**DS 212**

***Anthropology***

The Doctrine of Humanity

Class notes

by

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Mid-America Reformed Seminary

Dyer, Indiana

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DS 212—Anthropology (Doctrine of Humanity)

Mid-America Reformed Seminary

**Dr. J. Mark Beach, Instructor**

Fall Semester 2013

**Course Description:** A study of the doctrine of humanity, comprising debates concerning human origins, the constitution of man, man in the state of integrity and the covenant of works, the human fall into sin, the nature and character of sin, the transmission of Adam’s sin to his posterity, original sin, human freedom, common grace, and the covenant of grace. (2 *hours*).

**Course Objective:** Students will grow in a biblical, confessional, and historical knowledge of this theological locus, “theological anthropology,” so that they are able to define essential issues relative to the doctrines pertaining to it and articulate and defend the confessional consensus regarding the same.

**Procedure:** ATTEND COURSE LECTURES on the doctrine of humanity.

CRITICAL READING OF THE FOLLOWING TEXTS: (Total pages @ 900 [1400])

* Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: Sin and Salvation in Christ.* Vol. 3. Baker Academic, 2006. Pp. 25-232.
* Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be.* Eerdmans, 1995. Pp. 1-199.
* J. Mark Beach. *Christ and the Covenant: Francis Turretin’s Federal Theology as a Defense of the Doctrine of Grace.* Reformed Historical Theology, edited by Herman J. Selderhuis, et al. Gottingen: Vanderhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007. Pp. 78-324.
* Handouts

**[Reading Reserve for reference and recommended reading]**

* A. A. Hodge. *Outlines of Theology.* Banner of Truth, 1972. Pp. 280-377.
* J. Mark Beach, *Piety’s Wisdom: A Summary of Calvin’s* Institutes *with Study Questions*. Reformation Heritage Books, 2010. Pp. 38-130.
* Francis Turretin. *Institutes of Elenctic Theology,* 3 vols.P&R, 1992-97. See appropriate topics.
* Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, Pp. 181-300.

RECOMMENDED SUPPLEMENTAL SOURCES

* Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, III/2, 3-640; III/3, 289-368.
* J. van Genderen & W. H. Velema, *Concise Reformed Dogmatics*. P&R, 2008. Pp. 200-208; 222-243; 246-276; 314-381; 385-401; 539-572.
* Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms*. Baker, 1985.
* Rohls, *Reformed Confessions: From Zurich to Barmen.* WJK, 1997. [pp. 45-86]
* John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III.xxi-xxiv (pp. 920-987 in vol. 2 of the Battles translation; or pp. 202-58 in vol. 2 of the Beveridge translation; or pp. 170-241, in vol. 2 of the Allen translation.)
* Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics.* [1950] Repr. London: Wakeman Great Reprints. Pp. 220-250; 281-409.
* Various Handouts: Muller, Vos, Murray, etc.
* Wilhelmus à Brakel, *Our Reasonable Service*, vol. 1. Reformation Heritage Books, 1992. Pp. 251-463.

Humanity

* Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image*. Eerdmans, 1986.
* Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Christian Looks at Himself.* Eerdmans, 1975.
* Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology,* Vol. 2, pp. 3-309, Eerdmans, repr., 1979.
* A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, pp. 181-377. 1879; repr., Banner of Truth, 1972.
* Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology,* 4th ed., Eerdmans, 1939-1941. (pp. 19-301.)
* William G.T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 3rd ed. P&R, 2003, pp. 429-609.
* Leslie Stevenson, *Seven Theories of Human Nature.* Oxford, 1974.
* Cornelius Plantinga Jr., *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin.* Eerdmans, 1995.
* John Murray, *The Imputation of Adam’s Sin*. P&R, 1979.
* Emil Brunner, *Man in Revolt: A Christian Anthropology.* Westminster, 1947.
* Thomas R. Schreiner & Bruce A. Ware, editors. *The Grace of God*, *the Bondage of the Will: Historical and Theological Perspectives on Calvinism.* 2 vols. Baker, 1995.
* Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society.* Scribner’s, 1932.
* Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *The True Image: The Origin and Destiny of Man in Christ.* Eerdmans, 1989.
* G. C. Berkouwer, *Man: The Image of God*, Studies in Dogmatics. Eerdmans, 1962.

PAPER. Each student will write a **major research paper** on one of the following topics (or a topic of his or her choice approved by the professor):

1. Covenant and Election—Making Sense of Two Biblical Motifs, Their Interrelationship and Formulation in Light of Each Other
2. Human Freedom and Depravity—An Analysis of Free Will *Non Posse Non Peccare* (Fallen)and *Posse Non Peccare* (Redeemed) (engaging, say, F. Turretin or perhaps J. Edwards)
3. An Analysis and Critique of G. C. Berkouwer and/or P.E. Hughes on “The Image of God”
4. An Analysis of G. C. Berkouwer’s book “ “Man: Image of God” in his Studies in Dogmatics series.
5. An Analysis of G. C. Berkouwer’s book on “Sin” in his Studies in Dogmatics series.
6. The Social Character of Sin—A Biblical and Theological Analysis of Sin’s Effects and Consequences in Human Society & Social/Economic/Political Structures (using W. Rauschenbush and R. Niebuhr)
7. Sin’s Restraint and Common Grace—A Biblical and Theological Examination of the Doctrine of Common Grace (selections from Kuyper, Bavinck, Van Til, H. Hoeksema, and John Murray) or a close analysis of one figure
8. An Analysis and Assessment of Jonathan Edwards’s *The Great Doctrine of Original Sin Defended* or his book on *Freedom of the Will.*
9. Review and analysis of the book edited by Van Asselt treating Reformed understanding of human freedom, treating Zanchi, Junius, Gomarus, Voetius, Turrettini, and De Moor, entitled *Reformed Thought on Freedom: the Concept of Free Choice in Early Modern Reformed Theology.*
10. A detailed exegetical paper treating Rom. 5 and the doctrine of original sin.
11. A detailed exegetical paper treating body and soul and the doctrine of dichotomy/ or an analysis of John Cooper’s book on Body/Soul Anthropology.
12. An analysis of Klaas Schilder’s doctrine of the covenant.
13. An analysis of Meredith Kline’s doctrine of the covenant.
14. An analysis of Herman Hoeksema’s doctrine of the covenant.
15. An analysis of Herman Witsius on the doctrine of the covenant.
16. An exegetical and theological analysis of the viability of the doctrine of the *pactum salutis* (the covenant of redemption) in light of modern criticisms.
17. Analysis of the View that the Sinaitic Covenant is a Republication of the Covenant of Works
18. An Analysis of some 17th-Century Reformed theologians on the Question of the Sinaitic Covenant in Relation to the Covenant of Grace
19. Karl Barth’s doctrine of sin as “Nothingness.”
20. Karl Barth’s doctrine of the covenant of grace.
21. Karl Barth’s Christological Doctrine of Humanity
22. Or a topic of your choice provided it takes up a weighty issue and/or theologian, and it must, of course, be approved by the instructor. Basically, any topic pertaining to Theological Anthropology is permitted, but it must be treated in more depth than the class notes or readings. **Research the topic!**

**Paper Guidelines:**

1. A paper must have a thesis that is stated in the introduction, carefully argued in the body of the paper, and reaffirmed in the conclusion. The clarity and strength of the thesis and the quality of the argument supporting the thesis will weigh heavily in paper grading.
2. Grammar, punctuation, and spelling must follow proper English style. Students who need help in these matters should consult a guide to writing. Two helpful guides are *On Writing Well* by William Zinsser, and *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace* by Joseph M. Williams. Also see *The Elements of Style* by Strunk and White.
3. Papers must be typewritten and double-spaced, with a one-inch margin on each side of the page. Pages must be numbered consecutively throughout the paper.
4. Papers should be stapled neatly in the upper left-hand corner. Please do not put your paper in a plastic cover.
5. If there is a survey of important literature to your chosen topic, it should not exceed 25% of the entire length of the paper.
6. Sources used in writing the paper must be identified by footnotes or endnotes. If one source is used repeatedly in a paper, you may include an initial footnote with bibliographical information and a comment that subsequent references to the work will be made parenthetically in the body of the text. See Kate L. Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations.* Also see *The Craft of Research* by Booth, Colomb, and Williams, and *Church History: An Introduction to Research, Reference Works, and Methods* by James R. Bradley and Richard A. Muller.
7. NB: To expedite bibliographic citation, make use of OCLC Worldcat, cite/export feature, Turabian 6th ed. [www.worldcat.org](http://www.worldcat.org)

This paper should be between 14-20 pages. **Due:** **November 13, 2013.** This paper will count for 30% of the final grade.

**READINGS.** Signed statement vouching that you completed assigned readings. (10% of grade)

**EXAM.** One exam will be administered, during the week of final exams, covering course lectures and the assigned readings. 60% of grade.

**Evaluation:** Final exam: 60%; Major Research Paper: 30%; Readings 10%.

**\* Failure to fulfill all assignments for the course by the end of the semester will result in an “F” for the course. See policy in Student Handbook.**

Recommended Books (that is, books, besides the textbooks assigned, that either treat a topic well or represent a perspective you should know)

**Course Outcomes:**

*In General:* Students will grow in a biblical, confessional, and historical knowledge of the theological locus, “theological anthropology” so that they are able to define essential issues relative to this doctrine and articulate and defend the confessional consensus regarding the same.

*In Particular:*

HUMANITY

1. Students will be able to address the modern debate about human origins in light of scientific naturalism and classical and modern approaches to the book of Genesis.”
2. Students will know various paradigms of the constitution of human beings, specifically dichotomy, trichotomy, dualistic wholism, monistic wholism, etc.
3. Students will understand the biblical, theological, and confessional teachings on the nature of man created in the image of God, as well as modern debates upon the same by several contemporary authors; including the strengths and weaknesses of respective positions.
4. Students will be able to summarize and explain the traditional Reformed understanding of humans created in the image of God, defending such from Scripture and from the Reformed confessions.
5. Students will be able define and explain the biblical doctrine of the covenant of works, and know the criticisms directed against this teaching.
6. Students will know the biblical teaching of the human fall into sin and be able to state the enigma of evil in God’s creation.
7. Students will be able to define the errors of monism and Manichaeism
8. Students will be able to show what Scripture and the Reformed confessions teach about the nature and character of sin, including (from the Plantinga reading) sin’s many facets and traits.
9. Students will understand the different theories regarding the transmission of sin from Adam to his progeny.
10. Students will understand the doctrine of original sin.
11. Students will know the nature of total depravity and how it is loses its decisive and definitive character for believers. .
12. Students will know a biblical case for the doctrine of common grace, both as restraint to human depravity and a positive blessing for human flourishing.
13. Students will be able to define the meaning and importance of the doctrine of the covenant of grace, including the covenant of redemption, the biblical and confessional teaching of the same, and the unfolding of this covenant in the history of redemption.

**Assigned Readings by Topic:**

\*NB: pages places in brackets **[ ]** indicates second tier of priority. Make the first tier of reading your first priority. Do your best with the second tier of readings, try to read at least *some of each* of the second tier of readings.

**HUMANITY Optional Supplemental Reading**

Introduction to Anthropology & Human Origins A.A Hodge, 280-308. **[Turrettini, vol. 2:1-18]**

Imago Dei **[Bavinck, vol. 2, 530-62]**

The Covenant of Nature/Works A.A Hodge, 309-314. Beach, 78-147; Bavinck, vol. 2. 563-588; **[Richard A. Muller; G. Vos, (handouts on covenant)]**

Man’s Fall & the Origin of Sin A.A Hodge, 258-279.

The Character of Sin A.A. Hodge, 315-337. **[Plantinga, 1-199]**

Transmission of Sin A.A Hodge, 348-366.

Original Sin and Human Corruption A.A. Hodge 338-347.

Human Depravity **[Turrettini, X.i-iv (659-683)]**

Common Grace & Sin’s Restraint **[Turrettini, X.v (683-685)]**

Covenant of Redemption/Grace Beach, 149-272.

The Covenant of Grace A.A Hodge, 367-377. Beach, 272-339.

Total pages 441 [+Plantinga 199pp + Turrettini 44pp. + handouts 98pp]

**Schedule** for DS 134—Theology and Anthropology

**T**his class meets on Wednesday and Thursday mornings from 10:30 to 12:20, with break.

**Weeks 1 & 2 Topic**

August 28 \* Introduction to Theological Anthropology & Human Origins

\* Human Origins and Man as Body and Soul

September 4 \* Imago Dei

\* Imago Dei

**Weeks 3 & 4**

September 11 \* Covenant of Works

\* Covenant of Works

September 18 \* Critics of the Covenant of Works

\* Reply to Critics of the Covenant of Works

**Weeks 5 & 6**

September 25 \* Human Fall and the Origin of Sin

\* Human Fall and the Origin of Sin

October 2 \* The Nature and Character of Sin

\* The Nature and Character of Sin

**Week 7 & 8**

October 9 \* No class (Dr. Beach out-of-town)

October 16 \* The Nature and Character of Sin

\* Transmission of Sin

**Weeks 9 & 10**

October 23 \* Transmission of Sin

\* Original Sin

October 30 \* Original Sin

\* Original Sin

**Weeks 11 & 12**

November 6 \* Human Depravity

\* Social Nature of Sin

November 13 \* Common Grace & Sin’s Restraint

\* Common Grace & Human Flourishing

**Weeks 13 & 14**

November 20 \* The Covenant of Redemption

\* The Covenant of Grace

November 27 \* The Covenant of Grace

\* The Covenant of Grace

**Week 15**

December 4 \* The Covenant of Grace

\* The Covenant of Grace

**Anthropology (or The Doctrine of Humanity)**

See Belgic Confession, arts. 14, 15, 17; Heidelberg Catechism Q/As 6, 9, 26; Canons of Dort, III/IV, 1, 4; Westminster Confession of Faith, IV, 2, VI, VII; Westminster Larger Catechism, Q/As 1, 17 et al; French Confession, arts. 9-13; Second Helvetic Confession, arts. 7, 8, 9; Formula Consensus Helvetica, Canons, 7-13.

**I. Man as Created**

**A. Man as Creature**

In treating the doctrine of creation, we consider rival explanations of man’s origins. At this juncture it is not our concern to focus on the inescapable reality of *man’s fall*—a fall expressed and experienced in the brokenness and misery that course through the world and seep into all human relationships. To rightly understand ourselves and the human condition we will need to explore the nature of human fallenness and of human nature as corrupted, as well as the curse that rests upon an unredeemed humanity. Indeed, the brokenness of human life both defines human history in general and is part of every person’s individual story.

However, before we consider the sad “fact” of human fallenness, there is a prior history, a prior condition that defines who we are, namely our state as first created. This defines us structurally in ways that sin cannot undermine or vanquish, and our createdness undergirds the reality of our humanness in spite of our fallenness. Thus in turning to the biblical portrait of man, in considering what Scripture teaches us about humanity, and prior to discussing man in a state of sin, we need to examine what Scripture teaches us concerning man *as created* or man in a state of integrity, i.e., the constitutional nature of man, which is the prior reality of *human creatureliness*. If man insists that he is a product of nature (as evolutionists do), then they must also confess simultaneously that man is an odd child of nature—a strange animal, who questions whether he is an animal, who is in fact somehow quite different than the animals (and all other creatures).

Scripture, in its own way, makes clear that we are very much nature-oriented creatures, formed from the dust of the ground and placed in the role of vice-regent over the earth. We are creation-bound creatures. Our “createdness” is inescapable and is what fundamentally or foundationally defines us—we are creatures! Thus, while human beings wish to stress their uniqueness within the world of creatures, they sense a kinship with other creatures—a kind of responsibility for other creatures. (This isn’t unrelated to our role and function as divine image-bearers!) The question that emerges in the face of naturalism’s claims has to do with our continuity and discontinuity with nature? Are humans mere products of nature? Does the survival principle and random mutation or natural selection, as evolutionists maintain, adequately account for human nature, human society, *human*-ity?

Humans (even fallen humans) place value on certain behaviors and beliefs, while judging other behaviors and values as harmful, or even evil. This has posed serious problems for evolutionists and naturalists. What accounts for the concepts of good and evil? Are they actually valid? Are they merely tenets asserted for the benefit of human socialization and survival? Moreover, most people seek to account for a sense of human alienation and disappointment. There seems to exist everywhere the twin knowledge that (1) things are wrong; and (2) we know it. Jeremiah 10:23 records the prophet’s prayer: “I know, O Lord, that a man’s life is not his own; it is not for man to direct his steps.” The human situation is filled with anxiety and alienation, guilt and loneliness, violence and fear, war and death, treachery and betrayal. Humans, even fallen human beings, regret these things, for they do not wish to be the victims of these things. Humans sense that *sin* is not *creation*! Our sinful state is not our created state. “What is wrong with us?” is a deeply *human* question. The holocaust serves as the twentieth-century symbol that testifies that something deeply disturbing ails us, that evil is not a mere construal of events, that morality has some sort of validity. The mythology of evolutionism isn’t able to offer a satisfactory account of “evil.” “Weapons of mass destruction” also serve as symbols of humanity’s profound fallenness. Self-annihilation is the pinnacle of human rebellion against divine creation.

We see that even non-Christian ideologies, philosophies, and religions recognize that things are not as they should be, and proscribe remedies. Marxism, Existentialism, Freudianism, Buddhism, etc., each offer a diagnoses and treatment of human brokenness.

The Christian story-line of Creation, Fall, Redemption reflects this as well.

* Creation and our humanity (our createdness)
* Sin and our misery
* Grace and our renewal (in community)

If we say that a person or a given culture is evil because of “social conditioning” or due to habits of evolution that begs the question, for whence the evil comes that socializes or conditions us to evil? Moreover, where did we get the standard of judgment to recognize evil as evil, or to call something evil? If it is the case that we are all evil, and if we are totally evil, how can we know it? How do we define something as good?

Naturalism declares that humans are mere products of nature, and survival mechanisms account for morality and the life. But that leaves us were pure relativism, and consequently all talk of right and wrong, good and evil, moral and immoral, justice and injustice is grounded on nothing other than social convention or majority opinion—but each of those can be open to terrible tyranny. Without God, all things are permissible. Who is the say otherwise? With God, we acknowledge our creaturehood, and that is the most fundamental truth about us as human beings.

**B. The Constitution of Man**

The Bible clearly depicts the existence of man as God’s own creative act. On the sixth day of the creation narrative of Genesis 1, man was created last and in a special fashion. All other things were made before him, and so an already formed world is entrusted to him as he acts as God’s vicegerent on earth. Scripture is also clear that man was created in the image of God (Gen. 1:26, 27; 2:7), being set apart from the rest of creation in this way, sharing creatureliness with all other created things, to be sure, but distinct and set apart as well as the creature created in the image of God! Further, Genesis 2 tells us that man, at least in his physicality, is from the dust of the earth and that man is a product of God’s creative breath, for God breathed into him the breath of life and he became a living soul (Gen. 2:7).

As such, man is a moral creature. But what does it mean that man is a “living soul,” whose body is from the dust of the earth? This question is particularly relevant inasmuch as Scripture can speak of humans are consisting of body and soul. Some places in Scripture even use a trifold terminology: body, soul, and spirit (1 Thess. 5:23). Theologians have long disagreed whether man should be conceived under two aspects (body and soul) or three aspects (body, soul, and spirit). More recently a wholistic approach has gained momentum, in which man is conceived as body, as soul, as spirit—none of which refer to parts of a person. Thus a human being is not thought to *have* a body in distinction from soul; rather, a human being is body and is soul, and those terms are simply different ways to refer to the whole self. This view has met with considerable criticism, especially given its inability to speak intelligibly concerning the immediate state (the existence of humans after death) and the seemingly inevitable doctrine of annihilationism this view entails. For if a person *is* rather than *has* a body, then that person perishes as body—note, not just his or her body perishes, decays, rots in the ground, but the person. At the same time, it is a mistake to think of our bodies as things extraneous to our personhood, for God can say, “Dust you are, to dust you shall return” (Gen. 3:19).[[1]](#footnote-1)

**(1) Man as Psychosomatic Unity: Body and Soul Distinction—Holistic Duality**

Though it is understandable that one might lean toward trichotomy based on 1 Thess. 5:23 and Hebrews 4:12, the doctrine of a threefold substance in man meets difficulty in many places.

(1) It is contrary to the creation account of man as given in Genesis 2:7. Adam was formed of the dust of the earth. God breathed into him the breath of life, and he became a living soul. Nothing in this account suggests that humans are composed of three parts.

(2) This doctrine is opposed by the uniform usage of Scripture, where soul and spirit are used interchangeably. In Hebrew and Greek the word ‘soul’ means *breath or life.* So, too, the word ‘spirit’ means *breath, life,* or *wind.* Both ‘soul’ and ‘spirit’ are, thus, used in Scripture as that which thinks and feels, and as that which survives the body after death. A person’s soul is simply the ‘self.’ Your soul is you. My soul is me. What shall a man give in exchange for his soul? Jesus asked (Matt. 16:26). In the Bible the whole person is described sometimes as *a* *body and a soul,* — as when Jesus says: “fear him who can destroy both *body* and *soul* in hell” (Matt. 10:28) — and sometimes as *a body and a spirit* — as when Paul writes: “let us cleanse ourselves from every defilement of *body* and of *spirit*” (2 Cor. 7:1) [also see Matt. 6:25, I Cor. 7:34; Jas. 2:26]. Grief is ascribed to the *soul* as well as to the *spirit* (cf. Isa. 54:6; John 12:27; John 13:21; Acts 17:16; 2 Peter 2:8). So, too, joy and devotion are ascribed to both soul and spirit (cf. Ps. 42:1-6; Ps. 32:2; and Acts 4:32; Eph. 6:6; Phil. 1:27). Moreover, salvation is associated with *soul* and *spirit* (Jas. 1:21; I Cor. 5:5). And dying is described as the departure either of the *soul* or of the *spirit* (cf. Gen. 35:18; I Kings 17:21; Matt. 10:28; Ps. 31:5; Matt. 27:50; Luke 9:55; Luke 23:46; Acts 7:59). Those who have already died are sometimes referred to as *souls* and sometimes as *spirits* (Rev. 6:9; Heb. 12:23; I Pet. 3:18-20).

(3) Because soul and spirit simply mean life or breath, these words are used indiscriminately in the Old and New Testament to refer to both people and beasts (E.g., Eccles. 3:21; Rev. 16:3).

(4) Hebrews 4:12 and I Thess. 5:23 do not teach that man consists of three parts, just as Mark 12:30 does not teach that humans consist of four parts when Jesus says, *“you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.”* Furthermore, it is a sound rule of exegesis that exceptional statements in Scripture should be interpreted in the light of the analogy of Scripture, i.e., in light of the usual statements of Scripture.

(5) Trichotomy is universally rejected by the Reformed Confessions and by Reformed theologians of all stripes. Officebearers in the Christian Reformed Church, who sign the Form of Subscription, pledge “not only to reject all errors that conflict with [the doctrines of the Three Forms of Unity], but also to refute them, and do everything we can to keep the church free from them.”

***Excursus: Dualism, Monism, Dichotomy, and Trichotomy in Biblical Anthropology***

**Introduction**

“What is man that You are mindful of him?” David asks this question with a sense of awe at the glorious creation that reveals God’s majesty. Indeed, as awe-inspiring as creation is, God created man to be His crowning work. As we are amazed by the creation, we are also amazed when we explore how God has fashioned us. We can only hope to grasp a minuscule understanding of the ingredients God has used in making man. As we consider our own nature, we should be moved to glorify Him all the more.

There have been many differing views of anthropology. Not only is this a topic for discussion among Christian theologians. Philosophers have long discussed this question as well. What is man? Is man essentially made of one element? Or is he made of many? In philosophy the lines have traditionally been drawn between monism and dualism. In theology the lines are now drawn between dichotomy and trichotomy. The Christian church has traditionally held to a dichotomistic anthropology, but was it justified in doing so? These issues are well-worth exploring.

**Dualism and Monism**

Before we explore the dichotomy/trichotomy question, it is important to build a solid case for dualistic anthropology. John W. Cooper’s book, *Body, Soul, and Life Everlasting,* is an excellent treatment of the subject. His main concern is to argue for dualism, but not a Platonic dualism. Rather, Cooper wishes to advocate a holistic dualism, and defends this view both biblically and philosophically.

Cooper begins with a summary of Christian anthropology throughout history. Historically, there has been consensus among the church that man is constituted in such a way that at death he can be separated into distinct parts. Although Christians have held different opinions regarding the intermediate state, there has always been agreement that man lives on after death. For the most part, western Christianity has maintained this dualistic view of man. Cooper briefly traces this view throughout history by focusing on four important proponents of dualism: Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin, and Descartes. Augustine was primarily responsible for establishing dualism in the western church. Reacting against his earlier Platonic beliefs, Augustine held that the soul does not exist from eternity. However, the influence of Platonism did work its way into Augustine’s view of the soul. He believed that the soul is the essence of the man, and that it is what operates the body. Yet he also thought that the soul permeates the body, and therefore man should be viewed as a soul-body unity. His view dominated Western thought until the thirteenth century.[[2]](#footnote-2) Thomas Aquinas held a view in line with Augustine’s, although he did differ at certain points. Aquinas was influenced by Aristotle in his anthropology. He held that man is a single substance, a unity of two metaphysical principles. The soul was the form that organized the body, that is, the matter. Yet in contrast to Aristotle, Aquinas did believe that the soul could exist apart from the body.[[3]](#footnote-3) Calvin’s view of man is also dualistic. In the *Institutes,* Calvin writes that the soul “holds the first place in ruling man’s life.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Cooper points out that although Calvin believes dualism to be taught in Scripture, he also uses philosophical arguments to defend his position.[[5]](#footnote-5) Descartes’ dualism followed in the line of Augustinian anthropology. He believed that the soul was the essence of man and could exist apart from the body. Descartes is considered the father of modern anthropological dualism, which is sometimes called “dualistic interactionism” because the soul and body are said to interact and influence each other.

However, in recent times, dualism has come under much attack. Philosophical monism has risen to challenge the historic concept of dualism. Thomas Hobbes argued for a materialistic monism, claiming that human beings consisted only of physical matter, and that consciousness was simply the result of biological and chemical processes. Another version of monism was advocated by Baruch Spinoza. Cooper labels his view “dual-aspect” monism, because Spinoza thought that all reality was one. Therefore both mind and body are part of the greater oneness of reality. In addition to monism advocated on philosophical grounds, modern science has also been a challenge to dualistic anthropology. In the past century, many discoveries have been made concerning the brain and its functions. Since it is now known that the brain itself controls many functions that were previously believed to be controlled by the soul, the traditional view of dualism seems less plausible. However, the greatest challenge to the traditional view of dualism comes from within Christianity itself. Many Christian scholars have claimed that the biblical terms “soul” and “spirit” refer only to the life of a person. These scholars criticize traditional Christian thinking for importing a Platonic dualism into its interpretation of the biblical text.

To address Christian scholarship that favors monism, Cooper first explores the terms used by the Old Testament to refer to man. First, *nephesh* (commonly translated “soul”) usually refers to the vital principle or life force of a being. It often refers to the whole person and therefore is much different from the Platonic sense of soul. Second, *ruach* (commonly translated “spirit”), although more often referring to God than to men, can refer to wind, moving air, or breath. Like *nephesh, ruach* also refers to the vital force or power of life. Sometimes it refers to the source of higher subjective human capacities. In any case, it is not identical with the immaterial subsistent self of Platonism. Third, *basar* is usually translated “flesh,” and often refers to the human body as a whole. Cooper points out, however, that it never implies a metaphysical distinction between the physical and spiritual. Fourth, *qereb* refers to the inner parts or bowels. Interestingly, various organs of the body can be used to identify the location or source of higher human capacities.[[6]](#footnote-6) Last, *leb* or *lebab* (the heart) is the control center of the whole human being. Cooper concludes that the use of these Hebrew terms in the Old Testament does not provide adequate ground for a clear dualistic interpretation. In fact, the Old Testament does not seem to be dualistic from these terms, but rather holistic, albeit a holism that is able to distinguish between parts. One significant factor in this conclusion is that the Old Testament frequently makes use of synecdoche, a literary device that uses the part for the whole. For example, the phrase “he’s all brains” does not mean that the individual in question is literally made up of only physical brains, but rather it is a phrase that emphasizes that individual’s intellectual capacity. For these reasons, Cooper speaks of the Old Testament as presenting an anthropology of functional holism which “affirms the functional unity of some entity in its totality, the integration and interrelation of all the parts in the existence and proper operation of the whole.”[[7]](#footnote-7) This is different from ontological holism, however, which argues that man cannot be divided into various parts. That is, Cooper argues that the Old Testament is not monistic, but rather it recognizes two ingredients in man: the dust of the earth and the breath of God breathed into him (Gen. 2:7).

One strength of Cooper’s book is that he illustrates the importance of personal eschatology in the development of one’s anthropology. What one believes concerning man’s existence after death will shape what his belief concerning man’s nature. Having demonstrated the functional holism of the Old Testament, Cooper proceeds to show that the Old Testament does indeed support belief in life after death. This is clearly anti-­monistic. If something of man survives after death, then logically, man can be separated into different parts; he is not ontologically holistic. In his examination of the Old Testament, much of Cooper’s discussion focuses on the term *Sheol.* Since *Sheol* is used repeatedly in the psalms and other poetic literature of the Old Testament, Cooper is cautious to correctly exegete the meaning of the term, and rightly so. *Sheol* refers to the lowest level of Hebrew cosmology (and therefore is akin to the Greek *Hades).* The inhabitants of *Sheol* are called the *rephaim,* that is, shades. Interestingly, they are not called souls. For the most part the Old Testament idea of the *rephaim* in *Sheol* is that they are inactive. Yet the Torah’s many warnings and prohibitions against communicating with the dead suggest that necromancy is possible, and therefore, that the dead could be active in at least some situations. A particularly instructive case is the account of Saul’s consultation of the witch of Endor to communicate with the dead Samuel (l Samuel 28). We can conclude from this passage first, that there is a continuity of identity from one’s life on earth to their existence in death in *Sheol.* Second, we can conclude that activity is possible for the dead in *Sheol.* Third, in 1 Samuel 28, Samuel was a ghost or a shade; that is, he was a quasi-bodily being, *not* a Platonic soul or a Cartesian mind.

In addition to exploring the Old Testament’s teaching regarding *Sheol,* Cooper elucidates the Old Testament hope of the resurrection. Cooper cites two Old Testament passages that provided undisputed proof of the hope of the resurrection. First, Daniel 12:2, “And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting contempt;” and second, Isaiah 26:19, “Your dead shall live; together with my dead body they shall arise.”[[8]](#footnote-8) These two verses not only show the hope of the resurrection, but they also provide a solid basis for the concept of the intermediate state. In other words, after death, man exists in state of division between his flesh and his spirit until the resurrection, at which time these are reunited. Cooper concludes therefore, that the Old Testament presents man as an organic unity with an ontological duality.

Cooper also surveys the views of intertestamental Judaism. According to Cooper, the terms *nephesh* and *ruach* are used interchangeably, and even become synonymous in this period.[[9]](#footnote-9) Cooper states that the holistic emphasis of the Old Testament is not abandoned; rather Old Testament terms begin to take on new meanings. In addition to referring to the whole person, *nephesh* and *ruach* can now refer also to the discarnate dead.[[10]](#footnote-10) Additionally, the idea that the resurrection will occur on the eschatological day of the Lord begins to emerge in the intertestamental period. Cooper notices a shift in emphasis: there is more emphasis on the afterlife in the interlestamental period than there was in the Old Testament.

Cooper examines anthropology in the New Testament as well. First, he observes that synecdoche is common in the New Testament, as it was in the Old.[[11]](#footnote-11) Because a part of mankind is used to speak of the whole, these examples stress wholeness more than dualism. However, there also are clear texts that emphasize a dualistic aspect of mankind. The use of the Greek word *pneuma,* commonly translated spirit, is important in demonstrating this dualism. For example, Hebrews 12:23 speaks of coming to the heavenly Jerusalem, “to the spirits of just men made perfect.” In this passage, spirits exist apart from their bodies. This clearly implies a dual anthropology. Additionally, there are many texts which speak of death as giving up the spirit (and again, to believe that a human can be separated at death is to imply that his nature is made up of more than one element).[[12]](#footnote-12) Cooper finds a solid case in Luke 24:37. Here the resurrected Jesus appears to His disciples, who are terrified because they believed He was a spirit, that is, a *pneuma,* or a *rephaim,* a ghost from *Sheol.* The New Testament term, *psyche,* or soul, is used in Revelation 6:9-11 to refer to humans in the intermediate state:

I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain for the word of God and for the testimony which they held ... and it was said to them that they should rest a little while longer, until both the number of their fellow servants and their brethren, who would be killed as they were, was completed.

Matthew 10:28 is another passage where dualism is clearly set forth: “do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.” Cooper argues that both *pneuma* and *psyche* refer to deceased but existent human beings.

Again, the key issue in determining whether the Bible teaches a dualistic or monistic anthropological view is what happens to man after death. If the intermediate state can be proven from the New Testament, then a dualistic anthropology would necessarily be assumed. Cooper argues that the New Testament does indeed teach the intermediate state. John 5:28-29 gives support to this idea: “the hour is coming in which all who are in the graves will hear His voice and come forth—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.” John 11:23-24 also supports the idea of an intermediate state: “Martha said to Him, ‘I know that he will rise again in the resurrection at the last day.’” Furthermore, Luke 20:38 refers to God as the God of the living, implying that the patriarchs are still existent in some sense. Perhaps most convincing is the account of Jesus and the thief on the cross. When Jesus assures the thief, “today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43), Cooper argues (based on the view of intertestamental Judaism) that this Paradise is a place where the dead are to remain until the resurrection.

Cooper also examines the Pauline corpus to determine if Paul’s anthropology is in step with the New Testament as a whole. From Paul’s clear teaching regarding Christ’s second coming in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 and from his teaching regarding the resurrection in I Corinthians 15, it is clear that he does indeed assume a duality in the nature of man. Indeed, when Paul speaks of a man (2 Cor. 12) who was caught up into heaven and states that he does not know whether in the body or out of the body, his underlying assumption is that there is a part of man than can be separated from the body, and this is the case even *before* death occurred. Further, Paul writes in Philippians 1:23 that he has a “desire to depart and be with Christ.” Since his body will obviously remain on earth, Paul’s statement here again shows that he has an underlying belief in a dualistic anthropology. From his examination of these (and other) New Testament texts, Cooper concludes that New Testament anthropology is a continuation and further elucidation of the holistic dualism of the Old Testament.

To further explain holistic dualism, Cooper echoes Paul’s saying that to be absent from the body means to be present with Christ. He states that personal existence apart from the physical body is possible; man can survive “coming apart” at death. Cooper correctly states that the preceding biblical data must set the parameters for Christian anthropology. Christians are free to philosophize concerning anthropology, but they must do so within the confines of biblical boundaries. In this light he argues against Christians who advocate anthropology of monism. The most plausible explanation of the biblical data from a monistic point of view would be a belief in the re-creation of man at the resurrection. In other words, many Christian monists argue that when man (who is made up of only one element) dies, he ceases to exist completely (he is annihilated). In the future, at the resurrection, God will re-create the individual, and thus the individual will continue for eternity. Apart from the obvious inconsistencies with the aforementioned biblical texts, Cooper points out that this position is philosophically untenable. The major error here is that the re-creation view can not account for the continuity of identity for the individual in question. In such an occurrence, how could we be sure that the re-created person was genuinely the same as the person who died rather than being a copy of him? This is a real problem for the monist. They cannot guarantee one’s presence with the Lord at the resurrection. At most they can say it is plausible.

In the final analysis, John W. Cooper has provided a sound, cogent argument for holistic dualism. This anthropology is assumed by the biblical authors of both the Old and New Testaments, and it is philosophically sound as well. Having established this view, we turn now to the issue of whether man’s nature is dichotomistic or trichotomistic.

**Dichotomy and Trichotomy**

The dichotomy/trichotomy debate in Christian anthropology is a disagreement over the number of elements that constitute man. Dichotomists hold that man is made of body and spirit alone, while trichotomists argue that man is made of body, soul, and spirit. It is clear that dichotomists have a stronger case both historically and biblically.

Historically speaking, the early church generally held to a dichotomistic view, but there were a few church fathers who held a trichotomistic view. Irenaeus held such, and taught that nonbelievers possessed only a body and soul. According to him, when conversion occurred, man received a spirit as well.[[13]](#footnote-13) Most agree that this trichotomistic anthropology arose out of Greek philosophy. According to Plato, man’s soul corresponded to the heavenly (immaterial), while his body corresponded to the earthly (material), and the two were incapable of interacting with each other. Some church fathers (particularly the Alexandrian fathers) posited that the spirit was the element of man that brought the soul and the body into communication with each other. Among these were Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Gregory of Nyssa.[[14]](#footnote-14) Athanasius, Theodoret, and the Latin Church fathers opposed this trichotomistic view. Most importantly, Augustine, although influenced in some ways by Platonism, argued clearly for the dichotomy of man. Augustine’s anthropology became foundational for the church, and dichotomy became the standard Christian anthropological view for the following thousand years.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Reaction against heresies was an additional factor in the establishment of a dichotomistic anthropological view in the early church. There were two heresies in the ancient church that made use of a trichotomistic anthropological view. First, Apollinaris of Laodicea taught that Christ’s humanity was merely made of body and soul (*psyche*), while His divinity was the Logos, corresponding to the spirit (*pneuma*).[[16]](#footnote-16) In other words, Jesus Christ did not have a human mind, instead He had the divine Logos, and consequently (in order to experience human emotions) it was necessary for Him to possess a human soul also.[[17]](#footnote-17) Apollinariansim was condemned as heretical at the Councils of Constantinople (381), Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451). Second, trichotomy was also held by some Semi-Pelagians who taught that the human spirit (*pneuma*) was left untouched by original sin.[[18]](#footnote-18) In a reaction against these heresies, trichotomy fell into disrepute, and was not considered again by the majority of western Christianity until the nineteenth century.

Augustus Strong also points out that dichotomistic anthropology guards against four other errors. First, it opposes the Gnostics, who taught that the human spirit (*pneuma*) is part of the divine essence and is incapable of sin. Second, dichotomistic anthropology defends against the errors of Josua Placeus (1596-1655/65), who argued against the imputation of Adam’s sin, and believed that only the spirit (*pneuma*) was created directly by God. Third, dichotomy opposes the view of Julius Müller (1801-1878), who taught that only the soul (*psyche*) comes from Adam, but the spirit (*pneuma*) was corrupted in a previous state of being. Fourth, dichotomy guards against the annihilationist error (the view that the soul ceases to exist at death).[[19]](#footnote-19)

It was in the nineteenth century that trichotomy gained acceptance and revived, first among German and English theologians.[[20]](#footnote-20) The Scofield Bible also argued for trichotomy, especially in its notes on 1 Thessalonians 5:23. Trichotomy is now a prevalent view among many evangelical Christians.

Trichotomists typically argue that man is constituted of three elements. First, the body is the physical element of man. Second, the soul is the principle of life (which is present also in animals). Man’s soul is the basis of his reason, emotions, social interrelatedness, and personality.[[21]](#footnote-21) It is the immaterial element of man that makes him a conscious individual possessing appetites, imagination, memory, and understanding.[[22]](#footnote-22) Third, the spirit is the religious element of man’s nature. The soul is the lower part of life that man shares with the animals. It is what orients man toward God.

In opposition to the trichotomist, the dichotomist sees only two elements in man. Charles Hodge represents the doctrine well:

Man, then, according to the Scriptures, is a created spirit in vital union with a material organized body. The relation between these two constituents of our nature is admitted to be mysterious. That is, it is incomprehensible. We do not know how the body acts on the mind, or how the mind acts on the body.[[23]](#footnote-23)

When we examine the Scriptures, it becomes clear that it is proper to hold a dichotomistic anthropology. To begin, from God’s creation of man it is apparent that only two elements were included in his nature: the material (dust), and the immaterial (the breath of life, or the soul). Genesis 2:7 states: “And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.” Although the trichotomists argue that it is the spirit that distinguishes man from the animals, we see in Ecclesiastes 3:21 that the word “spirit” is used to refer both man and to animals. Additionally, there are many instances where the human spirit is distinguished from the body, indicating that there are only two elements that constitute human nature (for example, Gen. 35:18, 1 Kings 17:21, and Jas. 2:26). Although we should grant that at certain times there are distinct nuances in the terms “soul” and “spirit,” we must also recognize that many times these are used synonymously and interchangeably (for example, Gen. 41:8, Ps. 42:6, Jn. 12:27, 13:21, Mt 20:28, 27:50, Heb. 12:23. Rev. 6:9). Calvin writes:

Furthermore, that man consists of a soul and a body ought to be beyond controversy. Now I understand by the term “soul” an immortal yet created essence, which is his nobler part. Sometimes it is called “spirit.” For even when these terms are joined together, they differ from one another in meaning; yet when the word “spirit” is used by itself: it means the same thing as soul.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Some biblical texts use these terms in parallelisms, providing further indication that they are similar in meaning. For example, in the *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46-47), Mary says:

My *soul* magnifies the Lord,   
And my *spirit* has rejoiced in God my Savior.[[25]](#footnote-25)

From this brief survey of biblical texts, it seems clear that a dichotomistic anthropology is the biblical view.

However, there are two texts that trichotomists traditionally have used to support their anthropology. At first these texts appear to be problematic for dichotomists, but upon closer examination, they further strengthen the dichotomist position. The first of these passages is Hebrews 4:12, “For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of *soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow,* and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.”[[26]](#footnote-26) The second passage is 1 Thessalonians 5:23, “Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole *spirit, soul and body* be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.”[[27]](#footnote-27)

In response to the trichotomist interpretation of these two passages, Bavinck writes that they “no more contain a list of all the essential elements of man than say, Luke 10:27, and therefore do not prove anything.”[[28]](#footnote-28) Erickson also points out this absurdity, by saying that it is obvious that Luke 10:27 (“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself’) does not present *four* constituent elements of man, but rather is speaking of man in his entirety.[[29]](#footnote-29) Furthermore, if these texts taught a trichotomistic anthropology, what would happen to the soul at death? The body would decay (until resurrected at the *parousia),* the spirit would enter into paradise with Christ (as He tells the thief on the cross in Luke 23:43), but what happens to the soul? Trichotomists cannot adequately respond to this question.

In *The Christian View of Man,* J. Gresham Machen engages in an interesting discussion of 1 Corinthians 2:14-15. Here Paul writes:

But the natural man [*lit.* soul-man, *psyche*] does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned. But he who is spiritual [*pneumatikos*] judges all things, yet he himself is rightly judged by no one.

Machen points out that although it seems that Paul distinguishes between the soulish and the spiritual bodies, the context clarifies the text. Paul makes the point that sinful man can only know earthly things unless the Spirit of God reveals the spiritual to him. Therefore, the spiritual man is he who lives according to the Spirit of God, that is, the third person of the Trinity.[[30]](#footnote-30) While it is true that there are a few passages that seem to suggest a trichotomistic anthropology, upon closer examination, we can be confident that they are indeed in accord with biblical dichotomistic anthropology. As Berkhof writes, the exceptional statements in Scripture should be interpreted by the clearer statements. Scripture interprets Scripture.[[31]](#footnote-31)

**Confessional Support**

It is no surprise that in their summary of Scriptural doctrine, the Reformed confessions also hold to a dichotomistic anthropology. Although the confessions do not devote entire sections to this anthropological question, it is clear that dichotomy is implicitly taught in them. For example, Article XVII of the Belgic Confession speaks of the physical and spiritual death of man, implying a dichotomistic anthropology. Concerning the last judgment, this confession (Article XXXVII) states that “the dead shall be raised out of the earth, and their *souls* joined and united with their proper *bodies* in which they formerly lived.”[[32]](#footnote-32) Again, there is no mention of a third element within man.

The Heidelberg Catechism assumes a dichotomistic anthropology in its first question: ‘That I, with *body and soul,* both in life and death, am not my own, but belong unto my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.” Concerning the resurrection, the catechism (Lord’s Day XXII, Question 57) states, “that not only my *soul,* after this life, shall immediately be taken up to Christ, its Head; but also that this my *body,* raised by the power of Christ, shall again be united with my soul, and made like unto the glorious body of Christ.”

The Westminster Confession of Faith also assumes dichotomy. In its discussion of creation (IV.I), it states, “After God had made all other creatures, he created man, male and female, with reasonable and immortal *souls.”* That man was created with a body is assumed, but no mention is made of a third element in his constitution. As it addresses the fall (VI.II), the confession states that man “became dead in sin and wholly defiled in *all the parts and faculties of soul and body.”* It is clear that the confession is stating the fact that man was corrupted by sin in the entirety of his nature, and only two elements of human nature are listed. Dichotomy is most clearly seen in the Westminster Confession in Chapter XXXII, “Of the State of Men after Death, and of the Resurrection of the Dead.” Section I is clear:

The *bodies* of men, after death, return to dust, and see corruption: but their *souls,* which neither die nor sleep, having an immortal subsistence, immediately return to God who gave them: the souls of the righteous, being then made perfect in holiness, are received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God, in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies. And the souls of the wicked are cast into hell, where they remain in torments and utter darkness, reserved to the judgment of the great day. Besides these two places, for *souls separated from their bodies,* the Scripture acknowledgeth none.

From this it is clear that the Westminster Divines considered man to consist of only two elements. Section II of this chapter simply states that the souls of the dead shall be united again to their resurrection bodies at the last day. There is no hint of trichotomistic anthropology here.

The Westminster Catechisms also teach a dichotomistic view of man. Question 17 of the Larger Catechism teaches that God created man by first forming his body from the dust of the ground, and then second by enduing him with a living soul. Moreover, Larger Catechism Question 87 repeats the same language of the Confession (XXXII.I) concerning the resurrection, and in Questions 89 and 90, concerning the wicked and the righteous, respectively, at the Day of judgment, it states that “both body and soul” will either suffer punishment in hell or will be “made perfectly holy and happy.” The Shorter Catechism also summarizes this teaching (Questions 37-38). From this brief survey of Reformed confessions and catechisms, it should be clear that the Reformed church has clearly taken the dichotomistic position.

