that relation was determined by man's merit.[19]

18. G. C. Berkouwer, *Sin*, trans. Philip C. Holtrop, Studies in Dogmatics (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), 206.

19. Ibid., 207.

De Graaf likewise finds the idea of a covenant of works inimical to understanding the original covenant relation between God and man as one which was founded upon God's favor and goodness. According to De Graaf, the idea of a covenant of works suggests that God's favor comes at the *end* of man's relationship with God rather than at the *beginning*, as its source and foundation. This intimates that the covenant life man enjoys in fellowship with God comes only as a reward for obedience, as something merited or bestowed because man has made himself worthy of it. Contrary to this suggestion, De Graaf maintains

> [t]here is never any speaking of merit or reward in the covenant of God, even in the so-called covenant of works. God in his covenant is always the first who gives his love. Through his love he must teach us to love; and our love can never be anything other than a response to his love. Through the law God rules the fellowship of love we have with him, a fellowship which has no norm in itself, but for which God himself has established a norm. And so it is that we by our responsibility to the norm grow in the communion of the love of God. Thus the law is covenant law. In the place of a "covenant of works," then, it is better to speak of a "covenant of God's favor."[20]

De Graaf believes that in the terminology of a "covenant of works," there lurks the tendency to abstract the law from its setting within God's original favor to the creature, which gives the creature his place as a child and friend of God, called to obedience within the communion he already enjoys with the Creator. This conception conjures up the possibility of an absolute antithesis between works and grace,

20. S. G. De Graaf, *Het Ware Geloof* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1954), 31–32 (translation mine). De Graaf makes the same point, suggesting that we speak of a "covenant of favor," in his article, "De Genade Gods en de Structuur Der Gansche Schepping," *Philosophia Reformata* 1 (1936): 20–21: "Het is daarom m.i. beter, niet meer te spreken van 'werken verbond', waardoor we onwillekeurig de gedachte aan verdienen en loon, en dan ook aan een voorloopig Zich terughouden van God in het Paradijs indragen. De term 'verbond van Gods gunst' drukt beter uit de wekelijke verhouding. Voor het verbond na den zondeval blijft dan de term 'verbond van Gods genade', dat is van Gods schuldvergevende gunst."

merit and favor, in which man's standing before God is thought, at least in its original and primary form, to be founded upon meritorious works. Indeed, Berkouwer even goes so far as to argue that this language raises once more the specter of meritorious good works within the orbit of Reformed doctrine, a specter that threatens the Reformation criticism of the Catholic doctrine of justification by grace.

> Therefore whoever burdens the so-called "covenant of works" with the notion of achievement and presumes that we gain God's favor in this way, must endorse the idea of a "nomological" ur-existence of man and must cut asunder the law of God from the fellowship of God. In that way he isolates and hypostasizes the law. It is not clear how this infusion of *meritum* can leave room for a genuine criticism of Rome concerning the meritoriousness of works.[21]

What is clear from Berkouwer and De Graaf's criticisms is that they are concerned about a formulation of the "covenant of works" that places man's standing before God, in the original circumstance before the fall into sin, upon the foundation of merit and reward. This kind of formulation threatens not only to *distinguish* the prefall and the postfall covenants, but ultimately to *oppose* them: the first would

21. Berkouwer, *Sin*, 208. For similar criticisms of the doctrine of the covenant of works, see C. Van der Waal, *The Covenantal Gospel* (Neerlandia, AB: Inheritance, 1990), 47–56; Norman Shepherd, *The Call of Grace: How the Covenant Illuminates Salvation and Evangelism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2000), 23–41; and Clarence Stam, *The Covenant of Love: Exploring Our Relationship with God* (Winnipeg, MB: Premier, 1999), 47–54. Van der Waal expresses the common opinion of these authors, when he argues that Adam "was not created to be a legitimate pharisee, pelagian, or remonstrant" (54), as the doctrine of a covenant of works suggests. Though this criticism does not represent the best of the Continental (Dutch) tradition on the doctrine of the prefall covenant, it does reflect in part the absence of any express formulation of a "covenant of works" in the Three Forms of Unity (the HC, BC, and CD). I will have occasion to revisit this criticism of the covenant of works in subsequent chapters, especially chaps. 9–12, which treat the covenant views of the so-called "Federal Vision" movement and Norman Shepherd. These criticisms often betray one trajectory of thought within the Continental tradition, namely, the alleged contrast between the covenant theology of Continental Reformed theology and that of the Westminster Standards. One of my principal claims throughout this volume is that there is no substantive difference between the Westminster Standards and the Three Forms of Unity on the doctrine of Christ and the covenants.

be founded upon a principle of works; the second would be founded upon a principle of grace. Therefore, though they both acknowledge a real difference between these covenants—this is in part the reason for De Graaf's suggestion that we speak of a "covenant of favor" for the first covenant, and of a "covenant of grace" for the covenant after the fall into sin—they do not wish to acknowledge that man's covenant fellowship with God is ever founded upon something other than the love and goodness of God in granting it as his gift.[22] In this respect, their criticism of the formulation of a "covenant of works," though bearing some similarity to that of Karl Barth and those who follow in a Barthian line, should not be confused with it.

John Murray

The last critic of the WCF's formulation of the doctrine of the covenant of works whom I wish to consider is John Murray. Murray, though a faithful exponent of the system of doctrine contained in the WCF, was perhaps more critical of this aspect of the WCF than he was of any other. Based upon his own biblical-theological reflection, Murray offered several of what he believed were necessary correctives to the traditional formulations of federal theology, including the classical form found in the WCF.

