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# THE COVENANT OF WORKS

DS212—Doctrine of Humanity

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- Introduction
  - The Reformed tradition has spoken of the relationship between God and Adam as a covenantal relationship.
  - This covenant has been known by several different names: Covenant of Works, Covenant of Life, and Covenant of Creation.
  - The Covenant of Works is an important theological principle.
    - Without it, we cannot rightly understand man’s relationship to God in the Garden.
    - Neither can we understand the gospel, for the work of our Lord Jesus Christ was a redeeming work necessitated by the Fall into sin as a result of transgressing the Covenant of Works.
    - The covenant structure organizes all of God’s relations to man.
  - Introductory Textual Considerations
    - Gen 2:16–17—And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”
    - Hosea 6:7—But like Adam they transgressed the covenant; there they dealt faithlessly with me.
    - Romans 5:12–21
    - Gal 4:24a—Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants.
- Covenant Condescension
  - Westminster Confession of Faith 7.1—The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God’s part, which he hath been pleased to express by way of covenant (Job 9:32–33; 1 Sam 2:25; Ps 113:5–6; Ps 100:2–3; Job 22:2–3; Job 35:7–8; Luke 17:10; Acts 17:24–25).
  - This elaborates a fundamental Creator/creature relationship.
    - Condescension itself is a type of grace or at least a favor.
      - God is under no obligation to enter into such a relationship with his people. He does so of his own accord.
      - It is a benevolent and free act.
    - Creation is itself a sort of condescension. Still, it is helpful to note that creation is not *identical* with covenant.
      - The covenantal relationship is the voluntary condescension.

- WCF 7.1 presupposes a distance already present in creation. God *then* voluntarily condescended to enter into a covenant with man, whom he created.
    - At no point is the ontological distance between Creator and creature closed within the covenantal relationship. The relationship is one of “fruition” as a “blessedness and reward,” not one of ontological identity.
  - The Nature of the First Covenant
    - Westminster Standards
      - Westminster Shorter Catechism
        - Q. 12. What special act of providence did God exercise toward man in the estate wherein he was created?
        - A. When God had created man, he entered into a covenant of life with him, upon condition of perfect obedience; forbidding him to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, upon the pain of death.
      - Westminster Larger Catechism
        - Q. 20. What was the providence of God toward man in the estate in which he was created?
        - A. The providence of God toward man in the estate in which he was created, was the placing him in paradise, appointing him to dress it, giving him liberty to eat of the fruit of the earth; putting the creatures under his dominion, and ordaining marriage for his help; affording him communion with himself; instituting the Sabbath; entering into a covenant of life with him, upon condition of personal, perfect, and perpetual obedience, of which the tree of life was a pledge; and forbidding to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, upon the pain of death.
      - Westminster Confession of Faith 7.2—The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam; and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience (Gal 3:10, 12; Rom 5:12–20; 10:5; Gen 2:17).
    - To gain a grasp of the nature of this covenantal relationship, we must recognize several basic features.
      - First, recognize the relationship between Adam and God. These are two parties.
        - This is a bilateral bond. In other words, it goes both ways—not in parity—but in union and communion.
        - God remains the sovereign at all points, but he desires a reciprocal relationship of union and communion with his people.
      - Second, within this arrangement, God imposes stipulations upon Adam. These are “perfect and personal obedience.”

- Third, a reward is promised.
        - The reward is life (eschatological life).
        - Adam would have received consummate eschatological life upon the proper achievement of the stipulations of perfect and perpetual obedience.
      - Fourth, punishment is threatened for violating the stipulations.
      - Fifth, the relationship establishes a bond not only between God and Adam, but also between Adam and those whom he represents.
    - Let’s revisit the various names this covenant has been given.
      - “Covenant of Works” emphasizes the principle according to which Adam was to pass probation and gain his reward.
      - “Covenant of Life” emphasizes the reward offered for obedience.
      - “Covenant of Creation” emphasizes that this was a prelapsarian arrangement given at the time of creation.
  - The Comprehensiveness of the Covenant of Works
    - God deals with his people through a federal head.
      - Adam was the representative.
        - God dealt with Adam while simultaneously dealing with all the people he represents.
        - We’ll consider this further when we address original sin and especially the exegesis of Romans 5:12–21.
      - However, for now, it is important to recognize that God *continues* to deal with his people through a federal head.
      - There are only two: Adam and the second and last Adam, Jesus Christ.
    - God required perfect obedience.
      - Adam was made in the image of God. As the natural working out of that God-likeness, he was called to live like God, though always as a creature.
      - Adam was created “very good” and without sin. And he was called to *perfect* obedience because that is the nature of God’s righteousness.
      - Successful passage through probation would involve complete conformity to God’s standard.
    - Given these two points and the historical reality of the Fall into sin, we can see our need of a Redeemer.
      - The Covenant of Works is comprehensive of our relationship to God. It is also comprehensive of all people.
      - After the Fall, we all have fallen into an estate of sin and misery. We also are subject to death as the wages of that sin.
  - Relationship to the Covenant of Grace
    - WCF 7:3—Man, by his fall, having made himself incapable of life by that covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the Covenant of Grace, whereby He freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ, requiring of them faith in Him, that they may be saved; and promising to