**Practical Implications of Dichotomy and Trichotomy**

Perhaps at this point one might question whether the dichotomy/trichotomy discussion is relevant for the Christian life. One may ask if it really matters which view is believed. In fact, some dogmaticians have attempted to walk a middle line between the two views. For example, Norman Geisler tries to appease three groups at once:

There is some truth in all of the Christian anthropological views. *Monists* are right in claiming that human nature is one. *Dualists* are correct in that there are two dimensions to human nature (inner and outer). Trichotomists are on the right track in that human beings do operate in three directions (self-consciousness, world-consciousness, and God-consciousness).[[33]](#footnote-33)

Furthermore, Methodist theologian John Miley writes:

It follows that we have reached no dogmatic conclusion on the question of trichotomy. We are not concerned for the attainment of such a result, and for the reason previously stated, that the question does not seriously concern any important truth of Christian theology.[[34]](#footnote-34)

However, we must be careful to recognize that ideas have consequences. Anthropology affects other areas of theology. Charles Hodge shows it is necessary to have a biblical view of man because anthropology is intimately connected with vital doctrines of the Christian faith, including the person of Christ, the nature of Christ’s redeeming work, Christ’s relation to men, the fall, original sin, regeneration, the future state, and the resurrection. All of theology is intertwined, and slight errors in anthropology can work their way into serious errors in other doctrines, as seen in the aforementioned historical errors (Gnosticism, Apollinarianism, Semi-Pelagianism, anihilationism, and the errors of Placeus, and Müller).

Indeed, Machen calls trichotomy a serious error. It promotes what he calls an erroneous “empty room” view of God’s presence in redeemed man. In other words, the trichotomist sees fallen man as acceptable in his body and soul, but his spirit is empty until God comes into it. Machen rightly fears that this view of man does not take seriously the corrupt nature that affects the totality of man. Indeed, it denigrates the grace and power of God in the total transformation of man’s nature at conversion.[[35]](#footnote-35)

Lastly, Anthony Hoekema is helpful in noting that one’s anthropology has practical implications for many specific endeavors in life.[[36]](#footnote-36) First, our view of man affects the church’s preaching and its evangelism. We must seek to bring the message of the gospel to the whole person, both body and soul. Second, schools must address the whole person. Many times our schools teach only about the physical world and say nothing about the student’s spiritual life. Third, Christian parents have a duty to teach their children that God is concerned not merely with our souls, but also with our bodies. Fourth, in the realm of medicine, physicians must realize that the body can be affected by spiritual factors as well as physical. Fifth, and vice versa, psychologists and counselors must realize that the soul can be affected by physical factors as well as spiritual. To summarize, Hoekema identifies distinguishable elements in man, and he is concerned that we address the concerns of both the body and the soul, ministering to the whole person as a psychosomatic unity. This view falls in line nicely with Cooper’s holistic dualism. Most importantly, this is biblically sound.

**Conclusion**  
 Thus we have seen that biblical anthropology can be best described in philosophical terms as holistic dualism. This has been shown to be the case in the Old Testament, in the view of intertestamental Judaism, and in the New Testament. Biblical anthropology is a philosophically defensible position, which can stand against monistic attacks both from philosophers and theologians. Furthermore, we have seen that biblical anthropology can best be described in theological terms as dichotomistic. This view has been the historical view of the western church, it is solidly supported by the text of Scripture, it is taught by the confessions of the Reformed church, and it has important implications for practical Christian living. As we seek to glorify God in all aspects of life, let us glorify Him specifically in our anthropology, never forgetting that we belong with *body and soul,* both in life and death, unto our faithful Savior Jesus Christ.

\* \* \* \* \* \* \*

**(2) Man Created in the Image of God**

The Bible does not give us any kind of systematic theory about man as the image of God. In fact, the idea of man as the ‘image of God’ is far less central in Scripture than in the history of Christian thought. But this apparent discrepancy vanishes when we note that the Bible’s references to the image of God, where we find such, have a special urgency and importance. Moreover, the Bible can presuppose the idea without expositing it.

Basically, there are four emphases on the question of the divine image in man:

(1) Substantive (or Structural) View

(2) Relational Views

(3) Functional Views

(4) Synthetic Views (which is inclusive of all of the above).

In what follows below, we will address these emphases in connection with specific writers and positions. Let it be observed, it seems seriously mistaken to fail to embrace the *synthetic* conception of the image of God, for Scripture clearly demonstrates that the image of God in man consists of substantive, relational and functional traits.

**a. Image and Likeness in Genesis**

Naturally, we are drawn to those passages that do explicitly mention the image of God—man as created in God’s image or passages referring to the restoration of the image in Christ, and where Christ as the image of God is directly considered.

* Genesis 1:26—God’s original decision is to “make man in our image, after our likeness.”
* Genesis 1:27—”So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”

These passages are shortly followed by:

* Genesis 5:1—”When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God” – and
* Genesis 9:6—where the shedding of man’s blood is forbidden “for in the image of god has God made man.”

Special note has sometimes be taken of the fact that in Gen. 1:26 two words are used: ‘image’ and ‘likeness’—*’tselem’* [~l,,,,,c<,] and *‘demuth’* [tWmD>]. The strong distinction that some have tried to find between these terms is to be rejected, namely, that man is created only in the image of God and gradually evolves into the likeness of God. ‘Likeness’ is seen as something added to the image, *a super-added gift* (cf. Irenaeus; Origen, *On First Principles,* III.iv.1). Luther and Calvin, however, among others, rejected this notion; and today few hold to it.

Observe:

* Gen. 1:26 uses both *‘tselem’* and *‘demuth’*, for man is created after the *image* and *likeness* of God.
* Gen. 1:27 & Gen. 9:6 use only *‘tselem’.*
* Gen. 5:1, however, speaks of man’s creation as creation in God’s *likeness.*

These few passages alone indicate the terms have a nearly synonymous meaning. Certainly they do not refer to two different things. As Bavinck says, the two terms “are used interchangeably and alternate for no specific reason” (*IB,* p. 161). Both terms, obviously, refer to a relation between man and his Creator; a ‘likeness’ between man and God, with no explanation given as to exactly what this likeness consists of or implies.” Bavinck, leaning on F. Delitzsch, argues for a distinction in this way:

The distinction between them comes down to this: *slm* means ‘image,’ both archetype (*Urbild*) and ectype (*Abbild*); *dmwt* means ‘likeness,’ both example (*Vorbild*) and copy (*Nachbild*). The concept of ‘image’ is more rigid, that of ‘likeness’ more fluid and more ‘spiritual,’ so to speak; in the former the idea of a prototype predominates, in the latter the notion of an ideal. The likeness is a further qualification, an intensification and complement of the image. ‘Likeness’ as such is weaker and broader than ‘image’; an animal has some features in common with man (likeness) but is not the image of man. ‘Image’ tells us that God is the archetype, man the ectype; ‘likeness’ adds the notion that the image corresponds in all parts to the original (*IB,* p. 161).

Thus, being made in God’s image and likeness does not remove the difference between God and man; yet these terms witness to the uniqueness of man in comparison with other creatures.

**b. The Image of God in Man (according to F. Turretin)**

The Scriptures mention the image of God in a fourfold sense: (1) The Son of God who is called “the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15); (2) Adam, who was made in the image of God; (3) The renewed, who are said to be “renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created them” (Col. 3:10); and (4) man who in a peculiar manner is called “the image of God” above the woman, who is “the image of man” (1 Cor. 11:7).

* The Son of God is the *essential image of God*, fully equal with God, having the same numerical essence with the Father.
* Adam is the accidental and analogical image of inadequate and imperfect similitude (as to nature, gifts and state).
* The renewed are the spiritual image (as to supernatural gifts).
* Man compared with woman is the image of headship (as to the responsibility and leadership he has in relation to his wife).

Turretin argues that “image signifies either the archetype itself (after whose copy something is made) or the things themselves in God (in the likeness of which man was made); or the ectype itself, which is made after the copy of another thing, or the similitude itself (which is in man and the relation to God himself). In the former sense, man is said to have been made in the image of God; in the latter, however, the very image of God” (*Inst*. V.x.iii.).

*Negatively*, the image does not consist in:

1. A participation of the divine essence. For in this way the Son of God only is the image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15). Although 2 Pet. 1:4 says that by grace we are “partakers of the divine nature,” this is an analogical, accidental, and extrinsic participation (by reason of effects analogous to the divine perfections which are produced in us by the Spirit after the image of God).
2. Any figure of the body or external being in which man resembles God. For although we do not think that every relation of that image should be altogether denied of the body and see some rays of its glittering there, whether we regard man’s immortality of which his body is also in its own manner a partaker; or attend to the admirable structure, symmetry and use of the organic body and all its members; still it is certain that image shone in the body not so much formally as consequently and effectively (inasmuch as both the figure of man itself and the majesty resulting from it testify to the power of man over the rest of creatures, and thus of his having a soul fitted for contemplation and knowledge; and thus the proper seat of the divine image is the soul and not the body). (See Calvin on this too).

*Positively or affirmatively*, the image does consist in gifts bestowed upon man at creation. These were not only essential or only accidental, but both at the same time: internal as well as external, by which he was placed in such a degree of nature, perfection and authority that no visible creature was either more like or more closely allied to God. It consists in three things most especially:

1. –antecedently in man’s nature (as to the spirituality and immortality of the soul).
2. –formally in rectitude of original righteousness of nature.
3. –consequently in the happy or blessed state founded upon both, in the dominion and immortality of the whole man (which was the brightness of that shining image and the rays striking out in all directions which illumined the whole man).
4. In the Substance of the Soul.

The first part of the image has to do with the substance of the soul—especially that spiritual and incorruptible (or intrinsically immortal), and its faculties, namely, the intellect and the will, and the liberty arising from both. Hence man, even after the fall, is said to be made in the image of God (James 3:9), and the killing of man is called the destruction of the image of God (Gen. 9:6). To be sure, the Bible more often refers the image of God to righteousness and holiness, but the image refers to the soul itself, not merely faculties of the soul.

Nor is it absurd that the image should be said to be partly lost and partly preserved—for the image of God abides in a person in the essence of the soul and in the gifts remaining after the fall; the image of the devil abides in a person in his depravity and pollution.

1. In Original righteousness.

Rectitude and integrity also have to do with the image, or the gifts bestowed upon man, usually expressed by original righteousness, which was created with man and bestowed upon him at his origin, embracing true knowledge (or wisdom of mind), holiness (or holiness of will), and rectitude and good order in the affections. It bespeaks such a harmony among all his faculties that

the members obey the affections, →

the affections obey the will, →

the will obeys reason, →

reason obeys the divine law;

and thus man exists upright and innocent and without sin (though he remains in a mutable state). Thus, *contra* the Socinians and Remonstrants, the Reformed have affirmed that man was created with true knowledge, righteousness, and holiness—and the principal part of the image consists in it.

**c. Arguments supporting the Reformed view**:

1. Man was created upright and good and so originally righteous. Moral rectitude and goodness necessarily include righteousness. Indeed, God saw all that he had made and declared it “very good” (Gen. 1:31).
2. Since the image restored in us by grace and to be made perfect in us in glory, such was also bestowed on man in nature (or at creation), because he is renewed “after the image of the Creator” (Col. 3:10). The renewal of man consists of the illumination of the mind and holiness of will. Hence we are said “to be transformed in the renewing of our mind” (Rom. 12:2) and “to be renewed in knowledge” (Col. 3:10; Eph. 4:24). “The new man” (which is the very image transformed in us) is “after God, in righteousness and true holiness”—that is, either in true righteousness and holiness or in the righteousness and holiness which arise from the truth. Likewise, the image of God in man in our glorification will be none other than a perfect likeness to God in knowledge and absolute holiness (Ps. 17:15; 1 John 3:2).
3. God created man perfect, thus with original righteousness because this is the perfection of a rational soul.
4. Man was made by God to acknowledge and worship his Creator and to exercise dominion over the other creatures. But he could do neither without original righteousness. For how could he either wisely or justly hold dominion over creatures or serve God, if not endued with wisdom and holiness?

Man did not have original righteousness immutably—thus this original righteousness was neither an absolute impotence of sinning, nor simply sinlessness, but the power not to sin from mutable righteousness (which did not as such take away the ability to sin). The image of God did not, then, make man like God in the sense of an incapacity to sin. Man could imitate the righteousness and holiness of God and approach it, and still be far off from the holiness of God, which He possesses essentially, perfectly and immutably. The righteousness of grace and glory however, in contrast to that of nature, is immutable and incapable of being lost. So man only retains the image of God after the fall into sin in a relative sense, not an absolute sense, and he loses his original knowledge or wisdom, righteousness and holiness. Christ restores this righteousness, but now in a different way—so that now our wisdom, righteousness, and holiness can reach their fruition. And we possess these now supernaturally, by grace, and immutably.

1. The Image also consists in dominion and immortality.

The third part of the image of God consists in the dominion and immortality of man. Dominion is the power which is given to him by God as the chief over all lower creatures, by which he has the right to use them at pleasure. Turretin does not argue that the image of God consists exclusively of dominion, but he does see it as an aspect or dimension of it; certainly dominion emerges as a consequence of man bearing the image of God. This dominion, for its right and blessed exercise, necessarily requires and presupposes the possession on man’s part of reason according to true knowledge, righteousness, and holiness.

Man’s dominion is mentioned immediately in connection with his creation in God’s image. Although the fall very much broke and diminished man’s dominion, yet it has not wholly perished. But whatever man’s dominion consisted in even before the Fall, it differed infinitely from the dominion of God, which is independent, natural, absolute, and unlimited. Man’s dominion, by contrast, is dependent, precarious and circumscribed within its own limits.

Immortality is here added, not only of the soul itself (which still remains after sin), but of the whole subsisting substance; not absolute as that of the saints (which is an inability to die), but conditional (which is the power not to die if he had not sinned).

**d. The Image of God and Genesis Creation Account** (H. Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 205-217)

* 1. Image and Likeness (see section III.A, pp. 88ff. of these notes)
  2. Genesis 1:26 makes clear that God created man (or people—humans in the plural) in his image and after his likeness.
* Man and woman, the two of them not in separation from each other but in relationship and fellowship with other, are created in the image of God (v. 27)
* Not in the man alone, nor in the woman alone, but in both together, and in each in a special way, says Bavinck, the image of God is expressed.
* 1 Cor. 11:7 does not subvert or contradict this: Man is the image and glory of God, and woman is the glory of man. Paul is not speaking of man and woman considered apart from each other but he is speaking about their relationship in marriage (Bavinck, 206). The way woman is created in Gen. 2 is the way along which she received the image of God as well as man (see Gen. 1:27).
* The image of God rests in a number of people, with differentiation of race, talent, and powers—in short, in mankind—and further that this image will achieve its full unfolding in the new humanity which is the church of Christ, with all its members.
  1. God had a purpose in creating man in his image: namely that man should have dominion over all living creatures and that he should multiply and spread out over the world, subduing it.
* If we view the force of this subduing under the term “culture,” we can say that culture in the broadest sense is the purpose for which God created man after his image.
* This means that *image of God* is, first of all, a *creation category*. In fact, God’s image was granted to man so that he might in his dominion over the whole earth bring it into manifestation. So we see that the following are not in conflict as such:

Cultus and Culture

Religion and Civilization

Christianity and Humanity

* This dominion of the earth includes not only the most ancient calling of men, such as hunting and fishing, agriculture and stock-raising, but also trade and commerce, finance and credit, the exploitation of mines and mountains, and science and art.
* Such culture does not have its end in man, but in man who is the image of God and who stamps the imprint of his spirit upon all that he does, it returns to God, who is the First and the Last.

**e. The Image of God Partly Retained after the Fall**

1. *The Image Retained*

After the Fall, man is still called the image of God.

* Gen. 5:1-3—Post-fall God created man, i.e., man and woman in his image, for Adam begot a son in his own likeness, after his image.
* Gen. 9:6—shedding of man’s blood is forbidden for the reason that man was made in the image of God.
* Psalm 8—God’s glory and majesty reveals itself most splendidly of all in insignificant man and his dominion over all the works of God’s hands.
* Acts 17:28—Paul quotes an Athenian poet approvingly, “For we are God’s offspring.”
* James 3:9—With our tongue … we *curse men* who were made after the *image of God.*

Note: Fallen man is not only called the image of God, but Scripture treats and regards him repeatedly as such. Man is perpetually a reasonable, moral being who is responsible to God.

2. *The Image Lost*

* Along side of this representation we also find the idea that through sin man has lost the image of God.
* We are not told this directly, but it can be deduced from Scripture, for sin had robbed man of innocence, righteousness, and holiness, has corrupted his heart, darkened his understanding, inclined his will to evil, turned his inclinations right-about-face, and placed his body and all its members in the service of unrighteousness. (Hence, man must be changed, reborn, justified, cleansed, and sanctified).
* He can share in all these benefits only in the fellowship with Christ who is the Image of God (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15), and to whose image we must be conformed (Rom. 8:29).
* The new man is created in accordance with God’s will in true righteousness and holiness (Eph. 4:24), and is constantly renewed in knowledge after the image of Him that created him (Col. 3:10).
* The knowledge, righteousness, and holiness, which the believer obtains through the fellowship with Christ, have their origin and example and final purpose in God; and they cause man again to share in the Divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4).

**f. The Broader and Narrower Image**

(1) **Given that** after the Fall man continues to be called the image of God and offspring of God, and (2) **given that** (on the other hand) those virtues by which man especially resembles God have been lost through sin, and can only be restored again in the fellowship with Christ, **then propositions (1) and (2)** are *compatible* with each other ***only if*** the image of God comprises something *more than the virtues* of knowledge, righteousness, and holiness. Thus it is appropriate to distinguish between the image of God in the broader sense and in the narrower sense.

1. Lutheran view. Lutherans do not distinguish between the broader and narrower image of God in man, or otherwise attach little importance to it. Principally the image of God consists of true knowledge, righteousness, and holiness—that is, the image in the narrow sense. Thus, with the fall, humans are bereft of the whole image of God. Man’s rational/moral nature, remaining after the fall, does not count as remnants of the image of God.

2. Romish view. Roman Catholic theology does acknowledge the image of God in man in both a broader and narrower sense. The relationship of humans to image of God is that of a superadded gift. (Bavinck, pp. 208-210)

3. The Reformed view

* According to Scripture, the image of God is larger and more inclusive than the original righteousness. For although this original righteousness has been lost through sin, man continues to carry the name of the image and offspring of God. *There remain in him* some small remains of the *image of God* according to which he was originally created. That original righteousness, therefore, could not have been an endowment, separate and independent, and quite unrelated to human nature generally.
* The idea of man includes the idea of righteousness—man as created includes God-relatedness in righteousness.
* The image of God in the *narrower sense* is integrally related with the image of God in the *broader sense.* Thus it is better to say that man *is* (rather than *bears*) the image of God.
* Bavinck says that the image of God is *identical with* man; it is as inclusive as the *humanity* of man. To the extent that, even in the state of sin, man remained man, to that extent he has preserved remnants of the image of God; and to the extent that he has lost the image of God, to that extent he has ceased to be man, true and perfect man.
* The image of God in the *narrower* sense is nothing other than the spiritual wholeness or health of man. But sin has corrupted man’s whole nature. Just as the original righteousness was man’s spiritual wholeness and health, so sin is his spiritual disease. Yet, man still preserves his rational and moral nature.
* Such a conception (with the distinction between broader and narrower) of the image of God permits the whole teaching of Holy Scripture to come into its own. It acknowledges the grace of God which, after the Fall, permitted man to remain man and continued to regard and deal with him as a rational, moral, and responsible being.

**g. The Content of the Image in the Broader Sense**

* 1. Man has a spiritual nature that even sin cannot eradicate—even as man’s physical nature isn’t eradicated by sin. Man has a soul and is fundamentally, structurally or creationally a spiritual, God-relating creature.

This is evident from the origin, essence, and duration of the human soul.

* + 1. *Origin*—Unlike the animals, Adam received his soul from above (Gen. 2:7). God gives every man the spirit (Eccl. 12:7) and forms the spirit of man within him (Zech. 12:1).
    2. *Essence*—The special origin of the soul determines its essence too. Man’s soul is unique—being *spiritual in kind* (man has an independent spirit – cf. Dt. 2:30; Judges 15:19; Ez. 3:14; Lk 23:46; Acts 7:59; 1 Cor. 2:11; 5:3-4).
    3. *Duration*—Because of its spiritual nature, the soul of man is immortal. It doesn’t die when the body dies, but returns to God (again, being irrepressibly related to God). It cannot be killed (Mt 10:28). As spirit, it continues to exist (Heb 12:9; 1 Pet. 3:19; also see Jn 4:24).
  1. The image of God is revealed also in the *ability* and *power* that man possesses. Man can enter into the realm of concepts and ideas—deducing the general from the particular (from the concrete to the abstract), and can form ideas of the true, the good, and the beautiful. Moreover, man has an ineradicable sense of his own existence and of the peculiarity of his rational and moral nature. Man also uses and expresses all these abilities outwardly in language and religion, in morality and law, in science and art. *All of these abilities and activities are characteristics of the image of God.* Man in his humanity, expressing emotions, dispositions, and passions, such as wrath, jealousy, compassion, mercy, love, and the like are without hesitancy also ascribed to God, and so also constitute aspects of the image.
  2. The Body of man is likewise not excluded from the image of God. Yes, God is Spirit (Jn 4:24) and does not have a body; nonetheless he is the creator of the body and the whole sensuous world. The body is the *instrument* of the spirit’s activities. To the extent therefore that the body serves as a tool and instrument of the spirit, it exhibits a certain resemblance to and gives us some notion of the way in which God is busy in the world.

**h. The Content of the Image of God in the Narrower Sense**

The image of God in man only comes to its fullest and most harmonious expression in the original righteousness and what is called the image of God in the *narrower sense*.

The likeness of God, then, isn’t merely that we think and feel and will, but *what* we think, feel, and will—that he uses his faculties according to God’s will and glory. The image expresses itself principally in *pure knowledge,* and *perfect righteousness and holiness,* which together constitute the image of God in the narrower sense, and with which man was privileged and adorned at his creation.

1. *Knowledge—*The original knowledge isn’t of everything, but instead implies that Adam received an adequate knowledge for his circumstance and calling and that this knowledge was pure knowledge. He knew and loved the truth. The lie had not yet found a place or influence in his heart. He stood in the truth, and he saw and appreciated everything as it really was. This doesn’t mean that the state of integrity is equal to the state of glory. Thus Adam’s knowledge was limited and capable of growth.
2. *Righteousness—*This means that the man who thus knew the truth in his mind, and who was holy in his will and in all his desires, thereby also corresponded wholly to God’s law, wholly satisfied the demands of his justice, and stood before his face without any guilt. Truth and love bring peace in their wake, peace with God and ourselves, and the whole world. The man who himself stands in the right place, the place where he belongs, also stands in the right relationship to God and to all creatures.
3. *Holiness—*Holiness means that the first man was created free of all taint of sin. His nature was unspoiled. No evil thought, deliberation, or desire came up out of his heart. He was not neutral or simple, but he knew God, and he knew the law of God that was written in his heart, and he loved that law with his whole soul. Because he stood in the truth, he stood also in love.

Note: *Communion with God is presupposed in each of these.*

**i. Purpose of God in Creating Man in His Image**

1. Nearest Purpose

God created man in his image so that man might fill, subdue, and have dominion over the earth. Such dominion is not, says Bavinck, a constituent element of the image of God—nor is it the whole content of the image of God. Neither is it an incidental addendum. Rather, the image of God comes to expression in this dominion, and by means of it must more and more explain and unfold itself.

Dominion was immediately given to man as an endowment, but to a great extent it would be achieved only in the future (See Gen. 1:26-28; 2:15).

All this teaches plainly that man was not created for idleness but for work. Man was given a big, wide, rich task on earth—a task that would take centuries to accomplish. There is a big difference between the *condition* in which the first man was created and the *destination* to which he was called. The image of God had to be spread to the ends of the earth and had to be impressed on all the works of his hands. Man had to cultivate the earth so that it would more and more and more become a revelation of God’s attributes. (But development is not indefinite—it aims at rest).

1. Sabbath Rest as Final Purpose

Man’s work, like God’s, has an aim that does not forever go on monotonously, but there is an end to the work of his hands, which he can look back upon with approbation. Man ends his work, like God, in resting, enjoyment, and pleasure (cf. Heb. 4:9-10). Thus the final purpose of man lay in eternal happiness, in the glorification of God in heaven and on earth.

**j. *Excursus* on Several Matters Related to Man as the Divine Image**

1. The Image of God in Fallen Humans

Two passages, as noted earlier, are particularly relevant in this connection: Gen. 9:6 and James 3:9.

* In Gen. 9:6 murder is prohibited on the grounds that the human was created in God’s image: “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made man.” While the passage does not explicitly say that humans still bear the image of God, only that God had created them in the image of God, it seems clear that what God had done earlier still has bearing or effect—certainly the passage does not allow us to conclude that fallen humans do not bear the image of God in some sense.
* In James 3:9 we do have a more explicit reference to fallen humans bearing the divine likeness. For James condemns use of the tongue to curse humans on the grounds that humans are made in the likeness (*homoiosis—*o`moi,wsij) of God: “With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God’s likeness.” (There is also something of a suggestion of the image of God in Acts 17:28, although the term is not actually used: “For in him we live and move and have our being.” As some of your poets have said, “We are his offspring.”)

Luther propounded a unitary view of the image of God. All aspects of the image of God in humans have been corrupted; what is left is a relic or remnant of the image—not certain qualities but fragments, as it were, of all of what constituted the likeness of God remain. Luther’s response to Gen. 9:6 was that the uncorrupted image still exists as God’s intention for humans, but is not actually present in them (Lect. Genesis, in Luther’s Works, vol. 2, p. 141).

Calvin adopted a view similar in many ways to that of Luther, rejecting the dualistic scholastic view, and instead maintaining that a relic of the image remained in each person after the fall. Because a relic remained, knowledge of ourselves and knowledge of God are interrelated. In knowing ourselves we come to know God, since he has made us in his image (Inst. I.i). Conversely, we come to know ourselves by measuring ourselves against holiness. While all things, in a sense, display the image of God, humans particularly do so, most notably in our ability to reason as distinguished from the capacity of beasts (Calvin, Comm. John 1:4).

2. The Image as Analogy of Relation

(This material is taken and/or adapted from G.C. Berkouwer & M. Erikson, and also J. R. Franke)

We should also consider Karl Barth’s view of the image of God, who argues that Genesis describes the content of the image not as dominion (which is only a consequence of the image) but as man being created as *male and female, as man and woman.* Genesis 1:27—”So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” Barth sees this as a clear statement of the content or meaning of the image. “The text says that the image consists of the difference and the relation between man and fellow man, and with that we should rest.” Why, asks Barth, have theologians resorted to speculations and neglected the importance of the difference between man and woman, which is basic for the Scriptural picture of man? The similarity, the analogy between man and God is here, not an ‘analogy of being’ but an ‘analogy of relation.’ The relation between ‘I’ and ‘thou’, which is already present in God (‘let *us* make man in *our image*’) finds its creaturely analogue in the relationship in God, ‘a community of disposition and act in the divine essence,’ says Barth, so also is there in man an ‘I-thou’ relation, a ‘face-to-face’ relation; and thus the pattern of human life is analogous to that of the divine life…. We need seek no further for additional analogies in which to find the real meaning or content of the image of God (*CD*, III.1, pp. 183ff., 191ff.). The image consists of differentiated unity—of partnership and community.

We should observe that Barth is willing to speak of the image of God as still present in fallen humans inasmuch as they are still human (CD, III/1, pp. 197-98). Barth sees the image of God, as noted above, as consisting not only in the vertical relationship between human and God, but also in the horizontal relationship between humans. The image is not something a human is or does. Rather, the image is related to the fact that God willed into existence a being that, like himself, can be a partner (CD, III/1, p. 184).

Evidence of some sort of relationship within the Godhead is to be found in the very form of the decision to create: “Let *us* make man.” Barth maintains that within the very being of God there is a counterpart; thus God experiences a genuine but harmonious self-encounter and self-discovery. Humans reflect this aspect of God’s nature on two levels—they experience relationship with God and with one another. The similarity between God and the human, then, is that both experience I-Thou confrontation (p. 185).

Barth notes that both in Genesis 1:27 and 5:1-2 the statement that the human was made in the image of God is coupled with the words “male and female he created them.” The image of God in humans, then, is found in their being created male and female (p. 184). Both within God and within the human an “I” and a “Thou” confront each other. Humanity does not exist as a solitary individual, but as two persons confronting each other.

Moreover, and more fundamentally for Barth, the *imago Dei* is defined by Jesus Christ, who is the image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15-16). This means that the image of God is not something that human beings possess as a constituent part of their nature. Instead, the image of God is not an attribute of humanity so much as it is the relationship that humans bear to the true human, Jesus Christ. This points to the reason for which God engaged in the act of creation, namely, to pour out love and grace on humanity in the person of Jesus Christ. Creation is therefore the gift of God in Christ, but must always be ordered toward its consummation in Christ. Hence, creation is dependent on the specific and particular reality of the person of God’s Son, Jesus Christ, who is both its beginning and its end. As such, human beings find their true humanity only in relationship to God through Christ, who is the one through whom and for whom they have been made.

Barth makes one other point: that we learn about humanity by studying Christ, not humans (III/2, p. 41). There are significant differences between his humanity and ours, for his was human nature as it was intended to be (pp. 47, 222). Only from revelation can we know humanity as created, and Jesus is the fullest form of that revelation (pp. 88-89). We cannot determine on some independent grounds what human nature is, and thus know what Jesus was like (p. 208). What is about Jesus’ humanity? He is “for other men” (p. 59). The presence of the image of God in us, then, which is what makes us human, entails four points: (1) We see our neighbor as our fellow human (p. 250); (2) We speak to and hear one another (p. 252); (3) We render assistance to one another (p. 260); and (4) We do these things gladly (p. 265).

To sum up Barth’s doctrine of the image of God: We know from Gen. 1:26-27 that the image consists in humans’ reflecting the internal communion and encounter present within God. The internal encounter within a human rests in the fact that the human race has been created male and female. Thus there is an I-Thou confrontation within humanity just as there is in the human’s relation with God. We also know, from looking at Jesus for the full meaning of humanity, that the image of God consists in being for others. From this perspective as well, then, standing in relationship with others is what constitutes the image. We see that Barth wants to see the image of God in human nature through the study of the person of Jesus, not of human nature per se. Moreover, an understanding of the image is only from divine revelation—and this opposes any structural qualities within humans. The image is not something a human *is* or *has.* Rather, the image is a matter of one’s relationship to God and to others. It is dynamic, relational and functional, versus being static and structural. It is also universal, for even in turning away from God humans cannot negate the fact of being related to God in a way in which no other creature is or can be. There is always a relationship, either positive or negative. Barth is not interested in asking what if anything is required structurally for the image of God to be present in a human. The image is relational, not structural.

G. C. Berkouwer rejects Barth’s exegesis and argues for a strictly functionalistic view of the divine image in man, denying the relational notion.

3. The “Functional” Idea of the Divine Image

(This material is taken or adapted from M. Erikson)

A third type of view of the image is the functional view. This is the idea that the image is not something present in the makeup of the human, nor the experiencing of relationship with God or with fellow humans, but the image consists in something one does. It is a human function, the most frequently mentioned being the exercise of dominion over the creation.

While the relational view gives relatively little attention to the content of the image of God, this view attempts to determine from the biblical text itself the content of the image (Berkouwer, *Man*, p. 70). In Gen. 1:26, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness,” is followed immediately by “and let them rule over the fish of the sea….” A close connection between these two concepts is found not only in this verse, where God expresses his intention to create, but also in verses 27-28, where we read that God did in fact create humans in the image of God and issue to them a command to have dominion (L. Verduin, *Somewhat Less Than God,* p. 27). Some regard the juxtaposition of these two concepts as more than coincidental. The exercise of dominion is considered to be the content of the image of God. This was propounded by the Socinians and the Remonstrants. As God is the Lord over all of creation, humans reflect the image of God by exercising dominion over the rest of the creation. The image of God is actually an image of God as Lord.

A second passage containing a close connection between the image of God in humanity and human exercise of dominion is Psalm 8:5-6: “You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet.” Psalm 8 seems clearly dependent upon Genesis (see, for example, the catalogue of creatures in Ps. 8:7-8, beasts of the field, birds of the air, and fish of the sea). The conclusion is then drawn that verse 5 is equivalent to the statements in Genesis 1 that the human was created in God’s image. The god-like-ness of man in Ps. 8 consists above all in his sovereignty and power over all other things. Thus, following this line of thought, the divine image in man is viewed as having nothing to do with morals or any sort of ideals or virtues; it refers only to man’s dominion of the world and everything in it.

L. Verduin argues that “dominion-having” stands out as the central meaning of the image of God. The central point of the creation account given in the book of Genesis is that man is the image of his Maker in his “dominion-having” (p. 27). Some Reformed writers treat this idea as “the cultural mandate.”

4. Evaluation of the Relational and Functional Views

**(a)** The relational view has correctly seized upon the truth that the human alone, of all the creatures, knows and is consciously related to God. In fact, it was not good for the man to be alone. Humans were not created to be alone. Even persons who have the gift of ‘singleness’ does not entail loneliness, that is, they are not to live isolated lives, unrelated to God and to others. “In the image of God he created him male and female he created them.” Humans were not created merely to be a work of art, but God created humans to glorify Him and to enjoy Him forever! Humans are structurally God-related creatures. Thus Barth seems to be mistaken in opposing ‘createdness’ and our ‘humanness’ to our ‘relatedness’ to God and one another. In other words, there is no need to set the relational in opposition to the structural. For what is it about humans that enables them to have a relationship with God and ‘communion’ with one another, unlike other creatures? Precisely here we seem to be in a better position by affirming that the image of God involves some structural or substantive character.

* + - * 1. When we turn to the functional view, we again see an insightful seizing upon one of the major elements in the biblical picture of the image of God, namely, that God’s act creating the human is immediately followed by the command to have dominion. There certainly is, at the very least, a very close connection between the image and the exercise of dominion. There is also, to be sure, a parallel between Gen. 1 and Ps. 8. But it seems a stretch to reduce the divine image in man to mere function, for the human is spoken of as being in God’s image before being ordered to practice dominion. The two hortative expressions—”Let us make man in our image” and “let them rule”—seem to at least distinguish (if not separate) image from dominion to some degree. It seems to go to far to take what is certainly a consequence of the image—have dominion over the fish, etc.—and to exclusively equate it with the image itself.

**k. A Synthetic Understanding of Image of God**

* + - 1. In my judgment, we best capture the biblical portrait of the image of God synthetically. That is, we must allow both the idea of a broader and narrower conception of image of God, with the fundamental insight regarding the functional and relational definition of our humanity, to give content to the image. Barth’s insight, particularly his burden to root the image of God in Jesus Christ, is also commendable, but it has limitations inasmuch as Barth seems to speak univocally about the grace of God in Jesus Christ relative to creation, fall, and consummation. That simply wont do, and is unbiblical—purely and sadly so.
      2. A synthetic understanding allows us to do justice to the varied manner in which Scripture addresses *imago Dei*, and it also better enables us to treat the senses in which image of God is lost and retained in fallen man. Moreover, it allows us to see that image of God comes to expression also in corporate man, even humanity itself, in certain aspects of culture and cultural achievement, in social and relational features of human life together, ecclesiastically and beyond.

**l. Bavinck on the Wholeness or Synthetic Understanding of Image of God**

Here my comments are not comprehensive. To fully grasp what Bavinck does here, see his Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2, pp. 554-562. I limit myself to some observations and quotations.

1. For Bavinck, human beings are the image of God. To say they have or bear the image of God can lead to the idea that being human is one thing and being image of God is another, as if optional. As if it could be put on and taken off. No!
2. The entire deity, the Triune God, not just the Son, is the archetype of man. To be conformed to the image of Christ is to again be renewed into the image of God.
3. The image extends to the whole person. Nothing in a human being is excluded from the image of God—soul and body, in all his faculties and powers, in all conditions and relations. The body is not a prison, but a marvelous piece of art from the hand of God Almighty, and just as constitutive for the essence of humanity as the soul. It is our earthly dwelling, our organ and instrument of service, our apparatus by which we either serve God or serve sin. It is so integrally and essentially a part of our humanity that, though violently torn from the soul by sin, it will be reunited with it in the resurrection of the dead.
4. Dominion over the earth is also a part of the image of God.
5. Finally, man’s habitation in paradise is part of that which belongs to the image of God. Holiness, peace, blessedness, fellowship with God and the creation, happiness—these are all aspects of being God’s image. And so the whole human being is image and likeness of God, in soul and body, in all human faculties, powers, and gifts. Nothing in humanity is excluded from God’s image; it stretches as far as our humanity does and constitutes our humanity. What is in God finds its finite analogy in man. Man forms a unity of the material and spiritual world, a mirror of the universe, a connecting link, compendium, the epitome of all of nature, a microcosm, and, precisely on that account, also the image and likeness of God, his son and heir, a micro-divine-being. He is the prophet who explains God and proclaims his excellences; he is the priest who consecrates himself with all that is created to God as a holy offering; and he is the king who guides and governs all things in justice and rectitude. And in all this he points to One who in a still higher and richer sense is the revelation and image of God, to him who is the only begotten of the Father, and the firstborn of all creatures. Adam, the son of God, was a type of Christ.

**II. Man under the Covenant of Nature**

*Literature:* Herman Witsius, *Economy of the Covenants,* 2 vols., I, 41-161 [60-117]; Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, vol. 1, 569-586; G. Vos, “*De Verbondsleer in de Gereformeerde Theologie*,” English translation “The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology*,*” in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos* (P&R, 1980, [234-267]); L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 211-218; Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, II, 563-79; H. Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 281-300; Wilhelmus à Brakel, *Our Reasonable Service*, I, 355-67; A.A Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, 309-14; Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology,* II, 117-122; John Dick, *Lectures on Theology,* I, 455-88; W.G.T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 3rd ed., 537-38; R. 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,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 29 (April 1994): 75-100.

**Confessions:** The Irish Articles (1615), art. 21; The Westminster Confession of Faith (1647), chapter VII, 1, 2, 3; Westminster Larger Catechism, Q/A 20; Shorter Catechism, Q/A 12; Formula Consensus Helvetica (1675), canons VII-X; The Walcheren Articles (1693). Implicit features of this doctrine are expressed in other and earlier Reformed confessions inasmuch as humans are either reckoned in Adam or in Christ, the paradisal situation contains a probative feature with the positive command not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the presence of the serpent in order to tempt man, and negative sanctions explicitly imposed upon man for failure to heed God’s distinct and positive warning. Cf. Heidelberg Catechism, Q/As 6-7; 9-11; 20; 63; 86-91; 94-95; 113; 121-122; Belgic Confession, art. 14, 15, 17; 24; Canons of Dort, III/IV, art. 1-2, 4-5, etc.

**A. Introduction**

*Some* recent Reformed writers allege that the doctrine of the covenant of works is something less than a Scriptural doctrine. The allegations come in heaps: the covenant of works introduces works righteousness into the divine/human relationship; it makes the law greater than the gospel; it sets up a merit-religion; it supposes that humans can earn their way into God’s favor; it regards God as unloving towards his unfallen human creature. Given these sorts of allegations directed against the covenant of works, some propose instead a covenant of love or a covenant of friendship or a covenant of favor; or they argue for some other administrative arrangement that isn’t a covenant.

These criticisms are quite remarkable inasmuch as they bespeak a regrettable ignorance of classic Reformed doctrine. One form of theological error is to set up a false dichotomy, and such we find here. Are we really to believe that God’s law can rightly be set in opposition to God’s love? Or stated differently: Are we to believe that the law isn’t an expression of God’s goodness? Are we to understand that friendship with God is properly set against obedience to God? Has obedience to God become optional? The contemporarydenial of the covenant of works would have us oppose God’s love to God’s holiness, or his goodness to his justice.

We will consider these criticisms below. It is sufficient at this point to simply state that most such criticisms either attack a straw-man or represent a problematic or outright mistaken conception of the divine/human relationship at its foundation, failing to reckon with the Creator/creature distinction itself.

Already here we need to pause if we are to understand this doctrine aright, and so a couple of comments are in order. Let us state explicitly at the outset that the covenant of works is an expression of God’s gratuitous and kindly favor toward his human creatures, for in this covenant God displays his loving favor toward Adam, so that in walking in obedience before God, honoring God’s holiness and justice, in keeping his law, he, with his posterity, might be ushered into the fullness of fellowship with God and eternal life. Let us also state explicitly at the outset that the doctrine of the covenant of works is simply an outworking of the doctrine of the covenant of grace, as it honors the implications of the representation motif found in Scripture, especially in 1 Cor. 15:45-49 and Romans 5:12-21. Nonetheless, inasmuch as these basic ideas have been greatly underestimated and misunderstood among more recent Reformed theologians and pastors, the doctrine of the covenant of works has received a great deal of misinformed criticism. Before addressing these criticisms, first we consider the components that make-up the doctrine itself.

1. **The Doctrine Stated**

The discussion of the original state of humans, says Berkhof, that is, in his *status integratatis*, remains unfinished without considering the mutual relationship between God and man in paradise, which is best termed a covenant relationship. Definitions of this covenant relationship contain certain elements, namely two parties, a condition or conditions stipulated, and a penalty for failure to mean the requisite condition (with an implicit promise of blessing).

* “The covenant of works is God’s pact with Adam in his integrity, as the head of the whole human race, by which God, requiring of man the perfect obedience of the law of works, promised him, if obedient, eternal life in heaven, but threatened him, if he transgressed, with eternal death; and man, for his part, promised perfect obedience to God’s requirement” (Heidegger, *Corpus theologiae,*IX, 15).
* “This covenant is an agreement between God and Adam, formed after the image of God, as the head and root or representative of the whole human race, by which God promised eternal life and happiness to him if he yielded obedience to all his commands, threatening him with death if he failed but in the least point; and Adam accepting this condition” (Witsius, *Economy of the Covenants,* I.ii.1).

The Westminster Confession presents the doctrine as follows:

*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.* (Chapt. VII, 1).

Westminster, giving confessional expression to an old feature of the Reformed heritage, demonstrates that what is most fundamental about the divine/human relationship is that it is first of all (indeed inescapably so) a Creator/creature relationship. The Creator/creature relationship is distinct from and more fundamental than the covenant relationship. It is an ontic given and inescapable. Creatures—even human creatures made in the divine image—remain creatures and cannot have a relationship with God unless God establishes a with them, which of necessity requires that he condescend to us. This is a most fundamental principle, and its implications for Christian theology are profound—*positively* when rightly affirmed, *negatively* when ignored. This reality also gives shape to the original paradisal situation. The distance between God and his human creature can only be traversed if God does the traversing—and that according to his own kindness and goodness, grace and love. All creatures, being creatures, are without rights before God unless God, again, according to his goodness, grants such to them. As human creatures we owe God all obedience, apart from any specific covenant stipulation or requirement or any other arrangement—that is, we owe *God* all that is due Him *as God*. Without the covenant arrangement in paradise, however, our obedience does not issue forth into fellowship with God and eternal blessing, for God is under no obligation to bless or reward our obedience. Thus God, according to his love and goodness, condescended and established a covenant relationship with us in order to bless us; and the doctrine of “the covenant of works” (more on those terms below) describes God’s condescension in order to meet man in fellowship and bless him unto the full fruition or potential of that fellowship. This is itself purely and altogether a divine gift! Thus, we must immediately see that there is an immeasurable abundance of grace at work and on ready display in the covenant of works, for in reaching his human creature in fellowship God travels (in condescension) an infinite distance—the distance that exists between Creator and creature. God does this voluntarily, that is, freely and of his own accord. He is not under an obligation from without himself to do so. Unless we appreciate these features of the doctrine of the covenant of works, the rest of the doctrine will remain inaccessible to us, that is, we will not be able to understand it properly.

Westminster also tells us that God expresses this relationship with his human creatures “by way of a covenant.” Two observations here: First, this is an act of accommodation of God’s part—that is, that God employs the idea of a covenant relationship in order to relate to man in a very *human sort of way, for covenants are very human arrangements.* (Once more, this demonstrates God’s gracious and kindly way with man). Second, this is altogether fitting, given the sort of creature man is (namely a free, rational, moral creature), made in the divine image. Stated differently, something less than a covenant arrangement makes little sense, given what human beings are as moral agents. It hardly makes sense that God would relate to humans in a “*covenant* of grace” for their salvation while having no *covenant relationship* with them in their innocence and integrity, especially if there are obligations and sanctions attached to those obligations.

We see, then, that the classic Reformed doctrine of the covenant of works is concerned to maintain the proper relationship between creation and redemption, and so is jealous to avoid dualism on the one hand and a kind of pantheism on the other hand—that is, it is unbiblical to conceive of redemption as anti-creation or to conceive of God’s way with human beings as involving righteousness at certain times while negating righteousness at other times.

Westminster speaks of two covenants, which is really to talk about a twofold covenant in view of human fallenness.

*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.* (Chapt. VII, 2).

We need to explain briefly why the first covenantal expression of God’s relationship with human beings received the label “covenant of *works.*” Other nomenclature was used to described this covenant: covenant of nature, covenant of creation, covenant of life. As Berkhof notes, each of these labels were subject to serious misunderstanding. The terms *covenant of nature* and *covenant of creation*, inasmuch as they were apt to give the impression that this covenant was simply a part of the natural relationship in which man stood to God, failing to mark the more fundamental Creator/creature relationship, and since some Arminians used the term to support the idea that man was capable in himself, by his own natural endowments, to respond to God, other terms were sought. Westminster uses both the language of the *covenant of works* and the *covenant of life*. None of these locutions wholly satisfy, for the covenant of grace also gives life, eternal life; and the evangelical covenant isn’t wholly devoid of works—certainly not of Christ’s works on behalf of sinners in fulfillment of the law’s penalty and positive command, nor of the believer’s works offered in grateful response to God for his saving mercy. This again demonstrates that the doctrine of the twofold covenant, the covenant of works and the covenant of grace, is not, strictly speaking, to posit two distinct and separable covenants in God’s way with man; rather, God’s covenant with humans is a single covenant relationship with a *twofold* or *double* character, for the covenant of grace brings about a certain fulfillment of the covenant of works.

The designation “covenant of works” gained prominence in Reformed theology not because it best describes the diverse and complex features of the paradise covenantal situation and relationship between God and man, nor because it means to shortchange or deny the presence of God’s kindliness toward his image-bearer, or minimize God’s goodness, benevolence, and grace (in the sense of undeserved favor) as integral to the divine/human relationship; nor does it involve a denial of faith and dependency upon God as descriptive of man’s relationship with God. Rather, this locution was chosen because it sets up the best contrast with the covenant of grace relative to what is stipulated for man to do in his relationship with God in contrast to what Christ does for him, vicariously, according to God’s *gracious provision*.