Murray's original objection to the idea of a covenant of works stems from his reformulation of the doctrine of the covenant. According to Murray, "covenant" in the biblical writings always expresses a gracious disposition of God toward the partner with whom he covenants; the notion of a "covenant of works," accordingly, is contrary to the ordinary meaning of covenant in the Scriptures, at least when they speak of God's covenanting with man. In an encyclopedia

22. See Daniel P. Fuller, *Gospel and Law: Contrast or Continuum? The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1980), 18–64; Fuller, *The Unity of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), who argues that covenant theology shares with dispensationalism an unfortunate and unbiblical *disjoining* of grace and law, as well as a *disordering* of the relation as one of law first and then grace. Though I will address this criticism in the second part of this chapter, Fuller's criticism, like that of Barth and others, fails to do justice to the biblical history of creation, fall, and redemption, treating the prefall circumstance of man as though it were in almost every particular the same as the postfall circumstance.

article in which he traced briefly the history of covenant theology, Murray voiced this reservation about the older federal theology's doctrine of a covenant of works.[23] However, he provided a more complete statement of his revision of the doctrine of the covenant works in his important article, "The Adamic Administration."[24] As the title of this article suggests, Murray objected to the language of a covenant of works, not only in that it militated against the gracious character of God's covenanting with man, but also in that it speaks of a prefall "covenant," whereas the Scriptures reserve the language of covenant to God's postfall dealings with the sinful creature.

Murray opens his treatment of the Adamic administration, his preferred terminology for the prefall arrangement between God and Adam (as representative head of the human race), by noting that, prior to the special arrangement described in Genesis 2, man (who was created in God's image) existed in a relationship with God of "perfect legal reciprocity."[25] By this language, Murray refers to man's original obligation to live before God in accordance with the demand of God's law, the demand that he love and serve God with all his heart, soul, strength, and mind. This obligation to love God, the original demand of God's law of nature, constitutes the perpetual obligation of man as a creature formed for free and responsible service to God, his Creator. Were man to have fulfilled this law and preserved his original state of integrity, he would have continued righteous and holy before God, and "[i]n this righteousness he would be justified, that is, approved and accepted by God, and he would have life."[26]

However, in addition to this original circumstance of providence, a circumstance which Murray describes as "mutable" and absent

23. John Murray, "Covenant Theology," in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity* (Marshallton, DE: National Foundation for Christian Education, 1972), 3:199–216.

24. John Murray, "The Adamic Administration," in *Select Lectures in Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 of *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1977), 47–59. For a comprehensive study of Murray's doctrine of the covenant that compares it to that of Meredith Kline and the original formulations of the orthodox period, see Jeong Koo Jeon, *Covenant Theology: John Murray's and Meredith G. Kline's Response to the Historical Development of Federal Theology in Reformed Thought* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1999).

25. Murray, *Select Lectures*, 47.

26. Ibid.

"full-orbed communion with God in the assurance of permanent possession and increasing knowledge,"[27] Murray notes that the account in Genesis describes an additional "arrangement" or "administration" of God's providence, ordinarily termed the covenant of works. In addition to the perpetual obligation of obedience under which Adam stood from creation, God also "gave to Adam a specific command or, more accurately, a specific prohibition."[28] By means of a special prohibition (Gen. 2:17), to which was attached a particular threat of death, God entered into a peculiar relationship with Adam. This relationship or administration threatened death and carried within itself the implicit promise of life, though this promise is only indirectly suggested by the reference in Genesis 3:22, 24 to the "tree of life."

> The Adamic administration is, therefore, construed as an administration in which God, by a special act of providence, established for man the provision whereby he might pass from the status of contingency to one of confirmed and indefectible holiness and blessedness, that is, from *posse peccare* and *posse non peccare* to *non posse peccare*. The way instituted was that of "an intensified and concentrated probation," the alternative issues being dependent upon the issues of obedience or disobedience (cf. G. Vos: *Biblical Theology*, 22f.).[29]

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid., 48.

29. Ibid., 49. Cf. Karlberg, "Reformed Interpretation," 48–53, who criticizes Murray at this point for contrasting the obligations of obedience to the law, under which Adam stood at creation, from the specific obligations of the Adamic administration. He suggests that thereby Murray improperly separates the specific obligations of the "Adamic administration" from the obligations of obedience to the law which Christ, the second Adam, fulfilled in the covenant of grace (Rom. 5:12–21). However, it seems clear from Murray's statement (including his quotation from Vos) that he views the special obligation of obedience in the Adamic arrangement to be simply an intensification or concentration of the original obedience owed God by Adam by virtue of creation. For Murray, the key point is that God also graciously (undeservedly) attaches to this obligation, by a special providence, the promise of eternal life. Therefore, though it may be true that Murray treats the "Adamic arrangement" as a special providence that is not inherent within the original state of creation *simpliciter*, Murray does not posit a *dichotomy* between the prefall state of *nature* (with the obedience to law required of man as creature) and of *grace* (with the probationary command and an attached promise of eternal life as component of a gracious and sovereign administration, a special providence). The point Murray is anxious to preserve is that the promise of life,

There are several respects in which Murray's treatment of this Adamic administration differs from traditional covenant theology. As we have already noted, this difference is partially terminological. Rather than speak of a "covenant of works" or a "covenant of life" (the language of the WSC),[30] Murray prefers to speak of an "Adamic administration," noting that the language of covenant is not used explicitly in the Bible to describe this relationship. But the divergence is far more than terminological. Murray also avoids the terminology of "works" because he wants to underscore the fact that, though the relationship of this arrangement includes within itself a concentrated probation, this administration is "sovereignly dispensed by God," and is "not a contract or compact. Sovereign disposition is its patent characteristic."[31] Accordingly, this arrangement, though non-soteric or non-redemptive, is consonant with the essential characteristic of the biblical understanding of a covenant as a "sovereign, divine administration . . . [that] continues without any modification or retraction of its benefits by the immutable promise and faithfulness of God."[32]

---

which was attached to the particular stipulation of the probationary command, was freely (undeservedly) extended to Adam by a special act of divine providence. God does not owe this promise to Adam, as creature, but freely extends it to Adam in the "Adamic administration" as an undeserved favor.