give unto all those that are ordained unto eternal life His Holy Spirit, to make them willing, and able to believe.

- In his fall into sin, Adam made himself “incapable of life.” Yet after the fall, God offers sinners “life *and* salvation.”
- WCF 8:5—The Lord Jesus, by His perfect obedience and sacrifice of Himself, which He, through the eternal Spirit, once offered up unto God, hath fully satisfied the justice of His Father; and purchased, not only reconciliation, but an everlasting inheritance in the kingdom of heaven for all those whom the Father hath given unto Him.
  - Again, the same reward offered to Adam is secured by Christ.
  - This inheritance was secured for all whom Christ represents.
- There are many similarities between Adam and Jesus Christ in this covenant history. Still, there are several important differences.
  - Adam needed to obey the command of the Lord perfectly, conforming to his law as revealed.
  - Jesus needed also to obey the command of the Lord perfectly, but he also needed to bear the sanctions from the outset.
  - This necessity points to the need for both Christ’s active and passive obedience.
  - Through Christ’s life *and* death, his people may be brought to the originally-intended destination, a heavenly inheritance (cf. 1 Pet 1:3–7; 1 Cor 15:47–58).
- A Transtestamental Gospel
  - WCF 8:6—Although the work of redemption was not actually wrought by Christ till after His incarnation, yet the virtue, efficacy, and benefits thereof, were communicated unto the elect in all ages successively from the beginning of the world, in and by those promises, types, and sacrifices, wherein He was revealed and signified to be the Seed of the woman, which should bruise the serpent’s head, and the Lamb slain from the beginning of the world being yesterday and today the same, and for ever.
  - There is one savior—whether for people living after Christ’s death and resurrection or before.
    - Although in the Old Testament, Christ had yet to come in the flesh to accomplish his work of redemption, he is still the savior of all the elect, the only mediator between God and man.
    - This is possible, because Christ is present in the Old Testament.
  - Specifically, he is present in promises, types, and sacrifices.
    - More than that, we can elaborate that Christ must be present through the work of the Holy Spirit.
    - These find their fulfillment *and* substance in Christ.
- Objections to the Covenant of Works

- Some have rejected the Covenant of Works because they believe it introduces a meritocracy or places God in man’s debt. Others fail to recognize sufficient Scriptural support.
- S. G. De Graaf
- G. C. Berkouwer
- Herman Hoeksema
- C. Van der Waal and C. Stam
- James B. Torrance
- John Murray
  - Murray describes his objections to the Covenant of Works in “The Covenant of Works: Three Problems” found in *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2 of *The Collected Writings of John Murray*, pp. 47–59.
  - Murray takes issue with two parts of the “covenant of works” language.
    - First, he doesn’t like the use of the word “covenant.”
    - Second, he doesn’t like the use of the word “works.”
  - To elaborate, he identifies three problems in recognizing a covenant of works in Genesis 2.
    - First, Murray is surely not alone in believing that “works” does not accurately describe the relationship God established with Adam.
    - Second, Murray also argues that Scripture does not explicitly identify this relationship as a covenant.
    - Third, Murray insists that covenants are strictly postlapsarian arrangements.
    - Therefore, for Murray this arrangement is not a *covenant* much less a *covenant of works*.
  - Nonetheless, Murray argues for an Adamic Administration that is unique as a relationship between God and man.
    - This relationship is unique even when compared to the Mosaic Covenant or the New Covenant.
    - Murray rejects the notion that the Mosaic Covenant includes a republication of principles of the Adamic Administration.
    - Murray recognizes similarities between Adam and Christ, most notably in Romans 5:12ff and 1 Cor 15:22ff.
    - Still, he recognizes differences—as we already have—between them.
      - Christ had to die in order to secure life for his people.
      - Christ, therefore, had to redeem his people first.
  - Characteristics of the Adamic Administration
    - This administration is sovereignly administered by God. And under it, Adam is the head of the human race.

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