

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Excursus: Justification Revisited (Part II)

Covenant Theology, a defining feature of historic Reformed Theology, seeks (among other things) to address the question of how Adam acted as the federal head of all humanity. In fact, the word *federal* comes from the Latin word *foedus*, covenant. Adam's rebellion against God plunged all of humanity into sin. Adam stood therefore as the representative head of the human race. His sin was imputed to all of this posterity. Reformed Theology has traditionally affirmed what is known as the *Foedus Nature* or more commonly *Foedus Operum*, the Covenant of Works. The Apostle Paul uses the language the Law of Works (Rom. 3:27), and in Romans 5:12-21, he develops the analogy between the first Adam and Christ, the Last Adam.¹ Both Adams stand as Covenantal heads or federal representative for others. The Westminster Confession of Faith affirms; "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" (ch. 7, sec. 2). Elsewhere the divines declared: "God gave to Adam a law, as a covenant of works, by which He bound him and all his posterity to personal, entire, exact, and perpetual obedience; promised life upon the fulfilling, and threatened death upon the breach of it; and endued him with power and ability to keep it" (ch. 19, sec. 1). Let's examine this in the context of the Covenant of Works.

I. WHAT IS A COVENANT?

Meredith Kline writes, "Of the biblical words usually rendered 'covenant,' the primary one in the Old Testament is the Hebrew *berith*, for which the Greek *diatheke* was the translation choice of the New Testament writers. What is it that constitutes the peculiar *berith*-character of that which is so denominated? Repeatedly we read of a *berith* being 'made.' The *berith*-making is accomplished through a solemn process of ratification. Characteristically this transaction centers in the swearing of an oath, with its sanctioning curse. Clearly a *berith* is a legal kind of arrangement, a formal disposition of a binding nature. At the heart of a *berith* is an act of commitment and the customary oath-form of this commitment reveals the religious nature of the transaction."²

II. THE COVENANT OF WORKS

The great Puritan divine, Thomas Watson, developed this along the following lines.

A. Concerning the first covenant, consider these four things:

1. The form of the first covenant in innocence was working: 'Do this and live.' Working was the ground and condition of man's justification (Gal. 3:12). Not but that working is required in the covenant of grace, for we are bid to work out our salvation, and be rich in good works. But works in the covenant of grace are not required under the same notion as in the first covenant with Adam. Works are not required for the justification of our persons, but as an attestation of our love to God; not as the cause of our salvation, but as an evidence of our adoption. Works are required in the covenant of grace, not so much in our own strength as in the strength of another. 'It is God which worketh in you' (Philip. 2:13). As the teacher guides the child's hand, and helps him to form his letters, so that it is not so much the child's writing as the master's, so our obedience is not so much our

working as the Spirit's co-working.

2. The covenant of works was very strict. God required of Adam and all mankind, (1) Perfect obedience. Adam must do all things written in the 'book of the law,' and not fail, either in the matter or manner (Gal. 3:10). Adam was to live up to the whole breadth of the moral law, and go exactly according to it, as a well-made dial goes with the sun. One sinful thought would have forfeited the covenant. (2) Personal obedience. Adam must not do his work by a proxy, or have any surety bound for him; but it must be done in his own person. (3) Perpetual obedience. He must continue in all things written in 'the book of the law' (Gal. 3:10). Thus it was very strict. There was no mercy in case of failure.
3. The covenant of works was not built upon a very firm basis; and therefore must needs leave men full of fears and doubts. The covenant of works rested upon the strength of man's inherent righteousness; which though in innocence was perfect, yet was subject to change. Adam was created holy, but mutable; having a power to stand and a power to fall. He had a stock of original righteousness with which to begin the world, but he was not sure he would not break. He was his own pilot, and could steer right in the time of innocence; but he was not so secured but that he might dash against the rock of temptation, and he and his posterity be shipwrecked; so that the covenant of works must needs leave jealousies and doubtings in Adam's heart, as he had no security given him that he should not fall from that glorious state.
4. The covenant of works being broken by sin, man's condition was very deplorable and desperate. He was left in himself helpless; there was no place for repentance; the justice of God being offended set all the other attributes against him. When Adam lost his righteousness, he lost his anchor of hope and his crown; there was no way for relief, unless God would find out such a way as neither man nor angel could devise.³