30. WSC 12 reads: "What special act of providence did God exercise towards man in the estate wherein he was created? 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 pain of death."

31. Murray, *Select Lectures*, 50.

32. John Murray, *The Covenant of Grace: A Biblico-Theological Study* (London: Tyndale, 1954), 14. This language is taken from Murray's summary of what is essential to the biblical view of the covenant of grace. It is noteworthy to what extent Murray fashions his definition of the Adamic administration along lines that parallel his definition of the covenant of grace. This allows him to show a similarity in the covenant relation before and after the fall: each expresses a sovereign and gracious, because undeserved, favor toward man as creature (whether in the state of integrity or in the state of fallenness). However, because his generic definition of covenant emphasizes sovereign promise and disposition, the obligations of obedience in the Adamic administration may not seem to be as integral to the prefall covenant as the WCF represents them. This is the burden of Karlberg's criticism of Murray's reformulation of the prefall covenant relationship: it does not permit the obedience of Christ, the second Adam, to the law of God as Creator to be understood as a fulfillment of man's original obligations as creature under the covenant of works. Cf. Karlberg, "Reformed Interpretation," 52–53; Karlberg, "Original State," 297–300. Karlberg's criticisms of Murray's formulation of the prefall "Adamic administration" reflect the

In Murray's estimation, the language, "covenant of works," fails to do justice to the elements of grace entering into the administration. Despite the fact that the condition of obedience is essential to the probation which comprises such an important component of the Adamic administration, Murray regards the gracious origin and sovereign disposition of this arrangement as sufficient to prevent our legitimately terming it a "covenant of works." By means of this Adamic administration, God promised Adam—were he to fulfill the terms of the probation—an entrance into immutable and perpetual life in communion with himself, a state of glory that would exceed the mutability and contingency of his original state. This promise, according to Murray, is an instance of gracious condescension and kindness which God did not owe the creature, but which he was pleased to grant to him. This promise would not be granted upon the principle of *strict justice or merit*—God's justice does not require that Adam should ever be granted the status of immutability in fellowship with God—but would be an expression of God's undeserved favor.

Consistent with his aversion to the language of "covenant of works" and parallel insistence that God's grace and sovereign disposition are basic to the Adamic administration, Murray also challenged another feature of the older federal theology, namely, that the Mosaic economy or covenant included within itself a repetition of the obligation of obedience, first enunciated in the covenant of works.

> The view that in the Mosaic covenant there was a repetition of the so-called covenant of works, current among covenant theologians, is a grave misconception and involves an erroneous construction of the Mosaic covenant, as well as fails to assess the uniqueness of the Adamic administration. The Mosaic covenant was distinctly redemptive in character and was continuous with and extensive of the Abrahamic covenants.[33]

---

influence of the covenant theology of Meredith Kline. See n39 below for further comment on Kline's view that the prefall covenant was a covenant of "strict justice," which operated on the basis of what Kline terms a "works-inheritance" or merit principle.

33. Murray, *Select Lectures*, 50. In the following two chapters of this volume, I will offer an extensive assessment of the claim of some recent writers that the Mosaic economy

Because Murray desires to emphasize the gracious and sovereign disposition of the Adamic arrangement, as well as the essential graciousness of the biblical covenant of grace, he does not want to admit the legal requirement of obedience to be as integral to this arrangement or the postfall covenant of grace as was typically the case in the history of covenant theology. Although the older covenant theology regarded this legal requirement to be integral to the covenant of works, and even to the covenant of grace, Murray distinguishes sharply between the natural obligation of obedience and the probationary obedience of the Adamic administration. In treating the work of Christ as the second Adam, therefore, Murray also resists the usual understanding that it included, in an important sense, the fulfillment of the legal obedience required by the covenant of works. Although the obedience Christ rendered fulfilled the obedience in which Adam failed, Murray notes that it

> would not be correct to say, however, that Christ's obedience was the same in content or demand. Christ was called on to obey in radically different conditions, and required to fulfill radically different demands.[34]

Murray's treatment of the WCF's doctrine of the covenant of works, then, is not so much a repudiation of any of its essential teaching as a revision and refinement of some aspects of the WCF's formulation that he finds objectionable or misleading. Without denying the important sense in which Christ's mediatorial work involved an act of obedience as the second Adam, fulfilling Adam's original obligation of obedience, intensified and concentrated in the probationary command, Murray accents the elements of grace in the "Adamic administration." In Murray's judgment, the WCF's language of a "covenant of works" inadequately accounts for these aspects of the first covenant. Furthermore, the WCF does not fully indicate that this first covenant or "Adamic administration" was a divinely

---

included "in some sense" the republication of the prefall covenant of works.

34. Murray, *Select Lectures*, 58.

initiated and sovereignly administered disposition of God toward his image-bearers.

