
THE COVENANT OF WORKS AND MERIT

DS212—Doctrine of Humanity
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INTRODUCTION

- Today we want to consider the judicial character of God’s arrangement with Adam. Specifically, we want to consider the role of merit in this arrangement.
 - There are several different views within the Reformed tradition on the role of merit in the Covenant of Works.
 - *Merit* is “the quality of being particularly good or worthy, especially so as to deserve praise or reward.”¹
- Two general theological traditions of morality are of interest for us today.
 - The intellectualist tradition views that the faculty of the will is determined by the intellect. The will chooses that which the intellect recognizes as good. Thomas Aquinas is recognized as the chief of the intellectualist tradition.
 - Intellectualism is often contrasted with voluntarism. John Duns Scotus and William of Ockham are two key representatives of this tradition.
 - There are a couple ways to consider voluntarism.
 - First, there is an emphasis on the divine will. On this point, Scotus, for example, held that the morality of any act depends on God’s will and his free choice. Moreover, God’s actions cannot ultimately be rationalized or understood by the intellect.
 - Second, and in terms of man’s faculties, the will takes precedence over the intellect.
- These traditions have held different views regarding the role of merit in God’s dealings with Adam.

GRACE AND MERIT

- When we look at the Covenant of Works, we need to ask how grace and merit relate to each other within this arrangement.
 - Is it the case that this arrangement precludes merit of any kind? Is it entirely gracious?
 - Is it the case that this arrangement is based strictly upon a principle of merit?
 - Does the arrangement somehow include a principle of both grace *and* merit?
- Turretin is a great example of someone who sees that Adam’s obedience would have been rewarded as meritorious because it would have met the terms established by the covenant.

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<https://www.google.com/search?q=define+merit&oq=define+merit&aqs=chrome..69i57j69i60l3j69i59l2.1234j0j1&sourceid=chrome&es_sm=119&ie=UTF-8> Accessed November 23, 2015.

- Others, however, argue that this could not be the case. God’s arrangement with Adam was gracious and must preclude any principle of merit.
 - In this view, Adam’s obedience must be supplemented by grace, because any creaturely obedience—even if it’s perfect—cannot merit reward from God.
 - The 19th century Southern Presbyterian R. L. Dabney argues that, “God’s act of entering into a covenant with Adam . . . will be found to be one of *pure grace* and *condescension* . . . God, therefore, moved by pure grace, condescended to establish a covenant with His holy creature, in virtue of which a temporary obedience might be graciously accepted as a ground for God’s communicating himself to him, and assuring him ever after of holiness, happiness, and communion with God . . . (the life given was) more than he could strictly claim of God.²
 - For Dabney, the creature can lay no claim on the Creator even before the fall.
 - Dabney speaks of both the establishment (entering into) of the covenant with Adam as well as reward offered. *Both* are gracious. They are non-obligatory. God isn’t required to enter into the covenant. Neither is God required to give the reward. Rather, God “graciously accepts” Adam’s temporary and creaturely obedience, freely choosing to give him life that “was more than Adam could strictly claim of God.”

CONDIGN MERIT

- Dabney holds that God gives Adam more than Adam can “strictly claim” of God.
 - Dabney is guarding against a form of merit called “condign merit.” This is merit that obtains from the dignity and intrinsic worth of an act or moral constitution.
 - We also sometimes call this “strict merit” or “proper merit.” This is a way of defining merit ontologically. It has an intrinsic moral quality.
- Dabney rejects the idea that a finite creature could strictly merit anything from God thereby placing the Creator under obligation to the creature.

CONGRUENT MERIT

- The voluntarist tradition, contrary to the intellectualists, insisted that merit be defined not abstractly or ontologically, but that merit be defined and evaluated in terms of the *covenant*.
 - Merit must be understood *ex pacto* or in the concrete terms provided by the covenant.
 - Alister E. McGrath writes, “a distinction is to be made between the inherent value of a moral act and its ascribed value under the terms of the covenant.”³
- Francis Turretin uses this understanding of merit from the voluntarist tradition.
 - For Turretin, there is a role for merit within the covenant that does not require an ontological definition of Adam’s merit.
 - This affords Turretin to include both grace understood as voluntary condescension and merit within the covenant.