In the paradisal situation, man is to love and trust God, live with him in obedient fellowship, look to God for every good gift, in short, to glorify God and enjoy him forever—these are the works that Adam is to do, being the recipient of God’s favor and kindness; and without these works, Adam fails to give God what is due God, which is sin—and sin brings the requisite penalty, even death. Without the covenant arrangement, however, Adam’s obedience would not issue forth into eternal life and blessing for himself and his posterity. However, according to the covenant arrangement, Adam’s walk with God—concentrated in the probative command respecting the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and its threatened negative sanction—could transition from mutability and fallibility to immutability and infallibility. Observe, too, that without such a graduation or transition, Satan would inhabit paradise for eternity and so perpetually tempt Adam and his progeny (hardly a pretty portrait of eternal glory).

Thus what is distinctive about the covenant relationship which God establishes with Adam in Paradise is that God sets up a situation in which to test man, his image-bearer, who is the recipient of these abundant gifts. The sacramental trees (that is, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the tree of life) testify to the probative nature of God’s special prohibitive stipulation and warning, that is, the positive command forbidding Adam and Eve from eating of the first mentioned tree. The probative nature of this situation is further evidenced in the presence of an enemy in God’s paradise, for the serpent is allowed to tempt man, the very one created after God’s image and likeness. Although some theologians have tried to deny that the situation in paradise consisted of a probative or temporal trial and test, the above seems irrefutable as proof of its reality. In fact, if it isn’t probative, then why is the serpent allowed a place in the paradise of God? Moreover, what possible significance do the trees have, and what would be their function, if they do not have a sacramental function relative to the covenant arrangement? Moreover, why a positive warning about one tree—a tree that in itself it is pleasant to the eyes and good to eat—along with a negative sanction explicitly attached to this command? To what purpose? And, finally, besides the matters stated above, how is a static and mutable paradise possible? If Adam isn’t to be ushered to a brighter and fuller stage of blessedness, indeed an immutable state of fellowship with God, is redemption in Christ likewise fallible and mutable for believers? On the contrary, the covenant of works argues that the implicit blessing promised to Adam in paradise issues forth into immutable blessing, for it is undeniable that Adam existed in a mutable state, capable of falling from integrity and devolving into depravity, and not only for himself but for all his progeny. We see, then, that Adam, according to the covenant of works, functions as a *public person*—meaning, he has a representative role as head of the human race, which further demonstrates the probative nature of the paradise situation.

Humans of course did not keep their position in paradise, but with Adam’s fall God banished them and placed them under curse. Westminster states this with simplicity, demonstrating why an alternative covenant arrangement was necessary if man was to be brought to the fruition of his blessed relationship with God.

*Man, by his fall, having made himself uncapable of life by that covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the* covenant of grace. . . .” (Chapt. VII, 3).

What the above discussion comes to, cumulatively, is this: it is quite mistaken to treat Adam as a mere individual, as if he were not also head of the human race, even as it is quite mistaken to suppose that the situation in paradise defined man’s highest state of blessing or already gave expression to the fullness of blessing and fellowship contained within God’s relationship with man. As Bavinck states: “Adam did not possess the highest kind of life. The highest kind of life is the material freedom consisting of not being able to err, sin, or die. It consists in being elevated absolutely above all fear and dread, above all possibility of falling.” Then Bavinck shows the connection between the promised blessing of the covenant of works and the actual blessing of the covenant of grace: “This highest life is immediately bestowed by grace through Christ upon believers. They can no longer sin (1 John 3:9) and they can no longer die (John 3:16) since by faith they immediately receive eternal, inamissible life. Theirs is the perseverance of the saints; they can no longer be lost. Hence, Christ does not [merely] restore his own to the state of Adam before the fall. He acquired and bestows much more, namely, that which Adam would have received had he not fallen. He positions us not at the beginning but at the end of the journey that Adam had to complete. He accomplished not only the passive but also the active obedience required; he not only delivers us from guilt and punishment, but out of grace immediately grants us the right to eternal life” (*Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, p. 573).

**The Westminster Larger Catechism**

The Larger Catechism offers a clear articulation of Reformed federal theology (Q/As 20, 22, 30-36). Indeed, federal thinking is woven into the entire document. Note: it is altogether mistaken to pit Reformed scholasticism against Reformed federalism inasmuch as the chief practitioners of the scholastic method were also the most articulate formulators and defenders of the doctrine of the covenants.

We pause to examine a few of the features of federal theology as expressed in the Larger Catechism. First, covenant presupposes creation but creation is not covenant; thus these two are not one and the same thing. God created man as endued with “living, reasonable, and immortal souls,” and man, being created male and female, was also created after God’s own image, “in knowledge, righteousness, and holiness; having the law of God written in their hearts, and power to fulfill it … yet subject to fall” (Q/A 17). This is not to set up a dualism between creation and covenant, and certainly not an antipathy. But it is to acknowledge—as is explicitly stated in the Confession of Faith, that the Creator/creature relationship is prior to the covenant relationship, for the gap that exists between God as Creator and man as God’s image bearer can only be measured by infinitude. The act of creation anticipates covenant and man being fashioned after God’s image is for the purpose of the covenant relationship, but God must still condescend, establish the terms of that relationship, and show the path to blessing and fruition of that relationship, as well as announce the negative sanction of transgression and disobedience to his will. Besides, the catechism reflects the understanding that if creation equals covenant, then any prescribed commandment, such as the positive law regarding the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, is superfluous. If creation is covenant, then the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil simply function as sacramental trees naturally and bear this character apart from God’s specific ordinance and command, which is absurd.

Thus, the second noteworthy matter here is that the Larger catechism teaches that God addresses man his image bearer, as originally created and placed in Paradise (this being the estate in which he was created), with specific mandates, “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” (Q/A 20). Again it should be noted that this covenant of life is subsequent to man being created in God’s image. Moreover, this covenant of life makes explicit how man is to live before God in righteousness and that the penalty of death is the negative sanction if his obedience is not personal, perfect, and perpetual. Certainly man cannot walk unrighteously before God and live. He may not offer imperfect obedience to God or part-time conformity to the divine will and expect to enjoy God’s favor and fellowship.

Third, this covenant of life (the nomenclature “covenant of works” is also used, especially in the Confession of Faith) was made with Adam, such that he functioned as a covenant head, i.e., “as a public person,” which means that he did not merely act on his own behalf but also “for his posterity.” Thus his transgression of God’s commandment regarding the forbidden fruit brought both himself and the rest of humankind into “an estate of sin and misery” (Q/As 21-23). The violated commandment is specifically the probationary commandment regarding the fruit forbidden to man, namely the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Adam was called to live before God in trusting obedience, to live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord. And he was to do that as head of the human race, acting as its representative and covenantal head.

Fourth, the Larger catechism teaches that God does not surrender the human race to destruction; he does not abandon humanity to perish in its depravity and ruin “by the breach of the first covenant, commonly called the *covenant of works*”; rather, out of his love and mercy God delivers “his elect” from this condition and state, and brings then “into an estate of salvation by the second covenant, commonly called the *covenant of grace*” (Q/A 30). Noteworthy here is how the covenant of grace is first and principally considered in its testamentary character—hence the language regarding the elect enjoying the salvific blessings of this covenant. In fact, this accent on the testamentary dimension of this covenant is continued in answering the question concerning with whom this covenant is made, for the catechism asserts that “the covenant of grace was made with Christ as the second Adam, and in him with all the elect as his seed” (Q/A 31). This is not to deny that the covenant of grace may be described as being made with *believers and their seed*, for in its treatment of the sacrament of baptism the Larger Catechism explicitly states that the infants of believing parents (of even one believing parent) who profess “faith in Christ are “within the covenant, and to be baptized” (Q/A 166). The diverse manner in which the catechism defines the human parties of this covenant has to do with the *testamentary character* of the covenant on the one hand (which means the promises of the covenant are a bequeathal of Christ’s saving blessings to the elect); and on the other hand the manner of the covenant’s diverse administration in history, wherein the *conditionality* of the covenant is put on display in urging the human party of the covenant to faith and repentance (cf. Q/As 32-35). That the covenant is said to be made with Christ is grounded in the understanding that Christ himself is “the substance” of the covenant, i.e., of its saving blessings, for he forms the content of the promise and there is no blessing of this covenant except in him (Q/A 35). As the substance of the promised salvation of the covenant of grace, Christ, by his mediation, procures redemption as well as all the other benefits of this covenant (Q/A 57).

Fifth, the covenant of grace is a “second covenant,” and it is termed “the covenant *of grace*” because God “freely provideth and offereth to sinners a Mediator, and life and salvation by him.” Inasmuch as the first covenant is abrogated insofar as man obtaining life and blessedness from it—that is, in the way of living before God by personal, perfect, and perpetual obedience—a second covenant is requisite for life and fellowship with God. However, the first covenant is not abrogated in the sense that its negative sanction and penalty still applies, and in fact this describes the human race in Adam and under the penalty of death through Adam’s sin (cf. Q/As 25-29). Though we can no longer obtain life in living in accordance to God’s will and righteousness (for we are unable to do so), God provides the remedy of Christ our Mediator, who brings reconciliation by fulfilling all righteousness for believing sinners (Q/As 38-55). The obtaining of Christ is along the path of faith—thus, God requires “faith as the condition” in order to have interest in him (Q/A 32). Faith itself is a divine gift and part of the composite of the promises of the covenant of grace (cf. Q/A 67-68; 70-73). For we only become partakers of the benefits of Christ when the Holy Spirit applies these benefits to us, for redemption “is certainly applied, and effectually communicated, to all those whom Christ hath purchased it; who are in time by the Holy Ghost enabled to believe in Christ according to the gospel” (Q/A 59). The Holy Spirit, then, is promised and given “to all [God’s] elect, to work in them that faith, with all other saving graces…” (Q/A 32).

Sixth, the Larger Catechism teaches that the covenant of grace was administered distinctly under the Old Testament from its administration under the New Testament. The administration of this covenant during the Old Testament economy refers to the manner in which the gospel itself—i.e., the good message regarding the Messiah and the free and gracious salvation he brings—is presented, promised, and imparted. Thus under the Old Testament this gospel covenant is administered “by promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the Passover, and other types and ordinances, which did all fore-signify Christ then to come, and were for that time sufficient to build up the elect in faith in the promised Messiah, by whom they then had full remission of sin, and eternal salvation” (Q/A 34). Thus we see that the Old Testament teaches the same way of salvation as the New Testament—by faith in the Messiah. In the Old Testament this faith is placed in the Messiah *to come* or *the promised* Messiah. In the New Testament this faith is placed in the Messiah *having come* or the promised *fulfilled* in the person and work Jesus Christ. During the Old Testament administration of this covenant, grace or the gospel is set forth in multiform and varied ways. “Under the New Testament, when Christ the substance was exhibited, the same covenant of grace was and still is to be administered in the preaching of the Word, and the administration of the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper; in which grace and salvation are held forth in more fulness, evidence, and efficacy, to all nations” (Q/A 35).

1. **Scriptural Confirmation of the Doctrine**
2. Hosea 6:7 explicitly mentions a covenant with Adam: “They *like Adam* (~dak) have transgressed the covenant; there they have dealt treacherously against me” (cf. Job. 31:33, which grammatically supports this rendering). This translation is altogether preferable to the AV rendering “like men,” which likens the sin of Ephraim and Judah to sinning “in human fashion,” hardly a remarkable comparison and rather inane since man could hardly transgress in any other way. Moreover, the term itself is not plural but singular. Finally, the translation “at Adam” is likewise off the mark since the preposition does not allow this rendering (cf. B.B. Warfield, “Hosea VI:7: Adam or Man?” in *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield.* 2 vols. [Nutley, NJ: P&R, 1970], I:116-129, for a full exegetical defense of the rendering “like Adam”).
3. “The parallel which Paul draws between Adam and Christ in Romans 5:12-21, in connection with the imputation of sin on the one hand and the imputation of righteousness on the other hand, can only be explained on the assumption that Adam, like Christ, was the head of a covenant.” “According to Paul the essential element in justification consists in this, that the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, without any personal work on our part to merit it. And he regards this as a perfect parallel to the manner in which the guilt of Adam is imputed to us. This naturally leads to the conclusion that Adam also stood in covenant relationship to his descendants.” In short, “If we share in the righteousness of Christ, because he is our representative, then it follows that we share in the guilt of Adam for the same reason” (Berkhof, *Manual*, p. 131; *ST*, 214; cf. Bavinck, p. 565.). Both Socinianism and Arminianism oppose this idea. Also see 1 Cor. 15:22, 45-49.
4. Since the law of God contained in the Ten Commandments is not something new to God’s nature, but expressive of his abiding moral perfection and, therefore, issuing a perpetual imperative upon man as God’s righteous purpose for man whether in a state of integrity or in a fallen state, and inasmuch as Scripture sharply distinguishes the legal covenant from the gospel covenant, we may legitimately infer God’s positive moral law as inscribed upon humans, being created in the divine image, and so, necessarily, an obligation is imposed on humans to live rightly before God from the law of nature itself. Even in his unfallen state Adam was called to fulfill the first and great commandment, as well as the second commandment like unto the first. From the start, man was to worship God *as God* and make nothing into an idol; he was to honor God’s name and day, and so he was likewise to live with his neighbors in full integrity and charity. Thus even in his innocence Adam was called to *hallow God’s name, labor for his kingdom, do God’s will*, which means Adam was called to live before God according to divine law, with blessing promised in the way of trusting obedience to God’s word and will, with certain punishment and death threatened for failure to love God as prescribed.

Now, in that light, and in view of the connection that exists between the law of Sinai and the law of nature imprinted upon the human heart, the contrast the apostle sets forth between the legal covenant under Moses and the gospel covenant fulfilled in Christ also extends to the covenant established in Eden. In Galatians 4:24 (*“For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and the other by a free woman. 23 One, the child of the slave, was born according to the flesh; the other, the child of the free woman, was born through the promise. 24 Now this is an allegory: these women are two covenants. One woman, in fact, is Hagar, from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery. 25 Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. 26 But the other woman corresponds to the Jerusalem above; she is free, and she is our mother. 27 For it is written, “Rejoice, you childless one, you who bear no children, burst into song and shout, you who endure no birth pangs; for the children of the desolate woman are more numerous than the children of the one who is married.” 28 Now you, my friends, are children of the promise, like Isaac. 29 But just as at that time the child who was born according to the flesh persecuted the child who was born according to the Spirit, so it is now also. 30 But what does the scripture say? “Drive out the slave and her child; for the child of the slave will not share the inheritance with the child of the free woman.” 31 So then, friends, we are children, not of the slave but of the free woman.”)* the apostle mentions two covenants—the one from Sinai, bearing children of bondage (Hagar) and the other from above, Jerusalem—bearing children of freedom. The one is a covenant “by works of the law” (Gal. 2:16), demanding perfect obedience (Gal. 3:10), and by means of which (given our fallen depravity) no one can obtain eternal life (Gal. 2:16), for all who are under this covenant of law (both in its Mosaic expression and, prior to that, in its verdict of curse and death upon Adam’s posterity in paradise) perish under the sanction of the law. Meanwhile the covenant of grace (promised first in paradise after the fall, formalized in the Abrahamic covenant and the Mosaic covenant) promises life to those believing in Christ apart from works of the law (Gal. 3:22-24, 29). To be sure, the apostle’s point is to contrast the covenant of Sinai with the covenant of grace fulfilled in Christ, but it also applies to the covenant of works in paradise insofar as the Sinaitic covenant—that is, the Mosaic law—is re-enacted and renewed or republished with Israel at Sinai in the Decalogue. Thus the two covenants have reference, by necessary implication, also to the paradisal situation—hence to the covenant of works, that in contrast to the covenant of grace.

1. “The works of the law,” then, as well as being reckoned “under the law” as contrasted in the NT with faith in Christ has reference to both the Sinaitic covenant and the covenant of works (cf. Gal. 2:16; Rom. 3:27; Rom. 8:3; Rom. 6:14-15; 4:16), for the law of God isn’t one thing in paradise and something else at Sinai, even as the law that Christ fulfills on our behalf (both in his active and passive obedience) is nothing other than the same divine law that, because of our disobedience, condemns us in paradise and at Sinai. (Also cf. Rom. 8:3-4; Gal. 3:13; 4:4-5).
2. From a different angle, the covenant of works finds Scriptural support from the nature of covenants as such, for all the ingredients or elements that compose a covenant are present in the Edenic situation. Before we explore the elements of covenant, we need to give some attention to the word “covenant” itself. The term “covenant” as used in Scripture as a diverse range of meaning—a more proper or strict definition, as well as a more fluid, less strict usage. In its less strict, more fluid usage it can denote (1) *an immutable ordinance* made about a thing, such as God’s “covenant of the day” and his “covenant of the night” (Jer. 33:20), which refers to a fixed ordinance of God; and (2) *a sure and stable promise*, though not mutable (Exod. 34:10; Isa. 59:21), where God simply does something wholly apart from anything humans do; and (3) it can denote *a precept,* so that “to cut a covenant” is to give a precept (Jer. 34:13, 14), the covenant established is in fact a law declared—that is, such and such will happen stipulated (and so the decalogue is called God’s covenant).

The word “covenant,” however, has a more proper and strict usage in the Bible, where it signifies *a mutual agreement between parties,* with respect to something (so we see a covenant passed between Abraham and Mamre, Eschol, and Aner, who are called *confederates with Abraham* (Gen. 14:13, AV). Likewise we see this between Isaac and Abimelech (Gen. 26:28, 29), between David and Jonathan (1 Sam. 18:3), and this is the kind that we also see on display between God and humans. (The Greeks and Latins used the term like the Hebrews, with similar equivocation.) This covenant relationship characterizes both the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. It powerfully portrayed in the covenant between God and Abraham depicted in Gen. 15. (Even more striking is the testamentary sense of the covenant, something we will explore in connection with our discussion of the covenant of grace.)

1. To the objection that since the word “covenant” is not used in Genesis 1-3, it is speculative and unbiblical to characterize that situation between God and man in paradise as a covenant relationship, Thomas Brooks offers this reply: “Though the name be not in the Scripture, yet the thing is in the Scripture, as will evidently appear by comparing Scripture with Scripture. Though it be not positively and plainly said in the blessed Scripture that God made a covenant of works with Adam before his fall, yet, upon sundry scripture grounds and considerations, it may be sufficiently evidenced that God did make such a covenant with Adam before his fall; and therefore it is a nice cavil, and a foolish vanity, for any to make such a noise about the word covenant, and for want of the word covenant, boldly to conclude that there was no such covenant made with Adam, when the thing is lively set down in other words, though the word covenant be not expressed. . . .”[[37]](#footnote-37) More positively, the argument in support of characterizing paradise as covenantal rests in part upon the fact that all the ingredients of a covenant arrangement are present: “All the elements of a covenant are indicated in Scripture; and if the elements are present, we have not only the right but also the duty to combine them and to give the doctrine so construed an appropriate name. There are clearly two parties. God and man, entering into an agreement; there is a condition, the condition of obedience, which God imposes on man, Gen. 2:16, 17; and there is also a promise, the promise of eternal life. This is implied in the alternative of death as the result of disobedience, in such passages as Rom. 10:5 and Gal. 3:12, and in the symbolical significance of the tree of life, Gen. 3:22” (Berkhof, *Manual*, pp. 130-131).
2. Finally we point to the role of the symbolical or sacramental trees present in paradise—that is, *the* *tree of the knowledge of good and evil* and *the tree of life*. The former tree taught Adam *a posteriori* the enormity of his own evil, and thus the enormity of the goodness he yielded; and so he learned the enormity of the evil that came down upon him, and so the heights of happiness he forfeited and the depths of misery into which he plunged himself. God’s precept forewarned him, but by experience this tree, in its sacramental and symbolical character, taught him this in confirmation and support. The special probative command of God, tied to this tree, regarding something indifferent in itself, called Adam to live, not by bread alone but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil, then, is symbolic in character, serving as the sign of Adam’s trial of obedience, with the entirety of the natural law embedded within this precept—functioning as the matrix of all God’s commands. The symbolic character of this tree makes this explicit by warning of evil as a still invisible thing in a visible way. The trial of Adam bespeaks a covenant arrangement. As for the tree of life, it even more clearly functions in a sacramental manner. This tree signifies the immortality that God would have granted to man if Adam had prevailed in keeping the stipulations of the covenant of nature—hence it is called the tree *of life,* and this is inclusive of past natural life (as a divine gift), future life (as life progresses in paradise and grows into the fruition of future glory), and the eternal blessed state of glory (as it is symbolic of the eternal happiness prepared for us in heaven). Perhaps more important is its signification as typifying Christ himself, for he bestows the tree of life to his people in the paradise of God (Rev. 2:7), the tree that is in the midst of the heavenly Jerusalem unto the healing of the nations (Rev. 22:2). Witsius, with Turretin and others, sees this tree as signifying Christ himself. And more specifically, Witsius calls Christ the life of humans in every condition and the fountain of their happiness, though he is only the mediator of redemption in the covenant of grace.

The *Formula Consensus Helvetica*, canon VIII, states it this way: “Moreover the promise connected to the Covenant of Works was not a continuation only of earthly life and happiness, but the possession especially of eternal and celestial life, a life, namely, of both body and soul in heaven, if indeed man ran the course of perfect obedience, with unspeakable joy in communion with God. For not only did the Tree of Life prefigure this very thing unto Adam, but the power of the law, which, being fulfilled by Christ, who went under it in our place, awards to us nothing other than celestial life in Christ who kept the same righteousness of the law. The power of the law also threatens man with both temporal and eternal death.”

1. **Survey of Criticism**

As indicated above, within Reformed circles nowadays few doctrines are more misunderstood and misrepresented than the doctrine of the covenant of nature (also called the covenant of works, covenant of creation, covenant of life). This is true both within Dutch Reformed circles (*a la* G. C. Berkouwer, Herman Hoeksema and other Protestant Reformed pastors, and a variety of Liberated or Canadian Reformed writers) and within liberal and conservative Presbyterian circles (the former *a la* J. B. Torrance, Holmes Rolston III, and others; the latter *a la* John Murray, Norman Shepherd, and certain strong reactions against Shepherd *via* Meredith Kline, Mark Karlberg, Lee Irons, Lane Tipton, the latter mentioned names, in defending the doctrine, pushing it—so it seems to me—to another extreme). In many cases, what is attacked is a straw man, which means, if the doctrine of the covenant of works actually came to what they think it does, the criticism would be valid. Inasmuch as they have misappropriated this doctrine, misconceived it, or are reacting to someone else’s misconception and misrepresentation of the doctrine, the criticisms completely miss the target. By way of another general observation, inasmuch many critics of this doctrine are concerned to present God’s kindness and favor as a bestowal upon man in paradise, that concern (unbeknownst to the critics) is already shared and safeguarded in the right and accurate conception of the covenant of works.

**1. Dutch Reformed Critics**

*S. G. De Graaf*

Many critics of the doctrine of the covenant of works do not object to the idea of a covenant arrangement in Paradise or calling the relationship God establishes with Adam in Eden a covenant. Rather, the objection has to do with calling that covenant arrangement a covenant *of works*. For example, in his much loved work *Promise and Deliverance*,[[38]](#footnote-38) S. G. De Graaf affirms that in Genesis 2 a covenant is established between God and his image bearer, man. De Graaf says that the absence of the word covenant here “carries no weight, for all the elements of a covenant are to be found here” (P&D, I, 36). What is of more significance is that God’s covenant name is used here, Yahweh, which shows that from the beginning God is a God of covenant faithfulness. Thus De Graaf very much wants to affirm the covenant idea in Paradise, for “without covenant, there is no religion, no conscious fellowship between man and God, man would be just an instrument in God’s hand.”[[39]](#footnote-39) Man is not a mere tool to be used by God; man is a creature capable of responding to God, who can act as a covenant partner. Says De Graaf, “Without a covenant, God would have only claims and man only obligations.” However, “as soon as God gave man a promise, man also had a claim on God, namely, to hold God to that promise. And God then had an obligation toward man, namely, to fulfill that promise.” This is why we may speak of a covenant, for a formalized promise implies covenant inasmuch as a covenant is “an agreement between two parties in which the claims and obligations are spelled out.” Thus God is the initiator of the covenant in Paradise and God’s promise elevates man to the status of being his “covenant partner” (P&D, I, 36). These are most cogent observations and conform to the Reformed consensus about this doctrine. Up to this point, De Graaf has spoken as an advocate of and not as an opponent to this doctrine. His comments that follow, however, reveal him as a critic of this doctrine.

Specifically, De Graaf has concerns about calling this covenant a covenant *of works*, for he believes it is mistaken to think “man was expected to earn eternal life as a reward for doing good works, as though eternal life was man’s payment for services rendered.” Perhaps De Graaf merely wants to warn us away from the notion that human works in themselves earn blessing. For De Graaf makes this valid observation: “Because man owes everything he is and has to God, we may never speak of man earning wages paid out by God.” This in turn brings De Graaf, on these grounds, to bid us to abandon the nomenclature “covenant of works.” He opts instead for the locution, “the covenant of God’s favor.” De Graaf distinguishes favor from grace in that grace typically involves the forgiveness of sins, whereas favor expresses God’s kindness, while allowing us to reserve the word grace for salvation. God then made a covenant of favor with Adam and a covenant of grace with Christ, says De Graaf (P&D, I, 37).

From this presentation, it is not clear that De Graaf actually grasps what this covenant, in being called a covenant *of works*, actually means. Likewise, it is not clear how his own articulation of this doctrine (the covenant of God’s favor) bears the marks of consistency. For De Graaf’s view implies, on the surface, that divine favor requires no works. It seems extremely unlikely, however, that De Graaf actually wants to travel that path. He asserts that “the only demand made of Adam was that he choose consciously for the favor given him by God if he and his posterity were to abide forever in that favor” (P&D, I, 37). Adam only had to choose consciously for God’s favor. As it stands, that is a most dubious claim. In any case, what De Graaf has written certainly sounds like something must be done. There is something Adam must do in order obtain something else, namely, he must choose divine favor (“the only demand … was that he choose consciously for the favor given him by God”); and the something else to be obtained is conditioned on that choice—“… if he and his posterity were to abide forever in that favor.” So, following De Graaf, Adam must choose God’s favor in order to abide forever in God’s favor; and if he fails to do so, he forfeits both for himself and his posterity this favor, forever. How is this not subject to De Graaf’s own caricature of the doctrine of the covenant of works? How is Adam’s choosing God’s favor not payment for services rendered (to use De Graaf’s crass words)? How is meeting this demand not a work performed, a condition fulfilled, a prescription which, upon being met, issues forth in the promised reward, namely an abiding forever in God’s favor?

In fact, De Graaf cannot make clear what choosing consciously for God’s favor means, especially since he says that it is the *only demand* required of Adam. Yet no sooner does De Graaf make this claim, than he takes up the “test-command” God issued to Adam. God intended this “test-command,” says De Graaf, to usher man into a relationship of “conscious obedience,” which means man would consciously accept “the covenant” (P&R, I, 37). Notice De Graaf’s choice of words here: at stake in the covenant relationship between God and man in Paradise is that man should relate to God with “conscious obedience”—i.e., a “conscious obedience” is demanded of man, not merely a choosing for divine favor. Of course, De Graaf might mean to say that conscious obedience is the way one chooses for God’s favor. Fair enough, but now the phrase “choose divine favor” means “conscious obedience,” and obedience means doing what is required—in this case, doing God’s will, performing the works that are due to God and that we are capable of doing, for we were created to do them. De Graaf’s critique of a covenant *of works* evaporates at this point. He is chasing after the wind, for his own doctrine is (inescapably and legitimately) a covenant of works.

Having said that, it should also be noted that De Graaf is not wrong to speak of God’s favor in connection with the covenant in Paradise, for God was certainly *favorable* to Adam in Eden. In fact, the Reformed have always affirmed that the covenant established between God and man in Paradise is borne of divine favor. Adam certainly knew this favorableness of God toward him—that divine favor or kindliness is reflected in God providing a helper suitable for him, for “it is not good for the man to be alone” (Gen. 2:18). Interestingly, it was appropriate that Adam, in naming the animals, should discover for himself that he was alone, that the other creatures were not a fit match or companion for him, and that he needed one who was “meet” for him (Gen. 2:18). It was also appropriate, as De Graaf has argued, that man consciously obey God through the “test-command,” which brings about a “conscious acceptance of the covenant.” Adam had to learn to see “good” as what God commands, so that the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, though obviously good for food as such, is not for him since God declares it forbidden. Thus Adam is called to live not by bread alone (in this case, not by any fruit he is pleased to eat) but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord (cf. Deut. 8:3; Matt. 4:4). Thus, regarding the “test-command,” De Graaf is correct to say, “Only by facing the possibility of a conflict could he learn to choose consciously” (P&D, I, 37). But De Graaf is mistaken in thinking that by a mere change in terms—“the covenant of favor”—he has improved upon the classic doctrine of the covenant of works. De Graaf errs in characterizing—i.e., caricaturing—the covenant of works as some kind of *quid pro quo* relationship, the earning of eternal life as reward for doing good works. Perhaps he only wants to avoid misunderstanding, for the idea of “works” often has been tied to notions of “earned reward” and “wages paid for work rendered”—hence his remarks suggesting that it may be “wiser” to look for other terminology. This is understandable. What is not understandable is De Graaf’s failure to forthrightly declare that the “strict merit” or “earned wage” conception of the doctrine of the covenant of works is a gross distortion, an unrecognizable false portrait inasmuch as this doctrine has never taught an *earning* of reward or *meriting* of blessing or some kind of works righteousness. Failure to make this point slanders a tradition, for the consensus formulation of this doctrine, finding confessional expression, has never taught strict merit or earned favor or righteousness achieved by works, for the human creature cannot merit anything before God.

*G. C. Berkouwer*

We begin by examining G. C. Berkouwer’s critique of this doctrine; he well represents the misappropriation of this doctrine, mostly reacting to those who misconceive but advocate the doctrine.

Berkouwer rightly observes the following: “Man’s original life under God’s rule cannot be regarded, for even a moment, apart from God’s love and communion. Within that communion man was subjected to God’s holy and good command; furthermore, because of that communion the commandment expresses his lordship over *life*. Therefore, any discussion of the *usus legis*, in its various dimensions, is only conceivable in terms of this absolute goodness of God’s commandment for creaturely man. The fact that this accent was sounded so frequently in Reformation and post-Reformation times is no evidence of the darkening of the Gospel, and is no recognition of a ‘legal order’ above or before the ‘order of grace.’ What we see in this accent is only the *enigmatic nature* of guilt in the face of God’s loving communion or the goodness of his rule” (*Sin,* pp. 206-207). Again Berkouwer is completely correct, reflecting the consensus position among the Reformed (whether he realizes it or not), when he writes: “Because of that fact we can never construe an antithesis between the covenant of ‘works’ and ‘grace.’ We 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. In that case, we lose sight of the fact that man’s obedience to God’s command can never be different from a thankful response to God’s own fellowship” (*Sin*, p. 207). That is, Berkouwer is correct in opposing an antipathy between the covenant of works and divine grace; but he is mistaken if he thinks in no sense at all an antipathy can exist between the covenant of works and *the covenant of grace.*

However, where Berkouwer more explicitly goes astray (as does S. G. De Graaf) is in thinking that the covenant of works is *unto obtaining God’s grace and favor, his love and communion.* That is not the doctrine, never has been! Indeed, both of these writers rightly point out that man already possesses these gifts. The question involves whether the *fullness* of human blessing in the way of fellowship with God is already attained. Classic Reformed theology, from Zwingli, Calvin, and Bullinger onward hold to some sort of paradisal eschatology—in other words, there is more and even better blessing on the way. The reason for this position will be considered below. For now our concern is simply to examine the criticisms of this doctrine (as it is perceived by certain critics).

Berkouwer follows De Graaf in being displeased with the nomenclature “covenant of works” and “covenant of grace.” The reason is simple enough: it brings about a “merit” versus “grace” paradigm within the divine/human relationship. In all fairness to this concern, there have been at least a few more recent theologians who, at times, fell into using merit language without nuance or careful definition. Berkouwer, therefore writes: “Vainly do we search the Scriptures for any such antithesis in the *covenant* of works and grace. . . . [W]e find no indication that these terms point to alternative paths which were once laid out by God. Rather they point us to a much more radical antithesis. The way of works is condemned by God because it is *not the way of God”* (*Sin*, p. 208). Essentially Berkouwer is concerned that the doctrine of the covenant of works not be conceived as *human achievement* before God and the means for *obtaining divine favor*. This then casts the paradisal relationship between God and humans as a legal relationship *apart from fellowship with God.* Berkouwer is not denying that commandment or law is present in the original paradise situation; but he is burdened that we see the divine law functioning *within divine fellowship with his human creature*, “where a man shares in God’s favor and is thus enjoined to abide in his love” (*Sin*, p. 209). Berkouwer (rightly!) does not want the divine commandment severed from the bond of communion between God and man, for this empties the law of its meaning.

The question we raise concerning Berkouwer and De Graaf is this: Are they being fair to the Reformed tradition in their criticisms? Have they actually understood the doctrine they are criticizing? Or are they reacting to certain misrepresentations of it and their own misconception of it? I remain quite certain that the latter is the case.

*Herman Hoeksema*

We next turn to the criticisms of the one time leader of the Protestant Reformed Churches, Herman Hoeksema.

Hoeksema strongly opposes this doctrine, and uses Charles Hodge as his foil for this topic, stating that the Princeton theologian has “a rather elaborate discussion of this covenant” (*Reformed Dogmatics*, pp. 214ff.). In fact, Hodge’s exposition of this doctrine is rather truncated (all of six pages) given the size and scope of his three-volume systematic theology, and what is more, with all due respect for Hodge, he is not the best representative of the Reformed tradition on this point. Why not interact with Herman Bavinck on this topic, especially given Hoeksema’s own Dutch Reformed context? Or why not carefully examine the Westminster Confession on this doctrine and representative seventeenth-century English theologians in the Westminster tradition? I strongly suspect that Hoeksema chose Hodge as an opponent because his view was less fulsome and not as clearly and carefully argued as that of Bavinck or the older writers, which more clearly reflect the traditional statement of the doctrine.

In any case, Hoeksema’s objections to the doctrine may be summarized as follows: (1) For Hoeksema, the doctrine of the covenant of works does not rest on any express declaration of the Scriptures. He is not denying a paradisal covenant is scripturally defensible, he is denying that the doctrine of the covenant *of works* (as he perceives it) is expressly taught in the Bible. The problem here is that Hoeksema hasn’t even begun to explore what the biblical case for the classic Reformed doctrine is. He simply declares that it is unbiblical. We simply declare him to be wrong on this point.

(2) According to Hoeksema, the doctrine wrongly supposes that had Adam not fallen into sin there would have come a moment in his life when the period of probation was finished and when the promise contained in the covenant would have been fulfilled to him, so that he would have entered into immortality and eternal life—thus Adam would have been changed. This view, says Hoeksema, erroneously thinks that God would have had some other purpose than Adam’s fall and redemption in Christ. Thus Hoeksema argues that God never promises anything that is not possible of being fulfilled within his eternal counsel. Since Adam’s heavenly reward, if obedient, was not part of God’s eternal counsel, it therefore was never promised. In response to Hoeksema concerning this point, we find his criticism as nothing less than incredulous. We may not think in terms of hypotheticals or subjunctives?—*if Adam had not fallen into sin, the following would have resulted. . . .* Contrary to Hoeksema, proposing hypotheticals isn’t to place God at cross-purposes with himself or to deny the divine decree. It is only to demonstrate that the heavenly glory bestowed to fallen sinners in Christ is a fulfillment of God’s intention for man all along, even if Adam had not fallen into sin. To deny this is to advocate the worse kind of dualism—earthly paradise versus heavenly glory. Truly here Hoeksema is tilting at windmills.

(3) Although Hoeksema readily grants that the relation between God and Adam in the state of righteousness was a covenant relation, he denies that this covenant should be an established *agreement* between Adam and his Creator, *consisting of a condition, a promise, and a penalty, and that it was essentially a means whereby Adam might work himself up to the highest state of eternal life and heavenly glory that is now attained by the believers in Christ*. This is without biblical support, argues Hoeksema. There is no proof in Scripture for the contention that God gave to Adam the promise of eternal life *if he should obey that particular commandment of God*. Adam’s obedience would not bring him to glory and immortality, though he states that “Adam might have lived everlastingly in his earthly state” and “he might have continued to eat of the tree of life and lived forever. . . .” (p. 217). Notice what Hoeksema says—he *might have lived everlastingly in his earthly state* and *might have continued to eat of the tree of life and lived forever.* Now he is using subjunctives and hypotheticals himself—something he earlier denounced. Notice, too, although obedience does not bring Adam to glory and immortality, according to Hoeksema, eating of the tree of life apparently grants continual paradisal life. We ask: Is eating of the tree of life an obedient act? Is it purposeless? Surely, as Hoeksema conceives of it, eating of the tree of life is not (in that context) a disobedient act. Is eating of the tree of life, then, an *ex opere operato* sacrament? What Reformed theologians own that notion? More to the point, however, the covenant agreement is not to be conceived as an agreement between two equals. It isn’t. It is between the sovereign God who may rightly propose (and impose) this covenant, with conditions, and man, who in a state of integrity readily and cheerfully concurs. It is *God’s covenant—and in its initiation it is entirely monopleuric or unilateral.* Hoeksema fails to reckon with the fact that a covenant arrangement between *God* and man is a divine accommodation to a human concept—which may be likened (in some respects) to human beings covenanting with a gnat.

(4) Hoeksema states that there is no covenant *agreement* between God and Adam. A command is not a covenant; nor does the divine command bring with it the condition unto eternal life. Man by law-keeping can never merit a special reward from God or obtain a higher and heavenly life and glory. Hoeksema’s claim is false inasmuch as God can graciously reward human works and in fact does, even according to the Heidelberg Catechism (Q/A 63). But as for his criticism that the covenant is not an agreement with conditions, as noted above, he once more demonstrates that he does not understand in what sense Reformed theologians have called a covenant between God and man an agreement, and in what sense the covenant is conditional. Moreover, how does Hoeksema escape conditions in the divine/human relationship? As soon as it is acknowledged that man owes obedience to God and that there is penalty for failure to render such obedience, a condition for continuing fellowship with God has been established. Hoeksema cannot deny this without forfeiting God’s righteousness and holiness. When did it become possible for any human being to sin against God with impunity? As is obvious, Hoeksema’s own position, not to mention his critique, is ill-informed, inconsistent, poorly conceived, and speculative, not to mention without any Reformed pedigree, and simply mistaken.

(5) Hoeksema believes, as observed above, that it is quite impossible that man should merit a special reward with God. He says that obedience to God is an obligation and that obedience is its own reward—being life and joy. There is no merit, for man never merits anything with God. The problem, again, is that Hoeksema, like Berkouwer and De Graaf, are importing a notion of merit into the doctrine of the covenant of works that is foreign to the doctrine itself. Of course obedience is its own reward, for we were made in God’s image for fellowship with God. The question at issue is one of paradisal eschatology and probationary trial. Hoeksema wants to identify covenant and creation, arguing that if this isn’t done then covenant becomes something incidental and additional to man’s life in relation to God. What Hoeksema fails to reckon with is that the doctrine of the covenant of works is burdened to declare that humans are altogether without rights before God unless God grant them rights. God is under no obligation to bless Adam even in paradisal life as his image bearer, capable of a unique and moral relationship with God, *unless* God graciously bestow to him this privilege. Hoeksema represents the covenant of works as a mere “means to an end,” namely heavenly glory. Against that notion he argues instead that the covenant relationship is an end in itself, namely fellowship with God and his glory. But Hoeksema equivocates here. For the “heavenly glory” he disputes he conceives of as purely a human and selfish end, not as part of the fabric of the divine/human covenant relationship itself. He is mistaken, for the pathway of heavenly blessing isn’t merely for man’s benefit, but also for God’s glory, which is man’s chief end. What is more, the overwhelming majority of the Reformed, from Calvin onward, have always argued for a fuller, richer, transition from paradisal mutability and probation to heavenly immutability and perfect fellowship (see, e.g., Calvin, *Inst.* 2.1.4). Hoeksema fails to distinguish the Creator/creature relationship—where God is under no obligation to bless man with anything—and the covenant relationship—where God has imposed upon himself, out of his goodness and kindness, to bless humans in the way of obedience to him (see WCF, chapt. VII:1-2). What is more, the blessing isn’t according to merit in any strict or proper definition of the term since the blessing bestowed is completely gracious or unmerited and not commensurate with the work performed. Hoeksema is misinformed and wholly mistaken.

(6) God never promises anything that is not possible of being fulfilled within his eternal counsel. Since Adam’s heavenly reward, if obedient, was not part of God’s eternal counsel, it therefore was never promised. (See comments under #2 above.)

(7) Finally, Hoeksema says that this doctrine is unworthy of God, for it portrays the work of God as a failure to a great extent. It proposes that an entire human race would have been blessed had Adam obeyed the stipulation, but now, through Christ, only a part of that race is saved. God suffers heavy loses. God is a failure of sorts. If God could have blessed the human race through Adam, then he would have, and not chosen the long and deep way through the death of his Son, says Hoeksema. Heavenly glory is only obtainable through Christ, never in any other way, not even hypothetically. Therefore the doctrine of the covenant of works must be condemned as unscriptural. Nonetheless, says Hoeksema, the situation in Gen. 1-3 was a covenant relationship (cf. Hos. 6:7). But this covenant relation isn’t incidental but fundamental, that is, it is established by virtue of creation, being constituted by Adam being made in the image of God. Moreover, it isn’t an agreement; rather, it is a living relationship of fellowship and friendship.

Our reply can be brief. Hoeksema denies divine freedom, for, if God chooses to create human beings, then *he can only do so* by making them to be covenant image bearers who *must* fall and *must* be saved by Christ and *must* be ushered to heavenly glory *on no other terms* and *in no other way*. This erroneous doctrine is without any Reformed pedigree and is grossly unbiblical. Moreover, how is the word “covenant” being defined by Hoeksema if any idea of agreement, with mutual obligations and sanctions is voided from the word? Where is the biblical defense for that? Hoeksema seems to think he can import any meaning he wishes into the word “covenant,” despise its usage and meaning in the Bible. Finally, if creation is covenant, as Hoeksema insists, then God’s command forbiding Adam rights to the Tree of knowledge, with its threatened sanction, is superfluous and unnecessary. If, as constituted, Adam is in covenant, then “covenant” is a term without meaning or content. In short, Hoeksema proposes numerous *false dichotomies*: divine decree versus hypotheticals; covenant as fellowship and friendship with God versus covenant as requiring obedience with God, threatening death in the way of disobedience; covenant as an end in itself versus covenant as a pathway to the flowering of blessing with God.

Thus, after kicking up much theological dust over the covenant of works, Hoeksema (like John Murray whose views we’ll consider below), still affirms a covenant between God and Adam in paradise, still affirms that Adam is the head and representative of the human race to descend from him, still affirms that God gave a probationary command to Adam in order to test his obedience, that Adam’s disobedience to that command brought sin, death, and condemnation into the world, and so Hoeksema still affirms that Adam was a type of Christ, a second Adam, through whom we are delivered from the sad results of the first Adam’s sin (*RD,* 220). In light of that, I agree with John Bolt who aptly states: “This all seems to me like like a lot of unnecessary evasive dancing, so much exegetical ‘rope-a-dope’ ” (“Why the Covenant of Works is a Necessary Doctrine,” in *By Faith Alone: Answering the Challenges to the Doctrine of Justification*, Gary L. W. Johnson and Guy P. Waters, eds. [Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007], 183-4).

*C. Van der Waal & C. Stam*

Other opponents of this doctrine include Dutch Reformed writers from the Liberated churches, like C. Van der Waal (*The Covenantal Gospel*, pp. 47-64) and C. Stam (*The Covenant of Love*, 39ff.; 47ff.). Admittedly, these authors may not be regarded as weighty theologians. But inasmuch as they have produced books that lay people and pastors are likely to read, their views should be considered. Van der Waal (who was a minister in the Liberated Reformed Churches in the Netherlands) sets the sixteenth-century confessions against the seventeenth-century confessions. This worn-out tactic, common to Barthian and neo-orthodox theologians as well, is dubious in the extreme and has been wholly discredited in the last thirty years through careful scholarship in the original sources. It is also part of the ploy of pitting Calvin against the Calvinists. Sadly (for I do not enjoy saying this), Van der Waal is embarrassingly misinformed on what the traditional Reformed doctrine comes to; moreover, his criticisms are couched in an entire framework of misapprehension. He rightly reminds readers that the narrative in Genesis 1-3 is part of Torah, i.e., it is part of the five books of Moses, divine revelation to God’s covenant people, Israel. But, for Van der Waal, that comes to mean that the events in Genesis 1-3 cannot have a general application, or teach something principial about God and human beings and their relation. He tosses around words like “scholastic,” “neoplatonic,” and “humanistic” with little understanding, mostly leaning on an ill-informed secondary source, authored by N. Diemer.

More to the point, Van der Waal, like Hoeksema, does not deny the presence of a covenant relationship in the original Edenic situation. But he does not allow Adam to be anything more than an individual, a particular and individual man, not *adam—*the man—who as the public person is representative of the human race (apparently he has not thought through the implications of the apostle’s statements in Romans 5:12ff. pertaining to the parallel between Adam and Christ as the respective heads of the human race).

In any case, what is of major import for Van der Waal (as we saw was the case for Hoeksema) is that this covenant arrangement should be called and conceived of as a covenant *of works.* The notion that Adam could *earn* salvation, that this covenant was based on works and not on *grace*, Van der Waal judges to be quite erroneous. Similarly erroneous for Van der Waal is the idea that this arrangement would be called a covenant of *nature*—as if man can live before God by a law of nature inscribed upon the human heart. Obedience to this law would then mean that Adam obtains *righteousness through works!* Says Van der Waal, “This notion must be rejected radically.” Even more, in attacking the Westminster Confession on this topic, Van der Waal acts as if the Westminster doctrine is a uniquely English product. (Thus he is apparently and wholly unaware that the Dutch tradition developed this doctrine as thoroughly as any, and that some of the best presentations of the doctrine are of Dutch origin.) Hence he writes the following: “Adam was not created to be a legitimate Pharisee, Pelagian, or Remonstrant. When Israel read Genesis 1 and 2, it had no reason to think: ‘See, here we have the ideal person, building his own salvation out of obedience to the law.’ And the fact that seventeenth-century Puritans have actually made Adam into just such a rational creature, who with the innate divine and legal knowledge could work out his own salvation, has played into the hands of Descartes and of rationalism, as well as of work-holiness and of a perfectionism, but in fact it has strained the *gospel*.” Sadly, these remarks of Van der Waal, like Hoeksema’s, border on a flagrant violation of the ninth commandment, for they truly bear false witness to and slander an entire tradition. Van der Waal makes no attempt to document his charges other than to quote and misperceive the Westminster Confession. We will return to this below, for now it is enough to say that Van der Waal is jealous to deny that man may *merit* anything before God.