In Defense of the Westminster Confession of Faith

A careful evaluation of the preceding criticisms of the WCF's formulation of the doctrine of the covenant of works shows that there are several outstanding issues. Particularly within the orbit of neoorthodoxy and Barthian theology, the distinction between a prefall and a postfall covenant is emphatically rejected. Following the lead of Barth, critics of the WCF like Rolston and Torrance do not distinguish between a covenant of works and a covenant of grace, since they regard this as an illegitimate denial of the *one order of grace* which characterizes all of the triune God's dealings with his covenant creature. Furthermore, though the other critics we have considered do not share the Barthian theologians' denial of a distinction between a prefall and postfall covenant, they object to the WCF's designation of the first covenant as a covenant of *works*. It is frequently argued, as we have seen, that this terminology introduces the idea that man's standing before God, at least in the prefall circumstance, was founded upon "meritorious" good works. This, it is argued, threatens to make the creature's fellowship and communion with God, not so much a gift of God's grace, but a reward for good works. It also threatens to so distinguish man's covenant communion with God before and after the fall that the essential meaning of the covenant relationship is altered. In the first instance, God becomes man's debtor; in the second instance, man becomes God's debtor. The issues in these criticisms deal not only with the terminology of a covenant of *works*, but also the underlying doctrine of the covenant and the alleged intrusion of the idea of *merit* into the relationship between creature and Creator.

Admittedly, these criticisms and the issues they raise cannot be answered completely in this chapter. That would call for an examination of the whole doctrine of the covenant, in biblical, historical, and theological terms. However, there are several points that can be made in defense of the WCF. These points need to be borne in mind,

especially in order to avoid placing an unwarranted construction on the WCF's doctrine of the covenant of works.[35]

Two Covenants or One?

The first consideration has to do with the question whether we should confess, on the basis of scriptural teaching, the reality of two covenants, one before and the other after the fall, or one. Though this may appear to be an unnecessary question, since the answer may seem so obvious, it is one raised by recent criticisms of the WCF.

It must be clearly understood that one of the most profound differences between the older covenant theology and much—though by no means all—modern theology, lies just at this point. The theology of Karl Barth and his epigones has ultimately no place for the biblical revelation of the *history* of creation, fall, and redemption. In the criticisms of Barth, Rolston, and Torrance, the difference between man's situation before the face of God prior to and after the fall into sin is flattened out, even obliterated. These theologians do not clearly echo the scriptural teaching that man was originally created good, after God's own image, and placed in a covenant relationship of fellowship with God. This covenant communion with God, before the fall into sin, included promises and demands. It was, moreover, a mutable relationship, liable to being broken and lost through sin and disobedience. This original covenant communion, however the difference is articulated, cannot be identified with the postfall situation in which God's covenant people through the covenant of grace are restored once more to communion with God. This latter covenant, the covenant of grace, is a covenant with the new humanity in Christ, the Mediator, and involves the calling out of a people for God's own possession from among the whole, fallen human race.

When the WCF, therefore, speaks of a prefall covenant of works between the triune God and all of humanity in Adam, and then distinguishes this prefall covenant from a postfall covenant of grace, made with a new people, the new humanity, those who

35. As noted previously, I will have occasion at several points throughout the course of this book to return to the question of the nature of the "works" required in the prefall covenant of works. My resolution of the question here will only be provisional.

are in restored communion with God through Christ, it echoes the basic structure of the biblical story of creation, fall, and subsequent redemption. The structure of biblical history, which constituted the foundation of the older covenant theology (and of orthodox Christian theology generally), is often missing in modern theological revisions of the covenant, of which Karl Barth's is a notable example. In this revision there is no longer any place for a historical fall from favor with God through the sin and disobedience of our covenant representative, Adam. Nor is there any place for a subsequent covenanting between God and his people in the covenant of grace, by means of which fallen man is *restored to renewed covenant fellowship with God in Christ, the second Adam*. In this revisionist theology of the covenant, there is only one covenant between God and the creature, a gracious covenant in Christ, which spans—perhaps it would be better to say, which obliterates—the difference between man's state of original sinless integrity in communion with God and his subsequent reintroduction to communion in the covenant of grace (cf. Rom. 5:12–21; 1 Cor. 15:42–49).

Consequently, it is absolutely critical to a biblical theology of the covenant that we recognize the basic correctness of the WCF's distinction between man's fellowship with God before the fall and his renewed fellowship with God through the gracious work of Christ after the fall. Even though some may choose not to speak of "covenant" in the prefall state (for example, Murray), this does not alter the fact that a theology faithful to biblical teaching must reckon with the difference in man's standing before God in the pre- and postfall states. The WCF accomplishes this by means of its formulation of a covenant of works and a covenant of grace.

A "Voluntary Condescension"

This brings us to what may be a more difficult issue, which has to do with the nature of the prefall relationship between the triune Creator and his sinless image-bearers. We have seen that the WCF has been frequently charged with a misconstrual of this relationship that rests man's communion with God on the foundation of meritorious works. Implicit in this criticism is the fear that the

formulation of the WCF, though rightly distinguishing the pre- and postfall states, so distinguishes man's communion with God before the fall from his communion with God by grace after the fall, that there is almost an *antithesis* in the meaning of covenant before and after the fall. Or, to state it somewhat differently, the language of the WCF suggests a kind of *equivocation* on the meaning of covenant: in the one instance, it describes the relationship and communion of an Employer and employee, a Master and a servant (the prefall covenant of works), and in the other instance it describes the relationship of a Father and a child, or of a Husband and a wife (the postfall covenant of grace). The former covenant is merited; the latter is freely and graciously given. The former covenant is a matter of justice; the latter is a matter of grace.

This construction of the meaning and significance of the WCF's doctrine of the covenant of works, however, is open to serious objection. It trades too much upon the explicit language of a covenant of *works* and neglects to notice other aspects of the WCF's understanding of the covenant. Specifically, it fails to note that the WCF also speaks of God's *condescending favor* in the covenant of works and of God's *freely granted justice* in the covenant of grace. The full statement of the doctrine of the covenant in the WCF includes *promise and demand as essential constituents of both the covenant of works and the covenant of grace*. It is imperative to notice that the WCF, before defining the covenant of works in chapter 7.2 begins with a statement of the way all of the Creator's dealings with the creature are ordered covenantally (7.1). In this statement, we read that

> [t]he 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.