² Dabney, *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, 302.

³ Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, 87.

- He writes: “With respect to God (this pact or covenant relationship) was *gratuitous*, as depending upon a *pact* or *gratuitous promise* . . .”⁴
 - Yet, Turretin does speak of God binding himself.
- He continues: “by which God was *bound not to man*, but *to himself* and to his own goodness, fidelity and truth (Rom 3:3; 2 Tim 2:13).”⁵
 - So for Turretin, man does not place God into his debt by virtue of any intrinsic worth in his acts. God’s covenant blessings are “a debt of fidelity that arise out of the promise by which God demonstrated his infallible constancy and truth.”⁶
 - If in any way we speak of God being in “debt” to Adam, we must understand it “*not* as to the proportion and *condignity* of the duty rendered to God by man (Rom 8:18; Luke 17:10), but to the *pact of God and justice* (i.e., the fidelity of him making it).”⁷
 - This notion of justice arises out of the covenantal arrangement, which is itself a result of voluntary condescension.
- He writes, “if upright man in that state had obtained this *merit*, it must *not* be understood *properly and rigorously*. Since man has *all things* from and owes all to God, he can seek from him *nothing* as his own *by right*, nor can God be a debtor to him—*not* by *condignity* of work and from its *intrinsic value* (because whatever that may be, it can bear *no proportion* to the infinite reward of life), but *from the pact and liberal promise of God* (according to which he had the right of demanding the reward to which God had *of his own accord bound himself*). . . .”⁸
 - For Turretin, there is then a notion of merit, but one that arises from justice understood in conjunction with the covenant.
 - At the same time, there is a covenantally-qualified notion of merit for Turretin that arises “from the *pact* and *liberal promise* of God.”
- Turretin rejects an ontological definition of merit (condign merit) while affirming a form of congruent *ex pacto* merit.
 - In this way, he differs from the nominalist tradition, because obedience is accepted with reference to justice. But it’s justice in conjunction with the covenantal terms.
 - God is self-obligated to accept Adam’s obedience on account of his revealed justice. In other words, once God establishes the covenant with Adam, if Adam were to offer the obedience set forth in its terms, God would be *unjust* were he to withhold the covenant blessings, because God cannot lie.

⁴ Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:578.

⁵ Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:578.

⁶ Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:578.

⁷ Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:578.

⁸ Turretin, *Institutes*, 1:578.

OBJECTIONS TO FORMS OF MERIT IN THE COVENANT

- Objection #1: Condescension to make a covenant is gracious.
 - Some may object that since God condescends to make a covenant, then that precludes any notion of merit within the covenant.
 - God is in no way obligated to enter into the covenant with his creature.
 - And therefore, the reward offered to the creature cannot be an obligation in any form.
 - The gracious act of condescension must be carried through at all times. It implies and requires that the promised reward for obedience must be gracious in nature.
 - How does Turretin's formulation treat this objection?
 - God is not obligated to enter into a covenant with Adam. But once he does so freely, what is the case?
 - He is self-bound to the terms of the covenant. God is self-obligated to reward obedience.
 - The *establishment* of the covenant is gracious, but the *terms and reward* of the covenant are governed by covenantal justice.
 - Consider this scenario: (1) God offers a reward for obedience, and (2) He endows the creature with everything necessary to render that obedience. Assume further that (3) Adam renders to God the required obedience.
 - What would happen? Must God give Adam the promised reward?
 - What if the reward were entirely informed by grace—not just in terms of the establishment of the covenant, but also in terms of *awarding* the blessings?
 - (1) God offers a reward for obedience, (2) He endows the creature with everything necessary to render that obedience, (3) [for the sake of the discussion] Adam renders this obedience. (4) God does not reward the obedience.
 - If this reward is entirely informed by grace even *within* the covenant, then God would have the freedom to withhold the reward *even when* the terms of the covenant are met.
 - In this sense, grace undoes the covenant itself.
- Objection #2: No creature can earn God's blessing by obedience.
 - Others take issue with the notion that a creature could *earn* anything from God through obedience.
 - Adam offers a temporal and finite act of obedience. Yet God offers eternal and consummate life for obedience. How can this be? The blessing infinitely transcends the obedience.
 - Because of the disparity between the obedience and the reward, then merit must be precluded.
 - No creature can *earn* anything from the Creator abstractly. Yet, we are considering this concretely in terms of Adam's *covenantal* relationship to God.