III. **The Works Principle**

One of my esteemed professors at Westminster Theological Seminary was the late Meredith Kline. He insisted that *simple justice* is at the heart of the Covenant of Works. He wrote, "Not grace, but simple justice, was the governing principle in the pre-Fall covenant; hence, it is traditionally called the covenant of works. God is just, and his justice is present in all he does. That is true of gospel administrations, too, for the foundation of the gift of grace is Christ's satisfaction of divine justice. If you are looking for an element of continuity running through pre-Fall and redemptive covenants (without obliterating the contrast between them), there it is—not grace, but justice. Recognizing that God's Covenant with Adam was one of simple justice, covenant theology holds that Adam's obedience in the probation would have been the performing of a meritorious deed by which he earned the covenanted blessings."⁴

A. **Two Adams**

The relation between the consequences of Adam's work and the consequences of Christ's work for those whom they represent may be charted as follows.

Adam	Christ
Condemnation (5:16, 18)	Justification [of life] (5:17-19)
Appointed sinners (5:19)	Appointed righteous (5:19)
[Reign of] death (5:14, 17)	[Reign in] life (5:17; cf. 18) ⁵

B. **Inevitable Consequences**

Centuries ago the noted Dutch Theologian Wilhelmus á Brakel declared, "Acquaintance with this covenant is of the greatest importance, for whoever errs here or denies the existence of the covenant of works, will not understand the covenant of grace, and will readily deny that Christ by His active obedience has merited a right to eternal life for the elect."⁶ Rejection of the Covenant of Works directly leads to other systemic errors as seen in the views of Norman Shepherd and his disciples in what goes by the name The Federal Vision. The doctrine of justification by faith alone is directly impacted because the doctrine of the imputation of

Christ's active obedience is necessarily discarded. Ben Sasse correctly notes that an extremely important truth is frequently overlooked: We know that Christ atoned for Adam's and our *disobedience* on the cross, but we often forget that Christ's work was not merely negative or "passive" (enduring the curse). Our Lord was also "actively" obedient, fulfilling the law on our behalf. Those united to Christ stand not only neutral or guilt-free before the father, but actually as those reckoned positively righteous, as if we ourselves have clothed the naked, fed the hungry, and kept the whole law. Like the criminal on the cross, we have done these things "in Christ." The background for understanding the active and passive obedience of Christ (again, *actively* keeping the law and *passively* suffering in the place of law-breakers) is the covenant that God made with Adam. This agreement in the Garden – called the covenant of works – was not based on grace, but on merit. God promised Adam eternal life and blessings for obedience, and the curse of death for disobedience. After the fall, God mercifully offered a new covenant, this one a covenant of grace. But we must distinguish clearly here: The covenant of grace did not render the covenant of works obsolete; the Gospel did not do away with justice. Rather, the good news of the second covenant was that God would send a messiah to fulfill the first covenant. God promised a mediator, who would be obedient where the first Adam had proved disobedient. The covenant of works and the covenant of grace then both require perfect, perpetual obedience. The difference between them is that where the covenant of works required Adam's *personal* obedience, the covenant of grace provided his faithful descendants with a second Adam who would fulfill perfect, perpetual, *substitutionary* obedience. In an important sense, there are not two paths of salvation: faith or works. There is only one way – and it is by works. But the question is whether salvation comes by our personal works, or by the substitutionary work of another. The covenant of grace then is actually a path to fulfill the covenant of works – which hasn't gone away and which those of us born of Adam cannot personally fulfill. The important distinction here is not before versus after the Incarnation (Old Testament/New Testament). Rather, the chief distinction for all historical epochs is between seeking to fulfill the law ourselves (covenant of works) and relying by faith on the law-keeping of our mediator (covenant of grace).⁷