By employing the language of *voluntary condescension*, the WCF makes it clear that the original covenant relationship was a

sovereignly administered bestowal of God's favor to his image-bearers. In this covenant relationship, it is God who takes the initiative and condescends to the creature. He enters into a communion with Adam as his "son" (Luke 3:38) and not simply as a servant, in which a promise is made and an obligation stipulated. This language, accordingly, expresses something of what Murray and others mean when they speak of the "gracious elements" in the covenant of works, or when they insist that this covenant was not based upon a principle of "strict" justice, namely, the principle that man receives from God in this covenant only that which he in the strictest sense deserves. Adam is granted and established in a communion of life with his Creator in the covenant of works. And though he is obligated by the terms of his probation to offer a free obedience to his Creator, this obligation does not stand at the foreground or as the *foundation* of the covenant relationship, but rather it serves to express the manner and requirement of its administration.[36]

The WCF's emphasis upon all of God's covenants as voluntary condescensions exonerates the Confession from the charge of depriving the original covenant of the elements of God's favor and goodness, as though it were only a matter of strict justice between a master

36. Cf. De Graaf, "Genade Gods," who argues that, in the covenant of works, God's favor stands at the *end* rather than at the *beginning* of the covenant relationship. This is not necessarily the case, at least not in the statement of the doctrine in the WCF. Though it is true that the promise of life is upon condition of obedience, it is not true that Adam possessed nothing of that life, as a bestowal of God's condescending favor, at the beginning of the covenant relationship. Part of the difficulty here is that Murray, following a hallowed tradition of Reformed theology, properly regards the promise of life in the covenant of works to include an eventual *transition in Adam's standing before God from a state of mutability and contingency to one of irrevocable life in communion with God*. Because the obligation of obedience is regarded as a *probationary* obligation, it presumes some point of termination, at which time the promise of life would be irrevocably fulfilled. This latter promise, though conditioned upon Adam's obedience to his probation, grants much more than strict justice would require and is, therefore, an instance or element of grace in the sense of *unmerited favor* (though not of grace in the sense of *demerited* or *forfeited favor*). However, De Graaf makes the legitimate observation here, that God *threatens* death in the event of Adam's disobedience, implying that Adam enjoyed life-communion (albeit in a mutable state) with God from the beginning. The account in Genesis 2 does not teach that Adam was promised life *only after*, or at the successful completion of, a period of probation. Though Adam did not yet experience indefectible life in communion with God, as Murray properly emphasizes, he did experience the beginnings of life.

and his servant. Moreover, by its apparent distinction between the original natural state in which "reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto him [God] as their Creator" and the covenant of works, the WCF preserves the element of unmerited bestowal in this original covenant.[37] It simply cannot be argued convincingly that the WCF neglects this component of the original covenant relationship between God and the creature before the fall into sin and the institution of the covenant of grace. Though it may be helpful to reserve the term "grace" for God's unmerited favor toward undeserving sinners, there can be no objection to the claim that the Confession's language of "voluntary condescension" refers to the *undeserved favor* God as Creator shows to his sinless creatures and image-bearers.

The Terminology of "Covenant of Works"

No consideration of the criticisms often brought against the WCF on the covenant of works can avoid dealing with the question of terminology. Does the language of a covenant of *works* present,

37. I have already mentioned in a preceding footnote (n29) Mark Karlberg's criticism of the WCF for introducing a "speculative element" with this distinction between man's natural state and the subsequent introduction of a covenant of works. In both the WCF and in the reformulation of John Murray, there is (allegedly) present a disjunction between the original state of nature and the subsequent covenant of works that parallels the older, medieval distinction between *nature* and *grace*. Since it is not clear that the covenant of works is native to man's circumstance as creature, a state of nature is posited that antedates the state of "super-added" favor in the doctrine of the WCF and of John Murray. In my judgment, this criticism may have limited validity in respect to Murray's revision of the doctrine of the covenant of works, but less so in respect to the teaching of the WCF. The language of the WCF suggests that *the nature of the difference between Creator and creature requires covenant as the medium of communion or fellowship*. If this is the case, then the WCF ultimately does not separate between a state of nature and a state of covenant before the fall, but suggests that the covenant of works is a kind of administration or particularizing of that covenant relationship in and for which man was originally created. For a recent argument showing that man's original circumstance at creation was that of being in covenant with God, see Mark Vander Hart, "Creation and Covenant Part One: A Survey of the Dominion Mandate in the Noahic and Abrahamic Covenants," *MAJT* 6, 1 (1990): 3–18. The parallels between the language used to describe the terms of man's original created state and calling, and that used to describe the reestablishment of man in communion with God in the covenant of grace, suggest that, biblically, man is be understood as from the beginning a creature created for *covenant* with God. However, the prefall covenant must not be identified with creation *simpliciter*, since WSC 12 and WLC 20 do place the "covenant of life," as a work of God's providence, subsequent to creation.

especially in view of what we argued in the preceding section, something of a *one-sided* understanding of the original covenant? Perhaps it would be better to speak in terms of a "covenant of life," the language used for this covenant relationship in WSC 12. This language, or language like that of "covenant of creation" or "covenant of favor," does not diminish or belie the fact that God's original covenant with man was a bestowal of his favor, an act of undeserved and sovereign goodness in which the Creator took man into communion with himself as a friend and son. By contrast, the language of a covenant of "works," when exclusively employed as a description of the prefall covenant, may seem to convey that man's standing in this covenant was founded solely upon his own achievements or accomplishments.