Clarence Stam, a Canadian Reformed minister, is another popular author who misunderstands the classic doctrine of the covenant of works. While he argues cogently for a paradisal covenant, calling it a covenant with mankind, he opposes the idea that there is a pre-fall covenant *of works* in distinction from a post-fall covenant *of grace.* “This implies,” says Stam, “that before the fall man had to earn something, or at least show himself worthy of obtaining more than he had. But now, after the fall, since he lost the ability to earn anything, man can only live by grace.” Stam goes on to ask this question: “Has our relationship with God ever been built on human works, achievement, or merit? Did our works in the past and do they in the present in any way determine the relationship itself? Our works—or the lack of them—indeed influence the relationship with God and the way it functions at a given moment, but is it ever based on our works or always solely on his grace towards us?”

Stam has altogether confused the discussion at this point, for he is alleging that the doctrine of the covenant of works means that the covenant relationship with God is established by human works, a notion he rightly rejects. A frank question is in order at this point, however: What Reformed theologian, advocating the doctrine of the covenant of works, ever said that man’s works establish the covenant with God? Stam doesn’t offer up any theologian who advocates such a notion. What is more, he earlier quotes Herman Bavinck with approval (when Bavinck concludes that Hosea 6:7 is a legitimate proof-text for the doctrine of a pre-fall covenant between God and humans), admiring his careful theological and exegetical scholarship. Bavinck, however, argues that the pre-fall covenant was a covenant of works, but nowhere suggests that human works compose the covenant. Stam is sparring with the wind! His enemy, as he conceives of it, doesn’t exist—not if that enemy is supposed to be the traditional doctrine of the covenant of works.

Meanwhile, Stam is jealous to fend off any notion of works in the achievement of human salvation. Man never earns blessing before God. Thus the fall into sin was not a matter of Adam failing to do certain works (apparently obedience to God’s commandments isn’t a work in Stam’s definition of terms); rather, the fall into sin was rebellion and unfaithfulness; it was breaking of the covenant. In whatever way Adam’s sin is defined, his sin is not, for Stam, a failure to do something (a work!). Stam also dislikes any notion of a covenant eschatology in the paradisal situation. Adam and Eve were simply to remain obedient so that they, along with their descendants, would then abide, apparently forever, under the trial of paradise—ever in a state of *posse peccare et posse non peccare.* To escape this notion, Stam denies that a probationary period exists in paradise at all. That which is created good does not need to be tested, he says.

This is truly astonishing. Stam not only denies a *probationary period* that could issue forth into further blessing for Adam and his descendents, he denies that Adam was ever tested at all. In short, Adam is the recipient of life and blessing by God’s grace; now he must keep the stipulations of the covenant in order to continue in his paradisal situation. His position seems to come to this: “In the covenant by divine grace; kept in the covenant by human obedience.” But, for Stam, this obedience isn’t to receive the tag “works,” that is, somehow it isn’t to be construed as works. Thus, summarizing his view again, which seems to be advocated by quite a number of Liberated and Canadian Reformed pastors, Adam wasn’t under probation, ever! This means he does not move from a state of *posse peccare* to a state of *non posse peccare.* Instead Adam is forever under the threat of eternal damnation, though he obey for one billion years and another billion; he is always *posse peccare.* “Indeed, in paradise the basic rule and structure of the covenant was revealed: God’s ongoing blessing upon obedience and God’s certain wrath on disobedience. So it has always been, and so it will always be.” “Blessing on obedience,” says Stam—and that isn’t a doctrine of works?

Amazing! Setting out to deny the covenant of works, Stam has managed to produce a doctrine of the covenant of works that is colossally more “merit-making” and “human-centered” than anything scarcely conceived by the classic Reformed position. For himself, Stam wishes to call the covenant in paradise “the covenant of love”—hence the title of his book. He gets this beautiful phrase from Nehemiah 1:5: “Then I said: ‘O Lord, God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps *his covenant of love* with those who love him and obey his commands’ “ (NIV). The Hebrew, however, actually says “who keeps covenant and steadfast love” (ds,x,w” tyrIB.h; rmevo). What is more, this phrase refers to the legal covenant under Moses, which is itself subsumed under the covenant of grace. We query whether Stam wishes to make any distinction at all between the pre-fall and post-fall situation of man’s relationship with God.

**2. Presbyterian (Barthian) Critics**

*J. B. Torrance & Holmes Rolston III*

One of the most outspoken critics of the idea of the covenant of works has been James B. Torrance. He assesses this movement as a serious aberration from Calvin’s theology, introducing the notion of conditions to man’s relationship with God, as if the covenant were more of a contract than a covenant, and as if the covenant parties are mutually obligated to one another—each needing to meet certain conditions for some future blessing to result.

In back of Torrance’s criticism looms the theology of Karl Barth. Torrance argues that God’s covenant with humans is unconditional, and therefore he sets the language of love against the language of contract. “There is no such thing as conditional love in God or in man, and that fact is enshrined in the theological concept of ‘a covenant of love’. It is precisely this which makes a covenant so different from a *contract.*”[[40]](#footnote-40) For Torrance, then, a covenant must be radically opposed to a contract; and God’s dealings with humans are covenantal, never contractual. “*The God of the Bible is a Covenant-God and not a contract-god*.”[[41]](#footnote-41) His covenant with men is “unilateral,” which means that God takes the initiative, according to his love, to effect redemption *per Christum* and *in Christo.* Torrance believes that his own view is Calvin’s as well. Everything in the project of redemption has been completed or accomplished by Christ in the flesh. The work of the Holy Spirit in bringing persons to faith is “to make us cognitively aware (*cognitio*) of *what we already are in Christ* (Comm. on *John* 10,8ff.).”[[42]](#footnote-42)

In affirming the unconditionality of the covenant, Torrance makes the commonplace claim that God’s kindly disposition toward sinners is without any consideration of their merit or worth before him. However, he also asserts that God’s covenant with humans is “*unconditional* in the costly claims it makes upon us.” Apparently what Torrance means by this remark is that the claims were costly for God in giving Christ for sinners, but the claims upon sinners are unconditional—and thus not costly to them. Having stated matters in this way, Torrance admits that “cheap grace” and “antinomianism” lurk nearby—and both must be avoided. But the larger concern for Torrance is the problem of conditional covenant, conditional grace, and legalism. For legalism turns God’s gracious covenant into a contract. Whereas the biblical model places indicatives prior to imperatives, contract religion—that is, legalism—reverses the order and places imperatives ahead of indicatives.[[43]](#footnote-43) Without any documentation, Torrance claims that seventeenth century theology, due to the desire for civil and religious liberty, led to “contractual ways of thinking about God’s relation to men, and legalistic interpretations of Calvinism which were to leave an unhappy legacy in much Scottish religion, [and] which was to disturb many of Scotland’s ablest theologians in the years to come.”[[44]](#footnote-44)

Torrance believes that the entire project of federal theology is “built upon a deep-seated *confusion between a covenant and a contract*,” which is nothing less than “a failure to recognise that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is a covenant-God and not a contract-God.” This isn’t to deny, writes Torrance, that a covenant embraces obligations, promises, and warnings. “But the obligations of the grace are not conditions of grace, and it is false in Christian theology to articulate moral obligation in contractual terms.”[[45]](#footnote-45) The problem with this scheme is that it makes law *prior to* grace, whereas the biblical picture, according to Torrance, is the reverse. Grace is prior to law; and this is the case not only with respect to human redemption, but also creation. The “grammar of creation” is that of grace, which means the two covenant schema is altogether foreign to the Bible, even as it is foreign to Calvin’s theology.[[46]](#footnote-46)

Torrance’s most fundamental critique of federal Calvinism is that it is not a species of (Barthian) universalism. He views it as erroneous to assert that God relates to *all* people with justice but to *some* people with love or grace.[[47]](#footnote-47) This makes the attribute of justice to be more primary than God’s attribute of love. What is more, federalism sets up “a *radical dichotomy between the sphere of Nature and the sphere of Grace*, of natural law and the Gospel, with the result that the relationship between the Church and the world, Church and State, is no longer understood Christologically as in the Greek Fathers and basically in Calvin and Knox, but in terms of Gospel and natural law.” This is to sink back into the medieval dichotomy where grace not only presupposes nature but is necessary for its perfection. Meanwhile with the rise of federalism, argues Torrance, we see the simultaneous emphasis upon double predestination wherein “election precedes grace,” such that Christ’s person and work are “subordinated to the doctrine of the decrees.” Now the project of redemption is reduced to the execution of the decrees for the salvation of the elect. The most prominent practical and pastoral issue becomes determining whether one is among the elect or not; hence the “practical syllogism” (*syllogismus practicus*) occupies center stage in Puritan theology. Against Calvin and the early Reformers, with the emergence of federalism (in line with the supralapsarianism of Beza, Gomarus, Perkins, Samuel Rutherford and the dominant Puritan tradition), faith becomes a “reflex” act, looking for evidences in oneself for his or her salvation, or tokens of being elect.[[48]](#footnote-48)

This federal Calvinism, according to Torrance, received confessional status among the Reformed, at least in a milder form, in the Westminster Confession (1647).[[49]](#footnote-49) One of the major weaknesses of these documents, avers Torrance, is precisely the federal theology found within them. Although the doctrine of God as formulated and depicted in the Westminster Confession there is clear evidence that an Augustinian conception of God prevails—God is sovereign and God is free—nonetheless the confession fails in that it stresses that God’s *will* is sovereign and free versus teaching that God’s *being* is freedom. The Being of God means that he is “a God of Love whose freedom is always the freedom of his love.” The principal problem with federalism, then, with its conception of double predestination, is that “God is loving *toward* some men but not essentially *in his Being*.” This scheme gives us an “arbitrary God” and a “contract God.” In short, “The federal scheme has abandoned the Irenaean doctrine of recapitulation of all things in Christ,” and has adopted instead “a Western Nature-Grace model.”[[50]](#footnote-50) As part of the network of the western theological tradition, federal Calvinism views grace as too much separated from Christ, who merely purchases benefits or “graces” for sinners, with the dominant idea becoming how to obtain grace. Similar ideas relate to grace as something quantitative, being for some (the elect) but not for all (the reprobate)—and even then grace is bestowed upon the elect according to medieval notions of merit. What is obscured in federal theology, the Westminster Confession being a case in point, is that God’s grace means “God giving himself in love in Christ, and doing for us in Christ what we cannot do for ourselves.” Instead of a Christological focus, the accent is anthropological, as if grace is merely “the God-given answer to human need.”[[51]](#footnote-51) “The whole focus of attention moves away from *what Christ has done for us* and for all men, to *what we have to do* IF we would be (or know that we are) in covenant with God.”[[52]](#footnote-52)

“The very distinction [between a covenant of works and a covenant of grace] implies the confusion between a *covenant* and a *contract*—the one Latin word *foedus* meaning both and hence obscuring the distinction.” In fact, what is fundamentally in error in the federal system is that grace is impoverished, for there is

a shift of emphasis from what God has so freely and unconditionally done for all men in Christ, to a more subjective interest in what we have to do—to our need for repentance, personal covenanting, obedience, subjective grounds for assurance, closing with Christ, signing the covenants, keeping the sabbath, a preoccupation with election and the outward evidences of election.[[53]](#footnote-53)

Yet Torrance also acknowledges in another place that the conditions of the covenant are accomplished by Christ on behalf of the elect. Nonetheless the entire scheme of a covenant of works “implies that God is a contract-God, and denies that God is related to all men in Love (Agape).”[[54]](#footnote-54) Torrance thinks he is contrasting Calvin’s doctrine with seventeenth-century federalism when he writes

For Calvin, all God’s dealings with men are those of grace, both in Creation and in Redemption. They flow from the loving heart of the Father. The two poles of his thought are grace and glory—from grace to glory. There has been only *one eternal covenant of grace* promised in the Old Testament and fulfilled in Christ. ‘Old’ and ‘New’ do not mean two covenants but two forms of the one eternal covenant—the central theme of Book Two of the *Institutes.*[[55]](#footnote-55)

Torrance’s reading of Calvin can be contested at numerous points, even as his reading of Reformed federalism is subject to serious disputation.

The most vehement opponent of covenant theology in North America probably has been Holmes Rolston III. Rolston scores covenant theology for introducing a dual covenant formulation, especially its notion of a covenant of works. This covenant, says Rolston, is “based on divine *law* and *justice*; it is a *legal*, in contrast to an *evangelical*, covenant.”[[56]](#footnote-56) While Rolston acknowledges that federal writers spoke of merit *ex pacto*, he believes that the locution “covenant of works” had a “very deadening effect on anything said about grace” in connection with this covenant. Inasmuch as the covenant of works cannot be abolished and is established for perpetuity means that God fundamentally deals with humans on the basis of “eternal principles of justice” that are still in force.[[57]](#footnote-57) Thus, even though God also institutes the covenant of grace for man’s salvation, the whole theological enterprise of federal theology “remains colored by the primal covenant.” The covenant of works “is the polestar by which we traverse all religious terrain; it fixes the coordinates of our theological geography.”[[58]](#footnote-58) What is to be rejected at root is the notion that man’s primal relationship with God is that of law and justice, of demand and reward, of legal requirements and conditions instead of God’s irrevocable love and grace.[[59]](#footnote-59) Rolston also argues, given the primacy of the covenant of works, that Reformed anthropology is locked into a “concept of duty,” which again is a theme alien to Calvin.[[60]](#footnote-60) The Westminster Confession, Rolston maintains, sets forth the scheme: “law, law broken, then grace,” which is contrary to Calvin’s vision, namely “grace, grace lost in ingratitude, and grace restored.”[[61]](#footnote-61) A simple question for Rolson is this: How can grace be lost? And if God’s grace can be lost, can be lost again, and again, and again? Moreover, why should law and grace be set in opposition to one another?

A Conservative Presbyterian Critic: *John Murray*

The last Presbyterian critic of (the WCF’s formulation of) the doctrine of the covenant of works whom we wish to consider is John Murray. Murray is a faithful exponent of the system of doctrine contained in the Westminster Standards, but he finds himself out of sympathy with this feature of those documents. Thus he seeks to offer an alternative formulation of the basic content and features of the doctrine, while avoiding the use of the term “covenant.”

Murray’s rejection of the doctrine of the covenant of works stems from his definition of the word “covenant.” According to Murray, “covenant” always expresses a gracious disposition of God toward the partner with whom he covenants, and inasmuch as the covenant of works does not bespeak this portrait, the paradisal situation may not be considered as a covenant relationship. We get a sense of this in his article on “Covenant Theology” (see *The Encyclopedia of Christianity* [Marshallton: National Foundation for Christian Education, 1972], 199-216) and especially in his article “The Adamic Administration” (see his *Collected Writings*, vol. 2 [Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1977], pp. 47-59). Murray believes that the language of covenant must be reserved for God’s post-fall dealings with the sinful creature. His critique is mostly semantic. Notice his definition and exposition of this “Adamic administration”: “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* 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’ (G. Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 22f.)” (p. 49).

Murray’s own formulation of the paradisal administration, however, is not a matter of mere semantics. Murray wants to avoid altogether the use of the term “works” in speaking about the Adamic administration; instead, he wants to argue that this administration is “sovereignly dispensed by God” and is “not a contract or compact,” for “Sovereign disposition is its patent characteristic” (p. 50). (Murray seems to be oblivious to the fact that Scripture itself uses the term covenant for a sovereign administration.) Like others, Murray thinks that the language “covenant of works” fails to do justice to the “elements of grace entering into the administration” in paradise. 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 to be such as 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 but would be an expression of God’s undeserved favor. (Note: In these remarks and the concerns behind them, Murray is actually reflecting the classic discussion.)

Consistent with this 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 commonplace 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” (p. 50). Murray does not want to admit that the legal requirement of obedience is integral to the Mosaic economy and the post-fall covenant of grace. Whereas the older federal theology regards this legal requirement to be a feature of the Mosaic economy within the covenant of grace, with the decalogue being a more detailed expression of God’s natural law imprinted upon human nature, and so in that sense imposing the stipulation of the covenant of works upon sinners—do this and you shall live—, Murray wants to distinguish the natural obligation of obedience and the probationary obedience of the Adamic administration. How he is able to parcel these out is unclear to me. But Murray’s move here has consequent implications for soteriology, for he denies that Christ fulfills the stipulations of the covenant of works in his redemptive work: “The obedience Christ rendered fulfilled the obedience in which Adam failed. 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” (p. 58). While Murray is partly correct in saying this, he is also partly incorrect, for surely Christ *dies for sinners, and the penalty of death is the negative sanction of the covenant of works and the Mosaic law. If Christ isn’t dying in the place of sinners redemptively, according to the stipulation of the covenant of works (or Adamic administration), as well as the decalogue, then why does he die at all? Inasmuch as Murray does not deny the classic Reformed doctrine of atonement, but champions it, even as he affirms the active and passive obedience of Christ unto our justification, his remarks here aren’t particularly helpful, but harmful.*

In further reply to Murray, we may simply state that, like so many others, he misrepresents the federal scheme at certain points, and also fails to consider the implications of its abandonment. His own preferred term to covenant is “Adamic administration,” which has no biblical support and is wholly non-descriptive—it certainly doesn’t bespeak a gracious relationship. Moreover, Murray, in giving content to this locution, loads it with covenant content.

Another objectionable feature of Murray’s discussion is his separation of natural obligation from probationary obedience. Does Murray actually want to suggest that Adam would have remained unfallen had he fulfilled the probationary command while violating his natural obligation before God and vice versa? The only option left to him is to deny the existence of a natural obligation altogether, but if that is the case, why are Gentile unbelievers a law unto themselves and condemned for not living up to the law of nature, imprinted upon them, being written on their hearts (cf. Rom. 2:14, 15)? In fact, Murray does not deny the law of nature, for its biblical validity is difficult to deny and it has long been advocated by the Reformed. His thought does not bear the marks of consistency at this point, and hardly represents an improvement upon traditional federal theology.[[62]](#footnote-62)

Sadly, though Murray’s tinkering with the doctrine of the covenant of works did not have immediate negative repercussions in his own theology (though hints of trouble are on the way relative to soteriology and Christ’s work), it is arguably the case that certain of his students, Norman Shepherd, for example, developed his ideas further and have used them to undermine the active and passive obedience of Christ in the work of redemption and, likewise, have compromised the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

We have examined these diverse writers not because all of them are serious theologians of weight, but to illustrate the gross misrepresentation and sad misunderstanding of the doctrine of the covenant of works current within Reformed circles today.

**E. Concluding Observations**

**1. Regarding merit**. Whether we are speaking of the covenant of works or of the covenant of grace, God’s goodness comes to the foreground. Since the question of human merit emerges as a prominent concern among critics of this doctrine, we do well to offer a brief clarification and elaboration on what the covenant of works comes to with respect to the question of merit.

First and foremost it must be stated that inasmuch as some federal theologians are not averse to using the term merit, that does not mean that they are advocating parity between human works and divine reward. On the contrary, merit is used in the technical sense of *ex pacto* merit, not condign merit or congruent merit. *Ex pacto* merit simply means that the blessing bestowed upon human works is *from the covenant arrangement itself*, meaning, it is graciously rewarded. It does not mean that there is any sort of worthiness to human works which in themselves make God man’s debtor or that the reward given is earned or achieved. It simply means that the covenant stipulation has been fulfilled and the gracious reward will be bestowed, for God is true to his word and true to himself. He keeps his promises. As William Ames says, “In this covenant the moral deeds of the intelligent creature lead either to happiness as a reward or to unhappiness as a punishment. The latter is deserved, the former not” (*The Marrow of Theology*, I.x.11).

So what is condign and congruous merit? The merit of congruity refers to a work that is morally good and done from free will *without* the aid of divine grace; as such the “good works” performed belong to the unregenerate person prior to the reception of grace. However, in doing what they can, being morally inclined to God’s law, it is fitting and congruous for God, according to his goodness, to “infuse the grace of justification” into those so disposed. Thus it is congruous for God to give man a reward appropriate to his power of acting. The merit of condignity on the other hand has to do with persons who have thus become the recipients of divine grace; the “good works” they do are done from free will *with* the aid of divine grace. As such their works have an intrinsic value and are “althogether worthy” of reward, not only because they agree or congrue with God’s nature, but because their value requires an “equality between the work and the reward.” These works are condign because the merit and the reward are proportional to one another.[[63]](#footnote-63) Richard Muller explains that the distinction has to do with the merit of the individual’s own effort versus that of the Holy Spirit’s operation. In the former case, “the act is only a . . . half-merit, inasmuch as no human act can justly deserve the reward of salvation.” In the the latter case, however, “the act could be viewed as… a full merit, inasmuch as the work of the Spirit is absolutely good and is the ground of a truly and justly deserved salvation.” In short, this distinction enabled “late medieval scholastics to argue that a minimal act might be performed and, because of it, first grace conferred.”[[64]](#footnote-64) Turretin observes that true merit demands that five conditions be met:

(1) that the “work be undue”—for no one merits by paying what he owes (Lk. 17:10), he only satisfies; (2) that it be ours—for no one can be said to merit from another; (3) that it be absolutely perfect and free from all taint—for where sin is, there merit cannot be; (4) that it be equal and proportioned to the reward and pay; otherwise it would be a gift, not merit . . .; (5) that the reward be due to such a work from justice—whence an “undue work” is commonly defined to be one that “makes a reward due in the order of justice.”[[65]](#footnote-65)

In light of these stipulations, Turretin’s verdict is that humans cannot perform any work whatsoever that would mount up to having merited anything before God, either of congruity or condignity.

(1) They are not undue, but due; for whatever we are and can do, all this we owe to God, whose debtors we are on this account called (Lk. 17:10; Rom. 8:12). (2) Not one is ours, but all are gifts of grace and fruits of the Spirit (Jam. 1:17; Phil. 2:13; 2 Cor. 3:5). (3) They are not perfect, but alloyed as yet by various impurities (Rom. 7:18; Gal. 5:17, 18; Is. 64:6). (4) They are not equal to future glory because there is no proportion between the finite and temporary and the infinite and eternal (Rom. 8:18; 2 Cor. 4:17). (5) The reward promised to them is purely gratuitous and undue and so to be expected not from the internal meit of the work and its intrinsic worth, but only from the most free estimation of it by the one who crowns it (Rom. 6:23; 4:4; 11:6).[[66]](#footnote-66)

We also quote these words of A. B. Van Zandt in refutation of the misrepresentations of the doctrine of the covenant of works: “If the covenant with Adam was an act of mere arbitrary power, without any grace or goodness in it, it would be difficult to bring it into harmony with other Scriptures under any method. But as it was, itself, an act of grace, placing man in new relations to law, and with possibilities of benefit, vastly superior to any otherwise attainable, and within the reach of his free moral agency, we think it may easily be brought under the provisions of the one ‘Everlasting Covenant’ “ (A. B. Van Zandt, “The Doctrine of the Covenants Considered as the Central Principle of Theology,” *The Presbyterian Review* 3 [1882]: 37).

**2. The connection between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace.** Since Adam, as the representative head of the human race, violated the covenant of works, now the whole of humanity is under the curse or negative sanction of that covenant (Rom. 5:12). Instead of eternal life, we are under the sentence of eternal death. God, however, has not left us to our sin and misery. He has intervened with a second covenant arrangement, called the covenant of grace. The covenant of grace announces that God provides the way of salvation in his Son, Jesus Christ, the Surety or Guarantor of this covenant (Heb. 7:22), who suffers the curse of the covenant of works, the terrible penalty for sin, and also fulfills the law’s positive obligation and requirements on behalf of sinners (1 John 2:2; 2 Cor. 5:21). It is here that the doctrine of the covenant of works intersects with the doctrine of justification by faith alone. By Christ’s active and passive obedience, fulfilling the law of God and suffering its penalty, sinners are rescued from their sin (Rom. 4:24, 25). Thus, the doctrine of justification declares that sinners are reckoned righteous in God’s sight, not on the basis of their *own works* or their *own merits* but on the basis of *Christ’s work* and *His merit* (2 Tim. 1:9; Eph. 2:8; Phil. 3:9). Salvation is God’s free gift to us, since Christ’s works are the basis of every blessing bestowed upon sinners by faith (Rom. 6:23; 8:32). However, salvation is not free with respect to God’s provision, Christ himself. For Christ, according to the covenant of grace, meets the requirements of the covenant of works. In this way, God does not abandon his holiness in welcoming sinners to himself.

**3. The Abrogation of the covenant of works.** Here we simply quote from Berkhof (*ST,* p. 218): The question concerns “whether, and in how far, the covenant of works can be considered as a thing of the past; or whether, and in how far, it must be regarded as still in force. It is generally agreed [among Reformed theologians] that no change in the legal status of man can ever abrogate the authority of the law; that God’s claim to the obedience of His creatures is not terminated by their fall in sin and its disabling effects; that the wages of sin continues to be death; and that a perfect obedience is always required to merit eternal life. This means with respect to the question under consideration:

“a. *That the covenant of works is not abrogated:* (1) in so far as the natural relation of man to God was incorporated in it, since man always owes God perfect obedience; (2) in so far as its curse and punishment for those who continue in sin are concerned; and (3) in so far as the conditional promise still holds. God might have withdrawn this promise, but did not, Lev. 18:5; Rom. 10:5; Gal. 3:12. It is evident, however, that after the fall no one can comply with the condition.

“b. *That the covenant of works is abrogated:* (1) in so far as it contained new positive elements, for those who are under the covenant of grace; this does not mean that it is simply set aside and disregarded, but that its obligations were met by the Mediator of His people; and (2) as an appointed means to obtain eternal life, for as such it is powerless after the fall of man.”

***Excursus:* Some Observations about the *Three Forms of Unity* and the Doctrine of the Covenant of Works [from *MAJT* 21 (2010)]**

1. Recent Criticisms of the Doctrine of the Covenant of Works

Within the more recent history of Reformed theology some writers have greeted the doctrine of the covenant of works with suspicion, viewing it as something less than fully (or even remotely) biblical.[[67]](#footnote-67) Some view it as theological speculation, or more sinisterly, as a misappropriation of the Reformed heritage, such that a species of legalism is introduced into Reformed thought inasmuch as this doctrine places human *works* front and center in the divine-human relationship in Paradise. This is regarded as a fundamental and serious mistake, for humans never earn their way before God, not even before the fall, and to define man’s relationship to God in terms of *works* discards from the outset the favorable and beneficent nature of God’s relation to his image-bearer. Thus, the critics argue, this doctrine compromises, if it does not entirely give up, the favorable and loving nature of God’s relationship to man, which, at root, must be defined as a sort of fatherly kindness, an amicable relationship, and wholly gracious or at least characterized as a disposition of kindness on God’s part.

Another suspicion that lurks nearby with respect to the doctrine of the covenant of works is its idea that Adam had not yet achieved his final destiny in Paradise. Since most federal theologians have argued that Adam’s place in Paradise was not permanent, inasmuch as it did not characterize man’s finished or definitive state, and argue further that Adam, upon faithfully coming through the test of his obedience, would have been ushered into an incorruptible state (like believers in glory), no longer the object of the tempter’s deceits, the suspicion reigns that this doctrine posits the notion that man *merits* his improved condition, that this doctrine conceives of man as *earning* his way before God, so that divine blessings are based on man’s works. This notion, the critics assert, is both unscriptural and outrageously harmful. Blessing based upon human achievement runs at cross purposes with the gracious character of God’s relationship to man; worse, it sets up a paradigm of a “merit religion” that is unbiblical and pernicious. Moreover, some critics will also say that this doctrine posits the dubious notion of man being tested in Paradise, which is neither necessary nor kindly on God’s part, not to mention, such a testing is not taught in the Bible. Besides (and this is considered the nail in the coffin for the doctrine of the covenant of works), it is not a doctrine confessed in the sixteenth-century Reformed confessions, or more specifically the Three Forms of Unity.

This bundle of criticisms, of course, raises a fundamental question: Have the critics actually attacked *the doctrine* of the covenant of works which comes to expression for example in the Westminster Standards or the Formula Consensus Helvetica, or in any number of classic Reformed writers, such as Francis Turretin, A. A. Hodge, Robert L. Dabney, Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, or Louis Berkhof?[[68]](#footnote-68) In rejecting this doctrine, are they rejecting what the doctrine actually teaches or what actually constitutes the doctrine, or have they attacked and rejected *their own portrait* of the doctrine? Indeed, while admitting that there is not complete uniformity of presentation of this doctrine among Reformed writers, and admitting too that at least some more recent defenders of the doctrine sometimes appear to advocate the idea that man as creature can strictly merit before God the Creator—admitting this aberration—nonetheless, I maintain the critics’ sketch of this doctrine proves to be inaccurate, distorted, and in some cases overtly false.

As for the charge that this doctrine is not taught in the Three Forms of Unity, i.e., the Belgic Confession (1561/1618-19), the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), and the Canons of Dort (1618-19), here a distinction is necessary if we are to speak with accuracy and veracity. If it is said that the Three Forms of Unity do not teach this doctrine because the terminology which defines and explicates the mature doctrine is lacking, then, by those standards, it is conceded: the doctrine of the covenant of works is not taught in the Three Forms of Unity. However, if it is said that the substance of the doctrine is presented in the Three Forms of Unity, though some of the specific terminology is not used, then the conclusion must be different: the Three Forms of Unity teach the doctrine of the covenant of works. As Herman Bavinck observes, although the doctrine of the covenant of works is not mentioned in these confessions “in so many words,” it is nonetheless “materially” embodied in them.[[69]](#footnote-69) Although the word “covenant” is not to be found in the Three Forms of Unity to describe man’s relationship with God before the fall, this does not mean that the content of the doctrine is absent. On the contrary, as Bavinck says, “one may doubt the word, provided the matter is safe” (*de vocabulo dubiteur, re salva*)[[70]](#footnote-70)—which is to say, although a theological idea is not fully formulated in confessional documents, that does not mean it is not taught therein implicitly. The Three Forms of Unity, to be sure, do not *explicitly* teach the doctrine of the covenant of works. However, as I will argue below, that doesn’t mean that these confessional documents do not teach the essentials, the main elements, of the doctrine, and so the doctrine is present *implicitly* and *materially* in them. That is, the Three Forms of Unity provide us the materials for and even teach the essential content of the doctrine.

In what follows, I will first offer an exposition of the Three Forms of Unity as this relates to the doctrine of the covenant of works, followed by a summary, which in effect serves as an analysis and defense of Bavinck’s assertion that this doctrine is materially embodied in these documents. After that, and second, in view of certain criticisms that are often directed against this doctrine, I will present some analytical remarks in an effort to clear away some misconceptions and erroneous assumptions which commonly surround this teaching.

2. The Elements of the Covenant of Works in

the *Three Forms of Unity*

The principal materials for assessing the teaching of the Three Forms of Unity concerning the doctrine of the covenant of works include: Lord’s Days 3-6 of the Heidelberg Catechism; articles 14 and 15 of the Belgic Confession; and Heads III/IV, articles 1-3 of the Canons of Dort. In what follows, we will use the Heidelberg Catechism as the primary document, referring to the Belgic Confession and the Canons of Dort where apropos.

2.1. Man as Created

In Lord’s Day 3 of the Heidelberg Catechism (Q/As 6-8) the question is asked whether God created man as fallen: “Did God create man so wicked and perverse?” The answer to this question sets forth the original blessedness in which man was created. Instead of being created wicked and perverse, “God created man good, and after His own image; that is, in true righteousness and holiness, that he might rightly know God his Creator, heartily love Him, and live with Him in eternal blessedness to praise and glorify Him.” Similarly, the Belgic Confession teaches that God “made and formed [man] in his image and likeness—good, just, and holy; able by his own will to conform in all things to the will of God” (art. 14); and the Canons of Dort state that “Man was originally created in the image of God and was furnished in his mind with a true and salutary knowledge of his Creator and things spiritual, in his will and heart with righteousness, and in all his emotions with purity; indeed, the whole man was holy” (III/IV, art. 1).

God’s purpose or intention in creating man in his image merits our careful consideration, for the catechism presents a threefold purpose: that man may (1) truly know God; (2) love him with all his heart; and (3) live with him in eternal happiness, and all this for God’s praise and glory. The German original uses a purpose clause: “auss daß” (*so that*)—man is created *so that* he might know God, *so that* he might heartily love him, and *so that* he might live with him in eternal blessedness, to praise and glorify him. The Belgic is explicit in affirming that man, being the divine image-bearer, was created good, just, and holy in order to conform his will to God’s will. Man wasn’t to live any way he pleased, but he was to will to do God’s will. His life was to conform to the divine standard. The Canons explicitly state that man was created with a true and salutary knowledge of God; thus, man was not a blank slate—instead, a knowledge of God was written on his heart. He was knowledgeable of “things spiritual” and righteous in his “will and heart”; and his emotions were “pure.” In short, he was “holy.” Inasmuch as God created man with the purpose that he truly know him, love him, and live with him in blessedness, the same was his calling or duty; such is the only response that befits what man is as the bearer of the divine image and who God is as his Creator. Anything less than this response to God is rebellion and sin; anything less than responding to God in conformity to and in accord with the purpose of being created after the divine image, is sin and treachery of the highest order.

Thus the Three Forms of Unity are uniform in teaching that man was created holy, righteous, and good, with the aim or purpose to live that way before God.

2.2. Man as Fallen

*2.2.1. First Parents*

It is well known that the first Q/A of the Heidelberg Catechism does not begin with man’s creation; thus it does not begin at the beginning. Instead, it begins with the current lived experience of the believer in the rough and tumble of the Christian walk. Therefore it asks the believer, in the trial and struggle of faith, the question, “What is your only comfort in life and in death?” The reply is that believer’s comfort is in belonging, in life and death, body and soul, to the faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. But in order to possess that comfort they first need to know, among other things, how great their sin and misery are (Q/A 2). The catechism therefore explores the nature of human fallenness. Why and how are humans fallen? That is, how have humans gotten into the miserable mess of being estranged from God and under his wrath? The catechism explicitly denies that this is from God; instead, man’s corrupt nature comes “from the fall and disobedience of our first parents, Adam and Eve, in Paradise, whereby our nature became so corrupt that we all are conceived and born in sin” (Q/A 7). The Belgic makes clear that although God created man in his own image and likeness, that is, “good, righteous, and holy,” able by his own will to do all the things in agreement with God’s will, man subjected himself willingly to sin and so also to death and the curse when he gave his ear to the words of the devil. Thus he did not value or recognize the honor and excellence in which he was first created. His sin, specifically, involved the violation of the commandment of life. “For the commandment of life, which he had received, he transgressed; and by sin separated himself from God, who was his true life; having corrupted his whole nature” (art. 14).[[71]](#footnote-71) Being now subject to both physical and spiritual death, and guilty, as well as wicked, perverse, and corrupt in his whole nature and all these ways, “He lost all his excellent gifts which he had received from God, and retained none of them except for small traces which are enough to make him inexcusable” (art. 14).

*2.2.2. The Positive Law Prohibition*

The Belgic Confession refers to the positive law prohibition that God gave to Adam, the command not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, as “the commandment of life.” This nomenclature shows that the intention of the paradisal stipulation functioned as a test of obedience for the attainment of eternal life, i.e., a life no longer fallible, corruptible, and amissible. For the life that Adam possessed in Eden was still amissible. Some critics deny that there is any evidence in Scripture for a promise of a life no longer amissible (i.e., a promise of eternal life) or for a test of man’s obedience. But such denials need not detain us. The dots run in a straight line on this point, for disobedience clearly results in death, curse, and damnation—*eternal* damnation (except God come to the rescue); so the life promised is eternal life. This is why the Belgic Confession calls that prohibition the commandment of life.

*2.2.3. Human Nature Poisoned and Adam’s*

*Progeny under Judgment*

The Heidelberg makes clear that the fall of Adam and Eve poisons our nature. As it goes for them, it goes for us. Their fall brings forth corruption and guilt, which render us all fallen, so that we are born sinners, “conceived and born in sin.” According to God’s arrangement (call it his divine appointment), the failure of Adam and Eve to walk with God in true righteousness and holiness, specifically, their failure to know God truly, to love him with all their heart, and to live with him according to God’s standard of justice, brings the forfeiture for them and for us (for all their posterity) the eternal blessedness of living with God in fellowship and happiness. Consequently, their fall renders us fallen as well, and now we find ourselves infected with original sin, i.e., total depravity. Hence Q/A 8 asks: “But are we so corrupt that we are wholly incapable of doing any good, and inclined to all evil?” The answer: “Yes, indeed; unless we are regenerated by the Spirit of God.”

Not surprisingly the Canons of Dort echo these themes: “However, rebelling against God at the devil’s instigation and by his own free will, [man] deprived himself of these outstanding gifts. Rather, in their place he brought upon himself blindness, terrible darkness, futility, and distortion of judgment in his mind; perversity, defiance, and hardness in his heart and will; and finally impurity in all his emotions” (III/IV, art. 1). “The corruption [issuing from Adam’s fall] spread, by God’s just judgment, from Adam to all his descendants—except for Christ—not by way of imitation … but by way of the propagation of his perverted nature” (III/IV, art. 2). “Therefore, all people are conceived and are born children of wrath, unfit for any saving good, inclined to evil, dead in their sins, and slaves to sin …” (III/IV, art. 3). The Belgic likewise links Adam’s fall with our corruption and curse. “We believe that by the disobedience of Adam original sin has been spread through the whole human race. It is a corruption of all nature—an inherited depravity which even infects small infants in their mother’s womb, and the root which produces in man every sort of sin. It is therefore so vile and enormous in God’s sight that it is enough to condemn the human race…” (art. 15). Clearly, Adam functions as a public person in Paradise; as it goes for him it goes for his descendants.

*2.2.4. Divine Justice and the Requirement of God’s Law*

Lord’s Day 4 of the Heidelberg Catechism elaborates on this theme further as it takes up the matter of God’s justice in this arrangement, namely, that Adam’s and Eve’s disobedience has eternally mortal repercussions for their progeny. Is this arrangement (this connection between Adam and Eve and their posterity) fair, especially given that their fall renders us incapable of living with God in obedience, incapable of believing him and loving him? Is it right that the faith and obedience; or rather, the converse, that the faithlessness and disobedience of our first parents determine our spiritual estate from conception and birth, leaving us totally tainted in nature and unable to live holy lives? More specifically, “Does not God, then, wrong man by requiring of him in His law that which he cannot perform?” That is, given our fallenness, given that we are no longer able to do any good and are instead inclined to all evil, how can God continue to require us to obey his law since we can’t obey it? The catechism offers a negative reply to this query, for God created us capable of being law-keepers, “God made man capable of performing it,” i.e., performing his law.

Here we see that the call to obedience is not something foreign to the paradise situation, for God placed Adam and Eve in Eden with the ability to obey his law and with the intention that they do so. Indeed, in Paradise they were required to obey his law. Consider the alternative: that God does not require them to obey his law or that he does not care whether they perform his will! The alternative is absurd. The call to obedience, which is to love God, which is to believe his Word, which is to submit to him and honor him and render to him all that is due him as God, as Creator, is not contrary to the relationship that man has with God in Eden but is natural and fitting to the relationship between God and his rational, moral creature, especially one made after God’s image. It is inconceivable that God would not require that Adam and Eve walk before him in true righteousness and holiness, given that God created them good, after his own image, that is, in true righteousness and holiness, so that they might rightly know, love, and live with their Creator in eternal blessedness (cf. Q/A 6). That this eternal blessing did not come about for them or for their posterity is because “man, through the instigation of the devil, by his own willful disobedience, deprived himself and all his posterity of these gifts” (Q/A 9; cf. Canons, III/IV, art. 1).

That the Heidelberg Catechism in particular presents the essential ingredients of what later was formally developed and called the covenant of works is further confirmed by Q/As 10-11. Question 10 makes clear that man cannot sin against God with impunity. Divine punishment awaits human disobedience. There is an eternal and terrible penalty for the disobedience and apostasy of Adam and Eve in Paradise. Although question 10 is addressed specifically to fallen people, our fall is of one piece with Adam’s, and so it explains the penalty for *Adam’s disobedience*. Thus, being tempted by the devil, man by his own willful defiance deprived himself and all his posterity of the gifts of eternal life with God; he forfeited for himself and for us true knowledge of God, as well as righteousness, holiness, and love. The consequence for this failure to do what God required of man is clear: God will by no means allow such disobedience and apostasy to go unpunished, not Adam’s and not ours. “He is terribly displeased with our original as well as actual sins; and will punish them by a just judgment temporally and eternally, as He has declared, *Cursed is every one who continueth not in all things that are written in the book of the law, to do them*” (Q/A 10). Interestingly, the catechism commandeers Deuteronomy 27:26, the passage quoted in answer 10, to apply both to the situation in Paradise and to the abiding demand that all human beings must live by the righteous standard of God’s law, otherwise they come under the law’s curse (also see Gal. 3:10; cf. HC, Q/A 62).

2.3. The Gospel—or the Covenant of Grace

In contrast to the situation in Paradise, the Three Forms of Unity provide us, in a preliminary way, the first glimpse of the covenant of grace revealed and established after the fall. For example, the Heidelberg Catechism explains that salvation will not come by setting aside God’s standard of righteousness and holiness (Q/As 12, 16); therefore the Mediator that is needed in order to rescue fallen man must be true and righteous man, yet more powerful than all creatures, that is, he must also be true God (see Q/As 15, 17, 36). This is none other than Jesus Christ (Q/A 18).

Moreover, this good message to fallen sinners, i.e., this gospel, is “first revealed in Paradise” in the mother promise of Gen. 3:15 (Q/A 19). As further confirmation of this, the catechism recognizes the parallel that Scripture establishes between Adam and Christ, the second Adam (Q/A 20), in whom all humans may be reckoned—that is, a person is either fallen and guilty in Adam, or a person is by faith engrafted into Christ and reckoned righteous with the righteousness of Christ (cf. Q/As 59, 60). What must not be missed here is that the original, pre-fall relationship between God and man in Paradise does not provide the path for human redemption: there is no promised redemption or redeemer in the pre-fall arrangement between God and man in Paradise. In Paradise before the fall, man’s relationship with God was not through faith in the Mediator, through atonement; it was not *by faith alone in the righteous works of Another*.

The same ideas are expressed in the Belgic Confession and the Canons of Dort (see BC, articles 17-18, 20, 25-26; Canons II, articles 1-4, 9; I, art. 2). Satisfaction must be made to God’s justice. The standard of righteousness persists; it is not diminished because of sin, nor does the requirement of human obedience and righteousness suddenly emerge *post-fall*. Upholding the standard of righteousness always defines and conditions man’s relationship to God. Thus, the gospel—the rescue of sinners through Jesus Christ—is unto faith and the obedience of the good works, the fulfillment of all righteousness. “God in his boundless mercy has given us a guarantee [*Sponsrem*] his only begotten Son, who was made to be sin and a curse for us, in our place, on the cross, in order that he might give satisfaction for us” (Canons II, art. 2).

2.4. Summary

Given this short tour through what the Three Forms of Unity put forward concerning man as originally created and the nature of his relationship to God both before and after the fall into sin, we can summarize what these documents teach as it pertains to the question of the covenant of works:

(1) The confessions teach that Adam in some sense functions as a public person, meaning that as it goes for him it goes for his race; for his sin brings repercussions not just to himself but to all his progeny.

(2) The confessions teach that God created man as good, in righteousness and holiness in order to be righteous and holy, to obey God, which is to be a law-keeper, which is to love and conform himself to God’s will, with the explicit consequence that failure to do so brings accursedness and punishment.

(3) The confessions presuppose that we know from the account in Genesis how God warned Adam regarding the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and it is this positive prohibition (which the Belgic Confession calls “the commandment of life”), along with the whole of the law written on his heart (after all, that is what it means to be good, created in true righteousness and holiness) which man was *capable of performing*. Therefore, make no mistake, it was also this prohibition (along with the law written on his heart) that he willfully disobeyed through the instigation of the devil, thereby depriving himself and all his posterity of the inborn gifts (cf. Q/A 9; Canons III/IV, art. 1).

(4) The confessions thus teach that Adam and Eve were tested by God in being tempted by the devil, for the fall of man(kind) issues from the disobedience of our first parents in Paradise. They did not do what God called them to do; the work or obedience he required was not performed; and so in violating the specific positive command regarding the tree of knowledge of good and evil, they violated the whole law—including the law to love God with all their heart, with all their soul, with all their mind, and with all their strength; and the law to love their neighbor as themselves (cf. HC, Q/A 4). Were not Adam and Eve to be neighbors to one another in love, protecting one another from violating God’s command? But they did not love God or each other according to God’s law. They did not believe God’s word to them, nor did they do it.

(5) The catechism in particular teaches that the original paradisal standard of righteousness, which is God’s law, continues—meaning, after man’s fall, God does not change his standard of righteousness and holiness, for the law itself is nothing else than God’s own righteousness and holiness coming to expression in relation to humans who bear God’s image. This is why God does no one an injustice in continuing to insist upon the righteousness of his law to be performed by all persons, even though they are now fallen and totally depraved. (What absurdity to argue that Adam didn’t have to keep the law or perform works in accord with righteousness, but that his fallen descendants do!)

(6) The confessions teach that the violation of God’s law brings about eternal death and punishment for Adam and his posterity as the just penalty for his (and their) treachery (in him). God’s justice requires that sin be punished with the supreme penalty.

(7) The confessions also demonstrate, in contrast to the situation in Paradise, that God provides a new path for fallen man to enjoy fellowship with him, which is the gospel of Jesus Christ. The original arrangement in Paradise before the fall cannot and does not open the path to human redemption. God, however, according to his free mercy and grace, without violating but fulfilling his holiness and righteousness, provides the Mediator in his Son, who as the eternal Son of God became true, righteous man, to rescue sinners. This gospel, “first revealed in Paradise,” as the Heidelberg Catechism observes, shows that God must intervene if man, now fallen and under the judgment of death, would find eternal life.