CONCLUSION: Lee Irons, another former pupil of Meredith Kline rightly noted that Kline argues that if justification by faith alone is the article by which the church stands or falls, then the covenant of works is the article by which justification stands or falls. For if the covenant of works is inherently contrary to the graciousness of a God who allegedly never operates on a principle of merit then any notion of the imputation of an alien righteousness becomes unintelligible. For that righteousness, as traditionally conceived, is nothing less than the active and passive obedience of Christ secured by virtue of his meritorious fulfillment of the covenant of works on our behalf. To argue, therefore, that God's grace was operative in the covenant of works with the first Adam necessitates the conclusion that it was operative too in that of the Last. As Kline points out, "The parallel which Scripture tells us exists between the two Adams would require the conclusion that if the first Adam could not earn anything, neither could the second. But, if the obedience of Jesus has no meritorious value, the foundation of the gospel is gone." But not only is the merit of Christ's active obedience eclipsed by an a priori denial of the very notion of human merit, the central gain of the Reformation is also compromised: justification is no longer *sola fide*. If the notion of a pre-redemptive covenant of works must be overhauled beyond recognition by adding an element of grace and faith where it does not belong, the law-gospel contrast championed by Paul, Luther and Calvin is reduced to a Tridentine mush of salvation by faith-works, or by "the obedience of faith" (to use Paul's term in a non-Pauline sense). The Pauline antithesis between the law and the gospel is the ground of the federal scheme which is based on the two covenants with two opposed principles of inheritance (Rom. 4:13-16; 10:4-11; 2 Cor. 3:6-18; Gal. 3:10-12, 18; 4:21-31). Therefore, to inject grace into the covenant of works is to soften the law-gospel contrast and replace it with a continuum. Once this is done, one can no longer make a clear-cut distinction between faith and works with respect to the justification of sinners. To posit "the perfect complementation and co-ordination... of goodness and oughtness, of faith and obedience to law... in man's original state," opens the door for positing the perfect complementation and co-ordination of faith and works in justification. How can we go down that road without denying that justification is *sola fide*? All qualifications and denials of the covenant of works, while

apparently laudable in their concern to safeguard “grace,” have turned out on the contrary to be the proverbial grass concealing the poisonous viper of the old medieval synthesis of faith and works.⁸

ENDNOTES

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- ¹ Richard Muller explains; **foedus operum**: covenant of works; viz., the first covenant made by God with man, instituted before the fall when man was still in the *status integritatis* and capable of perfect obedience. The doctrine of the *foedus operum* assumes that Adam and Eve knew the moral law either as the *lex paradisiacal* revealed by God. Some of the Reformed go so far as to find in the tree of life (*arbor vitae*) and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (*arbor scientiae boni et mali*) sacramental signs of the grace available, on condition of obedience, to the first pair under the covenant of works. Since, moreover, the trees, and therefore the commands to eat and not eat, have a broad federal significance, the Reformed invariably interpret the violation of the covenant of works as more than a violation of a simple token command not to eat, indeed, as a violation of the entire *lex moralis*. The Lutherans, who do not argue a *foedus operum*, tend to argue that violation of the divine command was only mediately a violation of the whole moral law and, immediately, a violation of a test that demanded the same obedience if not the explicit behavior stipulated by the moral law. Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms (Baker, 1986) p. 122.
- ² M. G. Kline, Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundations For a Covenantal Worldview (Two Age Press, 2000) p. 1.
- ³ Available at <http://www.westminstershortercatechism.net/CovofWorks.html>.
- ⁴ M. G. Kline, “Covenant Theology Under Attack,” available at http://www.opc.org/new_horizons/Kline_cov_theo.html.
- ⁵ G. P. Waters, “Romans 10:5 and The Covenant of works” in The Law is Not of Faith, eds. B. D. Estelle, J. V. Fesko and D. VanDrunen, (P & R, 2009) p. 230.
- ⁶ Wilhelmus á Brakel The Christian’s Reasonable Service, vol. 1, trans. Bartel Elshout (Morgan: Soli Deo Gloria, 1992), p. 355.
- ⁷ http://pressiechurch.org/Theol_1/covenant_theology_by_ben_sasse.htm.
- ⁸ Lee Irons, “Redefining Merit: An Examination of Meredith G. Kline to Reformed Systematics” in Creator, Redeemer, Consummator: A Festschrift for Meredith G. Kline, eds. H. Griffith and J. R. Muether (Reformed Academic Press, 2000) p. 25.