One aspect of terminology with which I am not directly concerned here has to do with the absence of the language of "covenant" in the Bible to describe the prefall state. It is certainly true, as John Murray has argued, that the Scriptures do not clearly describe the original relationship between God and his image-bearers as a "covenant," and therefore the use of this language is not expressly biblical. However, the arguments in the history of theology for terming this relationship a "covenant" remain compelling. These arguments openly acknowledge that the doctrine is not expressly set down in the Scriptures, but nonetheless there are a number of biblical teachings or *sedes doctrinae* that cumulatively warrant the designation of this relationship as a covenant, the normal biblical designation for God's communion with his redeemed people in the covenant of grace.[38] When

38. The only instance in which the Bible speaks of a "covenant" in connection with Adam is Hosea 6:7 ("But like Adam they transgressed the covenant"). The meaning of the expression כְּאָדָם has always been disputed, some taking it to be a reference to a place name, not Adam, the head of the human race. For a defense of the claim that this phrase refers, among other things, to Adam's transgression of the covenant, see Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, "Hosea 6.7: Adam or Man?," in *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield*, ed. John E. Meeter, 2 vols. (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1970), 1:116–29; Duane Garrett, *Hosea, Joel*, New American Commentary 19A (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1997), 162–63; and Byron G. Curtis, "Hosea 6:7 and Covenant-Breaking like/at Adam," in *TLNF*, 170–209. However, the *sedes doctrinae* for the traditional description of the Creator's relationship with Adam before the fall are many. Among them are the following: the explicit use of God's peculiar covenant name, יְהוָה, throughout Genesis 2 and 3; the presence of a variety of covenantal elements in the description of God's dealings with Adam in Genesis 2 and 3 (the sovereign administration of a peculiar bond or communion

the constituent elements of a covenant are present, and when the normal biblical term for a divinely instituted and administered communion between God and his creature is "covenant," there should be no substantial objection to the use of this language. John Murray, who highlights the lack of an express biblical reference, prefers the terminology of an "Adamic administration." This terminology is not only alien to the biblical descriptions of the prefall state, however, but also to the biblical descriptions of God's communion with man in general.

On the matter of terminology, two points need to be made. First, the terminology of "covenant of works" needs to be complemented by the alternative terminology of "covenant of life" or "covenant of favor" (or even "covenant of creation"). There is a one-sidedness in the language of a covenant of *works* that demands the use of these complementary designations. It is especially helpful to speak of the prefall covenant as a "covenant of favor" since this language reminds us that this covenant was initiated and established by God, placed man in an undeserved position of special favor, and granted him life in communion with God which his obedience would maintain, unfold, and perfect. Even the obligation of obedience to the law, concentrated and intensified in the so-called probationary command, was an invitation to man to respond to his covenant Creator in heartfelt, thankful service. These dimensions of the first covenant can easily be diminished, when the exclusive terminology for this covenant is that of a "covenant of works."

A second consideration counterbalances this one. The language of a "covenant of works" helps to emphasize what was integral to the first covenant, namely, the obligation of obedience *on condition of*

---

between the Lord and Adam, the stipulation of a particular obligation, the pronouncement of a sanction or curse, the implicit promise or "sacramental sign" of life in the "tree of life" mentioned in Genesis 3:22, 24); the parallels in the language employed in Genesis to describe the prefall and postfall relationship between God and his people; and the apparent reminiscences of the covenant of grace in its earlier administrations, as well as the prefall covenant communion of God with man, in the descriptions of the eschatological covenant communion in Revelation 21–22. One hesitates here to apply the well-known words of Shakespeare, "a rose by any other name would smell as sweet," but it does seem appropriate. Why not term something a "covenant," though the express term is not employed in the Bible, when the thing being described has all the earmarks of a covenant?

which man would be perfected in immutable covenant communion with God. In the account in Genesis 2 of the stipulation of obedience, this dimension of the first covenant is most prominent. The language of the WCF, accordingly, keeps clearly before us the fact that no communion with God is possible for man, certainly no communion in which man might enjoy the fullness of life, short of one in which he offers to his Creator a glad-hearted obedience. Furthermore, this language clearly distinguishes the first covenant from the covenant of grace on precisely that matter which is most decisive. Though the first covenant was indeed an undeserved bestowal of divine favor, it was a favor shown to a sinless creature who had not yet forfeited through sin any further claim upon God's goodness. Moreover, the promise of the prefall covenant, eternal life in unbreakable communion with God, was granted upon "condition of personal and perfect obedience," to use the language of the WCF. There is a real difference between *undeserved favor* shown a sinless creature, obliged to perfect obedience by the terms of the prefall covenant of works, and the *undeserved grace* granted the disobedient covenant breaker in the postfall covenant of grace. The language of the WCF helps keep the difference between man's status before and after the fall clearly in perspective. God's dealings with man before the fall were not gracious in the strict sense of favor toward a fallen creature, as in the covenant of grace. In the covenant of grace, the demand and obligation of obedience remain, but God graciously gives a Mediator through whom that demand and obligation are met. What was promised man in the first covenant, on condition of "perfect and personal obedience," is given to the believer in the covenant of grace through the work of obedience of the second Adam. Only through the free gift of that righteousness which belongs to Christ, the second Adam, does the believer who receives this gift by faith become acceptable to God and again find himself received into his favor as a redeemed son (Rom. 5:18–21).

Therefore, the real difference between the first and second covenants is maintained by and reflected in the WCF's distinction between a covenant of *works* and a covenant of *grace*. Though this language may not be complete or altogether satisfactory, it preserves well the difference between a communion which, *to be maintained*

and perfected, requires free and heartfelt obedience, and a communion which, *to be restored and regained*, requires the gracious and merciful granting of eternal life through the work of a Savior. It echoes the scriptural truth that the life promised man in the first covenant is only restored to man and ultimately realized in eschatological glory in the covenant of grace (cf. Rom. 6:23; Rev. 2:7).

What about "Merit?"