In each of these teachings of the Three Forms of Unity we discover the essential elements of (what will subsequently) be formalized in and labeled the covenant of works or some such nomenclature. Man was always to be a law-keeper; for he was to be the original promise keeper, obeying his Creator’s commands, doing his Maker’s will, which is the way of true knowledge, righteousness, and holiness and the path along which fellowship with God and the blessing of God abides, even in glory.

3. Analysis and Observations

It has not been our interest in the foregoing to offer a full treatment of the doctrine of the covenant of works. Rather, our focus has been to set forth the teaching of the Three Forms of Unity pertaining to the original relationship man enjoyed with God in Paradise, and the requirements God established in order for that relationship to persist and issue forth into eternal fellowship. With that focus, we have also demonstrated what the Three Forms of Unity teach regarding the consequences of man’s fall, and God’s first overtures of gracious rescue for fallen sinners. Cumulatively, we discover that these documents affirm in substance the doctrine of the covenant of works. In rejecting the doctrine of the covenant of works, many critics (perhaps unknowingly) seem also to be rejecting the teaching of the Three Forms of Unity on God’s relationship to man in Paradise and the way of fellowship with God.

In what follows, I wish to offer a few remarks in an effort to clarify some aspects of the doctrine of the covenant of works which detractors of the doctrine typically distort, misunderstand, or ignore. In what follows, I will group my comments under two general headings.

3.1. The Meaning of Merit

First, we address the issue of merit. Although many opponents of the doctrine of the covenant of works do not want to relinquish a pre-fall paradisal covenant as such, they do want to rid this paradisal covenant of any notion of *merit*. They reject the idea that God blesses man *because of obedience* or that human works *earn rewards* from God.

Inasmuch as the question of human merit emerges as a prominent concern among opponents of the covenant of works, we do well to offer a brief clarification and elaboration on what the covenant of works comes to regarding humans meriting before God.

It must be stated from the outset, and this is chief, although merit- or reward-language is used by many writers who champion the doctrine of the covenant of works, such language does not affirm a strict parity between human works and divine reward. On the contrary, merit is used in the technical sense of *ex pacto* merit, not condign merit or congruent merit.

*Ex pacto* merit means that the blessing bestowed upon human works is *from the covenant arrangement itself*, meaning, it is graciously rewarded. It does not mean that there is any sort of worthiness to human works which in themselves make God man’s debtor or that the reward given is earned or achieved. It simply means that the covenant stipulation has been fulfilled and the gracious reward will be bestowed, for God is true to his word and true to himself. He keeps his promises. As William Ames says, “In this covenant the moral deeds of the intelligent creature lead either to happiness as a reward or to unhappiness as a punishment. The latter is deserved, the former not” (*The Marrow of Theology*, I.x.11). Similarly, Robert Rollock, writing his catechism on the covenants, addresses the issue of merit head-on, posing this question: “Is this condition of works one of merit?” The reply: “Not at all. Rather, it is one as of duties which bear witness to [man’s] gratitude towards God the creator (Rom. 11:35; Luke 17:10).”[[72]](#footnote-72) Likewise, the Reformed theologian, Daniel Wyttenbach (1706-79), in his work, *Tentamen Theologiae dogmaticae Methodo scientifica pertractate,* 3 vols. (Frankfort-on-Main, 1747-49; also Bern, 1741-47)II, pp. 568, 569, addresses this issue during the late period of Reformed orthodoxy, writing the following: “By perfect obedience Adam could not have merited anything. God could rightly have demanded such obedience, being the Most High and Absolute Lord, and man owed such obedience, both on account of the divine perfections and for the sake of his own happiness and the tremendous benefits received from God, and so obedience, even the most perfect, would have been sheerly due to Him…. Eternal life was accordingly promised to man and represented *in no sense as a reward*…. Adam could not have asked eternal life of God save *in virtue of* *the pact.*”[[73]](#footnote-73)

In the larger historical context of Christian theology, the Reformed were confronted with the medieval doctrine that distinguished between condign and congruous merit. The merit of congruity refers to a work that is morally good and done from free will *without* the aid of divine grace; as such the “good works” performed belong to the unregenerate person prior to the reception of grace. However, in doing what they can, being morally inclined to God’s law, it is fitting and congruous for God, according to his goodness, to “infuse the grace of justification” into those so disposed. Thus it is congruous for God to give man a reward appropriate to his power of acting. The merit of condignity on the other hand has to do with persons who have thus become the recipients of divine grace; the “good works” they do are done from free will *with* the aid of divine grace. As such their works have an intrinsic value and are “altogether worthy” of reward, not only because they agree or congrue with God’s nature, but because their value requires an “equality between the work and the reward.” These works are condign because the merit and the reward are proportional to one another.[[74]](#footnote-74) Richard Muller explains that the distinction has to do with the merit of the individual’s own effort versus that of the Holy Spirit’s operation. In the former case, “the act is only a … half-merit, inasmuch as no human act can justly deserve the reward of salvation.” In the latter case, however, “the act could be viewed as … a full merit, inasmuch as the work of the Spirit is absolutely good and is the ground of a truly and justly deserved salvation.” In short, this distinction enabled “late medieval scholastics to argue that a minimal act might be performed and, because of it, first grace conferred.”[[75]](#footnote-75)

The Reformed, for their part, rejected these notions of merit. Francis Turretin, for example, like Calvin, allows the use of the term when carefully defined. He speaks, then, of merit as “consecution,” that is, one thing is consecutive of or follows from another according to God’s arrangement. By contrast, Turretin observes that *true* or *strict* *merit* demands that five conditions be met:

(1) that the “work be undue”—for no one merits by paying what he owes (Lk. 17:10), he only satisfies; (2) that it be ours—for no one can be said to merit from another; (3) that it be absolutely perfect and free from all taint—for where sin is, there merit cannot be; (4) that it be equal and proportioned to the reward and pay; otherwise it would be a gift, not merit …; (5) that the reward be due to such a work from justice—whence an “undue work” is commonly defined to be one that “makes a reward due in the order of justice.[[76]](#footnote-76)

In light of these stipulations, Turretin’s verdict is that humans cannot perform any work whatsoever that would mount up to having merited anything before God, either of congruity or condignity.

(1) They are not undue, but due; for whatever we are and can do, all this we owe to God, whose debtors we are on this account called (Lk. 17:10; Rom. 8:12). (2) Not one is ours, but all are gifts of grace and fruits of the Spirit (Jam. 1:17; Phil. 2:13; 2 Cor. 3:5). (3) They are not perfect, but alloyed as yet by various impurities (Rom. 7:18; Gal. 5:17, 18; Is. 64:6). (4) They are not equal to future glory because there is no proportion between the finite and temporary and the infinite and eternal (Rom. 8:18; 2 Cor. 4:17). (5) The reward promised to them is purely gratuitous and undue and so to be expected not from the internal merit of the work and its intrinsic worth, but only from the most free estimation of it by the one who crowns it (Rom. 6:23; 4:4; 11:6).[[77]](#footnote-77)

That is, humans can only enjoy an *ex pacto* sort of merit before God, and this means human righteousness and blessing is from God’s free goodness and benevolence. God the Creator is not indebted to the creature.

Long before many recent critics voiced their objections to the doctrine of the covenant of works, A. B. Van Zandt offered these clarifying comments:

If the covenant with Adam was an act of mere arbitrary power, without any grace or goodness in it, it would be difficult to bring it into harmony with other Scriptures under any method. But as it was, itself, an act of grace, placing man in new relations to law, and with possibilities of benefit, vastly superior to any otherwise attainable, and within the reach of his free moral agency, we think it may easily be brought under the provisions of the one “Everlasting Covenant.”[[78]](#footnote-78)

Similarly, W. G. T. Shedd, in advocating the terminology of “the covenant of works,” carefully defines what is loaded into terms like “merit” and “reward.” He explains, “The merit to be acquired under the covenant of works was pactional.” In the event that Adam stood the test of obedience with integrity and faithfulness, he “could claim the reward … only by virtue of the promise of God, not by virtue of the original relation of a creature to the Creator.” For as a creature standing before his Creator he owed complete and perfect obedience to him *without reward*; *no merit* existed or could exist in that relationship. In doing all that was required of him, he would have only rendered to God what was his due and therefore he remains an unprofitable servant (cf. Luke 17:10).[[79]](#footnote-79)

Therefore, as it pertains to humans meriting before God, let it be clearly stated that the Reformed objection to this concept is not the term itself (which Reformed writers, including various Reformed Confessions, readily use in order to describe the work of salvation on our behalf) but the idea that man, strictly speaking, can put God in his debt. The latter notion is invalid; neither man as God’s unfallen creature nor man as sinner can place God in his debt. There can be no objection, however, in affirming that believers are rescued from God’s wrath through the merits of Christ imputed to us. Calvin uses this sort of language, as does the Belgic Confession—to mention only two examples (see, for example, Belgic Confession, Article 20-23; also Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Days 2-7, 16.40, 23-24).

Many opponents of the doctrine of the covenant of works have fallen afoul on this fundamental issue. Particularly at this point their arrows of criticisms have totally missed the proverbial target.

3.2. Love and Law

Second, many opponents of the doctrine of the covenant of works seem unwittingly to place God’s love and God’s law in opposition to one another. As noted earlier, some detractors dislike the doctrine of the covenant of works since it allegedly creates a legal relationship between God and man over against a relationship of love and friendship. This notion, the critics argue, brings a foreign and unwelcome development within the history of Reformed theology, for God never relates to his image-bearers in a *quid pro quo* arrangement. Grace or favor or divine friendship and love must have priority over law and duty and reward for obedience.

In addressing this concern it is important to note that errors come in many forms, and one form of error is to set up a false dichotomy, to establish an either/or choice between things that are not as such opposites. The doctrine of the covenant of works does not commit this error, for the doctrine, positively stated, asserts that love and fellowship with God is the real and proper relationship that exists between God and his image-bearer in Paradise before the fall, *and* that being made in the divine image, Adam is to walk before God uprightly, as in righteously, in thought, word, and deed in order to abide in communion with God. Adam cannot be blessed by living in disobedience to God. Disobedience is sin; and sin brings enmity and death. Adam must trust God, believe God, be faithful to God, and obey God.

No doubt, many critics of the doctrine of the covenant of works would agree with this portrait so long as it is clearly stipulated that in doing these things Adam is not earning from God any blessing or meriting any privilege or securing, by his works, any future for himself or his posterity. Well, certainly that concern is apt if *merit* in the strict sense is meant. As already observed above, however, merit in the strict sense is excluded.

Yet there is another matter that needs clarification at this point. It is important to remember that Adam’s (man’s) condition in Paradise was amissible—i.e., precisely as God’s image-bearer he was the object of the tempter’s deceits. The biblical portrait of Adam’s state in Paradise shows us that he was subject to temptation and fall, that his nature could be corrupted, and the life he enjoyed in communion with God could be lost—worse, should he disobey God, he was subject to eternal death and damnation as specified in the commandment of life (BC, art. 14). This commandment, the commandment pertaining to the tree of knowledge of good and evil, shows that Adam needed to be warned about his amissible condition: both of *death* should he disobey God and of *life* should he obey his Creator. The death threatened brings an eternal penalty; likewise, the life promised was *eternal life*, for Adam (man), being mutable and fallible, had not yet reached a state of *non posse peccare* (not able to sin). Clearly Adam’s test of obedience regarding the commandment of life was, in the way of obedience, *unto life indefectible and eternal,* for himself and his posterity. The Heidelberg Catechism reminds us that God created Adam (man) so that he might live with him in eternal happiness, and all this for God’s praise and glory (HC, Q/A 6). This was a state Adam (man) had not yet attained.[[80]](#footnote-80)

The commandment of life, then, demonstrates that God is prepared to usher Adam (man) from a state of mutability and fallibility—*posse peccare* (able to sin)—to a state indefectible, *non posse peccare* (not able to sin) *so that* he would no longer be subject to the tempter’s deceits or stratagems, and *so that* he might live with God in eternal happiness. This, after all, is why it is termed a commandment of *life—*in obeying it death is excluded. If this were not the case, then Adam (man), mutable and fallible, would be eternally subject to the testing of the serpent and the perpetual possibility of falling into eternal ruin and death. That arrangement certainly does not describe Adam’s life in Paradise as *most blessed* and *eternal*, for that arrangement, if it were true, means that God’s commandment of life, if obeyed, does not actually issue forth unto *eternal* life with God and death still threatens.

It is important to see that God gives Adam (man) the commandment of life in order that he might bless his image-bearer in the way of his obedience—an obedience already owed to God, an obedience, in being owed to God, cannot place God in man’s debt when performed. Only by way of this stipulated arrangement (or covenant relationship) does God place himself under obligation to man, and that freely and graciously, so that human obedience may issue forth, according to divine promise, in the inheritance of a blessing strictly unearned but nonetheless graciously rewarded, namely eternal and felicitous life with God.[[81]](#footnote-81) This point is so fundamental for a proper understanding of the Reformed doctrine of the covenant of works that unless it is rightly discerned and embraced (and unfortunately it is often not discerned), it becomes impossible to understand the doctrine in its key tenets.

In this connection we also note that it is a mistake to deny that Adam (man) was tested in Paradise by means of the commandment of life. The sacramental nature of the trees in the garden, the peculiar character of that commandment (forbidding the eating of fruit otherwise fitting to consume), and the presence of the serpent in God’s good creation make little sense if human probation is disallowed. Besides, the commandment of life, if obeyed, provided the avenue by which Adam (man) could enjoy the gifts of indefectible holiness and happiness (eternal life)—eternal according to God’s loving stipulations.

According to his love God issues the commandment of life, for love and law are not incongruent with one another. On the contrary, in love God calls us to walk in righteousness before him, since righteousness is always the road along which we enjoy communion with God and a blessed future with him. We may even say that righteousness is the *sine qua non* of an abiding relationship of love, blessing, and friendship with God. Adam’s fall into sin proves this. Christ’s works of redemption likewise prove this, for his redemptive work issues forth, according to its definitive outcome and effect, in the complete justification and sanctification of his people. Believers are reckoned righteous in him through his righteousness and they become righteous though the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.

By way of contrast, when Adam ceased to be righteous, all was forfeited. When Adam did not keep God’s Word to him, when he did not do what he was called, equipped, and qualified to do, he yielded Paradise and fellowship with God, both for himself and for all his descendants. He deprived himself and his descendants of eternal life and brought forth eternal death. As the Heidelberg Catechism teaches, God’s purpose or intention in creating man in his image was *so that* (“auss daß”) he might know God, *so that* he might heartily love him, and *so that* he might live with him in eternal blessedness, to praise and glorify him. There were works to be performed by God’s image-bearer, which Adam, unto human ruination, he did not perform, and that is why the Heidelberg Catechism quotes Deut. 27:26, for any violation of God’s law (and remember that the law is simply an expression of God’s holy and righteous nature) is a violation of God! Cursed be anyone who violates God and his law; an eternal curse be upon those who do not continue to do everything written in the book of the law. That includes the written down moral code and the divine law written on our hearts (see Canons of Dort, III/IV, art. 1; Belgic Confession, art. 14; HC, Q/A 11; also see Rom. 1).

God may certainly establish a relationship with man in Paradise that is both a relationship of love and friendship and a legal relationship that stipulates obedience—which is what he did. For God loves and befriends his image-bearers *and* calls them to obedience. That God stipulates obedience, a life of submission to his will, to his Word, does not mean that God lacks love or does not exercise friendship toward Adam, just as he does not lack love for or fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ, the second Adam, when he calls him to fulfill all righteousness. Similarly, when Jesus teaches us that if we love him, we will keep his commandments (John 14:15, 23-24), thereby calling us to obedience, that does not mean he ceases to love and favor us. Stated in other words, God’s relationship with man in Eden was indeed a relationship of love and friendship, but that doesn’t mean Adam could live in fellowship with God and enjoy blessings if he walked in way of falsehood and unrighteousness, if he didn’t love God or believe his Word, if he disobeyed and did not do what he was required to do, i.e., if he failed to perform the works of the law written on his own heart and heed the positive law given to him regarding the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

Again, love and law are not opposites. Just as faith and works are not opposites *as such*, for true faith issues forth in godly works. The contrast between faith and works is a result of man’s fall, so that now, because we are fallen and our works are corrupted and unfit for any saving good, *our works* must be displaced by a faith in *Christ’s works* for us. The contrast between faith and works in God’s work to rescue sinners is due to the fall, for faith and works, grounded in God’s kindly condescension to bless his image-bearers eternally, were united with one another in the context of Paradise before man had fallen into sin. In believing God’s Word to him, Adam was to do the good works required of him.

Thus, we see that if Adam had loved God more than himself, if he had trusted God’s Word instead of listening to Satan’s lies, if he had performed the will of God, he would have been delivered from the tempter once and for all, and his posterity with him. But in fact Adam did not perform the will of God; instead he sinned against the will of God. He failed at the legal requirements of his relationship with God and therefore surrendered his friendship with God.

Both Scripture and the confessions teach that in his law God rightly requires man to perform its stipulations; and God will not suffer such disobedience to his law, such apostasy, to go unpunished, not in Paradise and not now. Thus he imparts the penalty both now and in eternity, for God’s “justice demands that sin, committed against his most supreme majesty, be punished with the supreme penalty—eternal punishment of body and soul” (HC, Q/A 11). Adam could not sin against God with impunity, no matter how much love and favor characterized his relationship with God in Eden.

The Three Forms of Unity teach that man communes with God in the way of trusting obedience and righteousness: believing and obeying God, willing as God wills, loving him with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength.

Conclusion

From the considerations and analysis presented, we share Herman Bavinck’s sentiment that “the doctrine of the covenant of works is based on Scripture and is eminently valuable.”[[82]](#footnote-82) As for the critics of this doctrine who dispute the idea that God’s law and human obedience to it qualified and conditioned man’s relationship to God in Paradise before the fall, they are faced with the dilemma of explaining how man falls from God’s favor if human works do not condition that relationship. They must face, too, why, after the fall into sin, divine law and righteous obedience to it, are necessary for redemption. They also find themselves at odds with the teachings of the Three Forms of Unity on these and related matters, which set forth a rudimentary doctrine of the covenant of works. Again, as Bavinck noted, “one may doubt the word, provided the matter is safe” (*de vocabulo dubiteur, re salva*)[[83]](#footnote-83)—which is to say, although a theological idea is not fully formulated in confessional documents, that does not mean it is not taught therein implicitly and materially.

***Addendum I: Man’s destiny, Adam’s representation, and the test in the garden.*** Some critics of the doctrine of the covenant of works will admit that eternal life was promised to Adam and his progeny in the way of obedience, but eternal life refers only to man’s continued life in Paradise, not to a heavenly glory or a heaven and earth glory after the manner of the redemption accomplished in Christ. This is not an impermissible position to argue as such, but we would argue that it presents us with problems, chief of which is that Christ’s redemption seems to take us where God never intended Adam and his race to go—that is, had Adam remained faithful to God. In any case, this position has been claimed by some Reformed theologians throughout the history of Reformed theology, so it is permissible except when it is linked up with a denial that God was testing Adam in Eden. The denial that Adam was a public person who was tested in his obedience to God in Paradise, such that as it goes for Adam it goes for his descendants, is without any Reformed pedigree and is most sinister in its implications.

Some critics would have us believe that if Adam had not fallen into the devil’s snare, nothing would have resulted as consequence, i.e., nothing would have changed at all. There would be no consequences for good or ill. Why? Because, it is asserted, when the devil seeks to deceive the first pair, God does not intend that as a “test” of obedience for his image bearer. Such testing is judged to be unseemly for God, not to mention ungracious and unkind. God doesn’t treat Adam like that, it is argued. Thus, had Adam and Eve remained true to God when the serpent spoke his lies to Eve, Adam following his wife in the deception, nothing consequential would have resulted or changed in man’s relationship with God—not even the serpent’s banishment. Man would have remained as before, enjoying amissible gifts and amissible life. Thus, in denying this longstanding theological point of Adam being tested in Paradise, certain critics seem to argue that man had achieved his destiny in Paradise, that Adam and his descendants had reached the pinnacle of their relationship with God, except for the being fruitful and the multiplying of the race. Meanwhile, since Adam was not “tested” and cannot be ushered into an infallible state, the serpent (it seems) may perpetually attempt to harass God’s image bearers and set his snares in an effort to bring the downfall of the race. Moreover, since Adam does not function as a public person, according to these critics, apparently the serpent need only bring any human being to ruin in order to ruin all of mankind.

And so, according to this alternative scheme, standing in opposition to the doctrine of the covenant of works, Satan could have, apparently, for millennia, even for an eternity, hung about Paradise ever attempting to trip up divine image bearers and bring them onto the path of disobedience.

Some of the critics also deny that Adam functioned in Paradise as a public person, i.e., they deny that the first man in some way represented the human race; thus, if Adam was tested in Paradise, he was tested only for himself. In any case, they assert, it is unkind of God to “test” his image bearer; this is unfriendly; this doesn’t befit the benevolent relationship between God and Adam. Thus, there was no test. Interestingly, and not surprisingly, having made this theological move, they have little to say why God would issue the prohibition regarding the Tree of knowledge of good and evil. What purpose did it serve? Nor do they have much to say why God allows this serpent in the garden to tempt this first human pair. Apparently, allowing the tempter access to his image bearers is not regarded as an unkindly act on God’s part. Nor do they have much to say about the connection between Adam’s fall and our own, except, inexplicably, there is a connection. How it is kindly and benevolent on God’s part to infect Adam’s race with Adam’s sin is likewise not explained.

***Addendum II: The affirmation of an original covenant relationship.*** Some theologians, doing their work within the context of the Dutch theological debates surrounding covenant and baptism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, especially the debates in the 1930s, argue for a doctrine of an original covenant relationship between God and man but do so cautiously; some are a bit shy of calling this covenant relationship a covenant *of works*; in any case, they do argue for an original covenant relationship. We see this for example in the work of J. van Genderen and W. H. Velema, in their joint dogmatic project *Concise Reformed Dogmatics*.[[84]](#footnote-84) They point out that man has a relationship with God from the beginning. Indeed, man cannot be God’s image bearer without having a relationship with God. Man is ever dependent upon God and under his care. He is involved with God; in fact, his relationship with God defines who he is. It must also be affirmed, since there is no denying it, that man has an origin and a destiny. Since God has entered into a relationship with man, how ought we to describe and characterize that relationship? Inasmuch as God has addressed man, spoken to him, man must echo back and respond to God appropriately; the divine/human relationship is an address-response relationship. This address consists of “a command and a promise, a charge and a blessing” (358).

In these concepts Reformed theology has from the beginning recognized the constitutive elements of a covenant. The relationship between God and man is not an arbitrary contact that can easily be broken off. It is not a flash encounter that is quickly forgotten. No, this contact takes place within the context of a promise and a mandate from God’s side, and man’s obligation to respond. A covenant relationship implies an enduring framework for interaction, with rules and a perspective for growth.

This covenant relationship is presented in Genesis 1, if only in principle, although all of the constitutive elements are present here. A bit later in the Bible we come across an official, explicit establishment of a covenant. Going back to Genesis 1 we already discern the essential elements of a covenant, such as those subsequently established with Noah, Abraham, and Israel. Both mandate and promise, blessing and curse are present.

In the covenant God spells out his plans for man and what he expects from him. Man may claim this promise, but must also fulfill his commitments. A covenant implies for both parties: being bound to each other, and therefore permanence, certainty. From man’s point of view, the maintenance of the covenant relationship ensures progress, prosperity, and security. In the foregoing material we have not restricted ourselves to Genesis 1. We have also brought Genesis 2:15-17 into the picture. Here we find the counterpart of 1:28. Genesis 2:18-25 must also be considered in this connection. Here 2:24 is indeed crucial because of the fact that this verse may be called the “magna carta” of the marriage covenant. The relationship of God to man and vice versa becomes a covenant relationship as soon as God addresses man after creation….

It is indeed clear that man—as a creature that is addressed (in distinction from plants and animals)—must also be a creature that responds. The covenant idea implies the need for a positive response. The covenant may have been initiated one-sidedly by God, but its proper functioning is assured only when both parties speak and act in line with the nature of the relationship. Man is a full partner once his response has been given. Otherwise the actual practice and experience of the covenant interaction do not yet exist. Man realizes and achieves his destiny when in his response he echoes the Word of God. This is to say that he maintains and preserves the covenant in love and obedience (358-359).

Van Genderen and Velema again take up the idea of an original covenant relationship with God when they discuss the doctrine of sin. But before we get to that, it is worthwhile to follow their analysis of Genesis 2 and 3 and its meaning. They note that “Adam’s sin consists in *transgression of God’s prohibition*” (389).

[Adam] and Eve were prohibited from eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil (Gen. 2:17). Exegetes disagree on practically every aspect of Genesis 2 and 3….

We believe that *knowledge* here refers to determining, ascertaining, and deciding (for a detailed review see Oosterhoff, 1972 [*Hoe lezen wij Genesis 2 en 3?*], 142-51, especially 149). Man is prohibited from deciding for himself what is good and what is evil. He has to submit himself to this rule. This is also confirmed by the fruit that man took. Man appropriated something that is only due God. He claimed equality with God. In Genesis 3:22 God concedes this as a fact without sarcasm or caricature. Man sought to usurp God’s position. He reached for God’s crown and claimed what was only due God. According to Oosterhoff (1972, 152), man withdrew himself from God’s authority and law, sought to stand on his own two feet, and wished to try his own fortune against God’s will. God’s will had been made known to him through the declared prohibition (389-90).

Van Genderen and Velema observe that this first sin was not “a minor event” or a “small matter.” It is rather a crossing of boundaries in an attempt to claim equality with God. Both the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the tree of life depicted in the garden have “sacramental significance”—the former to keep man from evil. The prohibition surrounding this tree brings man to a decision in his relationship with God; it is a “test” whether “man indeed recognizes God as God” (390-91).

Recognition of the boundary imposed by God is intended to be manifested in *spontaneous love and obedience.* This is neither a mere formality nor formalism. It is a matter of life and death. It is an astute insight of the Belgic Confession of Faith, article 14, to speak of “a commandment of life.” We consider the expression “commandment of life” to be a true and even essential qualification of the concept of “probationary commandment” first suggested by Augustine. Augustine is right that God tests man. This test is not entirely symbolic. Its aim is the life that God grants upon obedience. Recognizing the boundary is a matter of life and death, death being the consequence of crossing this boundary! Man’s sin begins when he crosses this boundary. He takes his life into his own hands (by reaching for the fruit). He wants to decide for himself what is good and what is evil. This implies in fact that what God calls sin, he considers to be good! This is how sin begins and progresses. He who rejects the way and the command of life achieves death instead. When God put Adam to the test, avoidance of death was at stake. He failed, and this is the historical reality of the fall into sin (391).

From here we are in a position to examine van Genderen’s and Velema’s consideration whether sin is also a breaking of covenant. Specifically, does this apply to Adam and his descendants prior to the establishment of the covenant of grace with Abraham? For those who resolutely hold to the doctrine of the covenant of works, this is not a difficult question to answer. In providing their own answer, van Genderen and Velema piece together a doctrine of a covenant of works. In their words:

Possible objections to the idea of a covenant of works include not only its name (as though it concerned a labor-wage relationship, cf. a collective labor agreement), but also the fact that Genesis 1-3 does not mention the establishment of an official covenant. Subsequently this does not become the case, namely with the establishment of the covenants with Noah (Gen. 9:8-17), Abraham (Gen. 17:1-27 and its preparation in 15:1-21), and Israel (Ex. 24:1-8).

We can say that in the Old Testament *berit* means “a definite recognition of the reality of communion between God and his people (or mankind), the complete recognition of God—the Holy One—who sovereignly establishes and leads this communion, and the definite recognition of the rules of the covenant instituted by God.”

This paints the picture of a well-defined communion, established through solemn institution and acceptance, on the basis of an already existing relationship between Yhwh and Israel. Its institution must be entirely ascribed to Yhwh. Its acceptance by the people reflects their recognition of the position of Yhwh as redeemer, protector, and ruler. The covenant comprises the gift and acceptance of God’s promises and his commandments. The new communion with its privileges and commitments is cogently summarized in the words: “I shall be your God, and you will be my people” (Loonstra, 1990 [*Verkiesing-verzoening-verbond*], 202)….

Now we turn to what the Bible says about God’s relationship with the first human being. Genesis 1 portrays creation as including a mandate combined with a promise…. In Genesis 2:17 we read of a prohibition coupled with a sanction, while the Tree of Life reminds us of the blessing of life that man receives if he does not disobey the prohibition…. Although the gift of life is not described with so many words, it can be inferred from the subsequent course of events that man forfeits the blessing of life when he disobeys the prohibition.

In this passage we encounter at any rate a sovereign decree on the part of God as the Creator. There is also the gift of life in communion with God, which is the converse of the threat of death in case of disobedience. The latter is explicitly stated. The former is in fact taken away from man when he is expelled from Paradise, and his descendants are faced with death. It is a matter of man having to acknowledge God by accepting his command and not seeing the sanction of death implemented. God’s objective is life in communion with him, hence the “commandment of life.” God wants to be the God of Adam and his family. They may belong to him by displaying his image.

Since being God’s image implies that the relationship with God is neither arbitrary nor optional, it may be concluded that everything that follows has the character of a covenant, although it does not carry this name. Obedience and the rejection of disobedience are founded on the relationship established in Genesis 1:26-28. We see Genesis 2 as an elaboration of this, rather than the introduction of a new topic. Just as the story of creation is presented twice, so is the relationship between the Creator and man as his creature.

To us this in itself constitutes sufficient grounds for saying that the relationship between God and man is essentially a covenantal relationship. Although all of the elements (ingredients) are present, it does not carry this name. The identification of these elements in Genesis 1 and 2 does not constitute a fabrication on our own part. On the contrary, we merely trace and connect biblical lines. We prefer to speak of a *covenant of life* rather than a covenant of works (394-96).

Van Genderen and Velema also argue, like many Reformed theologians before them, that Romans 5, wherein a certain parallelism is expressed between Adam and Christ, particular the position of Adam which is comparable to the position of Christ. For this passage shows that “in a sense Adam occupies as fundamental a position with respect to his people as Christ represents to his people!” Inasmuch as we “cannot speak about Christ’s redeeming work without referring to the covenant,” we may conclude that “Adam’s position in the human race is unthinkable apart from God dealing with mankind through him.” This then “implies a covenantal relationship,” for “God is not dealing with a single human being here.” No, “Through Adam, God deals with everyone.” Thus “we do not hesitate to say that God’s relationship with Adam has the character of a covenantal relationship”—a relationship that has its own particular features and characteristics when compared with other covenant relationships described in the Bible (396). Thus the first sin does constitute a breaking of the covenant.

**III. Man as Fallen**

* + 1. **Man’s Fall and the Account of Genesis 3**

1. We aren’t told how long Adam and Eve lived in the Garden before their fall into sin. Presumably it was not, says Bavinck, a long period of time after creation before God’s command was transgressed. Creation and fall are not co-existent and are not to be identified with each other.
   * + - Scripture offers no detailed account of the creation and fall of the angels. But we do know that there are angels, and that a large number of them fell away, and also that this fall seems to have taken place at the beginning of the world.
       - Since the beginning of creation is Genesis 1:1 (--God creating the heavens and the earth--), so it appears that the rebellion of the angels must have taken place after the creation was complete with the formation of man.
       - At the same time, it is clear that the fall of the angels preceded that of man. Sin first broke out in heaven, in the immediate presence of God, at the foot of his throne, so to speak.
       - The thought, the wish, the will to resist God first arose in the heart of the angels. Perhaps pride was the first sin (cf. 1 Tim. 3:6); perhaps Satan’s sin began in the form of self-exaltation and pride.
       - Thus, already in the Paradise there is a fallen creature, the devil in the form of the Serpent, who seeks to subvert God’s will and his good plan for man, God’s image and vice-regent on earth. Adam and Eve came to transgress God’s law at the instigation of the devil. The woman was deceived by the serpent and tempted, and fell into transgression (cf. 2 Cor. 11:3; 1 Tim. 2:14).
       - The Serpent was a creature like other creatures of the field, but subtler and wiser (craftier) (Gen. 3:1; Mt. 10:16). The Bible further reveals to us that the serpent also has a symbolical character, and Satan made use of the snake to beguile man and lead him astray.
       - The Scriptures tell us that Satan is an accuser and tempter of men (Job 1:1; 1 Chron. 21:1; Zech. 3).
2. There is clearly another sinful world than the one here on earth. There is a spiritual realm of evil of which innumerable demons, wicked, impure spirits, the one more iniquitous than the other (Mt. 12:45) are the subject servants, and of which Satan is chief and head.

Various Names for the devil:

* + Satan is the great dragon, the old serpent (Rev. 12:9)
  + The Adversary (1 Pet. 5:8)
  + Devil, which is blasphemer (Mt 13:39)
  + The Enemy (Mt 13:39, Lk 10:19)
  + The Evil one (Mt 6:13; 13:19)
  + The Accuser (Rev. 12:10)
  + The Tempter (Mt 4:3)
  + Belial=meanness or worthlessness (2 Cor. 6:15)
  + Beelzebul or Beelzubub = lord of the flies or fly-god (2 Kgs 1:2; Mt 10:25)
  + Prince of the demons (Mt 9:34)
  + Prince of the power of the air (Eph. 2:2)
  + Prince of this world (John 12:31)
  + god of this age (2 Cor. 4:4)

The realm of darkness came into being at the fall of Satan and his angels. Peter says the angels sinned and were therefore punished by God (2 Pet. 2:4), and Jude 6 says that they did not keep their estate given them by God. They were not satisfied with the status that God had placed them in, and desired something more. The devil sinned from the beginning (1 Jn 3:8). Jesus says that Satan was a murderer from the beginning, and that he did not abide in the truth but is a liar (Jn 8:44).

Man’s temptation finds its origin in Satan, for James tells us that God is above temptation and himself tempts no man—(cf. Bavinck, 233). When man falls, he immediately accuses God of guilt—such Adam did. James counters this (also see 1 Cor. 10:13). In fact, the probationary command given to Adam was designed to cause his obedience to become manifest, and by no means was it beyond the range of his powers.

Satan seeks to twist, corrupt, and subvert God’s good intentions. Satan abuses the probationary command and makes of it a temptation, a secret attack on the obedience of the first man, to cause man’s fall.

* + - * 1. Satan re-presents God’s command as an arbitrary burden, as an unfounded *limitation* of man’s freedom.
        2. Thus there is sown in Eve’s soul the seed of doubt concerning the divine *origin* and *justness* of the command.
        3. Next that doubt is developed into *unbelief*—so that the thought develops as if God had given the command lest man become like himself, knowing good and evil.
        4. This unbelief in turn serves the imagination and makes the transgression appear to be as the way to life and equality with God.
        5. The imagination then does its work on the inclination, so that the forbidden tree becomes a lust to the eye and a desire of the heart.
        6. So when Eve follows her desire, she took the fruit and ate, and she gave also to her husband with her, and he also ate (Gen. 3:1-6).

Such is the biblical depiction of the Fall and the origin of sin. Later or subsequent sins, of course, assume a sinful nature.

**B. The Mystery of Man’s Fall and the Origin of Evil**

1. ***Adam and Eve did not possess a sinful nature, so how did they fall into sin?***

Bavinck bids us to remember that in all their perfection, they were nevertheless created in such a way that *they could fall,* and further that sin, by virtue of its nature, always has a *quality of unreasonableness* and *arbitrariness* about it. There is *never* a reasonable basis or ground for sin. Its existence is and remains *lawlessness.* Sin is never to be traced back (either rationally or psychologically) to a disposition or action which has any reason or right to exist.

This is especially true of the first sin. We can shed some light on the possibility of the Fall, but the transition to the *actuality* of it remains shrouded in darkness. Scripture makes no attempt to render this transition understandable—for sin is illegitimate (by definition); it is unreasonable and unjustifiable.

That there is sin and misery is known not only from Scripture; it is preached to us daily and every moment by the whole of a groaning creaturedom. No one thinks this world is paradise—yet eternity resides in man’s heart (Eccles. 3:11). And man’s conscience accuses him of his own waywardness.

1. ***Hence the question that cannot be suppressed: Whence cometh evil?***

Genesis 3 raises itself immeasurably above all human wisdom in the course of centuries in simply refusing to “explain” or “offer a reason for” sin and evil.

1. Human solutions to or explanations for sin and evil fall into certain classifications:
2. Evil comes from circumstances or environment (man is good and his heart is uncorrupted, but an evil environment corrupts him).
3. Evil comes from the sensuous nature of man. Man has a soul, but also a body, with appetites and base passions, which in turn stand in the way of noble ideals. (But evolution has said that man is an animal—and doesn’t really have a soul).
4. Man’s sinful or evil appetites and inclinations are due to his ancestry, but man is reformable—and eventually will evolve out of his “sinfulness.” Sin is but a vestigial influence and remnant of our earlier animal condition.

Numbers #ii and #iii are actually more modern versions of the doctrine that sin takes its point of departure *in matter* and *finitude.* Spirit versus matter! Matter is uncreated and unwanted by God. Matter is darkness, and exists eternally alongside of God—unless one posits two gods, one of light, another of darkness. Thus two eternal principles—or a singular impersonal God of mixed, blind forces.

The Bible is clear, though: God is light and in Him is no darkness at all—and in the beginning all was created good!

All these explanations for evil find the origin and seat of it *not* in the will of the creature but in the *structure* and *nature* of things; and therefore in the Creator who is the cause of that structure and nature, and if such is uncreated, then evil is simply part of the fabric of reality. However, if sin lurks in circumstances, in society, in sensuality, in the flesh, in matter, then the responsibility for it is to be charged to Him who is the Creator and Sustainer of all things. And then man goes scot free. In that event, sin did not begin at the time of the fall but at the time of creation. Creation and Fall are then identical! Then existence, being itself, is sin. Which entails: Either redemption is impossible or it culminates in the annihilation of the real, in nirvana.

1. The divine explanation for evil is quite different, for instead of charging God with responsibility for evil in order to vindicate man, God is rightly vindicated and man is charged with guilt.

Scripture is unremitting in implicating man and vindicating God with respect to sin and evil. To be sure, sin is not something that goes on outside the pale of his providence; and the Fall did not take place outside the scope of his foreknowledge, counsel, and will. Sin doesn’t render God plan-less and power-less. For God even brings good out of evil and makes it serve his glory. But even then sin remains utterly sinful.

Bavinck observes the following:

1. If in a particular sense one can say that God willed sin inasmuch as without his will, and outside of its pale, nothing can come into being or exist, still, it should then always be remembered it is as sin that he willed it, something which is abnormal and ought not to have been at all, something illegitimate, therefore, and in conflict with his commands.
2. If sin precedes God’s will, it loses its moral character, becoming a natural or necessary thing, inseparable from existence and thus in some mysterious sense sin cannot precede the divine will.
3. Sin does not, then, belong to the nature of things—it consists, rather, of departure from God’s ethical norms, and in fact the first human sin consisted of the transgression of the probationary command and thus of the whole moral law, which finds its seat in God’s authority. Even before the Ten Commandments, there existed a *natural law* that man was obliged to obey—this being constitutive of his created nature. (In short, the creature as created and unfallen owes God all that is due God as God – cf. covenant of nature)

**C.** **The Nature and Character of Sin**

**(a)** Sin is designated by many terms, such as *iniquity, disobedience, unrighteousness, ungodliness, and enmity (against God).* As G. C. Berkouwer observers, “The Word of God sees sin as something radical and total, and regards it as a missing of the mark, apostasy, transgression, lovelessness, lawlessness, and an alienation from the life of God” (*Sin*, 285). Several particulars stand out regarding the Scriptural portrait of sin:

1. *Sin and evil, and sin’s near-neighbors.* Nowadays many people are more comfortable talking about evil than about sin. Indeed, not all evil is sin; but all sin is evil. For example, there is physical evil, such as birth defects, tornados, earthquakes and the like; and there is moral evil, such as murder, idolatry, slander, and blasphemy. Physical evil has to do with phenomena of nature that bring injury, calamity, or some kind of suffering, along with things like disease, crop failure, drought, and resulting famine, starvation, and such. These things are are not sins to the degree that they are not result of human error, negligence, ineptitude, etc., but they are evil. Sin, by contrast, is a moral evil. Most of the terms used in Scripture for sin point to the moral dimension. Neal Plantinga points out that sin is a “vandalism of shalom.” Instead of life unfolding according to plan, functioning with right order, so that things are the way they are supposed to be, sin brings a ruination of God’s design, resulting in disorder. This is moral evil. From the biblical portrait of sin, which is multifaceted and richly textured, we discover that sin is a deviation, a missing the mark; it is to go off course and to be on the wrong path. Sin is disintegrating and breaks integrity; it violates rectitude. It is also a revolt against what is good and a refusal to be in subjection to rightful authority. It is a positive—often deliberate—violation and transgression of the law. Sin breaks promises and runs roughshod over what is righteous and good. It renders persons guilty and subject to penalty, for sin is treasonous and entails unfaithfulness. Sin is also vanity and foolishness; it is a folly. It brings on a distortion of nature and a perversion of what is ordered, right, and good. It disunites what should be joined and joins what should be disunited. Crookedness of disposition, of nature, of path, of walk, of affection depicts sin. Human volition stands in back of sin, with resulting calamity, ruination, and a poisoning of what is pure or wholesome. Sin, then, is not mere weakness, a simple error, a misjudgment, an imperfection, but, L. Berkhofs words, “an active opposition to God, and a positive transgression of His law, which constitutes guilt” (ST, 231).

Plantinga demonstrates the evil is manifest in sin, crime, immorality, and disease. Indeed, each of these depicts and is an example of evil. These are not however identical to one another. Thus sin can be distinguished from many of its conceptual near-neighbors, such as crime, immorality, and disease, though not disentangled from these. For instance, “crime is statute-relative in a way that sin is not.” Passing off bad checks is likely a crime in every jurisdiction, but “a lot of sin (e.g., frittering your life away on trivial pursuits) is perfectly legal, and some (e.g., godlessness) is in certain legal jurisdictions even obligatory” (18). Sometimes civil disobedience is a crime but not a sin. In the case of disease, sometimes sinful actions and immoral choices cause disease or spread existing disease or case injury to oneself or another, but “disease sometimes furnishes an occasion for or even inclines a person toward sin, as in cases of an invalid’s malice toward the healthy.” The two remain distinct, however. “Sin makes us guilty while disease makes us miserable. We thus need grace for our sin but mercy and healing for our diseases” (20). Sin can be objective or subjective. Objective sin is sin that breaks shalom, that involves an action, choice, thought, word, or deed that violates the standard God has put in place, with the result that the agent is guilty. Subjective sin involves the agent acting, thinking purposely against what he or she believes to be objectively sinful (even if the agent is mistaken in believing that). If someone believe any use of alcohol is wrong (even if they are wrong to think that), for that person to consume alcohol (even in moderation) is a sin. “For by doing what he thinks is wrong, a person does what he thinks will grieve God, and the willingness to grieve God by one’s acts is itself grievous” (20-21). We see, then, that whereas all sin is evil, not all evil is sin.

1. *Sin’s absolute character.* The Westminster Larger Catechism reminds us that every sin deserves God’s wrath and curse, which means that every sin, even the least, inasmuch as it is against the sovereignty, goodness, and holiness of God, and against his holy law, is subject to eternal judgment, and God is perfectly just to punish every sin both in this life and in the life to come. We cannot expiate our sins, for only Christ’s blood is the expiation for sin (Q/A 152). There is, then, an absolute character to sin. In that sense, there are no “light weight” sins or harmless sins or little sins. The least sin earns death and the divine curse. However, this is not to confuse or relativize or flatten out the effects of sins and the misery they cause. Some sins are more egregious than others; some are more harmful; some are bigger shalom-breakers. As Plantinga notes, “All sin is equally wrong, but not all sin is equally bad” (21). Surprisingly, many believers have trouble grasping this point. The Second Helvetic Confession, chapter 8, states: “We … confess that sins are not equal; although they arise from the same fountain of corruption and unbelief, some are more serious than others. As the Lord said, it will be more tolerable for Sodom than for the city that rejects the word of the Gospel (Matt. 10:15; 11:2-24).” The Westminster Shorter Catechism addresses the issue explicitly as well: “Q. 83. *Are all transgressions of the law equally heinous*? A. Some sins in themselves, and by reason of several aggravations, are more heinous in the sight of God than others.” The Larger Catechism elaborates on this issue at great length (see Q/As 150, 151). We will address this matter further below, but we note that when we distinguish between sins and expose the inequality that exists among them, this does not mean we deny the absolute character of sin. Good and evil are absolute concepts—evil is evil and good is good; they don’t mix into something inbetween or a third hybrid. These are qualitative concepts, not quantitative ones. Thus, as L. Berkhof states, “Sin is not a lesser degree of goodness, but a positive evil” (ST, 232). There is no neutrality with respect to each. This means that human beings are either on the right side or on the wrong side; they are either children of God or children of the devil; they are either citizens of the kingdom of light or citizens of the kingdom of darkness (cf. Matt. 10:32, 33; 12:30; Luke 11:23; James 2:10).
2. *Sin always has relation to God and his will.* We must see that sin is treachery; it is a personal defiance of God. It is a violation of his will, indeed, an overt disregard for his will. Sin is rebellion, a kind of making war against God. To say that sin is a lack of conformity to God’s law is true but grossly under stated. If we consider the content of God’s law, which depicts his righteous character and maps out the path for human happiness and blessing, we begin to sense the scandal of sin. The law calls us to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Sn laughs at this call. Our sin turns a blind eye to God, directing our hearts away from loving him, our lives are expended in other pursuits, our minds used to question him or doubt him, our strength used up in rebellion against him and in chasing other loves. The law also calls us to love our neighbor as ourselves, but sin bears the teeth of enmity toward our neighbor. We invent ways to abuse and use others—our sins typical harm other image bearers of God, and often ourselves. Yet all sin is finally a violation of God and against God (Ps. 51:4; also cf. Rom. 1:32; 2:12-14; 4:15; James 2:9; 1 John 3:4).
3. *Sin includes both guilt and pollution.* Guilt refers to the culpability of our sin, that we are deserving of God’s displeasure and wrath; that we are worthy candidates of condemnation, that there are no excuses that mitigate or otherwise tone down our blameworthiness. We are liable to punishment, for we are immoral and guilty—guilty with Adam’s sin and guilty with all of our own copycat sins that follow in his line. Guilt bespeaks a trampling upon justice and righteousness, and so our sin renders us justly under the penalty of righteousness. L. Berkhof, following Dabney, observes that the word guilt “has a twofold meaning. It may denote an inherent quality of the sinner, namely, his demerit, ill-desert, or guiltiness, which renders him worthy of punishment.” This is what may be called “potential guilt.” Berkhof continues, “It is inseparable from sin, is never found in one who is not personally a sinner, and is permanent, so that once established, it cannot be removed by pardon. But it may also denote the obligation to satisfy justice, to pay the penalty of sin….” This may be called “actual guilt.” “It is not inherent in man, but is the penal enactment of the lawgiver, who fixes the penalty of the guilt. It may be removed by the satisfaction of the just demands of the law personally or vicariously” (ST, 232). Our guilt is either clearly stated or assumed in various biblical texts: Jesus taught us to pray for the forgiveness of our “debts” (Matt. 6:12); Paul teaches us that by the standard of the law, every mouth is stopped and that all persons are accountable to God for their sins (Rom. 3:19); moreover, Adam’s transgression brought condemnation down upon all (Rom. 5:18). It is not for nothing that the Apostle says that we are all by nature “children of wrath” (Eph. 2:3). As for the pollution of sin, here we consider the damage sin does to our nature as moral creatures. Instead of being a pure spring that issues forth pure water, our nature is like a poisoned well that pours filth from the spigot. Every sinner is now inherently corrupted, i.e., every person is infected with a befouled nature, so that even the human heart is turned away from God; even worse, as sinners we desire and enjoy wickedness instead of righteousness. Because we are guilty in Adam we deserve the affliction of sin’s pollution. Like an ailment or a disease, we start life infected and tainted with a toxic disposition; sin, like a contagion, leaves us morally sick and spiritually ailing. Because we are guilty with Adam’s guilt it is just that we are corrupted with Adam’s corruption. Indeed, why else should Adam’s progeny be afflicted with his pollution? Thus our being corrupted is inconceivable without our first being guilty. Guilt therefore logically precedes corruption, but it always is followed by pollution. (NB: many theologians erroneously want to turn this idea of around.) In L. Berkhof’s words, “Every one who is guilty in Adam is, as a result, also born with a corrupt nature” (ST, 233). Human pollution is evident throughout the Bible. Jeremiah declares, “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure” (Jer. 17:9). The Apostle Paul warns believers away from sin’s pattern, which consists in futile thinking, darkened understanding, a life of ignorance, separation from God’s life, which flows out of a hardened heart, insensitive, given over to sensuality and every sort of impurity, and an abiding lust for more (Eph. 4:17-19). In Romans the Apostle tells us that in living in sin we set our minds on the sinful nature and its desires; and the mind of sinful man is death, being hostile to God and in rebellion to his law. Such cannot please God (Rom. 8:5-8). “A good tree,” Jesus tells us, “cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit” (Matt. 7:18). Humans are bad trees and cannot bear good fruit. The pure cannot come from the impure (Job 14:4).