- In the covenant of works, God as covenant maker promises a reward to a creature upon condition of perfect obedience. Since God is bound by justice as a necessity that arises from the nature covenant, he must reward Adam if he meets the terms of the covenant. Yet this is always *ex pacto* merit arising from God's voluntary and gracious condescension. It is not condign or abstract merit.
- Objection #3: A Father-Son relationship is by definition gracious.
 - Even if one were to grant that merit could be understood within some Creator-creature relationships, some point to the fact that Adam was much more than a mere creature.
 - Adam was a son who bore his Father's image (Gen 1:26–28; 5:1–3).
 - The parental type of relationship must be gracious.
 - Good fathers deal with their children tenderly not as a cold judge.⁹ This fatherly disposition is the basis for the covenantal reward.
 - In response, consider that Jesus Christ is the eternal Son. Moreover, it is widely held that Jesus Christ *merits* his inheritance. Given these two truths, we must conclude that sonship is not fundamentally incompatible with meritorious obedience.

CONSIDERING THE RELATIONSHIP OF GRACE AND WORKS

- Meredith G. Kline and John Murray are often set against each other on their views on the relationship between works and grace. Murray is characterized as the one who held that God's arrangement with Adam was strictly gracious. Kline is often contrasted with Murray as one who held that the Covenant of Works was just that: a covenant *of works*. Its operative principle was works, not grace.
- Kline has two sides to his covenant theology: (1) voluntary condescension, and (2) the priority of the law.
 - Voluntary Condescension
 - Kline is not opposed to the idea that God graciously condescends to enter into a covenant with Adam. In fact, he supports the idea of voluntary condescension.
 - He does, however think speaking of this condescension as “gracious” complicates matters, because this is different from speaking of “grace” in terms of God's redemptive work.
 - In other words, there are different ways to define “grace.” Kline says, “Grace, in the specific sense that it effects restoration to the forfeited blessing of God is of course found only in redemptive revelation. But in another sense grace is present in the pre-redemptive covenant. For the offer of a consummation of man's original beatitude, or rather the entire glory and honor with which God crowned man from the beginning, was a display of the graciousness and goodness of God to his claimless creature of the dust.”¹⁰

⁹ Meredith G. Kline, “Of Works and Grace,” 88.

¹⁰ *By Oath Consigned*, 36.

- Kline restricts grace/benevolence to God’s covenantal condescension. God is under no obligation whatsoever to enter into a covenant with the creature. At the same time, once the terms of the covenant are set, if they are met, the reward is given according to those terms.
- As a result, God is not obligated to enter into a covenant with Adam, but once he does, he has bound himself to the terms of that covenant. If the terms are met, God is covenantally self-obligated (again, because of his *voluntary condescension*) to grant the reward.
- So, voluntary condescension is the first side to Kline’s covenant theology. The priority of the law is the second.
- The Priority of Law
 - Adam could receive the promised reward of the covenant only by offering perfect obedience throughout his time of probation.
 - Kline writes, “Now if it is obedience of the one that is the ground of the promise-guarantee given to the many, then clearly the principle of law is more fundamental than that of promise even in a promise covenant. The difference between pre-redemptive and redemptive covenant is not, then, that the latter substitutes promise for law. . . . The difference is rather that redemptive covenant is simultaneously a promise administration of guaranteed blessings and a law administration of blessing dependent on obedience, with the latter foundational” (31, 32).
 - Kline is beginning his consideration from within the covenant arrangement.
 - Law is not primary to God’s gracious condescension.
 - However, within the covenant, law is the operative principle.
 - Still, we must maintain that merit, and therefore law, must always be covenantally qualified. It arises from voluntary condescension.