In order not to leave one further loose end among the common objections to the WCF's doctrine of the covenant of works, it is necessary at this point to consider whether it is ever permissible to speak of "merit" in the relationship between God and his covenant creature. One of the difficulties that emerges from a review of the criticisms of the WCF is the ambiguity of the language of "condition" and "merit" in many treatments of the covenant of works.

It should be evident from the foregoing that there is one obvious sense in which the language of "merit" has no place in a biblical theology of the covenant: *at no point in God's dealings with man as covenant creature may we say that God, in the strict sense of justice, owes the creature anything.*[39] Everything God bestows upon the crea-

39. For a contrary view, which argues that the covenant of works enunciated a doctrine of merit or strict justice, see Meredith Kline, *Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 107–17. Kline argues for a sharp distinction between "law covenant" and "promise covenant" that elucidates the difference between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. According to Kline, the covenant of works is the original and basic type of covenant administration in Scripture. It is a law covenant in which obedience is stipulated, and a promise and sanction are attached. Such a law covenant operates according to a "law-inheritance" principle; obedience to what is stipulated "merits" the inheritance in the sense of strict justice. The inheritance granted in the covenant of works is based upon covenanted justice and is in no respect an instance of divine grace or unmerited favor. By comparison, the covenant of grace continues to recognize the foundational place of law or the stipulation of obedience, but there is now *added* the promise that God will mercifully fulfill this stipulation through Christ. Accordingly, the covenant of grace continues to uphold the "law-inheritance" principle, so powerfully enunciated in the covenant of works, but it does so by way of the addition of an alternative "faith-inheritance" principle, in which the covenant member receives life through faith in Christ, the Mediator of the covenant of grace. Christ's obedience to the law and his suffering of the law's curse obtain life for the believer. Though there are features of Kline's formulations that are acceptable, especially his insistence that the stipulation of obedience, first made in the covenant of works, remains operative in the covenant of grace,

ture, whether in creation or redemption, is an undeserved benefit of his goodness and kindness. This holds true as much for man in his original state as in his redeemed state, though there is a difference between the favor shown sinless man and the grace shown the sinner, the covenant breaker who has forfeited any claim upon God's continued favor. At no point in God's dealings with man may we say that man gets what he deserves, strictly speaking, from God.[40]

The fact is that God, by entering into covenant with man, has bound himself by the promises as well as the demands of that covenant. This means that Adam's obedience to the stipulated obedience, 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. 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. The terms of the stipulation of obedience—the explicit threat of death in the case of disobedience, the implicit promise of life in the case of obedience—warrant a qualified use of the language of "merit" or "reward."[41]

---

he tends to diminish the aspect of God's *favor*, as I prefer to speak of it, in God's original condescension to Adam, his image-bearer, in the covenant before the fall into sin. See also Lee Irons, "Redefining Merit: An Examination of Medieval Presuppositions in Covenant Theology," in *Creator, Redeemer, Consummator: A Festschrift for Meredith G. Kline*, ed. Howard Griffith and John R. Muether (Greenville, SC: Reformed Academic Press, 2000), 253–69. Irons defends Kline's view that the covenant of works was administered according to a "law-inheritance" principle of "strict" justice or merit. He also rejects the idea that God "favored" Adam by promising him a reward that was disproportionate to what he strictly deserved as a mere creature, arguing that this notion assumes the medieval distinction between "condign" and "congruent" merit. It is not surprising, therefore, that Irons concludes that the WCF's language of "voluntary condescension" reflects an unbiblical nominalism in its view of God's will.

40. For a similar view of the language of "voluntary condescension" in the WCF, see Robert Letham, *The Westminster Assembly: Reading Its Theology in Historical Context* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 231–32. Letham correctly criticizes Meredith Kline's insistence that the covenant of works enunciated a principle of "strict justice." According to Letham, "the Confession stresses condescension as underlying all God's covenants, including the prefall one. Whatever the place of law may be, it is in harmony with God's free and sovereign stooping down to do us a favor" (231).

41. Consequently, in the history of Reformed theology, the language of "covenanted merit"(*meritum ex pacto*) has been employed to emphasize that God grants Adam the "right" to the reward of eternal life by virtue of the promise of the covenant of works, even

This becomes especially significant when we consider the work of Christ, the covenant Mediator and second Adam. Christ, by his obedient fulfillment of all that the law required, can legitimately be said to have *merited* or *earned* the Father's favor toward his people, those for whom he actively obeyed the law and on whose behalf he suffered its curse (his so-called "active" and "passive" obedience). Christ met the conditions of the first covenant and obtained for his people a favor previously lost through the disobedience of their first federal head, Adam.

In this connection, it is instructive to note that Calvin, to whom many appeal when criticizing the WCF's language of "works" and of "condition" in describing the first covenant, explicitly defends the practice of speaking of Christ's work in the covenant of grace as "meritorious." Admittedly, Calvin readily acknowledges that Christ's work is not meritorious in the sense that our salvation finds its ultimate source in God's justice. Christ himself, in his person and his work as Mediator, is wholly the gracious gift of the Father on behalf of his people. In that sense, all of Christ's work finds its source in the grace, the unmerited favor, of God toward undeserving sinners. Nonetheless, integral to the gracious work of Christ is an obedience, after the pattern of Adam's disobedience, which remedies our circumstance as sinners by *meriting* God's favor and restoring us to a state of acceptance with God.[42] Christ's work as Mediator, including

though, as a creature, Adam's obedience could never earn in the sense of "strict merit" (the reward is commensurate with the work performed). See, e.g., *IET*, 2:710–23; *RD*, 2:569–71; and Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1985), s.v. *ex pacto*, 108–9. Turretin's treatment of the meaning of the language of "merit," whether "properly" in the sense of "strict justice" or "improperly" in the sense of the covenanted promise of life upon condition of personal and perfect obedience, offers the most satisfying theological resolution of this question.