5. *Sin has its seat in the heart.* The Bible tells us that out of the heart are the issues of life (Prov. 4:23). This applies to sin as much as to righteousness. “The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks” (Luke 6:45). The heart is the wellspring of our thoughts, desires, and actions. Thus the intellect and will, our emotions and desires, all our affections are circumscribed by the heart; more, the heart commandeers our faculties and uses them for its sinful purposes. The whole man (including his body, his mind, his soul, and his strength) is taken up into sin’s service. The heart orients and directs all of man’s actions. “For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what make a man ‘unclean’; but eating with unwashed hands does not make him ‘unclean’ “ (Matt. 15:19, 20). Being fallen, subjected to pollution, the heart wants what it wants; sadly, it no longer wants God. It does, however, want sin. It delights in waywardness. The sinful heart thrives on an appetite of more sinning. Pride, envy, anger, sloth, avarice, gluttony, and lust are its bread and butter.

1. *Sin does not consist only in overt acts.* Sin is not only or merely overt actions. Sin does not consist only in outward, visible deeds, though, obviously, sin includes outward actions and visible deeds. But sin can also be inward, subtle; it can hide behind a mask of righteousness and innocence, while it harbors habits of the heart that are malicious, slanderous, envious, and idolatrous, to mention only a few. Behind every sin stands these sinful habits of the heart; and that disposition bespeaks a sinful condition. As L. Berkhof writes, “The sinful state is the basis of the sinful habits, and these manifest themselves in sinful deeds.” Sin also has the power and tendency to gain momentum—repeated acts of sin breed more sin of the same sort and give rise to off-shoot sins, and together these form sinful habits. All sins, though, including our sinful habits of heart, our sinful dispositions, are rooted in our sinful and polluted nature. Fallen humans are called “flesh” in Scripture, and intentions of their hearts and the imagination of their minds are fleshly. Paul sums up the opposition between the flesh (which describes our sinful nature) and the Spirit (who renews us to life and the image of God) in these words: “For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want” (Gal. 5:17). Yet, for the believer there is also this reality: “… those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.” (Gal. 5:24).

All of these terms point in the same direction.

Paul the apostle: Knowledge of sin is the by the law of God (Rom. 3:20), and John declares that all sin, from smallest to greatest, is unrighteousness, lawlessness, transgression (1 John 3:4).

**(b)** Summary

* If transgression is the very character of sin, then that character cannot lie in the nature or essence of things, be they matter or spirit, for things owe their essence and existence to God alone—He who is the fountain of all goods. The evil can therefore only come *after* the good, can only exist through the good and on the good, and can really consist of nothing but the corruption of the good.
* Thus all the good gifts with which man was originally endowed, though now corrupted, are still good gifts as such, for they come from the Father of lights. However, they are now used by persons, individually and collectively, as weapons against God and put into the service of unrighteousness.
* Sin, accordingly, is not merely a lack or want, not even merely a lack of what man originally possessed. Sin is more than a mere absence of something. It is a deprivation of that which man, in order to be truly human, ought to have; and it is at the same time the introduction of a defect or inadequacy which is not proper of man.
* Sin is not a substance in itself, but that sort of disturbance of all the gifts and energies given to man which makes them work in another direction, not towards God but away from him. Thus all of our human faculties – reason, will, emotions, passions, abilities – have become weapons of unrighteousness. Hence, Jesus can liken the Jewish leaders that opposed him as to children who have the devil as their father (cf. John 8:44).
* In short, sin does not belong to the essence of the world, but is something which has come into the world as an alien. As something foreign to the essence of creation itself, sin can also be removed from creation by the power of God’s grace, for his grace is stronger than every creature.

***Excursus I:* Millard J. Erikson’s Discussion of the Nature of Sin** (*Christian Theology*, 2nd ed., pp. 579-598)

**Terms for Sin**

**(i) *Terms Emphasizing Causes of Sin***

The Bible uses many terms to denote sin. Some focus on its causes, others on its nature, and still others on its consequences, although these categories may not always be clear-cut. The first are those that emphasize causes of sin, predisposing factors that give rise to sin.

* Sin as *ignorance* — a;gnoia (*agnoia*) = a + ginwvskw, in the LXX it renders hgv and gg;v. Eph. 4:18 says about the Gentiles: “They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts.” Also cf. 1 Pet. 1:14. Some misdeeds, at least, committed in ignorance required atonement (cf. Heb. 9:7). There is willful ignorance—knowing the right course, or being able to know the right course, but choosing not to know it. (cf. Acts 17:23; 2:4; 2 Cor. 6:9; Gal. 1:22; Heb. 5:2; Acts 3:17; 17:30).
* Sin as *error* – hgv (*shagah)* this is the tendency to go astray, to make mistakes. Thus, in Ezek. 34:6 we read of sheep that stray from the flock. We also read in Isa. 28:7 of drunken persons who stumble and reel. Generally the term refers to error in moral conduct, such that the person committing the error is liable for his or her action. For example, 1 Sam. 26:21—Saul sought to kill David, but David spared Saul’s life. Saul says, “I have sinned. Come back, David my son. Because you considered my life precious today, I will not try to harm you again. Surely I have acted like a fool *and have erred greatly*” (daom. hBer>h; hG<v.a,w).

A related word is hggv (*shegagah*)*.* More common that either *shagah* and *shegagah* is h[T (*ta’ah*), occurring about fifty times in the OT. In the NT the word that most frequently denotes sin as error is planw/mai (*planōmai*). It emphasizes the cause of one’s going astray, namely, being deceived, which is nonetheless an avoidable error (cf. Mk 13:5-6; 1 Cor. 6:9; Gal. 6:7; 2 Thess. 2:9-12; 1 Jn 3:7; 2 Jn 7). Jesus likened sinners to straying sheep (Lk 15:1-7). The Sadducees’ error is ignorance of Scripture and of God’s power (Mk 12:24-27). The sin against nature is termed error in Rom. 1:27 and Tit. 3:3. The wilderness generation are astray in their hearts (Heb. 3:10).

Both the Old and New Testaments recognize various errors as sin. Of course there are such things as accidents, acts done with no malicious intent. In most cases, however, what the Bible terms errors simply ought not to have occurred: the person should have known better, and was responsible to so inform himself. While these sins are less heinous than the deliberate and rebellious type of wrongdoing, the individual is still responsible for them, and therefore penalty attaches to them.

* Sin as *inattention* – the NT uses this word parakoh, (*parakoē*), which in several places means disobedience as a result of inattention. For example, Heb. 2:2-3: “For if the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience [parakoh,] received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation? This salvation which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who hear him.” The verb parakou,w (*parakouō*) expresses a similar idea, as it means “refuse to listen” (Mt. 18:17) or “ignore” (Mk 5:36). Thus the sin of parakoh, is either failure to listen and heed when God is speaking, or disobedience following upon failure to hear aright.

**(ii)** ***Terms Emphasizing the Character of Sin***

* Sin as *missing the mark* – Probably the most common of the terms that stress the nature of sin is the idea of missing the mark. It is found in the Hebrew verb ajx (*chata’*) and in the Greek verb a`marta,nw (*hamartano*). The Hebrew verb and its cognates appear about 600 times and are translated in the LXX by thirty-two Greek words, the most common rendering by far being a`marta,nw and its cognates. In the Bible “missing the mark” suggests not merely a mistake or a failure, but a decision to fail, i.e., a volunatary and culpable mistake. In the NT a`marta,nw means “to miss the mark, to miss, to lose, not share in something, to be mistaken.” The noun refers to the act of itself, the failure to reach a goal. This word family occurs almost 300 times in the NT. This sin is always sin against God, since it is failure to hit the mark he has set, his standard, of perfect love of God and perfect obedience to him (cf. 1 Cor. 3:16-17). Blameworthiness is attached to missing the mark. The act of sin is culpable behavior. The noun a`marti,a refers to the actual act of sinning; but he noun a`ma,rthma refers to the end result of the sin.
* Sin as *irreligion/impiety* – avsebe,w (*asebeo*)—the opposite of piety or devout, thus ungodly or irreverent; avdiki,a (unrighteous)—also denotes irreligion, an absence of righteousness, and a failure to measure up to the standard of righteousness; avnomi,a (lawless)—not so much a breaking of the Mosaic regulations in a narrow sense, but a breaking of the law of God in a broader sense. When Paul refers to the narrow Mosaic code he uses the word paranome,w (Acts. 23:3).
* Sin as *transgression* – The Hebrew word rb[ (*‘abar*) appears approximately 600 times in the OT. It means, literally, “to cross over” or “to pass by”; nearly all of the occurrences are in the literal sense. But in a number of passages the word involves the idea of transgressing a command or going beyond an established limit. In Esther 3:3 it is used of an earthly king’s command. In most of the parallel cases, however, it is used of transgressing the Lord’s commands. A concrete example of this is found in Num. 14:41-42. The people of Israel want to go up to the place which the Lord had promised, but Moses says, “Why are you disobeying the Lord’s command? This will not succeed! Do not go up, because the Lord is not with you. You will be defeated by your enemies.” The people were not to transgress God’s covenat (Dt 17:2) or his commandment (Dt 26:13). Other examples include Jeremiah 34:18 (“And I will give the men that have transgressed my covenant, which have not performed the words of the covenant which they had made before me, when they cut the calf in twain, and passed between the parts thereof … [I will give them into the hands of their enemies]”); Dan. 9:11 (“Yea, all Israel have transgressed thy law, even by departing, that they might not obey thy voice; therefore the curse is poured upon us, and the oath that *is* written in the law of Moses the servant of God, because we have sinned against him”); and Hos. 6:7 (“But like Adam they have transgressed the covenant; There they have dealt treacherously against Me”); 8:1 (“*Put* the trumpet to your lips! Like an eagle *the enemy comes* against the house of the LORD, Because they have transgressed My covenant And rebelled against My law”).

The closest NT Greek word for the Hebrew term is parabai,nw (*parabainō*) and its noun form para,basij (*parabasis*). Cf. Mt 15:2-3. Sometimes these terms refer to the transgression of a particular commandment, for example, Adam and Eve’s eating of the forbidden fruit (Rom. 5:14; 1 Tim 2:14). Always the implication is present that the law has been transgressed. Thus where there is no law there is no transgression (Rom 4:15; 2:2; 9:15).

* Sin as *iniquity* or *lack of integrity* – Sin is also characterized as iniquity. The primary word here is lw;[ (*‘awal*) and its derivatives. The basic concept seems to be deviation from a right course. Thus, the word can carry the idea of injustice, failure to fulfill the standard of righteousness, or lack of integrity. For the idea of injustice, see Lev. 19:15; and for lack of integrity the idea is that the individual lacks unity of character—a discrepancy is present between former behavior and current behavior.
* Sin as *rebellion* – A number of OT words depict sin as rebellion, a rather prominent idea in Hebrew thought. The most common of these is [v;P (*pasha’)* together with its noun *pesha ‘.* The verb is often translated “transgress,” but the root meaning is “to rebel.” It is sometimes used of rebellion against a human king (1 Kg 12:19), but more frequently refers to rebellion against God. Cf. Isa. 1:2: “I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me.” Other words conveying the idea of rebellion: -- hrM *marah* – denoting refractoriness (cf. Isa. 1:20); -- drM *marad* – See Ezek. 2:3; -- rrs *sarar* – Dt. 21:18; Ps. 78:8.

The NT also characterizes sin as rebelliousness and disobedience. The most common terms are the noun avpei,qeia (*apeitheia*) and the related verb avpeiqe,w (*apeitheō*) and adjective avpei,qh,j (*apeithēs*). In all, these terms appear 29 times (cf. e.g., Heb. 3:19; 4:6; Lk 1:17; Heb. 11:31; 1 Pet. 3:20; also Eph. 2:2; 5:6; Col. 3:6. Two other NT terms are avfi,sthmi and avpos- tasi,a.

* Sin as *treachery* – l[m (*ma’al*) d[B (*bagad*) parapi,ptw. In the OT this word is used to describe a woman’s unfaithfulness to her husband (Num. 5:12, 27) and of Achan’s taking the devoted things, thus breaking faith (Josh. 7:1; 22:20). See Lev. 26:40; also Ezek. 14:13; 15:8. In the NT the term denotes a falling away (Heb. 6:6), which is a deliberate turning from what one has been exposed to and tasted as good and from the Lord. Another word para,ptwma occurs 21x and denotes something close to a traitor’s desertion. In both testaments there is a focus on the bond or covenant which exists between the Lord and his people. The sin of betrayal of or infidelity to that which he has entrusted to them is labeled treachery. It is reprehensible because of what has been violated.
* Sin as *perversion* – hw[ (*awah*). This term means “to bend or twist.” People can be bowed down (Isa. 21:3; 24:1); minds can be perverted (Prov. 12:8); cities can be twisted out of shape (by destruction; Ps. 79:1; Isa. 17:1; Jer. 26:18; Mic. 1:6; 3:12). When referring to sin, the term often carries the suggestion of punishment. Cain says, “My punishment is greater than I can bear.” We see very close connection between the act and its consequences. The one who sins becomes twisted or distorted, as it were.
* Sin as *abomination* – #WEQv (*shiqquts*) and hb[WT (*to’ebah*). This characterization of sin seems to have special reference to God’s attitude toward sin and its relation to him. “Abomination” is the most common English translation of these words, that which is particularly reprehensible to God, such as idolatry (Deut. 7:25-26), homosexuality (Lev. 18:22; 20:13), wearing clothes of the opposite sex (Deut. 22:5); sacrificing sons and daughters (Deut. 12:31) or blemished animals (Deut. 17:1), and witchcraft (Deut. 18:9-12). These practices virtually nauseate God. This term suggests more than divine peevishness; it expresses divine revulsion.

**(iii) *Terms Emphasizing Results of Sin***

* Sin as *agitation* or *restlessness* – [vr (*resha’*). This term is usually translated “wickedness” and is believed to have originally suggested the concept of tossing and restlessness, and its root meaning may been “to be disjointed, ill regulated, abnormal, wicked.” Job 3:17 comes close: “There the wicked cease from troubling. And there the weary are at rest.” So does Isa. 57:20-21: “But the wicked are like the troubled sea, when it cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt. ‘There is no sea,’ says my God, ‘for the wicked.’” Wickedness causes agitation and discomfort for the agent and others around him; chaotic confusion and disorder characterize the life of the wicked person.
* Sin as *evil* or *badness* – [r (*ra’*). This is the generic term. It means evil in the sense of badness, and can thus refer to anything harmful or malignant, not merely moral evil. Food that has gone bad or a dangerous animal, distress or adversity (in Jer. 42:6 the words “good and evil” could be rendered “prosperity and adversity”). This word binds together the act of sin and its consequences. In Deut. 30:15 God sets before the people the choice between “life and good, death and evil.” Obedience brings the former, disobedience the latter.
* Sin as *guilt* – ~va (*‘asham*). This term is explicit in regarding sin as guilt, which refers to an act of sin in the sense of “to do wrong, to commit an offense, or to inflict an injury.” It has the notion of need for compensation—in fact, in about one third of the passages where the word is used, it refers to “sin offering.” In Num. 5:8 it means “compensation or satisfaction for injury inflicted.” “But if the man has no relative to whom restitution may be made for the wrong, the restitution for the wrong must go to the Lord for the priest, in addition to the ram of the atonement with which atonement is made for him.” In the NT the word enocoj is used, appearing 10x (Matt. 5:21-22; 1 Cor. 11:27, “guilty of the body and blood of Christ”; James 2:10, “guilty of the whole law”; etc.
* Sin as *trouble* – !wa (*‘aven*). This word literally means “trouble” and is almost always used in a moral sense. The underlying idea is that sin brings trouble upon the sinner. Hosea refers to Bethel, after it had become a seat of idolatry, as Beth-aven, the “house of trouble” (Hos. 4:15; 10:8). Cf. Ps. 5:5; 6:8, etc., for “workers of trouble”; Proverbs 22:8: “He who sows iniquity will reap sorrow [calamity], and the rod of his anger will fail.”

***Excursus II: Louis Berkhof on the Pelagian View of Sin*** (*Systematic Theology*, 4th ed., pp. 233-235)

The Pelagian viw of sin is quite different from that presented above. The only point of similarity lies in this that the Pelagian also considers sin in relation to the law of God, and regards it as a transgression of the law. But in all other particulars his conception differs widely from the Scripturel and Augustinian view.

1. Statement of the Pelagian view. Pelagius takes his startingpoint in the natural ability of man. His fundamental proposition is: God has commanded man to do that which is good; hence the latter must have the ability to do it. This means that man has a free will in the absolute sense of the word, so that it is possible for him to decide for or against that which is good, and also to do the good as well as the evil. The decision is not dependent on any moral character in man, for the will is entirely indeterminate. Whether a man will do good or evil simply depends on his free and independent will. From this it follows, of course, that there is no such thing as a moral development of the individual. Good and evil are located in the separate actions of man. From this fundamental position the doctrinal teaching of Pelagius respecting sin naturally follows. Sin consists only in the separate acts of the will. There is no such thing as a sinful nature, neither are there sinful dispositions. Sin is always a deliberate choice of evil by a will which is perfectly free, and can just as well choose and follow the good. But if this is so, then the conclusion inevitably follows that Adam was not created in a state of positive holiness, but in a state of moral equilibrium. His condition was one of moral neutrality. He was neither good nor bad, and therefore had no moral character; but he chose the course of evil, and thus became sinful. Inasmuch as sin consists only in separate acts of the will, the idea of its propagation by procreation is absurd. A sinful nature, if such a thing should exist, might be passed on from father to son, but sinful acts cannot be so propagated. This is in the nature of the case an impossibility. Adam was the first sinner, but his sin was in no sense passed on to his descendants. There is no such thing as original sin. Children are born in a state of neutrality, beginning exactly where Adam began, except that they are handicapped by the evil examples which they see round about them. Their future course must be determined by their own free choice. The universality of sin is admitted, because all experience testifies to it. It is due to imitation and to the habit of sinning that is gradually formed. Strictly speaking, there are, on the Pelagian standpoint, no sinners, but only separate sinful acts. This makes a religious conception of the history of the race utterly impossible.

2. Objections to the Pelagian View. There are several weighty objections to the Pelagian view of sin, of which the following are the most important:

a. The fundamental position that man is held responsible by God only for what he is able to do, is absolutely contrary to the testimony of conscience and to the Word of God. It is an undeniable fact that, as a man increases in sin, his ability to do good decreases. He becomes in an ever greater measure the slave of sin. According to the theory under consideration this would also involve a lessening of his responsibility. But this is equivalent to saying that sin itself gradually redeems its victims by relieving them of their responsibility. The more sinful a man, the less responsible he is. Against this position conscience registers a loud protest. Paul does not say that the hardened sinners, which he describes in Rom. 1:18-32 were virtually without responsibility, but regards them as worthy of death. Jesus said of the wicked Jews who gloried in their freedom, but manifested their extreme wickedness by seeking to kill Him, that they were bond-servants of sin, did not understand His speech, because they could not hear His word, and would die in their sins, John 8:21, 22, 34, 43. Though slaves of sin, they were yet responsible.

b. To deny that man has by nature a moral character, is simply bringing him down to the level of the animal. According to thtis view everything in the life of man that is not a conscious choice of the will, is deprived of all moral quality. But the consciousness of men in general testifies to the fact that the contrast between good and evil also applies to man’s tendencies, desires, moods, and affections, and that these also have a moral character. In Pelagianism sin and virtue are reduced to superficial appendages of man, in no way connected with his inner life. That the estimate of Scripture is quite different appears from the following passages: Jer. 17:9; Ps. 51:6, 10; Matt. 15:19; Jas. 4:1, 2.

c. A choice of the will that is in no way determined by man’s character, is not only psychologically unthinkable, but also ethically worthless. If a good deed of man simply happens to fall out as it does, and no reason can be given why it did not turn out to be the opposite, in other words, if the deed is not an expression of man’s character, it lacks all moral value. It is only as an exponent of character that a deed has the moral value that is ascribed to it.

d. The Pelagian theory can give no satisfactory account of the universality of sin. The bad example of parents and grandparents offers no real explanation. The mere abstract possibility of man’s sinning, even when strengthened by the evil example, does not explain how it came to pass that all men actually sinned. How can it be accounted for that the will invariably turned in the direction of sin, and never in the opposite direction? It is far more natural to think of a general disposition of sin.

\* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \* \*

1. **The Transmission of Sin**

**1. The Solidarity of Humanity**

Scripture treats humankind as a solidarity, for humanity does not consist of an aggregate of individual souls who have accidentally come together from all sides of a given place, and who, for better or for worse, must now somehow, because of their many contacts, get along with each other as best they may. Human kind is a unity; rather, one body with man members, one tree with many branches, one kingdom with many citizens. Although the Fall has brought disunity and enmity between human beings as individuals, socio-economic groups and ethnic groups, as tribes, communities, and nations, it is nonetheless united in its fallenness, its estrangement from God, its depravity and pollution, and its guilt before the Creator of heaven and earth. Physically humankind is one because of blood. Juridically and ethically humankind is one because, on the very basis of the natural unity, it has been placed under one and the same divine law, the law of the covenant of nature.

From this the Bible depicts for us that humankind remains one also in its fall. Such is how Scripture views the human race from its first to its last page. In themselves, despite distinctions in gender, rank, status, office, honor, talents, and the like, all people are alike before God, for they are all sinners, sharing in common guilt, tainted by the same impurity, subject to the same death, and in need of the same redemption. In fact, God has included all persons under the same disobedience in order that He should be merciful to them all (Rom. 11:32). No one may rightly assume that they escape the universal character of sin, nor despair that God’s grace could never reach them.

**2.** **Romans 5:12-21 & 1 Corinthians 15:22**

This theme receives explicit treatment from the apostle Paul. When in his letter to the Romans he has first set forth the fact that the whole world is damnable in the sight of God (Rom 1:18-3:20), and when he thereupon has explained how all righteousness and forgiveness of sins, all reconciliation and all life have been accomplished by Christ and are available in Him for the believer (Rom 3:21-5:11), he concludes in chapter 5, verses 12-21 (before he proceeds to describe in the sixth chapter the moral fruits of the righteousness of faith), by once more summarizing the whole content of the salvation that we owe to Christ, and he contrasts this in a context of world history to all the guilt and misery that have accrued to us *in Adam.*

By one man, he says, sin came into the world, and together with death accrued to all people. For that sin, which the first man committed, was quite different in character from other sins. It is called transgression, different in kind from the sins which men committed in the time between Adam and Moses (Rom 5:14), and an offense (Rom 5:15ff.), a disobedience (Rom 5:19), and as such it forms the sharpest of contrasts wit the absolute, death-tested obedience of Christ (Rom. 5:19).

Therefore the sin that Adam committed did not remain limited to his person alone. It continued to operate in and through the whole human race. For what we read is not that by one man sin came into one person but into the world (Rom 5:12), and also death which carried on in all men, and justifiably so, because all men had sinned in that one man.

* + 1. That such is Paul’s thought can be proved from the fact that he derives from the transgression of Adam the death of the people who lived from Adam to Moses, and who could not have sinned with a transgression like to that of Adam (inasmuch as at the time there was no positive law, that is, no law of the covenant to which a specific condition and threat was attached). But if Romans 5:12ff. should still leave any doubt about this, it would be removed by what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:22.
    2. For there in **1 Cor. 15:22** we read that all men died, not in themselves, not in their parents or grandparents, but *in Adam*. That is to say, people are not subject to death first of all because they or their ancestors have personally become guilty, but they have all already died in Adam. It was determined already in the sin and death of Adam that these all should die. The point is not that in him they have all become mortal, but that really they have in an objective sense already died in him. Already *then* the sentence of death was pronounced, even though its execution, so to speak, followed later. Now Paul recognizes no other death than a death which is the result of sin (Rom. 6:23). If all men have died in Adam, then they have also all sinned in him. By the transgression of Adam, sin and death could come into the world and accrue to all men because that transgression had a peculiar character. It was the transgression of a particular law, and it was transgressed not by Adam alone but by Adam as head of the human race.

As Turretin states, the phrase “In Adam all die” means that all people “incur the guilt of death and condemnation. Therefore in the same one they also sinned and are held in a common blameworthiness with him. No one can in anyone [no person can in any other person] deserve the punishment of death unless he had with him and in him a common sin, the cause of death. Nor does it suffice to be said that all die in Adam efficiently [i.e., Adam as the cause] because we draw from Adam original sin (which is the cause of death). In the same way, we can be said to die in our parents and ancestors, from whom we draw sin immediately (which nevertheless Scripture nowhere says, but concerning Adam only because we were in him in a peculiar way, not only as the seminal principle, but also as the representative head). Thus we are said to have sinned in him not only by efficiency (because he is the cause by which sin is propagated to us), but also by reason of demerit (because his criminality drew guilt upon us). In the same manner, ‘all’ are said in the same place ‘to be made alive’ in Christ, not only efficiently by the vivifying Spirit, but also meritoriously by the imputation of his righteousness” (Inst. IX.ix.xviii).

* + 1. Only if Paul’s thought in Rom 5:12, 14 is understood in this way can full justice be done to what is said in the following verses about the consequences of Adam’s transgression. It is all the development of a single basic idea. By the transgression of **one** man (Adam) many (descendants) have died (verse 15). The guilt (that is, the judgment or sentence that God as Judge pronounces) by this **one** who sinned became a judgment that comprehended the whole human race (verse 16). By the offense of that **one** man death reigned in the world over all men to condemnation (verse 18). And, in the final epitome, by the disobedience of the **one**, the many (all the descendants of Adam) were constituted sinners. By that disobedience they all immediately came to stand before the face of God as sinful men (verse 19).
    2. The seal is placed upon this interpretation of Paul’s thought by the comparison that he introduces between Adam and Christ. In Romans 5 Paul does not treat the origin of Adam’s sin, but the fullness of the salvation achieved by Christ. In order to explicate or exhibit this salvation in all its glory, he compares and contrasts it with the sin and death that have spread out over the human race from Adam. In other words, Adam serves in this context as example and type of the One that should come (verse 14).
    3. In the one man, Adam, and through his transgression, the human race was condemned; and in the one man, Jesus Christ, that race has by a judicial verdict of God been declared free and justified. By one man sin came into the world as a force or power that ruled over all men; just so one man accomplished the governance of divine grace in humankind. By the one man death came into the world as evidence of the rule of sin; by one man also, namely, Christ Jesus our Lord, grace began to rule by way of a righteousness that leads to eternal life. The comparison of Adam and Christ holds in all applications. There is only one key difference: sin is mighty and powerful, but God’s grace is far superior in riches and abundance.

Carefully read and ponder: Turretin, *Institutes,* IX..ix.15-45; Bavinck, *RD,* III: 83-85; 100-106.

**3. The Imputation of Adam’s Sin**

Although Christian agree in acknowledging the sin of Adam, yet they differ in many ways among themselves as to how and to what degree (if any) we may speak of Adam’s sin having consequences upon his descendants, and if his sin does have far reaching consequences (as argued above), how is his sin spread or transmitted to his descendants? This is an especially perplexing theological issue, so much so that Bavinck called original sin the most difficult subject of dogmatics. The center of debate focuses on the idea of the imputation of Adam’s guilt—especially whether it is “mediate” or “immediate,” and if “immediate,” how ought this to be constructed and understood? Realists reject the notion that Adam’s descendants are guilty with Adam’s guilt. A doctrine of “corporate personality” likewise tries to free the connection between Adam’s sin and our own from “alien guilt.” The federal model argues for the immediate imputation of Adam’s guilt.

**(a) Denials of the connection between Adam’s and that of his descendants**

The Pelagian model denies that Adam’s sin injured his descendants; rather, his sin injured himself alone and did not implicate or pollute his posterity. Romans 5:12 merely allows us to say that in the way of negative imitation or example Adam’s descendants have followed Adam in sin, but they are not reckoned sinners, nor are they rendered sinners, by Adam’s sin. The Socinians follow Pelagians in this teaching, which would likewise describe much of classic liberalism. Socinus expressly denied that the whole human race sinned and fell in Adam or that God willed that on account of that one fall the whole human race should be guilty of sin. Anabaptists follow in this line as well. They deny that the posterity of Adam is guilty on account of his fall. The Remonstrants, too, may be counted as in this camp. This is not to deny the distinction between Pelagianism and semi-Pelagianism, but it is to acknowledge that with respect to the question at hand, whether Adam’s guilt is imputed to his posterity, this is denied by Pelagians, Socinians, Anabaptists, classic Arminians, classic liberalism, and many modern Baptist writers.

**(b) Different theories of the connection**

It is important to understand that the doctrine of the imputation of Adam’s guilt has been understood in two fundamental ways—that of mediate imputation versus immediate imputation, and particularly the latter has been understood in a variety of ways, or is expressed in a various versions.

Imputation (in this connection) refers technically to “the guilt of Adam’s act.” “Guilt” just means liability to punishment. The recognition of guilt is a judicial and not a sovereign act of God. “Imputation” (the Hebrew bv;x; and the Greek logi,zomai frequently occurring and translated “to count,” “to reckon,” “to impute,” etc.) is simply to lay to one’s charge as a just ground of legal procedure, whether “the thing imputed” belonged antecedently to the person to whom it is charged, or for any other adequate reason he is justly responsible for it.

**[i.] *The theory of mediate imputation*** *–* Mediate imputation refers to the divine attribution of sinfulness to humankind, explicitly Adam’s guilt, because of the inherited corruption or hereditary corruption of all people. The imputation is mediate since it is contingent upon the natural corruption of individual human beings. The point of mediate imputation is that it denies that the guilt of Adam’s sin is *directly* or *immediately* or *unmediatedly* imputed to his descendants; rather, it argues that his guilt is imputed to us *mediately*, *indirectly*, coming to us *through* *the corrupt nature* we inherit from Adam. Thus Adam’s descendants derive their innate corrupt or polluted nature from him in the way of natural generation, and *then* guilt comes from our own depravity, i.e., only on the basis of our own inherent depravity of nature, which we now share with Adam and all his posterity, are we considered guilty sinners before God and guilty then with Adam of his apostasy. As Berkhof says, according to the theory of *mediate* or *indirect* imputation, “[Adam’s descendants] are not born corrupt because they are guilty in Adam, but they are considered guilty because they are corrupt.” In other words, their condition of corruption is not based on their legal status of being guilty, but their legal status of being guilty is based on their condition of corruption.

It is possible to construe Calvin’s doctrine along these lines, but he did not actually treat the topic with that kind of strictness or precision. Josué De La Place (1596-1655), of the French Reformed School of Saumur, is the first clear advocate of this position. (This view was rejected by the orthodox Reformed as standing in conflict with and prejudicial to the imputation of Christ’s satisfaction; see, e.g., the *Formula Consensus Helvetica* [1675], x-xii). Also note, I agree with B.B. Warfield and John Murray, against Charles Hodge, in affirming that Jonathan Edwards is not an advocate of mediate imputation.

**Objections to Mediate Imputation**

This doctrine is to be rejected for the following reasons:

* 1. This doctrine does not actually escape the problem that faces the theory of immediate imputation, for while it seeks to evade the charge of alien guilt by rooting human condemnation in human depravity, it still cannot explain why Adam’s descendants are justly infected with Adam’s corruption, or why it is right and proper for God to allow Adam’s depravity to spread to his posterity.
  2. As Berkhof says, a thing cannot be mediated by its own consequences. This is like the argument stated in number 1 above. Adam’s sin results in our inheriting a corrupt nature, which seems to represent a verdict against us from the outset, for why should we receive such a penalty if we are not already guilty?
  3. This teaching fails, as represented in number 1 and 2 above, to offer an objective ground or legal basis for Adam’s corruption and/or guilt being transmitted to his descendants. Is it mere natural generation? If so, did God so arrange things according to his justice, according to a covenant of nature, so that there is a legal basis for treating Adam’s posterity *in Adam*? If not, then the theory of mediate imputation faces serious objections concerning divine fairness or justice.
  4. Berkhof notes that this theory proceeds on the assumption that there can be moral corruption that is not at the same time guilt, a corruption that does not in itself make one liable to punishment; rather, condemnation and punishment are consequent upon behaving corruptly from a corrupt nature.
  5. Perhaps, however, advocates of this theory might say that the legal ground for implicating Adam’s descendants in Adam’s sin is their inherent corruption. But that begs the question, for *why do they inherit such corruption, why is that appropriate?* It seems that they must be guilty in Adam in order to rightly receive the corrupt nature of Adam.

**[ii.] *The realistic theory of imputation*** – This teaching, in distinction from mediate imputation theory, argues that there is no strict imputation of *Adam’s guilt* to his descendants; the sin and guilt imputed to Adam’s sin is *their own sin* inasmuch as they were present with Adam in the act of sin. Thus there is a definite connection between Adam’s sin and the guilt and pollution of his descendants. This theory, called realism, is to the effect that human nature constitutes not only generically, but numerically as well, a single unit or entity. Adam possessed the whole human nature in himself, and thus he corrupted in himself the whole human nature in his own voluntary apostatizing act. Realism argues that individual persons are not separate substances; rather, they are manifestations of the same general substance; they are numerically one—hence a single entity. What goes for Adam, goes for all of his descendants. What is true of Adam is true for all of his descendants. What Adam did in the garden, all of his descendants did in him. Thus, when the universal human nature became corrupt and guilty in Adam, so every individual of that nature, with Adam and in Adam, likewise became corrupt and guilty. In short, all persons *actually* sinned in Adam before they were born. All persons *sinned in Adam’s act,* being present in his loins (so to speak) and so sinning with him*.* Adam’s descendants thus are guilty immediately *with their own sin*; they are guilty with and in Adam. The imputation of *Adam’s guilt* does not strictly apply (not in strict realism); instead, all of Adam’s posterity come under the guilt of *their own sin* in Adam’s sin; in this sense *their own sin* (sinning with Adam in his sin) is imputed to them, and this imputed to them is directly or unmediatedly, for each of us actually sinned in Adam, being there with him in the whole human nature he possessed.

Thus the key idea in realism is that the sin with which we are guilty in Adam is *our* sin, the sin we committed with Adam, being there in Adam. Realism is jealous to escape the charge of “alien guilt.” None of Adam’s descendants are guilty with a guilt that is not properly their own. Adam’s guilt is not imputed to his posterity; rather, each person’s own sin (committed in Adam’s sin) is immediately imputed to him- or herself. In other words, God only imputes to us the sin we committed. We are guilty of this sin because it is really our sin. For realists, then, Adam’s sin is ours not because it is imputed to us; but it (in a manner of speaking) is imputed to us, because it is truly and properly our own. Realism, strictly speaking, does not conceive of imputation as pivoting on Adam’s representative headship. But some realists introduce a form of Adam’s representative headship into their thought (complicating things in certain respects).

Key advocates of this theory are the early church Fathers, chief among them being Augustine, and more recent Reformed proponents are Wm. G.T. Shedd, Klaas Schilder, S. Greijdanus, and various Baptist writers, such as A. H. Strong.

**Objections to Realism**

Realism, however, has serious problems:

(1) It cannot really explain how Adam’s sin is our sin *in the same sense* as it was his. It was not our act, i.e., an act in which our reason, will, and conscience were exercised. It is not our sin in the sense that we were agents of the act. Moreover, it implies that we are somehow existent before we exist, that we are moral agents before we come into existence as moral agents.

(2) Moreover, and this is pivotal, *human nature* isn’t a moral agent; so, to treat Adam’s descendants as present with Adam and actually sinning in his act of sin, since they share in his nature (as Realists maintain to be the case) is rather wide of the mark, for it is not enough to say we are there in a generic human nature. How are we there *as persons, as moral agents,* *as centers of consciousness, with reason and will?* To be moral agents as human beings we must have a human nature, to be sure; but human nature itself doesn’t constitute individuals as *persons.* Realism is conceptually confusing and difficult to explain because it is a confused and flawed conception, requiring a heavy dose of Platonism to be made even modestly plausible, and so it likewise requires a powerful species of Idealism for this theory to work. But even then it fails to show how individuals pre-existed with and in Adam *as moral agents, as persons* in his act of sin. Obviously we share a common generic human nature with Adam, and obviously our *nature* was present in Adam’s sin, for Adam sinned as a human being (not as something else). But that doesn’t mean *we* (or *all his descendants* *as persons*)were present. The logic of a bare realism would mean that all humans are present not only in all the moral acts of Adam but in all the moral acts of all human beings, actually committing the sins of all humans, for we are there, *via our common human nature*, in the moral acts of all human beings. Or stated more modestly: realism does not explain why Adam’s descendants are held responsible for his first sin only (assuming that he alone possesses the whole of all human nature), and not for his later sins, nor for the sins of all the generations of forefathers that followed Adam.

(3) As Berkhof observes, realism is contrary to the testimony of conscience and does not sufficiently guard the interests of human personality. Every person is conscious of being a separate personality, and therefore far more than a mere passing wave in the general ocean of existence.

(4) If realism is true, how does Christ, who has a true human nature, escape sinning with and in Adam, *actually committing sin with Adam*? For if we are present with Adam in his sin because we are there, present with him by sharing in a generic human nature, then Christ seems implicated in Adam’s sin too, for he shares that human nature. In which case, Christ ceases to be without sin.

**[iii.] *The federalistic theory of immediate imputation*** *–* Federalism is also called representative headship. A. Hoekema simply calls it the theory of “immediate imputation.” This can be confusing, for their can be different versions of immediate imputation. In any case, this theory is called immediate imputation because, by contrast to the mediate theory, it refers to the *immediate* divine attribution of sinfulness to humankind, explicitly Adam’s guilt, because of Adam’s fall; that is, it is the immediate attribution of Adam’s guilt to all the progeny of Adam, apart from their hereditary corruption. The imputation is immediate because it is not contingent upon the corruption of individual human beings. Berkhof calls this the doctrine of the covenant of works because in federalism Adam is appointed by God to be the federal or covenantal head of humanity (cf. Bavinck, *RD*, III: 105-106). This is not to deny that there is also a natural relationship that exists between Adam and his progeny. But this natural relationship cannot fully account for how Adam’s descendants are considered guilty in Adam—which is to say, it is illegitimate to treat them as guilty merely in virtue of the natural relationship in which Adam stands to the human race. Something more is needed. In fact, the doctrine of the covenant of works recognizes Adam as appointed by God to serve as the federal representative of humanity; thus Adam did not merely represent himself in the probation of the garden, but functioned according to God’s appointment as the representative of all his descendants. This means, as Berkhof notes, that Adam was the head of the race not only in a parental, but also in a federal sense. Indeed, without this covenantal arrangement, Adam and his posterity would have come under a continual state of trial and testing, ever fallible, perpetually in jeopardy of sinning. Moreover, as the representative head of the human race, both the obedience and the disobedience of Adam have immediate repercussions for all his descendants—eternal life and blessedness in the way of obedience, and eternal death and damnation in the way of disobedience. As is well known from the Scriptural account, Adam went the way of disobedience, bringing the sanctions of that covenant to bear upon all his progeny. Thus Adam’s fall has brought death upon himself and all his descendants, even as his fall has brought corruption and depravity upon himself and the race of which he is the appointed head. He is guilty in the sight of God; and because he is the federal representative of the race, God imputes his disobedience and guilt to all those whom he represents—that is, all whom God reckons under him, all those federally related to him.

(The orthodox Reformed furthered argued that, since Christ’s righteous satisfaction was imputed immediately to believers without any righteousness being present in or satisfaction made by them before the imputation, the imputation of guilt must also be immediate; if not, injustice would be done to Christ’s work.)

**Objections to and Defense of Federalism**

Federalism has been challenged on several fronts—most prominent is the issue of “alien guilt.” G.C. Berkouwer, among the more recent Reformed writers, has vigorously opposed the representative headship model. Below I set forth his key objections, with my comments in response following each.

(1) Says Berkouwer, federalism is plagued with the problem of alien guilt. This doctrine seems unfair, for our condemnation seems to rest upon the sin another. How is my sin actually related to Adam’s sin? As he states, *Sin,* p. 524, “In federalism the idea of a ‘representation’ is linked together with imputation in a manner which leaves the impression that the unguilty are merely ‘declared’ to be guilty.” In short, federalism entails the imputing to all persons a guilt for which *they are not responsible.*

*Response:* Berkouwer, in many respects, simply begs the question, for the issue is whether God may rightly and justly appoint Adam to represent his progeny, and then given that appointment, may God impute Adam’s sin to his descendants? These ideas stand or fall together. If the entire notion of federal representation is out of bounds, as Berkouwer insists, then of course the imputation of Adam’s sin to his posterity is an imputation of an *alien* *guilt*—something foreign to them. But if federal representation is valid (and Berkouwer seems to affirm its validity—indeed, its wonderful validity—in Christ’s substitutionary role as our Redeemer), then there is nothing *alien* about the guilt that is imputed to Adam’s posterity, for that guilt is properly *their own* precisely because God’s appointment of Adam as federal head is altogether fitting and accurate; his sin is my sin. I am responsible because God, being completely wise and perfect, appoints an altogether appropriate representative of me and the rest of the human race—Adam.

(2) Moreover, says Berkouwer, the so-called parallelism between Adam and Christ, at least in the way federalism constructs it, is erroneous, for the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to believers, *as if* they had never sinned nor been sinners (as the Heidelberg Catechism states) is not an identical concept to the imputation of Adam’s guilt unto condemnation. For the “as if” in the case of salvation is a thoughtful confession of faith and an “alien righteousness”; but there is no similar “as if” or *alienum* in the situation of our guilt in Adam. Humans, as fallen, are never “as if” sinners. They have their own sins; they are their own sinners. For Berkouwer, then, an alien guilt suggests that which does not rightly belong to you—it being not properly your own; it’s truly foreign to you. It is not justly yours. Stated in another way, Berkouwer’s point is this: since we did not place our faith in Adam and perform an act to identify with him, we cannot inherit Adam’s guilt. In the case of Christ, however, we do put our faith in him; in this way we form a bond of identity with him, and so his righteousness, alien to us, is properly imputed to us for our righteousness. Thus, according to Berkouwer, there is no like parallel between our relationship to Adam and to Christ. Sinners are guilty with their own sin, not Adam’s, for they have done nothing to identify with Adam except sin. With Christ, however, it is different, for believing sinners are righteous before God with Christ’s (alien) righteousness, not their own, since they have placed their faith in him and so are identified with him. Thus Berkouwer likes the idea of Christ’s alien righteousness being imputed to sinners, but for him there cannot be such a thing as an *alien* *guilt* imputed to sinners, for this would be unjust. Sinners can only be guilty with their own sin, and in fact they are guilty in precisely that way. We are sinners because we have committed our own sins. This means, then, according to Berkouwer, that we are in Adam as sinners because we are guilty with our *own sin*. There cannot, however, be any sort of *as if* guilt. It isn’t the case that I get something from Adam’s fall that is *alien* to me. Guilt isn’t alien to me; it is my own.

*Response:* Berkouwer has again misappropriated and misconstrued the tradition at this point, for he prejudices the discussion in his use of the word “alien,” and he misrepresents how the parallelism functions. He sets up an altogether deformed portrait on this matter, for what makes Christ’s righteousness alien to me is its *origin*—that is, it comes from without me, but it is, by God’s grace and appointment, *really mine!* To be sure, I am united to Christ *by faith*, but that too, the *by faith*, is by divine appointment. Faith doesn’t carry within itself a magic power to unite us to Christ—that is according to God’s arrangement. Moreover, although the act of faith certainly carries within it my will and desire, that is by grace alone, which means that God’s sovereign and gracious electing choice is also at work here. Thus, when Adam’s guilt, being imputed to his posterity, is called an *alien guilt*, that is because it *derives* *from Adam—*that is its *origin*—but by God’s appointment it is *really mine,* and not foreign to me or misapplied to me.