42. *Institutes*, 3.17.1: "In discussing Christ's merit, we do not consider the beginning of merit to be in him, but we go back to God's ordinance, the first cause. For God solely of his own good pleasure appointed him Mediator to obtain salvation for us. Hence it is absurd to set Christ's merit against God's mercy. For it is a common rule that a thing subordinate to another is not in conflict with it. For this reason nothing hinders us from asserting that men are freely justified by God's mercy alone, and at the same time that Christ's merit, subordinate to God's mercy, also intervenes on our behalf. Both God's free favor and Christ's obedience, each in its degree, are fitly opposed to our works. Apart from

both his perfect obedience to the demands of God's law and his suffering the penalty due the lawbreaker, earns salvation for his people. Though all stems from God's undeserved grace or favor, this does not mean that the actual work accomplished by Christ in no respect can be described as "meriting" salvation for his people. In the work of Christ as Mediator, God's "exact justice and rich grace" are demonstrated and maintained.[43]

Therefore, whether or not one is fully satisfied with the WCF's choice of words when it speaks of a "covenant of works," it remains true that the biblical teaching which the covenant doctrine of this confession expresses is the common inheritance of the Reformed churches historically. This inheritance has always understood the work of Christ, in the context of redemption and the covenant of grace, to be one which restores fallen man to that original favor and communion with God in and for which he was first created. The covenant of grace is a postfall remedy for the rupture in the covenant relationship between God and man brought about by the failure of Adam to live happily in terms of the first covenant. And it is a remedy that fulfills the covenant creature's obligations to his Creator, thereby restoring him to, and perfecting him in, fellowship with God.

Conclusion

Though not exhaustive, the preceding defense against many recent criticisms of the WCF's doctrine of the covenant of works

---

God's good pleasure Christ could not merit anything; but did so because he had been appointed to appease God's wrath with his sacrifice, and to blot out our transgressions with his obedience. To sum up: inasmuch as Christ's merit depends upon God's grace alone, which has ordained this manner of salvation for us, it is just as properly opposed to all human righteousness as God's grace is." Though Calvin is speaking here in the context of redemption, and not creation, it is not difficult to see that his reasoning would equally well apply to the circumstance of Adam in the covenant of works. Though Adam by virtue of God's favor and goodness was placed in fellowship with God from the beginning, his blessedness and continuance within this fellowship *depended upon* his grateful obedience to the stipulations of this communion. In this latter, subordinate sense, you might say Adam would have "merited" or "deserved" the fellowship his obedience maintained.

43. The language "exact justice and rich grace of God" is found in WCF 11.3, which describes the work of Christ whose "obedience and satisfaction" satisfy the just demands of God's holy law on behalf of his people.

should caution against jettisoning its formulations too quickly. It is especially important that critics of the WCF, especially those who write from within the framework of a commitment to historic Reformed orthodoxy, not unwittingly join their voices to those who do not share this commitment and whose criticisms arise out of a radically unbiblical framework.

The WCF's formulation of the doctrine of the covenant of works rightly preserves the difference between the covenant of favor which man enjoyed before the fall into sin and the covenant of grace by which this favor, once forfeited, is restored. It preserves the real historical difference between sinless man's fellowship and communion with God, a fellowship to be expressed and fulfilled in the way of obedience, and the sinner's restoration to fellowship through the work of Another, the second Adam. Furthermore, the WCF reminds us in its covenant doctrine that the saving work of Christ, the Mediator of the covenant of grace, involved not only an atoning death which satisfied the truth and justice of the first covenant, but also a saving life of obedience by which man's creaturely/covenantal obligation to his Creator was fulfilled. In so doing, the WCF helps us to see more clearly the glory of our covenant Mediator, by whose life, death, and resurrection the believer is restored to covenantal life and fellowship with God.

In the biblical drama of the living God's works in creation and redemption, no theme is more lustrous than that of God's gracious intention to enjoy communion with humans who bear his image and whose lives have been broken through sin.

Cornelis Venema summarizes and defends a broad consensus view of the doctrine of the covenants in the history of Reformed theology, clarifying areas of dispute.

"No one today is better qualified to address the perennially important issues of covenant theology than Cornel Venema. In this volume he considers some of these issues in the context of current discussions and debates, doing so in a particularly instructive and helpful manner."

RICHARD B. GAFFIN JR., *Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology, Emeritus, Westminster Theological Seminary*

"Cornelis Venema sheds much-needed light on issues ranging from the doctrine of republication to the Federal Vision theology. Regardless of whether one agrees with all of Venema's specific conclusions, his arguments cannot be ignored. A must-read."

KEITH MATHISON, *Professor of Systematic Theology, Reformation Bible College*

"Cornel Venema . . . is an expert to whom I have often looked for analysis and assessment of important issues relating to classic covenant theology. . . . Venema is superb in his synopsis of and engagement with these kinds of issues."

LIGON DUNCAN, *Chancellor and CEO, Reformed Theological Seminary*

"We have come to expect great things from Dr. Venema's writings and this volume does not disappoint. Treatments of three major issues currently troubling Reformed churches are done with masterful analysis. Quite frankly, these pages are necessary reading from one finest theologians of our time."

DEREK W. H. THOMAS, *Chancellor's Professor, Reformed Theological Seminary*

CORNELIS P. VENEMA (Ph.D., Princeton Theological Seminary) is president of Mid-America Reformed Seminary, where he is also professor of doctrinal studies.

P&R PUBLISHING
www.prpbooks.com

THEOLOGY / DOCTRINE
ISBN: 978-1-62995-251-2

9 781629 952512 52499