As for the parallelism issue, Berkouwer fails to reckon with the fact that the reason the parallelism is not absolute between “Adam and his progeny” and “Christ and his people,” and more, the reason we may affirm an “as if” in the latter relationship and not the former, is due to the distinct way we are related on the one hand with Adam and on the other hand with Christ. For our union with Christ involves a transitioning from one head (Adam) to another (Christ). That is, the believers’ relationship with Christ and the imputation of his righteousness to them involves their transitioning from being under the federal headship of Adam to being under the federal headship of Christ. Thus in coming under this new Guardian, we receive a new status, and that new status brings about the *as if—as if* I’d never sinned nor been a sinner.Consider this: if the situation were reversed, if we were first in Christ, being righteous in him and without fault, but then transitioned from his headship to Adam’s as fallen, so that we now found ourselves in Adam, under condemnation, Adam’s guilt being imputed to us, then we could speak of God condemning us, reckoning Adam’s sin to us. We would receive a new status—from righteous to unrighteous. That new status would also bring about an *as if.* Thus transitioning from Christ to Adam, we could then say that that accounts us guilty in this head, Adam, *as if* (so far as our new judicial status is concerned) we had never acted righteously nor been righteous, *as if* we had committed all the disobedience that Adam committed on our behalf. In fact, contrary to Berkouwer, the parallelism, though not absolute, applies between Adam’s guilt reckoned to his progeny and Christ’s righteousness accounted to his people.

In short, Berkouwer’s objection at this point has the quality of smoke and mirrors; it is much ado about nothing.

1. Berkouwer also alleges that the imputation of Adam’s guilt to his progeny looks like an act of divine caprice, for the best that can be said in describing it is that God does this according to his own “hidden and righteous judgment” (*Formula Consensus Helvetica* [1675], x). But, says Berkouwer, federalism fails at precisely this point. Why should this act be according to a *hidden* justice or righteousness of God?

*Response:* Berkouwer just has trouble with the notion that God can sovereignly and judicially arrange the world in such a way that he treats humans together as a race along the lines of a natural and covenantal progenitor. That God arranges and orders humans to stand in a particular relationship to Adam—Adam functioning as their federal head—and that through Adam (but also through the second Adam) humans stand in a specific relationship to God, such an arrangement is indeed according to God’s own wisdom and “hidden” and “righteous” judgment. But this should not be construed as a problem or vulnerability within federalism. For has God actually revealed to us why he has established this covenantal arrangement, or why he treats us in this way? If not, then it can still be a righteous judgment of God while remaining “hidden” from us. There is nothing capricious in this; just as there is nothing capricious in choosing to save a people unto himself, electing some and not electing others to salvation. Does Berkouwer have the answer to that question? Then he would have done better to learn from the apostle Paul and Calvin, among others, to leave the secret things to God and not accuse God of capriciousness in exercising his own sovereignty.

1. Clear biblical precedents, argues Berkouwer, are at odds with federalism, for “the rule of justice” that is expressed in Ezekiel 18:20, namely that sinners are condemned for their own sins, and only for their own sins, is violated in federalism (also cf. Dt. 24:16; Jer. 31:29-30; and cf. Exod. 20:4; Dt. 5:8).

*Response:* Berkouwer fails to reckon with the fact that our relationship to Adam is not of the same kind as the parent/child relationship. The parallel is between Adam and the second Adam, Christ, in that each was appointed representative head of a people; the parallel is not between Adam and his federal relation with his progeny on the one hand, and parents and their relation to their children on the other. Ezekiel 18, and like passages, are literally beside the point at issue. Besides, Berkouwer presses these passages too far in any case, for the sins of the parents can and do have repercussions upon their children—often generationally (cf. Exod. 20:5, 6).

1. Federalism, says Berkouwer, betrays its own uncertainty in affirming a doctrine of “double guilt,” or a “twofold” guiltiness in humankind—that is, the guilt of Adam’s sin and the *proper* or *actual* guilt of our own sin and corruption.

*Response:* Berkouwer misconstrues what a “double guilt” entails. It does not mean that our guilt in Adam is a kind of legal fiction, whereas our own personal guilt, due to the sins we commit in our own depraved and corrupted state, is a legal reality—these latter crimes alone properly belonging to us. The distinction is simply an affirmation that guilt comes to us through Adam’s representative role by divine appointment; and thus being fallen and ruined, we continue to travel along the path of sinfulness and, in a matter of speaking, fill full our guilt in Adam. It also explains how people are guilty from birth, before committing cognitive and volitional acts of sin, and are liable to sin’s penalty, even death. Does Berkouwer have an explanation of why infants suffer and die? Is this due to their innocence? Or is this due to their personal acts of sins, prior to the ability to commit such acts? Positing “double guilt” unfolds the fulness of divine revelation; it certainly does not betray an uncertainty about the validity of federalism. Instead, we see how Berkouwer displays his misapprehension of federalism. What is more, it does not seem to bother Berkouwer that the Heidelberg Catechism uses the distinction between original and actual sins, as the answer to question 10 explains: God will not suffer human disobedience and apostasy to go unpunished, for “He is terribly displeased with our original as well as actual sins….”

1. Berkouwer further observes against federalism, that the doctrine itself is of later pedigree within Reformed theology, and therefore a theological formulation foreign to the first generation of Reformed creeds. The earlier Reformed creeds and catechisms of the Reformed churches seem to espouse more of a realist conception, and perhaps even can be read as espousing a form of mediate imputation. Thus this doctrine should not be foisted upon the churches since it is, strictly speaking, *extra* creedal.

*Response:* Berkouwer is formally correct in this assessment. However, federalism did reach creedal status in both the Westminster standards (1646) and the Formula Consensus Helvetica (1675), though this latter document had a short life among the Swiss Reformed churches, given the latitudinarian trends of the late seventeenth century. Nonetheless, it is false to assume that everything early in the Reformed tradition is of superior quality or theologically better than that which comes later—if that were so, Berkouwer’s own theological project, as well as the contributions of all subsequent generations to the Reformers, would be doomed from the start. But beyond this, Berkouwer is mistaken in what he thinks this comes to, for in fact, as mentioned earlier in connection with the covenant of nature, implicit features of that doctrine are expressed in early Reformed confessions inasmuch as humans are reckoned either in Adam or in Christ, the paradisal situation contains a probative feature with the positive command not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the presence of the serpent in order to tempt man, and negative sanctions explicitly imposed upon man for failure to heed God’s distinct and positive warning. Cf. Heidelberg Catechism, Q/As 6-7; 9-11; 20; 63; 86-91; 94-95; 113; 121-122; Belgic Confession, arts. 14; 15; 17; 24; Canons of Dort, III/IV, art. 1-2, 4-5, etc; note too: The Irish Articles (1615), art. 21; Westminster Larger Catechism, Q/A 20; Shorter Catechism, Q/A 12; The Walcheren Articles (1693).

**[iv.] *Excursus I*: *Jonathan Edwards’s identity theory of imputation*** – [The following is an excursus on Edwards’s doctrine, which is taken from a portion of an unpublished paper by J. Mark Beach, “Jonathan Edwards’s *The Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin Defended*—An Analysis and Assessment.”]

The great objection, as Edwards refers to it, deals with the justice of imputing Adam’s sin to his posterity. How can his descendants be guilty of another’s sin? Why should Adam’s failure render them corrupted, enslaved to wrong doing, and to consequent ruin?

Edwards, in constructing an answer to this question, displays his readiness to go beyond the Augustinian and Reformed tradition in order to provide what he considers to be a more defensible and satisfactory formulation of imputation. His aim is twofold: to set forth the *Scriptural* conception of imputation and then to *defend* it against misconceptions. He states the doctrine of imputation as follows: “that God, in each step of his proceeding with Adam, in relation to the covenant or constitution established with him, looked on his posterity as being one with him.” Then he says: “And though [God] dealt more immediately with Adam, yet it was as the head of the whole body, and the root of the whole tree; and in his proceedings with him, he dealt with all the branches, as if they had been then existing in their root.”[[85]](#footnote-85) Adam’s descendants are as much involved in the “guilt” and “depravity of heart” of Adam’s sin as Adam himself is, “as if he and they had all coexisted, like a tree with many branches; allowing only for the difference necessarily resulting from the place Adam stood in, as head or root of the whole, and being first and most immediately dealt with, and most immediately acting and suffering.”[[86]](#footnote-86) For Edwards, a “*oneness*” or “*identity*” exists between Adam and his progeny by divine constitution. Thus Edwards rejects the notion of double guilt, as if Adam’s descendants are guilty with Adam’s sin and then guilty with their own sin, arising from their own corrupt hearts. “The guilt a man has upon his soul at his first existence, is one and simple: viz. the guilt of the original apostacy, the guilt of the sin by which the species first rebelled against God.” As Edwards conceives of sin, it is erroneous to think that only the *action* or *behavior* that follows an evil disposition of the heart—”consequent operations”—constitutes the sin. These are not strictly speaking “two things.” To be sure, they can be distinguished, but the guilt is one. Likewise, “the guilt arising from the first existing of a depraved disposition in Adam’s posterity . . . is not distinct from their guilt of Adam’s first sin.” After all, Adam’s first wayward disposition or desire to sin was not “properly distinct from his first act of sin, but was included in it.”[[87]](#footnote-87) The act of sin follows the direction of the heart—the guilt is singular, arising from a wicked inclination of the heart. Indeed, sin resides in the inward man.

In Adam’s case, the first instance of an evil inclination of his heart constitutes “his first act of sin, and the ground of the complete transgression.” However, having first sinned, now this evil inclination continued in him as a “confirmed principle,” for as punishment God withdrew his Spirit’s presence in his soul. And, of course, left in this confirmed corruption, Adam continued to sin and “brought additional guilt on his soul.”[[88]](#footnote-88)

Edwards argues that the same situation applies to Adam’s descendants. God, according to his own sovereign and wise decision, reckons Adam one with his descendants and his descendants one with Adam. This “constituted union” between Adam and his progeny is central to Edwards’ conception of the doctrine of imputation. Adam’s descendants come into the world with a corrupt disposition of the heart (something untrue of Adam himself, though subsequently true after his first sin). However, Adam’s progeny, by virtue of the constituted union between Adam and themselves, participate in Adam’s sin and so likewise come under the guilt and the abiding punishment for this transgression, a withdrawal of God’s spiritual presence and the consequent corrupt inclination of the heart as a confirmed principle.[[89]](#footnote-89) Strictly speaking, Edwards does not wish to view the innate evil disposition of Adam’s descendants as a consequence of the imputation of Adam’s sin. In other words, Edwards does not wish to say that *as a result of* Adam’s sin his progeny have become depraved of heart and so, *as a consequence*, sinfully behave and are guilty. Such was not the case with Adam. He did not first have his sin imputed to him and only thereafter perform a sin. Rather, *prior* to any such consequence of imputation, Adam sinned. Thus,

the derivation of the evil disposition to the hearts of Adam’s posterity, or rather the *coexistence* of the evil disposition, implied in Adam’s first rebellion, in the root and branches, is a consequence of the union, that the wise Author of the world has established between Adam and his posterity: but not properly a consequence of the imputation of his sin; nay, rather *antecedent* to it, as it was in Adam himself. The first depravity of heart, and the imputation of that sin, are both the consequences of that established union: but yet in such order, that the evil disposition is *first,* and the charge of guilt *consequent;* as it was in the case of Adam himself.[[90]](#footnote-90)

In an extended footnote to this Edwards suggests that humankind is “one complex moral person.” There is “a *communion* and *coexistence* in acts and affections: all jointly participating, and all concurring, as one whole, in the disposition and actions of the head.”[[91]](#footnote-91) So much for Edwards *statement* regarding imputation. Next, he offers a *defense* of it.

Is it reasonable or fair for God to establish such a union between Adam and his posterity? Indeed, this is the grand objection. Edwards observes that the fact of such a union is undeniable, as his earlier discussion to this point has demonstrated. Furthermore, if such a union is denied, then God unjustly subjects innocent people to the fallout and effects of Adam’s sin.[[92]](#footnote-92) On the contrary, it is not unjust that God treat Adam and his posterity as one, especially if we give our attention to the meaning of *sameness* or *oneness* to created things in general, that is, how the past, present, and future existence of a created thing can possess an abiding identity or sameness. Edwards argues that the identity of any created thing depends wholly upon “the sovereign constitution and law of the Supreme Author and Disposer of the universe.”[[93]](#footnote-93) We do well not to shortchange this portion of Edwards’ argument at this point.

We can begin with a question: How can an aged oak that has stood for a century be identified with its existence as a little sprout? Given that the greater part of the tree’s substance has changed countless times, wherein lies the *identity* between the tender sprout and the aged tree? Or how can a person have identity with his or her infancy? Indeed wherein lies the *personal identity* between infancy and adulthood? How can that person, given so many changes and development, be identified as the same person? Edwards’ answer to such questions is that God establishes or constitutes a union between the sprout and the mature tree, establishing by constant succession the most important properties to the tree, such that whether it be a sprout or aged, it is as though it were one.[[94]](#footnote-94) Likewise, with respect to persons, he maintains that “the communication or continuance of the same consciousness and memory to any subject, through successive parts of duration, depends wholly on a divine establishment.”[[95]](#footnote-95) For Edwards, created substance and created beings do not have the “absolute independent identity of the first being.” Rather, the creation has always and ever “dependent identity; dependent on the pleasure and sovereign constitution of him who worketh all in all.” God upholds all things, which means that all created things (and intelligent created beings) have “dependent existence.” This means that a created being “is an *effect,* and must have some *cause:* and the cause must be one of these two: either the *antecedent existence* of the same substance, or else the *power of the Creator.*”[[96]](#footnote-96) That it cannot be due to the former is, for Edwards, obvious. For example:

the existence of the body of the moon at this present moment, can’t be the effect of its existence at the last foregoing moment. For not only was what existed the last moment, no active cause, but wholly a passive thing; but this also is to be considered, that no cause can produce effects in a *time* and *place* on which itself is *not.* ‘Tis plain, nothing can exert itself, or operate, when and where it is not existing. But the moon’s past existence was neither *where* nor *when* its present existence is. In point of time, what is *past* entirely ceases, when *present* existence begins; otherwise it would not be *past.* . . . From these things . . . it will certainly follow, that the present existence, either of this, or any other created substance, cannot be an effect of its past existence.[[97]](#footnote-97)

The implications of this are simple: all created things, in order to exist at all in successive moments, must be the result of God’s own immediate agency, will, and power.[[98]](#footnote-98) This means that the existence of each created person and thing is, at every moment of its successive existence, an “immediate *continued* creation of God.” For Edwards, the preservation of the creation is “perfectly equivalent to a *continued creation*—that is, it is perfectly equivalent to God “creating those things out of nothing at *each moment* of their existence.”[[99]](#footnote-99) All things would drop into nothingness if God did not cause them to exist moment by moment. Each person or thing’s existence in each successive moment is entirely, not partly, dependent upon God’s action. The antecedent existence of a created thing does not contribute in any degree to its continued existence, in being antecedent it has become past and that which is past is nothing and therefore cannot influence or assist its future existence. Consequently, “God produces the effect as much from *nothing*, as if there had been nothing *before*. So that this effect differs not at all from the first creation, but only *circumstantially*.”[[100]](#footnote-100) What all of this means is that if any created thing exists, it exists as a “*new effect*.” Therefore that “new effect”—that created entity or person—can only possess an identity or oneness with its past or future existence by “the *arbitrary* constitution of the Creator, who by his wise sovereign establishment so unites these successive new effects, that he *treats them as one*, by communicating to them like properties, relations, and circumstances; and so, leads us to regard them as one.”[[101]](#footnote-101)

What Edwards calls God’s “arbitrary constitution” does not mean that God acts whimsically or capriciously; rather, it means that such a constitution is solely dependent on God’s will and wisdom. Thus the whole course of nature, all natural laws, and the like, proceed according to the divine “arbitrary constitution.” Everything is dependent upon God’s abiding and constant activity, “as light from the sun.” Indeed, “in him we live, and move, and have our being.”

The net result of this philosophical detour into the nature of identity is to bring us to an understanding that identity or oneness is impossible to establish for any created thing or person, existing in successive moments, unless God sovereignly constitute such identity or oneness to exist. And so Edwards reaches the outcome of his argument:

. . . it appears, that the objection we are upon, made against a supposed divine constitution, whereby Adam and his posterity are viewed and treated as one, in the manner and for the purposes supposed, as if it were not consistent with truth, because no constitution can make those to be one, which are not one; I say, it appear that this objection is built on a false hypothesis: for it appears, that a *divine constitution* is the thing which *makes truth,* in affairs of this nature.[[102]](#footnote-102)

God, then, by his own will and wisdom, sovereignly constitutes Adam and his posterity as one, so that a real union exists, like between root and branches. What is therefore true with respect to each individual is also true with respect to all individuals considered as one race. If God establishes continuity and identity in the case of Adam’s sin and ours, then that is the reality.[[103]](#footnote-103)

Edwards closes out this most philosophical portion of his treatise by reiterating that the charge of injustice against the doctrine of original sin is groundless, based upon a tangle of misunderstandings. Adam’s descendants partake of the first apostasy, and Adam’s sin becomes *their* sin, because of the real union that exists between Adam—the root—and the human race. Edwards realizes that some readers will remain unpersuaded by the philosophy or metaphysics of his argument, but he believes it is undeniable that all created things depend upon the “sovereign constitutions of the supreme Author and Lord of all.” That fact, says Edwards, ought to stop the mouths of those who would impugn God’s justice regarding a matter so “plainly” and “fully” taught in Scripture, namely “the derivation of a depravity and guilt from Adam to his posterity.” This doctrine is not only absolutely Scriptural, it is “abundantly confirmed by what is found in the experience of all mankind in all ages.”[[104]](#footnote-104)

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Edwards’s attempt to construct a philosophical answer to this problem is noble, and certainly constitutes a brilliant attempt to resolve a perplexing doctrine. But his thesis fails since he misunderstands the classic Reformed distinction regarding *creatio continuata*. A continual creation does not mean the world and human beings continuously come into and go out of existence, God then acting ever afresh to reconstitute us as existent beings, etc. Rather, it affirms that the same divine power is at work in divine providence—in the way of preservation, concurrence, and governance of the world—as creation *ex nihilo.* In other words, precisely because God’s providence is of the same nature as God’s creating activity, the world never goes out of existence; it never needs to be reconstituted and brought back into existence. On the contrary, according to the law of nature and even curse of death that infects the created order, nature’s laws dependent upon divine concurrence, humans develop into maturity and also grow old and succumb to death and a returning to the dust. But the soul never ceases to go out of existence, though the body gives way to corruption. Edwards’s appeal to and effort to construct an analogy from the doctrine of continual creation simply doesn’t work.

Perhaps he could better appeal to the doctrine of the resurrection of the body. How are we the same persons, constituted the same and at one with ourselves, relative to our redeemed but pre-glorified and our redeemed and glorified state, with new resurrected bodies? Here, it would seems, a version of Edwards argument might work. For doesn’t God simply constitute us, joining our souls to glorified and resurrected bodies, as whole persons in continuity with our former selves? Isn’t this according to his sovereign right, not to mention his sovereign power and wisdom?

Thus, in this latter way, perhaps Edwards has asked the right question, with the answer rooted not in how humans have continuity with themselves over time, but how we have continuity with ourselves in a pre-glorified and glorified state.

**v. *Summary of different theories***

The imputation of Adam’s sin has spawned a long-standing debate within the Christian Church. Romans 5:12ff. has been at the center of discussion and dispute. The following solutions have been proposed, some of these we looked at earlier:

1. Pelagian theory—every person is born innocent; there is no direct connection with the sin of Adam; instead, imitation of a immoral example accounts for the spread of sin in the human race; that is, Adam’s failure established a bad example that is subsequently followed by his posterity, from one generation to the next. Every person falls into their own depravity and is therefore responsible for their own guilt.
2. Arminian (Wesley)—we inherit both depravity and guilt but actually participate in that guilt when we sin personally, upon reaching years of discretion (between 10 to 18 years of age). Thus sin infects our nature, but not until we are mature can we be reckoned guilty in God’s sight.
3. “New school” theory—we are born with a sin tendency, but this does not become sin until we *consciously* transgress God’s law. Every person functions as a kind of Adam figure—though we are more apt than Adam to sin, since we are placed in a more sinful environment, namely, the world filled with people who sin.
4. Mediate imputation—we inherit sin’s corruption and depravity from Adam, and so as *corrupt persons*, being corrupt, *we* are *consequently* judged guilty; in other words, the condition of *our own* corruption (derived from Adam’s) *leads to* legal guilt. Thus guilt follws corruption and is mediated through corrupted (hence *mediate* imputation). In this scheme, Adam functions as the natural head of the human race, his actions poisoning all human nature and bringing *consequent* guilt. One’s guilt before God is due to one’s own depravity before God, a depravity mediated to us from Adam.

(5) Corporate personality—God treats Adam and his race as a single entity, just as Israel or the church can viewed as corporately guilty, or a family can be treated or judged according to the actions of its head, the father. Thus Adam and his race are reckoned as one thing, a single entity, together caught up into the depravity and guilt of sin for which each and all are responsible.

(6) Realistic theory or natural headship (Augustine)—Adam possessed the total human nature in himself, and so all people *actually* sin because every person was part of Adam and present with him in Paradise. Functioning as the natural head of humankind, the whole of the human race is contained in Adam’s loins, i.e., in his seed, and that see sinned with him in Paradise. Thus the whole human race sinned in Paradise, being there with Adam, sinning with Adam. Consequently, the nature of every person is corrupted; and guilt is imputed *seminally* and immediately.

1. Federal headship or immediate imputation—as the father of the human race, Adam was the representative and *covenant* head of the race; therefore, the covenant of nature (the pre-fall condition) extended to Adam and to his posterity, i.e., all are under this covenant through Adam, and thus Adam’s disobedience is imputed to his his descendants. Thus all persons are guilty before God in Adam, as well as being totally deprived, inheriting as well his corrupted nature. Guilt is by immediate—or an unmediated imputation, meaning it is not mediated through sin’s corruption; rather, it is direct and immediate, imputed to us by our covenant head, Adam. All persons are now guilty with the guilt of Adam, and being totally depraved (original sin) they are guilty for that corruption, and finally they are guilty with actual sins, meaning the sins that issue forth from their corrupted nature.

***Excursus III: On the Relation of Original Sin, Human Freedom, and Reprobation***

It should be observed that the doctrine of the transmission of Adam’s sin and its *effects* upon his progeny (the effects of his sin being called original sin) is often linked to issues surrounding election and reprobation, and human freedom in the face of human depravity or inability. For if humans, especially the reprobate, inherit a depravity from Adam that render them incapable of turning to God, how are they fairly condemned, since they act and behave according to a fallen nature that they obtained from another? [See *Is There Injustice with God?* Th.M. thesis, Calvin Seminary, 1994, by J. Mark Beach, pp. 174-177.]

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**(4) Original Sin (Inherited Guilt and Depravity) and Actual Sin**

***Original Sin Defined and Explained***

Original sin (*peccatum originalis*) is not a substance or a positive attribute, but a defect in human nature caused by the fall and consisting in the loss and consequent absence of original righteousness and of the image of God (in that sense). Original sin is (1) *hereditary guilt*, which is imputed to all mankind because of the sin and guilt of Adam—in classic Reformed theology this imputation rests on the federal headship of Adam. It is also (2) *hereditary corruption*, which, because of the guilt and corruption of Adam and Eve, is transmitted to all their descendants by generation. Original sin is usually distinguished from actual sin, for our actual sins refer to the sins we commit out of the inherited fallen nature of original sins. Thus, actual sins are not “more real” or more personally “our sins” than original sin, but they are concrete sins we commit from our depravity of nature and corrupted disposition, i.e., from habit.

Original sin refers to an inborn and inherent guilt and corruption in Adam’s progeny from conception and birth, and accounts for the *origin* of our sinning and being sinful. It is the sin that makes us sinful. It is that sin that renders all human beings in Adam corrupt and guilty before God. From conception and birth, human beings are polluted with sin and a sinful nature, and also stand guilty before God as sinners. This is to say that humans are born sinful, so that their nature is now, because of original sin, wholly smeared with sinful desires and inclinations. As guilty sinners, all humans from birth are worthy of God’s displeasure and verdict of condemnation. Thus the two key elements of original sin is guilt and pollution (see Berkhof, pp. 245-246).

The Westminster Confession (chapter 6) offers a robust definition and explanation of original sin. Adam’s fall brings a loss of original righteousness and communion with God; it also brings death and defilement in all the faculties and parts of the soul and body (6:2). As the root of the human race, the guilt of Adam and Eve was imputed, with the same death and corruption of nature conveyed, to all their progeny (6:3). Thus original sin ushers in original pollution, whereby we are utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil. From this all actual sins and transgressions come forth (6:4). This corruption of nature remains even in believers during this life—yet it is also pardoned and mortified (6:5). What this entails is that original sin corrupts us and leaves us guilty before God, and then being in this state we sin further—called actual sins—for now we sin according to our fallen nature against God’s law; and so we bring further guilt upon ourselves. Every sin binds us over to God’s wrath and the curse of the law, so that as fallen persons we are subject to death, with all the miseries attached—spiritual miseries, temporal miseries, eternal miseries (6:6). Note the Scripture proofs attached. (Also see Shorter Cat. Q/As 18 &19; and Belgic Confession, art. 14 &15.)

The Belgic Confession says that original sin “is a corruption of all nature—an inherited depravity which even infects small infants in their mother’s wombs, and the root which produces in man every sort of sin. It is therefore so vile and enormous in God’s sight that it is enough to condemn the human race, and it is not abolished or wholly uprooted even by baptism, seeing that sin constantly boils forth as though from a contaminated spring.”

The Bible teaches us that, due to original sin, we commit actual sins. Some actual sins are *voluntary*, that is, the result of positive of positive human willing; others are *involuntary*, arising not out of malice but out of ignorance, fear, and the like. There are also sins of *commission* and sins of *omission.* The relationship between original and actual sin is important to understand, for original sin gives us the disposition and habit of sin—which means: we are sinners, therefore we sin, not merely that we sin and therefore we are sinners. We sin because we are *sinful*. As noted before in the notes, it is not the case that we sin by mere imitation—although, of course, we do imitate sinful behavior. But why would we want to imitate that which is wrong? Because we like to sin; our nature is sinful, that is, polluted or corrupted, which gives us the disposition to sin, and the inclination or propensity to imitate sinful behavior. Original sin renders humans disposed to sinning, and also guilty before God from birth. Reformed writers often describe the effects of original sin with the phrase “total depravity.”

***Total Depravity Defined***

L. Berkhof takes up the matter of total depravity in the chapter entitled “Sin in the Life of the Human Race.” In defining the two elements in original sin (that is, original guilt and original pollution), Berkhof proceeds to the question of *total depravity* and *total inability* as an inherent positive disposition of original sin, or more precisely, as aspects of original pollution. First he notes that original (or inherited) pollution, due to its “pervasive character,” is called total depravity. He elaborates:

*Negatively,* it does not imply:

1. that every person is as thoroughly depraved as he or she can possibly becomes;
2. that the sinner has no innate knowledge of the will of God, nor a conscience that discriminates between good and evil;
3. that sinful man does not often admire virtuous character and actions in others, or is incapable of disinterested affections and actions in his relations with his fellows;
4. that every unregenerate man will, in virtue of his inherent sinfulness, indulge in every form of sin—it often happens that one form excludes the other.

*Positively*, it does indicate:

1. that the inherent corruption extends to every part of human nature, to all the faculties and powers of both soul and body; and
2. that there is no spiritual good, that is, good in relation to God, in the sinner at all, but only perversion.

***Total Inability Defined***

Berkhof next explains the idea of total inability. With respect to the effect original pollution has on man’s spiritual powers, original pollution is called “total inability.” Again, Berkhof makes a distinction. “By ascribing total ability to *the natural man* we do not mean to say that it is impossible for him to do good in any sense of the word ….” At the same time, it is maintained that whatever seemingly good actions and feelings the natural man exhibits, “when considered in relation to God, [they] are radically defective.” Berkhof explains why this is so: “Their fatal defect is that they are not prompted by love to God, or by *any regard for the will of God as requiring them.* When we speak of man’s corruption as total inability, we mean two things: (1) that the *unrenewed sinner* cannot do any act, however insignificant, which *fundamentally* meets God’s approval and answers to the demands of God’s holy law; and (2) that he cannot change his fundamental preference for sin and self to love for God, nor even make an approach to such a change. In a word, he is unable to do any spiritual good.” Thus, fallen man now has “by nature an *irresistible* bias for evil.” This irresistibility refers to his own inability; he cannot not want to act self-centeredly in some sense. In himself he cannot want God or love God. “He is not able to apprehend and love spiritual excellence, to seek and do spiritual things, things of God that pertain to salvation”—like repentance and faith. (See Canons of Dort III/IV, arts. 1, 2, 4)

For Berkhof, total depravity and total inability are different terms used to talk about aspects of one thing, namely original pollution. It is illegitimate to divide or separate what is only to be distinguished. Moreover, Berkhof defines total depravity as a *corruption* *that extends* to all faculties and powers of body and soul, while total inability is the *effect this corruption* inevitably evidences. In other words, where corruption reigns, its effects or consequences are nearby. Total depravity and total inability are not, as defined above, two separable entities. [See class notes, pages 61-65]. Note the words of article 3, head III/IV of the Canons of Dort: “Therefore, all people are conceived in sin and are born children of wrath, unfit for any saving good, inclined to evil, dead in their sins, and slaves to sin; without the grace of the regenerating Holy Spirit they are neither willing nor able to return to God, to reform their distorted nature, or even to dispose themselves to such reform.” Also noteworthy is the language used in the Canons to describe the ingredients of rebirth or regeneration: “…by the effective operation of the … regenerating Spirit, God … penetrates into the inmost being of man, opens the closed heart, softens the hard heart, and circumcises the heart that is uncircumcised. He infuses new qualities into the will, making the dead will alive, the evil one good, the unwilling one willing, and the stubborn one compliant; he activates and strengthens the will so that, like a good tree, it may be enabled to produce the fruits of good deeds” (art. 11, Head III/IV). Article 12 describes it as a “new creation,” being raised from the dead, which is not effected by moral persuasion or by anything that is somehow within our own power to accomplish. “Rather, it is an entirely supernatural work … not lesser than or inferior in power to that of creation or raising the dead.”

***Scriptural Materials***

Universality of Sin

* 1 Kings 8:46: “When they sin against You (for there is no man who does not sin) and You are angry with them and deliver them to an enemy, so that they take them away captive to the land of the enemy, far off or near…
* Ecclesiastes 7:20: Indeed, there is not a righteous man on earth who *continually* does good and who never sins.
* Isaiah 53:6: All of us like sheep have gone astray, Each of us has turned to his own way; But the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all To fall on Him.
* Isaiah 64:6: For all of us have become like one who is unclean, And all our righteous deeds are like a filthy garment; And all of us wither like a leaf, And our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.
* Psalm 130:3: If You, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?
* Psalm 143:2 Do not enter into judgment with your servant, for no one living is righteous before you.
* Romans 3:19: Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God;
* Rom 3:22-23: This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,
* Galatians 3:22: But the Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe.
* James 3:2: For we all stumble in many *ways.*
* 1 John 1:8: If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.
* 1 John 1:10: If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.
* 1 John 5:19: We know that we are of God, and that the whole world lies in *the power of* the evil one.
* Romans 3:10: as it is written: “There is no one who is righteous, not even one;

Total Depravity

* Jeremiah 17:9: The heart *is* deceitful above all *things*, and desperately wicked: who can know it?
* Genesis 6:5: Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.
* Ecclesiastes 9:3: This is the evil in everything that happens under the sun: The same destiny overtakes all. The hearts of men, moreover, are full of evil and there is madness in their hearts while they live, and afterward they join the dead.
* Psalm 58:3: The wicked are estranged from the womb: they go astray as soon as they be born, speaking lies.
* Ecclesiastes 8:11: Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed quickly, therefore the hearts of the sons of men among them are given fully to do evil.
* Genesis 8:21: The Lord smelled the pleasing aroma and said in his heart: “Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done.
* Matt 7:16-19: By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.
* Psalm 51:5 Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, And in sin my mother conceived me.
* John 3:6 “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.
* Ephesians 2:3: Among them we too all formerly lived in the lusts of our flesh, indulging the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, even as the rest.
* Job 14:4: Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? No one can.

Inability

* John 15:4: “Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither *can* you unless you abide in Me.
* John 6:44: “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him; and I will raise him up on the last day.
* 2 Corinthians 3:5: Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as *coming* from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God,
* Romans 8:7: For this reason the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law-- indeed it cannot,
* 1 Corinthians 2:14: But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised.
* Hebrews 11:6: And without faith it is impossible to please *Him*, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and *that* He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.

Spiritual Death in Sin

* Ephesians 2:1: And you *hath he quickened*, who were dead in trespasses and sins;
* Ephesians 2:5: Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;)
* Colossians 2:13: When you were dead in your transgressions and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He made you alive together with Him, having forgiven us all our transgressions,
* Ephesians 4:17: This I say therefore, and testify in the Lord, that ye henceforth walk not as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind, having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart…

***Excursus* IV: *Are Believers, Who are in Christ and His New Creation, “Totally Depraved”?***

The above definitions help us with a question that pops up from time to time, namely, whether believers are totally depraved. Are believers who are in Christ and his new creation to be reckoned among those whose depravity is wholly pervasive so that they are in complete bondage to sin?

Berkhof’s definitions and terminology resists the division some make between total inability and total depravity. Corruption produces effects. However, proponents of an “in Christ” total depravity—that is, those who assert that believers can be simultaneously in Christ and totally depraved—maintain that believers, even as new creatures in Christ, *abide in the same corruption as those in Adam*, yet this is a corruption without certain effects—total inability falls off. They then maintain that believers are able (or enabled?) to do spiritual good while remaining totally depraved—in short, they argue that totally corrupted people (all faculties and powers of body and soul affected by the original corruption) do not inevitably produce corrupt fruits. This position would mean that the rotten tree is, so to speak, nonetheless capable of good fruit. We may liken it to a briar bush producing fine grapes, or a poisoned well offering sparkling wine; or a spigot piped to a filthy reservoir pouring forth pure water. All nonsense! In any case, those who maintain that believers are still totally depraved, even after rebirth, so that the all-extensive taint of original sin and pollution is still descriptive of them, yet they aren’t subject to total inability, such seems similarly nonsensical.

***Observations from Calvin for this issue***

The idea that believers are total depraved is perhaps advocated with noble intentions, but it nonetheless minimizes the believers new status and condition in Christ. Repentance, as Calvin explains, involves a “turning of life to God,” and requires “a transformation, not only in outward works, but in the soul itself” (III.3.6). Why? Because “only when it puts off its old nature does it bring forth the fruits of works in harmony with its renewal.” Calvin understood that the old corrupt nature produces the old corrupt fruits. It is the new heart, not the old corrupt or depraved heart, that repents of sin. The mark of renewal “comes to pass when the Spirit of God is imbues our souls, steeped in his holiness, with both new thoughts and feelings, that they can be rightly considered new” (III.3.8). We truly partake in Christ’s death (Rom. 6:6) so that “the corruption of original nature may no longer thrive. If we share in his resurrection, through it we are raised up into newness of life to correspond with the righteousness of God” (III.3.9). Calvin realizes that we haven’t attained heavenly glory and that sanctification is a process. Indeed, God has assigned to believers “a race of repentance, which they are to run throughout their lives” (III.3.9). Believers are still sinners, but sin has lost its dominion over them. And this “dominion of sin” is what total depravity is jealous to teach regarding the unregenerate. Believers, on the other hand, are liberated from this bondage. “For the Spirit dispenses a power whereby [God’s people] may gain the upper hand and become victors in the struggle” (III.3.11). That liberation is described in a well known word: Redemption!

***Further Observations***

One Reformed writer has rightly stated that the only solution to total depravity is total renewal. Believers are not totally renewed, but neither are they *totally* depraved. Much depravity afflicts us, but not the pervasive depravity that afflicted us before our rebirth in Christ. The power of sin is real in the believer’s life (no minimizing that), but sin’s power cannot negate the power of the Spirit. Total depravity is the state from which believers are delivered by the power of Christ. The spiritually dead are made alive (Eph. 2:1, 4). Are human beings so corrupted that they are totally unable to do any good and inclined toward all evil? Yes, unless they are born again, by the Spirit of God (HC, QA 8).

I suspect pause is given this answer due to our continual struggle to live a godly life and the plague of temptation that is perpetually with us. Yet, notice what is confessed by the church in those words: Totally unable … unless! Inclined toward all evil … unless! That is the catechism’s answer. If we have a hesitancy to speak with the catechism, we ought to give pause to ourselves. Of course, this hesitancy might have a noble motivation or it might have a harmful one. First the harmful one. Some have been raised to relish total depravity. They feel *good* talking about how *bad* they are! Others have such a deep respect for the power of sin in their lives, they inadvertently disrespect the power of the Savior. They are so caught up by how bad they are and how bad they remain, even being found in Christ, that they are unimpressed how significant it is to be his new creation; they ignore the “unless.” So much for the harmful motivation, what about the more noble motivation that makes believers hesitant about denying their own total depravity? Indeed, there can be a more noble reason why some believers do not want to jettison talk of total depravity as characterizing their lives, and that has to do with “working out your salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12).

We must, to be sure, resist the urge to become over-confident. Our boasting may never be in ourselves. Our boasting must be a boasting in the Lord. But let us, by all means, not fail to boast in Him! In any case, as saved sinners we do not forget that we are sinners, that sin is still mighty attractive in many respects and looks desirable. Like a recovering alcoholic still has a liking for alcohol, so renewed and redeemed (set free from bondage) sinners, Christians, are not yet completely liberated from the liking or desire for sin. Our renewal is genuine but it has no reached its perfection. But our depravity is likewise no longer total. We are still haunted by the old demons of sin, so we must be cautious. We are free, but not above slipping into old, ugly habits. We need perpetual help through the Spirit’s prompting and convicting, and guiding and urging—making full use of the means of grace. We remember the demons of sin and are humbled by their tug and pull.

This, I suspect, is what motivates those who believe that total depravity is descriptive of the believer’s life—a noble motivation, but still off the mark. Believers suffer depravity perhaps, but no longer *total* depravity. We like sin, but we also hate to sin. We struggle to obey God, and fail often, but not always. Yes, we yet think perverted thoughts, but it is untrue to say that there is only perversion in reborn sinners and no spiritual good at all in relation to God (recall Berkhof’s definition). And, we must admit that corrupt habits, speech, dispositions, attitudes abide in us. But more decisive than what abides in us is that we abide in Christ! Believers have new hearts, and out of the heart are the issues of life.

We must never forget that in Christ it is salvation that is worked out in us, not damnation. It is life that characterizes us, not death. We are new creations, part of the new order; we’re not part of the former order that is passing away. Perhaps those in Christ, this side of glory, may be called (among other descriptions) depraved sinners. But they are not to be reckoned with totally depraved and lost sinners; otherwise we spurn (again with the noblest of motives) the work of our Savior. Moreover, we minimize what we have already become, awaiting our final redemption, in Christ Jesus our Lord.

P.S. Reformed writers like Wm. G.T. Shedd and Charles Hodge define total depravity as the lack of any holiness before God. This is precisely what no longer characterizes those *in Christ.*

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**(5) Miscellaneous Topics surrounding Sin**

**a. Mortal and venial sins**

Mortal sins are sins that, in Roman Catholic theology, result in damnation and eternal death because their commission so denies faith and the work of the Spirit that salvation becomes impossible, as distinguished from venial sins, which are merely weaknesses. Against the medieval scholastics, both the Lutheran and the Reformed deny the distinction, at least in the sense that venial sins must also be recognized as damnable and as worthy of eternal punishment if the sinner perseveres in them to the point of final impenitence. Whereas medieval scholastic theology liked to treat the seven deadly sins, that is, the seven font sins that give birth to many other sins, the Reformed preferred to speak of sins of the heart, the mouth, and of action; often rendered, sinning in thought, word, and deed.

**b. Gradations to sin** (for a fine discussion of this issue, see G. C. Berkouwer, *Sin*, 285-322).

Not all sins are equal in the harm they do; and not all sins are equal in the motivations behind them. Some sins are in fact more monstrous, scandalous, and bring forth more misery than others. Many Christians have been taught that all sins are the same. When we examine Scripture, however, it becomes clear that not all sins are of the same sort or produce the same “fall out.” To distinguish between the relative nastiness or heinousness of sins has longstanding Reformed pedigree. For example, the Second Helvetic Confession, chapter 8, says the following: “We … confess that sins are not equal; although they arise from the same fountain of corruption and unbelief, some are more serious than others. As the Lord said, it will be more tolerable for Sodom than for the city that rejects the word of the Gospel (Matt. 10:15; 11:2-24).” This is one of the most universal and authoritative of the Reformed Confessions, written by Heinrich Bullinger in 1566. The Westminster Shorter Catechism echoes the sentiments of the Second Helvetic, “Are all transgressions of the law equally heinous? *Answer:* Some sins in themselves, and by reason of several aggravations, are more heinous in the sight of God than others.” (For elaboration see Larger Catechism Q/A 151.) The Heidelberg Catechism also acknowledges the relative weight of various sins, a greater of a lesser, for the violation of the Third Commandment is regarded as most sinister: “No sin is greater or more provoking to God than the profaning of His name” (Q/A 100). This is not to deny that the Bible has a few statements that seem to run counter to this position or that appear to militate against distinguishing between various gradations of sin. For example, James says: “*For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all*” (James 2:10). And Jesus says in Matthew 5:19: “*Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven.*” But James and Jesus are showing us that all sin is sin, making us worthy of damnation, that sin is rooted in rebellion. When we commit even a lightweight sin we are exposed in our rebellion, and our guilt is both exposed and without excuse. Thus, we do well to acknowledge the gravity of any and all sin, for “Cursed be every one who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, and do them” (Gal. 3:10). And the Heidelberg Catechism reminds us that “the righteousness that can stand before the tribunal of God must be absolutely perfect and wholly conformable to the divine law” (Q/A 62). The wages of sin—all sin and any sin—is death (Rom. 6:23).

Scripture, therefore, never treats any particular sin in a superficial manner, but it also shows us that God recognizes differences in sin. When Jesus is on trial before Pilate he says: “*You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above. Therefore the one who delivered Me to you has the greater sin*” (John 19:11). Or consider 1 John 5:16 where a sin “*leading to death*” is distinguished from other sins. Then there is Ezekiel 8:6, 13, 15. Here the Lord shows Ezekiel abominations and even *greater* abominations. Also under the old Levitical laws found in Leviticus the Lord himself distinguished between sins demanding greater and lesser punishment (see, e.g. Lev. 19:20, Lev. 20:19ff).

Jesus teaches that judgment day will show a distinction of punishment. In Matthew 10:15 he says: “*Assuredly, I say to you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for that city* [which rejects the gospel]” (NKJV). The Apostle Paul honestly believed himself to be the *chief* of sinners because he formerly persecuted the Church (1 Tim. 1:15).

The practical point of all this is that, though we are sinners, Christians don’t have to live utterly sinfully. We don’t have to wallow in our sin. We are called to fight against our sin. There is no place for a person to conclude: “Whether I sin a little or I sin a lot is of not significance, for sin is sin.” In fact, sin is sin but not all sins are the same. The Bible makes clear that greater judgment awaits greater sinners! God’s vengeance is more severe on those whose sins cause the deeper wounds, create the greater misery, and inflict the greater harm; even as greater judgment is upon those who knowingly versus sins of ignorance.

**c. The sin against the Holy Spirit** (for a very insightful treatment of this topic, see G. C. Berkouwer, *Sin*, 323-353)

This sin is often called the unforgivable sin or the sin of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, which then consists of blasphemy against the truth of salvation conveyed to the heart and mind by the Spirit. Both Lutherans and Reformed have traditionally distinguished between the sin against the Holy Spirit and mere final impenitence, arguing that the former is not simply impenitence but the ultimate apostasy from and conscious rejection of the obvious truth of the gospel, despite the work of the Spirit, by one who remains convinced of that truth and cannot deny it, but still maliciously assaults it and rejects it. Since the work of the Spirit is the one path toward remission of sin, ultimate rejection of the Spirit in this blasphemous manner is the sole unforgivable sin. (See Matt. 12:31; also Heb. 6:4-6; 10:29).

This doctrine has been the source of much consternation among believers throughout the history of the church. Some have taken it to be a blemish upon the otherwise flawless complexion of God’s grace. Positing an unpardonable sin suggests that divine grace runs dry at some point, that sin out paces God’s mercy, that some sins are beyond the reach of God’s loving forgiveness. Grace has limits! Thus we meet from time to time persons who are deathly afraid that they have committed this sin. Their anxiety, even terror, over the thought they have succumb to this offense can be heart-wrenching; and one does not easily dissuade them of their doubts and worries. Indeed, Berkouwer reminds us that we face an important question at this point:

Apart from what this sin *is*, do we ever meet a definite limit beyond which it is *not forgiven?* Is that limit obvious in the case of this one sin *alone?* But why, then, should this single sin, *qua talis*, be outside the confines of redeeming grace? Where must we draw the line between those other sins that evoke God’s wrath, but still are pardoned, and *this sin?* What must we say about the word of John: “the blood of Jesus … cleanses us from *all sin*” (1 John 1:7)? Should we cordon off the limits of that statement? How should we read the reference in Isaiah: “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they red like crimson, they shall become like wool” (1:18)? The hallmark of divine forgiveness would seem to be its unrestricted scope; but how then can we speak of a *limit?* *May* we isolate this single sin? We read in the Scripture that God is “good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love to all who call on him” (Ps. 86:5). What sense does it make to curb his steadfast love which “extends to the heavens” and his faithfulness which reaches “to the clouds” (Ps. 36:6)? The saints of the Old Testament knew that although their transgressions prevailed against them, yet God forgave (Ps. 65:3). “For I am ready to fall, and my pain is ever with me” (Ps. 38:17); “if thou, O Lord, shouldst mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with thee” (Ps. 130:3-4). “Thou wilt cast all our sins into the depths of the sea” (Mic. 7:19).[[105]](#footnote-105)

Inasmuch as the glory of the gospel is expressed in such sentiments, that grace is bigger and stronger in finding remedy for our guilt—indeed, no matter the guilt—how can any sin be unforgiveable? To answer these sorts of questions, we must consider what this sin actually comes to, i.e., we must define exactly what this sin is. Anthony A. Hoekema states that this sin is unpardonable “not because it is too great for God to forgive, but because by its nature it excludes the possibility of repentance.”[[106]](#footnote-106) This is a correct statement, but could easily be misconstrued. Some might deduce that sin is pardonable in proportion to repentance, which is quite mistaken. For it is not the case that our sins are itemized into distinct columns, so that upon the death of a believer the sins that have been freshly repented of are deemed forgiven while the sins that have not been newly repented of are left unforgiven. Hoekema, no doubt, has something else in mind in speaking of this sin excluding the possibility of repentance.

Matthew 12:31-32 (par. Mark 3:28-30; Luke 12:10) give us the first definition of this sin. Upon hearing about Jesus’ healing a demon-possessed man who was blind and mute, the Pharisees ascribe Jesus’ ability to perform this miracle to Beelzebub, the prince of demons. This is not a divine work, but a demonic one—used as subterfuge by Satan to deceive. The Pharisees’s verdict concerning this miracle is that Jesus is in league with the devil. In his rebuke of the Pharisees Jesus boldly contradicts this assessment, and says that he drives out demons by the Spirit of God, and this miracle gives evidence that God’s kingdom has come upon them (Matt. 12:22-28). Mark records for us Jesus’ counter verdict as follows: “ ‘Truly I say to you, all sins shall be forgiven the sons of men, and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin’ – because they were saying, ‘He has an unclean spirit’ “ (Mark 3:28-30).

Blasphemy as such does not mount up in an unpardonable sin, for Jesus tells us that “all sins” shall be forgiven, including “whatever blasphemies are uttered.” Indeed, the Apostle Paul is an example of the forgiveness of such blasphemy, for he describes himself as one who “formerly blasphemed and persecuted and insulted” Christ (1 Tim. 1:13). He is now however redeemed and under grace. Paul’s sin (when he was still called Saul) was willful, deliberate, murderous; he even describes it as a “kicking against the pricks” (Acts 26:14; 9:5). But Jesus sets forth a contrast between a general category of blasphemies (“whatever blasphemies [people] utter”) and blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. “All sins” are pardonable; “every sin” is forgivable. Whatever blasphemies people utter can be pardoned, for blasphemy, too, is among “all sins.” Even speaking against or blaspheming the Son is forgiven, but not blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Matt. 12:32; Luke 12:10).

What makes the blasphemy *against the Holy Spirit* a *special, unforgiveable blasphemy?* To point merely to recalcitrance and obstinacy does not seem to explain it, for God is the God who turns hearts of stone into hearts of flesh. The Apostle John presents us with the same disturbing portrait of the unforgiveable sin when he tells us not to pray for one who has committed the sin leading to death. “If any man see his brother sin a sin *which is* not unto death, he shall ask, and he shall give him life for them that sin not unto death. There is a sin unto death: I do not say that he shall pray for it. All unrighteousness is sin: and there is a sin not unto death” (1 John 5:16-17). Hebrews, chapters 6 and 10, have also figured prominently in discussions surrounding this issue, especially the question of apostasy. A denial of the Son of God, after having tasted of salvation, is to crucify the Son anew; it is to apostatize; it is to have “outraged the Spirit of grace” (Heb. 10:29); and it is render yourself beyond the possibility of repentance (Heb. 6:4-6).

Given those words, what are we to make of Jesus’ words on the cross: “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34)? Certainly to apostatize from Christ after being “enlightened,” after having “tasted the heavenly gift,” after having “shared in the Holy Spirit,” and, yes, after having “tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come,” is a very different matter than the unbelief and ignorance of those who crucified Christ. The latter partook of none of the blessings of the former. Interestingly, it should be noted that the testimony of First John and the book of Hebrews exhibit no distinction between Christ and the Holy Spirit as we find in the Gospels. In fact, now the focus is more on Christ than the Spirit. Or, at the very least, the maltreatment of the one is equivalent to maltreatment of the other, for despising Christ is an outraging of the Spirit of grace; and crucifying Christ afresh in apostasy is a spurning of sharing in the Spirit. Indeed, we discover that blasphemy as such is not the unpardonable sin—and thus blasphemy as such is not blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

Why the sharp distinction between the Son of Man and the Holy Spirit in Mark 3 and Matthew 12 versus the lack of any distinction in Hebrews 6 and 10? The only explanation, it appears, is the different stage of redemption history that marks these respective texts. In the Gospels the Son of Man is veiled as the Son of God; Christ exists and suffers in a state of humiliation. He is concealed and emptied of the glory of his divinity. His majesty is cloaked; his deity masked behind his humanity, being in the form of a servant. In the Gospel accounts, when the indisputable is disputed; when the evident and obvious is denied and question, even ascribed to Beelzebub, when God’s presence and sweet grace is deliberately, willfully, wantonly—even maliciously—snubbed, rebuffed, and hated, then we begin to glimpse this sin. It is not blasphemy per se, not deliberateness and willfulness per se; not stubbornness and meanness per se. No, “Only when we look at the incontestable evidence of Christ which is nevertheless contested can we possibly understand the warning which Christ gives. The Pharisees exemplified the abysmal apostasy of man’s heart and necessitated this stern rebuke. Hence the distinction between the blasphemies against Christ and blasphemies against the Spirit.”[[107]](#footnote-107)

After Christ’s resurrection and ascension, especially after Pentecost, we no longer deal with a concealed Christ, the Son of Man in a state of humiliation. Rather, now we meet the exalted One, the Christ in a state of exaltation. The mystery is revealed, and the Holy Spirit testifies of him in all of his light and glory. This brings us to a solution to this question, which Berkouwer has most ably articulated.

From that standpoint it is plain why Hebrews points us to a deliberate and willful sinning as the conscious rejection of what *has occurred* and *is now manifest*. There is now a flagrant and purposeful outraging of the Son of God, a crucifying of him anew, and a deliberate despising of his blood. Against the curtain of what has happened, it is now evident why this distinction between Christological and pneumatological falls away. That which men now commit against the Son of God is sewed up with blasphemy against the Spirit of *grace*. Everything *now* is concentrated on the resistance or antipathy in which evil men respond to this decisive act in Christ. There are many who blasphemed the crucified Lord and despised him in his deepest humiliation; yet for all of these there is still forgiveness. “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34); cf. 1 Cor. 2:8). But when the sun arose on Easter morning and the message of the cross was preached abroad and confirmed by the Spirit in the resurrection of Christ and Pentecost, a *new era* was given birth and men no longer could differentiate their sinning against Christ from their sinning against the Spirit. Sin was now qualified for all time as the renunciation of salvation in Christ and the light which shines in darkness (1 John 2:8). Therefore the whole counsel of God must now be proclaimed (cf. Acts 20:27; 1 Cor. 2:2), and men must be adjured to come to faith and repentance. From this time forth (as we read in Hebrews) any despising of Christ’s blood is the very ame thing as a blaspheming of the Spirit of *grace*.[[108]](#footnote-108)

This sin, then, is not a mystery; rather, it is “an apostatizing from Christ and his Kingdom even though one already has the knowledge of Christ through the Spirit.” As such it is a “conscious rebellion against the Kingdom of God’s grace.” It is the apostatizing sin “against the *obviousness of salvation*.” And this is no mystery. We are warned away from it; we are beckoned to watch ourselves, to be vigilant against it. This sin is a menace, to be sure, but not a mystery. We know exactly what this sin is, what it involves and the road it travels. Thus, we need not disturb the conscience of weak, doubting Christians needlessly. The worried believer clearly has not traveled that path. The penitent, those desiring mercy, those seeking God’s favor, those troubled of heart that they have committed this sin most certainly have not. It is the impenitent, the hardened, the unconcerned, brazen and lost and confident in their unbelief and impenitence unto whom this sin might be ascribed.[[109]](#footnote-109)

**E. Human Freedom in a State of Sin: God’s Decree, Divine Foreknowledge, and Free Choice: Compatibalism versus Incompatibalism**

What is the logical relationship between free will and God’s foreknowledge, even God’s decreeing all that comes to pass? In modern philosophy, these questions are often treated under the broad categories of compatibalism and incompatibalism. From the angle of classic Reformed theology, this terminology is not without problems, for how determinism is defined and understood very much affects whether the Reformed understanding of human freedom consists better with the one heading versus the other. Certainly not just any form of determinism coheres with the Reformed understanding of human freedom.

1. Compatibalism (or soft-determinism) and Incompatibalism (indeterminism) Defined.
   * Compatibalism is the view that *there is no logical inconsistency between free will and determinism, and that it is possible that human beings are free and responsible for their actions even though these actions are causally determined.*
   * Incompatibalism is the view that *free will and determinism are ideas that cannot logically cohere with one another, and thus it is impossible for human beings to be free and responsible for their actions if their actions are causally determined.*

Given these descriptions, it becomes necessary to define both “determinism” and “freedom.”

1. Determinism and Indeterminism
   * + 1. Determinism is the view that every event, including human choice, has a cause. Thus all events in the world are effects, or are caused by something else. Hence any event of any kind is an effect of a prior series of effects, a causal chain with every link solid. Determinism is branded as either “hard” or “soft.”
     1. “Hard” determinism is the view that, given determinism, human freedom is illusory, since choice and behavior are brought about by prior causes—whether genetic, innate, external, or something else (thus B.F. Skinner is a hard determinist).
     2. “Soft” determinism on the other hand is the view that human freedom, defining freedom as rational spontaneity (versus libertarian freedom), is compatible with determinism.

* The compatibalist view is “soft” determinism, which means that compatibilists accept determinism while not accepting the radical conclusions drawn by other (“hard”) determinists (like the denial of free will and moral responsibility).
* Compatibalists affirm that humans are free and responsible persons, which is something extremely important to say.
* Compatabilists, as noted above, also affirm determinism, for human affairs and events in the world are not uncaused or undetermined, otherwise the world would tumble about topsy-turvy.
* Thus, according to compatibalists, the *inconsistency* between freedom and necessity is *apparent only*.
  1. Indeterminism is the opposite of determinism. This is simply the view that determinism is false. The indeterminist does not need to claim that *no* event is caused, only that *not every* event is caused (that is, that there exist some “uncaused events”). (An uncaused event would be a happening that is not a necessary happening, an event that does not follow necessarily from the events that preceded it.) Indeterminism has been given a new respectability because of recent developments in physics. (This is somewhat ironic because the authority of determinism—in a scientific and philosophical perspective—has usually been associated with its relationship to classical physics.)
* Usually going hand-in-hand with indeterminism is the idea of libertarian freedom, which holds that determinism (“hard” or “soft”) is false. Freedom (i.e., libertarian freedom) only exists when acts are uncaused; only then are they truly free. Advocates of libertarian freedom side with “hard” determinists against “soft” determinists on one important topic: the libertarian and the “hard” determinist agree that *if* *determinism* *is true, then there is no freedom*.

1. Compatibalist and Incompatibalist Notions of Freedom

Freedom—as defined and advocated by compatibalists and incompatibalists—is diversely understood. There is *libertarian freedom*, which rejects determinism altogether (hard or soft); and there is *freedom as rational spontaneity,* which typically affirms soft determinism.

* + - 1. The compatibalist’s definition of human freedom is usually called the *freedom of* *rational spontaneity.* Persons are free when they act or make choices according to their *prevailing desires* or *wants*, that is, the agent acts according to his or her own nature, making choices according to strongest preferences. Thus a human action is free if it exhibits the following characteristics: (1) It is not caused by compulsion or by states of affairs external to the agent. (2) The *immediate cause* of the action is a state of affairs internal to the agent—a prevailing wish, desire, intention or something of the sort. (3) The situation is one in which it was *in the agent’s power* to have acted differently *if he had wanted to.*
* An action fitting the above description, then, may well be called free. The cause of the action lies in the character and personality of the agent, and the action fully represents the agents desire, will, purpose, and person. (Being free from coercion or compulsion is important in this idea of freedom.)
* Obviously, the compatibalist notion of freedom excludes the notion of freedom defined as *libertarian freedom,* for libertarian freedom does not allow for any sort of causal antecedents to human choice. In other words, although there may be antecedent states of mind or desires present, nonetheless, none of these is a prevailing or causal antecedent.
* For compatibalists, free will consists in (1) the choice, so that what is done is done by a previous judgment of reason; (2) the willingness, so that what is done is done voluntarily and without compulsion. The former belongs to the intellect; the latter belongs to the will.
* For classic Reformed orthodoxy, not all species of necessity are compatible with freedom so conceived, nor incompatible with it. In fact Turretin offers a sixfold account of necessity: **First**, the necessity of coaction arising from an external agent (that is, he who is compelled, contributing nothing). **Second**, physical and brute necessity occurring in inanimates and brutes who act from a blind impulse of nature or a brute instinct and innate appetite, without, however, any light of reason (as the necessity of fire to burn when a combustible object being supplied; the necessity in a horse to eat the straw or grass put before him) and without any choice. The **third** is the necessity of the creature’s dependence on God, as much as to right and the law established by him as in reference to fact (to wit, the government of providence: [1] in the antecedent decree; [2] in the subsequent execution). This necessity is called hypothetical both of infallibility (with respect to prescience) and of immutability (with respect to the decree and actual concourse). **Fourth**, rational necessity of the determination to one thing by a judgment of the practical intellect (which the will cannot resist). **Fifth**, moral necessity or of slavery arising from good or bad habits that although the acquisition of them be in our power, still when our will is imbued with them, they can neither be unexercised nor be laid aside. Hence it happens that the will (free in itself) is so determined either to good or to evil that it cannot but act either well or badly. Hence flows the slavery of sin and of righteousness. **Sixth**, the necessity of the existence of the thing or of the event, in virtue of which, when a thing is, it cannot but be.
* The first two descriptions of necessity are incompatible with human freedom—for the necessity of coaction takes away willingness, and physical or brute necessity takes away intellect. Things done without reason cannot be done freely; and things done by force or compulsion cannot be done voluntarily.
* The other forms of necessity, however, are compatible with freedom (as defined by compatibalists). For example, free will does not exclude the necessity of dependence upon God, but in fact supposes it. For however great may be the liberty of the creature in its operations, still that liberty cannot be exempted from God’s moral law, or separated from God’s providential concurrence (upholding us and our actions in existence), or conceived of apart from then necessity of certainty that his foreknowledge and decree secure. Likewise with regard to rational necessity, the will follows the prevailing inclination of the mind, so that in being brought to the point of judging or making a decision the will is as the prevailing inclination is, for if it wasn’t, we would act irrationally or in opposition to what in fact prevails, which is absurd. Otherwise, our choices would be irrational, without prevailing reasons, and such choices are rightly called a species of fatalism. As for moral necessity, this does not overthrow the essential nature of liberty—if it did, then a virtuous person of good habits, would be as unfree or enslaved as a vicious person of evil habits. In fact, habits do not count agree liberty. Although the sinner is so enslaved by evil that he cannot but sin, still he does not cease to sin most freely and with the highest liberty. As to the necessity of the event, free will is similarly not compromised, for although whatever is, when it is, is necessarily (so that it can no more but be), still not the less freely or contingently is it said to be done as depending upon free or contingent causes. The certainty and truth of the existence of a thing cannot change its essence.
  + - 1. The incompatibalist’s definition of human freedom is usually called (or at least is so-called nowadays) *libertarian* *freedom* (also sometimes called *the power of contrary choice* or *contra-causal freedom*, also called the freedom of *indifference*). According to this understanding of freedom, in any given situation, a person is only free when he has the power to make one choice over against one or more other choices, including the power that enables him to follow prevailing desires or to overrule prevailing desires. The agent is free or independent to choose—that is, to make any choice—without being compelled by anything independent of the act of choice itself.
* Incompatibalists generally affirm libertarian freedom and reject any kind of determinism—freedom and determinism are incompatible ideas.
* It is not true, as is sometimes alleged, that a libertarian conceives of a free choice as a chance event. A free choice is a *choice,* evaluated in terms of some kind of criteria, and finally decided one way or the other.
* The libertarian differs from the determinist in that the determinist affirms that there must be *sufficient causes* which determine the agent to choose as he does, while the libertarian denies this. But this denial in no way places a free choice in the same category as a random event.
* Thus the libertarian does not deny the relevance of motive to human choices, nor does he deny that it is possible to influence actions by presenting the agents with relevant motivations (rewards, punishments, etc.). Libertarianism does, however, reject the idea that “we always act on the strongest motive,” for advocates of libertarian freedom view this as a vacuous statement inasmuch as we cannot measure which motive is strongest.
* Most libertarians nowadays argue that for our choices to be free what is required is not pure indifference, nor the idea of prevailing inclinations or strongest motives, but merely that choices have adequate reasons. For instance, a fellow’s desire for ice cream may be an adequate reason for his decision to indulge in Baskin Robbins. But his desire to lose weight may also be an adequate reason to abstain and eat an apple instead. Both desires could be adequate—but neither makes his decision necessary.
* Moreover, argue advocates of libertarian freedom, various choices seem to be genuinely in our power—there is nothing at all that prevents us from choosing one way or the other. Thus in the act of choosing, agents have the power of origination. (John Stuart Mill attacked this argument as a mere memory and a mistaken inference).

C. Critique of the Libertarian Notion of Freedom

Libertarianism, in my judgment, faces some problems and conundrums. Consider the following:

* + - * 1. If human beings make choices contrary to *strongest or prevailing desires* (i.e., make choices contrary to the last judgment of the practical intellect), then human choice seems to be whimsical or otherwise unreasonable inasmuch as choices are made contrary to what seems *to the agent*, all things considered, most desirable or reasonable. Stated in other words, this would amount to choosing evil not as a perceived good (even if it is perversely so perceived) but choosing evil as evil and turning away from good (i.e., the thing wanted, desired, an perceived as good to the agent) as good, which is absurd. (We must remember that though human will frequently seek evil, “[i]t does not seek evil as evil, but as an apparent, useful or pleasant good” (*Inst.* X.ii.7). As Turretin explains, “If the last judgment of the practical intellect is brought to the point of judging that this object, here and now (all the circumstances being weighed) is the best, and the will should be opposed to this judgment, then it would be turned away from good as good” (*Inst.* X.ii.7).
        2. If human beings make choices *from* “strongest or prevailing desires” or according to the last judgment of the practical intellect, then human choice is *determined by* internal preferences and libertarian freedom is jeopardized, indeed, forfeited.
        3. If, in order to escape the claims of (1) and (2) above, it is said that strongest or prevailing desires do not exist and that human beings make choices for “adequate reasons,” then not only do we deny a basic human intuition that in fact we do have prevailing desires that account for choices, that we do will according to the last judgment of the practical intellect, but the question emerges regarding what constitutes an adequate reason “adequate” but not “prevailing” and can the “adequate” reason given not be according to the last judgment of the intellect?

This last question is the focus of this critique.

*Adequate versus Prevailing Reasons/Motives/Desires*

In asserting that human choices are made for “adequate” reasons, proponents of libertarian freedom do not wish to take “adequate” to mean “prevailing” or “strongest” reasons, for that would undermine the entire premise of libertarian freedom. Libertarians want to preserve the power of contrary choice and deny that the agent in making choices is caused in any way. They want to maintain that in any act of choice, for whatever adequate reason, the agent has the power of contrary choice; there is contra-causal freedom. Thus in following an “adequate reason,” that “reason” cannot be a prevailing desire, if it were, then it would become a “cause” and undermine freedom. For every adequate reason for making a choice, the agent must be able to offer another or distinct adequate reason that would explain the counter-choice or contrary choice.

But how can an *adequate* reason be distinguished from a *prevailing* reason? It is not clear that this can be done. If Bill Clinton explains that he chose to have sexual relations with Monica Lewinsky out of a combination of middle-aged insecurity and animal lust, then that constitutes an adequate reason for his choice (certainly not for his behavior). Perhaps a sinful, lustful pattern of behavior is deeply ingrained in him; perhaps he has made a prior choice to make the most of every sexual opportunity, with whomever, so long as she is attractive and the chances of getting caught are slim. This too would form something of an adequate reason. But how is an adequate reason not a prevailing reason? Advocates of libertarian freedom would likely argue that never is an adequate reason a prevailing reason, for that undermines freedom. What distinguishes an adequate reason from a prevailing reason in making a choice is that for every adequate reason in a volitional action, there are competing adequate reasons to act contrary to or in an alternative manner to the choice made. This means that for any choice made, there are other adequate reasons available to the agent for not making that choice. So why, given competing adequate reasons, is any choice rendered?

It might seem at this point that we arrive at something similar to Buridan’s ass in different guise, which in varying versions depicts a donkey torn between desires in two directions, a pile of hay and a pile of oats—having equal desire for each, the donkey is paralyzed with indecision; and so choosing neither the hay nor the oats the animal starves. But this is not an accurate depiction of human volition. Proponents of libertarian freedom do not believe that every adequate reason for a choice or a contrary choice are equally desired or hold equal weight. In fact, they argue that humans can make choices for adequate reasons that carry less weight than the alternatives, for this is what libertarian freedom entails—the power of contrary choice and freedom from *potent desires.* In other words, humans must be free from both external coercion and also internal disposition. For any given set of powerful motives and desires pressing upon human volition, a free agent must have power to act *contrary to* these motives and desires, and when acting *according to* them, *not be determined* by them.

We should not underestimate the intuitive power, on one level, of this position, for a basic human intuition is that we have the power of contrary choice, at least in a large array of situations. We see this in that we often regret a choice we have made and chastise ourselves for having made the choice we did. It can be as simple as a trip to Grandma’s house and the driver turning left at, say, Broadman Ave (having forgotten about the road construction on that street) instead of going straight and then turning at the next thoroughfare, Clarkson Ave. The driver says to himself, “I should have gone straight. I could have taken Clarkson Ave.” But the driver may ask himself why he turned at Broadman. In this scenario, it might be that the driver, in choosing a route to Grandma’s house, quickly reasoned that Broadman has fewer lights than Clarkson or the driver likes the scenery better on Broadman, or maybe the driver is bored driving down Clarkson and hasn’t been on Broadman for some time. Whatever the reason or set of reasons, this (or these) form the reason adequate for the choice, and so he turned on Broadman. However, now having new information about the road construction on Broadman, the driver has a new and different reason adequate for the choice, and wishes he had gone straight and turned at Clarkson. In fact, if at the moment of the earlier decision the information about road construction on Broadman was in mind, a different choice would have been made with a different adequate reason. Yet for the libertarian, no adequate reason *determines* choice.

But something looks suspicious here. In light of the above, how is the adequate reason offered not in fact the prevailing desire at the time of the decision? We regret decisions in this manner all the time. We explain and defend our decisions in this manner as well. We speak with subjunctives in defending the choices we have made—”I didn’t know that going this way would make us late, if I had known this, I would have taken a different route.” It therefore doesn’t seem adequate (no pun intended) for libertarians to account for choice by an appeal to “adequate” reasons or desires since these reasons don’t actually determine choice. Granted that, for libertarians, humans aren’t indifferent in making choices; and granted too that humans make choices for reasons. But how is an adequate reason not the prevailing reason? Or, stated differently, inasmuch as no reason is a prevailing reason, as libertarians claim, and no adequate reason determines choice (again, as libertarians claim), isn’t the agent indifferent, not relative to having desires and looking for outcomes, but relative to what dictates or *determines* his choice. The adequate reason does not determine choice. Only the agent determines his or her choice and that choice isn’t determined by any adequate reason. The agent must have the power of contrary choice, which is contra-*causal* freedom.

Once more, our own experience seems to confirm the idea that for every adequate reason we offer for a choice rendered, upon analysis, that reason or motive shows itself to be prevailing *at the moment of the choice*. For example, a minister, Rev. Lundegaard, is called by two different churches to serve as their new pastor. No doubt, a huge list of reasons and motives play into the decision making process for Rev. Lundegaard. Should he take the call to Tucson, AZ, with the sunshine and the cactus, with the high-pay package, with the prestige of this affluent congregation, or should he heed the call to Milwaukee, where a newly established church has known steady growth for the last year and is bursting with enthusiasm? No doubt, Rev. Lundegaard can be tugged in two directions at once. He ponders many things and tries to sort out all the motivations that are inappropriate or selfish. He evaluates his own gifts; he consults his family and the needs of his children. He finds himself making a list of pros and cons surrounding each church. Finally, however, he comes to a decision and *at the moment of the decision* certain motivations or desires prove more decisive or weighty than others, and it is the prevailing motives that bring him to the choice he makes.

Now, it is possible that no sooner has Rev. Lundegaard sent off letters of acceptance and decline to the respective churches, he learns some new piece of information about one of the churches that sways him to regret his decision altogether, and so *at this new moment* a different choice is reached for a different adequate reason, and precisely that new adequate reason is the prevailing reason, which determines the choice.

We see from these scenarios that libertarians resist calling adequate reasons *prevailing* reasons, for they want to preserve the power of contrary choice not merely if new or different motives play into a volitional action, but they want to preserve the power of contrary choice *at the moment of decision* so that the agent is free from any adequate reason and able to act for (but not determined by) another adequate reason. In this sense, the will can be indifferent to any adequate reason. For prevailing reasons, in prevailing, would render an agent unfree. But are not what libertarians term “adequate reasons” the reasons that *prevail* in the very nature of the case? If this were not so, then an agent’s volitions would take on either a whimsical or capricious dimension a la indifference or they are made for “less-than-adequate” reasons. For how can an agent act contrary to what he or she regards as “more adequate” reasons? Isn’t this nonsense inasmuch as persons choose according to what they regard as *most* reasonable or adequate or beneficial *at the moment of decision* relative to their own assessment and analysis? It is difficult to see how it isn’t!

Thus, returning to Bill Clinton and his reason(s) for having sexual relations with Monica Lewinsky, if libertarian freedom is true, it is not clear why one reason or set of reasons for a given choice proves more adequate over another reason (or set of reasons). Why did Bill Clinton have sexual relations with Monica? There were adequate and substantial reasons not to do so, such as: the fear of getting caught, a public scandal, that she might tell others, the shame he might feel, especially if discovered, feeling like a cad, the dishonor this brings to his character and the harm he is doing to his relationship with Hillary, that he would be breaking his marriage vows, etc. These reasons, altogether adequate as they are, both individually and in combination, did not prevail upon Bill Clinton; rather, some other reason or reasons did so. At the moment of choice, Bill chose what he most desired among competing desires.

From a slightly different angle we may ask the question as to what makes a reason for a given choice “adequate”? Does the agent merely determine that it wasn’t random? That seems to be an inadequate explanation. Does the agent view the reason(s) as merely fitting or *more fitting* than other reasons? How are the choices that an agent makes not made according to what is regarded as (in some sense, even in a perverted sense) *most fitting?* The libertarian argues that an “adequate” reason does not determine the choice of the agent and, besides, *strongest* desires and inclinations or *most fitting* reasons cannot be determined or ciphered out. Thus, again, the agent possesses a power above desires or inclinations, and to that degree, relative to choice, is *indifferent* to any given adequate reason or reasons, desires, or preferences.

It appears that the only other option open to the libertarian is to say that the agent has the power to determine the desires that in turn determine his choice. But that hardly seems possible. Can an agent freely determine his own desires? If so, this involves a prior choice for every choice—that is, an agent determines his or her choices by making choices, so that choice orders and determines choice. As Jonathan Edwards points out, here libertarians find themselves caught in a problem of infinite regress, an act of choice is determined by a prior act of choice, which is determined by a prior act of choice, *ad infinitum*; or until we arrive at an act of choice wherein the will is not self-determined. But then libertarian freedom fails. Or to state it another way, as earlier observed, if I make choices for adequate reasons, why do I judge them adequate? Isn’t saying that they are adequate the same as saying that there is a good reason or motive for making the choice I make? To act according to an adequate reason is the same as saying “because”—”Why did you choose that?” “Because….” But why do you place value on that reason? What makes it adequate? Do you decide that it is adequate? If you don’t decide it is adequate, then you seem to be unfree according to the standards of libertarian freedom. If you do decide it is adequate, why? What is the adequate reason for deeming that to be an adequate reason? If I have no reason, then I act capriciously or irrationally. If I have a reason, haven’t I already made a kind of *prior choice* in seeing the reason as “adequate”? We face another kind of infinite regress here as well, for why is it adequate? Libertarians are forced to admit either that an adequate reason is adequate for some particular reason, and that reason for another reason, and that one for another one, and so on *ad infinitum;* or libertarians are forced to admit that an act of will is without an adequate reason, and so irrational; or they are forced to admit that an *adequate* reason is actually a *prevailing* reason or motive—one that they did not decide or choose to possess; persons just find themselves wanting and desiring certain things. Either way, it appears that libertarian freedom gives way.

Thus while libertarians are headed in the right direction when they say that humans make choices not from mere indifference but from adequate reasons, that admission does not actually secure the kind of freedom they wish to maintain. For, as noted above, they want to argue that “reasons,” though adequate, do not actually determine choice. Whichever way Bill Clinton decides relative to Monica, whatever adequate reasons he offers as an explanation for his choice, those reasons do not actually account for his choice—his choice accounts for his choice. For the libertarian, if Bill’s choice is determined by a set of “reasons,” then he is unfree. Adequate reason(s) may not be the *cause* of his choice. Consequently, his choice is not determined by these reasons; rather, it is determined by himself. But if that is true, either he follows his prevailing desire, according to his own nature, in making a choice (as compatibalists maintain); or he makes a choice from choice, which is irrational and absurd.

*Can Humans Choose to be Indifferent to Their Desires?*

Another way of focusing the problem facing libertarian freedom has to do with whether humans can be indifferent to their desires and preferences or whether they can choose to be indifferent to their desires and preferences. Libertarians, it would seem, offer an affirmative answer to both questions. Opponents to libertarian freedom reply in the negative.

Take a case of a person wanting ice cream at Baskin Robbins: Does a person, Ashlyn, have the ability to be indifferent to her desire with respect to ice cream, either to refrain from eating it or to indulge? Most libertarians want to deny both that humans choose from *prevailing* desire or that they choose from *bare indifference*. Thus, in making a decision about ice cream, Ashlyn is not *indifferent* to ice cream at Baskin Robbins. At the same time, no desire is prevailing upon her (even if it is her desire), determining her choice.

But is it really the case, as libertarians maintain, that in making choices agents are neither moved by “a prevailing desire” nor are they “indifferent”? For libertarians, freedom is forfeited if a prevailing desire determines choice; and the moral integrity of choice is forfeited if indifference accounts for choices, for then agents are capricious and choose without purpose. It seems, however, that some type of indifference is requisite for the will to remain free according to the libertarian definition. It won’t do to say that an adequate reason determined the will or moved it to action unless the will has the ability to be indifferent to that action. Hence, even though an adequate reason is offered in explanation of a given choice, that reason didn’t determine the choice. Thus, to the degree that an act of volition is *not determined* by the adequate reason proffered in explanation, the will is *indifferent* to it. This indifference, then, is what secures the freedom of the will inasmuch as indifference represents the power of the will over the agent’s desires, inclinations, dispositions, and preferences. Indifference is what enables the power of contrary choice and safeguards contra-causal freedom.

But does such indifference actually exist in human agents? In fact, human beings are genetically predisposed and/or socially conditioned to certain preferences, desires, and behaviors concerning which they cannot simply be indifferent. Take Ashlyn’s love for ice cream. She indulges her appetite, and offers as her adequate reason for eating the ice cream that she simply loves it and that her body craves it, or states instead that she eats it as a stress reliever. These are her adequate reasons for her choice. But, as libertarian proponents argue, none of these caused her choice. According to libertarian freedom, only her choice *causes* her choice—that is, she is the self-cause of her choice to eat ice cream. The adequate reason didn’t determine her choice. Thus, while she has reasons or explanations for her choice, these do not mount up to explaining her decision as such, for she had the power to act contrary to these reasons and could have acted contrary to them. Thus, to argue that Ashlyn has been socially conditioned to eat sweets when she is depressed, and this explains her choice, is not actually true. Social conditioning did not cause or determine her choice for ice cream. Whereas such conditioning can tug upon her as a potent desire, she may not, according to libertarian freedom, be controlled by these desires if she is to be truly free. Her will must have the power to be indifferent to this conditioning; otherwise it isn’t free.

The issue here proves fundamental. Is choice caused by some external force or some internal bias? Does it come about by an antecedent volition? Is there any cause at all? Why do people choose one thing instead of another? Most specifically stated: Does the agent act because of causal factors which decisively incline the will or does the agent act without any factors decisively inclining the will?

One libertarian answer is that choice or volition is *self-caused*. The agent causes his or her acts.

This explanation, however, misses a key part of the question. For the question is not only what is the cause of an act; but also what is it that causes the agent to act? The second part of the question is left unanswered in merely saying volition is self-caused. It is certainly true that it is the agent who acts; it is the agent who causes *the act*. This is not in dispute. But does the agent act without reason? Is there nothing which decisively inclines the agent to will? How can an agent act or choose contrary to the prevailing desires or motives?

Edwards found the “self-cause” explanation quite absurd, since, as stated above, this amounts to saying that a person *determines* his acts by *choosing* his own acts. This means, then, that choice orders and determines choice. Again, as earlier noted, the fatal flaw in such a scheme is that it leads to endless regression—every free act of choice is determined by a preceding act of choice, *viz.,* choosing that act. Yet if acts are determined by choosing, then even this prior act is determined by an even prior act of choosing; and so on *ad infinitum;* or until we arrive at an act of the will wherein the will is not self-determined. But if that is the case then this sort of freedom gives way. Thus, if people use their faculty of the will to determine their will, the determination of volition is itself an act of volition.

The question we are asking is what leads a person to make a given choice? What is the reason for a person deciding one way versus another? To say merely that a person *decides* how he or she will act begs the question. Why does a person act or choose or decide as he or she does? Again, to say a person determines himself to will amounts to saying he wills himself to will. Yes! And what makes him will himself to will? And on and on.

Some advocates of contra-causal freedom object by noting that as an actor a person causes the act but is him- or herself uncaused. Norman Geisler argues:

If the real cause of a free act is not an act but an *actor*, then it makes no sense to ask for the cause of the actor as though the actor were another act. The cause of a performance is the performer. It is meaningless to ask what performance caused the performance . . . Once we have arrived at the free agent, it is meaningless to ask what caused its free acts. For if something else caused its actions, then the agent is not the cause of them and thus not responsible for them. And it is as senseless to ask what caused the free agent to act as it is to ask who made God? The answer is the same in both instances: nothing can cause the first cause because it is the first.

This explanation seems to suppose that the actor is an unmoved mover, for Geisler supposes that the actor, by a sovereign-uncaused power within herself, acts or chooses as she does. He asserts this against the freedom of spontaneity. But do humans have such a power? Geisler supposes so. But how can humans exercise sovereignty over their desires? If one grants that strongest motives or inclinations determine or cause the agent to act as he acts then contra-causal freedom is yielded; and if one argues that the actor, though not indifferent to strongest motives or inclinations, acts contrary to these, then, the actor acts arbitrarily, and moral responsibility is yielded. And so-called adequate reasons are really not explanation at all.

Libertarian freedom involves an actor or agent, in being the cause of a given act, acting in a way wherein he or she, as an agent, reigns over (and vetoes) his or her own prevailing inclination or desire. While it is true to say that it is the performer who *causes* a performance; surely the performer does not perform without reasons or some kind of preponderating inducement. Why does the performer perform? Are we to assume that the performer chooses to play the violin instead of walking off the stage at the same time she remains unmoved or neutral toward either act? This suggests that, in the words of Edwards, “the mind has a preference, at the same time that it has no preference.” For the alternative would be to suggest that the actor acts according to her strongest preference, in which case “free acts” are caused by prevailing preferences. “[T]he very act of choosing one thing rather than another, is preferring that thing, and that is setting a higher value on that thing.” Geisler (and libertarians) must then concede that the actor’s acts are caused or induced by her own prevailing preferences, which are inseparably connected to her nature as a person. Otherwise, they must concede that the actor acts either indifferently or arbitrarily. And, then, to suppose that the performer functions indifferently, uncaused, for she is a self-cause, is to say that the performer performs as she pleases (or as she wants) when she has no pleasure (or desire) to follow. Even God does not will contrary to his desire or his nature, but according to it. To say the actor is the self-cause of his acts is not particularly startling; but if indifference is supposed it leads to absurdity; and if indifference is not supposed then contra-causal freedom must be surrendered. Free agents are not free from who they are as persons, since such agents act according to their nature, with its inclinations and motives.

To recapitulate: persons make choices either according to preferences or they do not. But how, supposing a state of indifference or non-preference toward any potent desire or set of prevailing desires, does an actor choose? Choice appears impossible in such a state. Thus we must assert not only that it is true that humans *aren’t indifferent* to a great many things, *their inability to choose to become indifferent necessarily limits the range of human choices, specifically contrary choices* (at least pertaining to certain things).

If this is true, and it appears obviously true, then libertarians must concede that people just happen to like certain things and dislike others. And more, humans can’t decide or choose to be indifferent about a large number of things. Insofar as this is true, it seems that humans are unfree following the scheme of libertarian freedom.

In this connection, we can return to Ashlyn and her desire for ice-cream, as well as her competing desire to lose weight: Is Ashlyn *indifferent* to matters regarding her weight? Libertarian proponents would agree with advocates of rational spontaneity that Ashlyn is, indeed, not indifferent whether she weighs 110 lbs rather than 310 lbs. She much prefers to weigh closer to 110 lbs than 310 lbs. If, however, Ashlyn isn’t indifferent to her weight, can she *decide* or *make a choice* to be indifferent? Thus, Ashlyn is not indifferent with respect to her desires in this way. But that is of no concern to the libertarian. The advocate of libertarian freedom might reply that whereas humans aren’t *indifferent* regarding their desires, neither are they *controlled* by their wants and preferences. But if this is the case, we face a new question. If Ashlyn isn’t indifferent to Baskin Robbins, nor *controlled by wants and preferences* relative to ice-cream and weight loss, is this because she decided or makes a choice to be neither indifferent nor controlled? After all, wants and desires and motives are what they are! Did she *decide* or *make a choice* not to be indifferent or not to be controlled? Even more, *can* she decide to become indifferent toward a given want or preference? Can she, moreover, decide to have another set of preferences in order to make willing one thing over another less difficult?

The libertarian might reply that it doesn’t matter whether Ashlyn has the ability to become indifferent toward preferences, say, ice cream, so long as she is free to act *contrary to* that strong preference and is not determined by it. Thus, though Ashlyn is not indifferent to wanting ice cream—no matter what accounts for this desire—so long as she can act contrary to this inclination and give an adequate reason for choosing contrary to that inclination, she has acted freely—*that is*, iff she could have chosen contrary to the choice she did make for an adequate reason. For every adequate reason that grounds or explains a choice, one must be free to act contrary to that reason for an adequate reason.

But isn’t it the case that the range of “live choices” for human agents is greatly limited by inherited or genetic or sociological factors, such that humans find themselves with desires and inclinations that they did not choose to have, and that these same desires and inclinations greatly circumscribe our behavior and actions, including choices? And biblically speaking, it is clearly taught that the range of live choices for spiritually dead human agents is also limited by original sin and spiritual death.

The libertarian might say that Ashlyn doesn’t need to be able to choose to become indifferent regarding her weight so long as she is free to act/choose contrary to her desire relative to her weight. But that looks suspiciously like choosing to be indifferent to her desire relative to her weight. And, as we have noted before, that appears to be a very dubious idea, for it seems obvious that humans do not possess that ability. Inasmuch as Ashlyn cares deeply about being physically fit, and hates herself for being fat, she cannot simply choose to “not care” whether she weighs 310 lbs and so is indifferent about obesity. This is clearly false, but following libertarian freedom—in order to be free—Ashlyn must have this power of choice.

Once more, the libertarian might argue that although Ashlyn isn’t indifferent about her weight, she still has the power of contrary choice, for nothing *causes* her to choose as she does. Okay, let us suppose that Ashlyn in fact has the power of contrary choice in the way libertarians maintain. But as earlier observed, can Ashlyn actually decide to be indifferent about her weight or not to be indifferent about her weight? How? Many, if not all, people would be surprised to learn that they have the power to be indifferent about how much they weigh, or about having or not having acne, or about being blind or being able to see, or about loving their children versus not loving them. Perhaps the libertarian will say that of course people aren’t indifferent about these things, and that what is at stake in libertarian freedom is not indifference but that human agents have the power of contrary choice and that “adequate reasons” *account for* but *do not cause* them to make the choices they make.

But the issue before us focuses upon human freedom with respect to one’s own internal desires and dispositions, and things like self-evaluation. Leaving aside, for now, the libertarian claim that we have the power of contrary choice *even while we are not indifferent*, the question is whether we have freedom with respect to our desires and inclinations and feelings. Given that I have a particular disposition or set of motives, do I have the ability (following the power of contrary choice) not merely to choose contrary to that disposition or set of motives, but do I have the ability to choose to alter and thereby actually change my preferences, dispositions, and desires? If not (and it seems obvious that in many cases persons cannot do this), libertarian freedom flops. In other words, who has the “power” at any given moment to stop loving their children, given a potent inclination or motive to love them?

Following the libertarian notion of freedom, however, if I do not have the power to choose to be indifferent about a particular matter versus not being indifferent to it, then I am not free concerning it. If I choose as I do without the ability to choose to be indifferent, my freedom is limited and the power of contrary choice is forfeited, for I am no longer free to choose the contrary and act upon that choice. Lacking freedom in this way (that is, according to the libertarian definition of freedom), my “adequate reasons” then actually function as *causes*, not explanations, of my choices. However, if I am to be free in the way of libertarian freedom, then nothing may determine my choices, and I must have power over my desires—even if I happen to be either indifferent or predisposed toward something. I may not be determined by my desires or my likings or inclinations or my nature—or even my “reasons.” Thus (following the libertarian scheme), I don’t make choices without “reasons,” and my choices aren’t merely random or whimsical; “adequate reasons” explain my choices, nonetheless, they do not determine them. Nothing determines my choice except my choice, so that the ultimate explanation for my choice are not “reasons” that are adequate, but my own choice itself.

Such reasoning, of course, is a classic case of question begging.

Thus going back to Ashlyn: Is Ashlyn in some way conditioned in the desires she possesses in relation to weight-gain and weight-loss? If so, do certain prevailing desires hold sway?—or if not prevailing desires, do certain adequate reasons account for her choices, such as, the desire for health, or the desire to attain a certain body image, or the desire to fit into some clothes for an upcoming event, or a desire to please her spouse by losing weight? If that is the case, then whence cometh these desires and motives, or “reasons” for wanting to keep her figure? Moreover, given a libertarian conception of freedom, how would it be reasonable for Ashlyn to act contrary to her most adequate reason? For if she acts contrary to her most adequate reason, she acts, it seems, irrationally. Remember: it is absurd to say she is indifferent to what she is not indifferent about. To be sure, she will either eat the Baskin Robbins ice-cream or refrain from doing so for an “adequate” reason, for what she judges to be an “adequate” reason is something she is not indifferent about. But then how is she free in the way that libertarians want her to be free? For now she follows “reasons” or desires that she doesn’t have control over, or that she didn’t decide to have—such as the delight and desire for ice cream. Maybe she refrains from Baskin Robbins because she is very insecure about her body image and is only happy with herself when she fits into a size 4. Did she “decide” to have a preoccupation with body image? Or is she, perhaps, partially conditioned or shaped by a faultfinding father from childhood? Is that her adequate reason for abstaining from Baskin Robbins? And is that exercising freedom in a libertarian way?

For libertarian freedom to stand, Ashlyn must have the power of contrary choice, which means that she must have the power at any given moment, given an identical set of antecedents and circumstances, to choose not only not to be swayed or influenced by a particular set of preferences, desires, and dispositions in making a choice, but she must be able to not be swayed by these inclinations; and more, she must be able to choose to have a different set of preferences, inclinations, and dispositions. If she cannot do this (and, again, it seems obvious that in many instances people cannot do this), then her choice is determined in some way by these preferences and dispositions. That being the case, libertarian freedom crumbles, or, at least, needs further explanation and defense.

In summary, libertarian freedom is exposed when we focus upon what actually dictates or determines or accounts for human choices. For libertarians must maintain that however adequate any reason is for making a given choice, it is not decisive, and the determination of one’s choices is not because of the reasons, but independent of or indifferent to these reasons. And such acts of choice are therefore unreasonable. Moreover, libertarians cannot escape the reality of our human condition and creatureliness—that humans do not have sovereign power over their desires and inclinations; they do not have the ability to be indifferent in relation to a host of matters that concern them and about which they make choices; and they cannot “re-originate” their nature in Adam. Humans are not unconditioned or uninfluenced or uncaused in judging something to be “reasonable.” For human choice follows human nature.

In short, if a person doesn’t have the power to decide to be indifferent to any set of desires or preferences, how can he or she have the power of contrary choice? Libertarian freedom has been compromised inasmuch as that person can’t choose to desire differently.

**Confessional Materials**

See: Westminster Confession of Faith, IX. 1-5; Second Helvetic Confession, IX. 1-11; Belgic Confession, art. 14 (part 2); Canons of Dort, head II, rejection of errors 3 & 6; the Reformed catechisms only treat the topic lightly, see HC *Q/A* 8; WSC *Q/A* 82; WLC *Q/A* 149.

D. Charles Hodge on Free Agency (see his *Systematic Theology,* vol. 2, pp. 278-309)

1. Different Theories of the Will

All the different theories of the will may be included under the three classes of Necessity, Contingency, and Certainty.

(A) *Necessity*

(1) Fatalism

* The doctrine of fatalism is equivalent to blind necessity, that is, events arise from mere chance, without the will of intelligent being.
* Fatalism entails “the law of sequence” to which God and humans are subject. The universe has the ground of its existence in itself, and is governed in all its operations by fixed laws, which determine all events.
* Fatalism reduces the acts of humans to the same category with those of irrational animals.
* Properly speaking, fatalism refers necessity to fate—an unintelligent cause.

(2) The Mechanical Theory

* This theory denies that humans are the efficient cause of their own acts.
* In this scheme, humans act from *mere* spontaneity—and this theory is connected with materialism (cf. Hobbes).
* Mechanical necessity ignores the distinction between physical and moral necessity, and rejects the notion of free agency.

(3) First Cause Necessity

* It teaches that all events are referred to the immediate agency of the first cause, and secondary causes are excluded or superseded.
* This fits with Pantheism, for God is the only agent.
* Occasionalism seems to entail this doctrine, too.

(B) *Contingency*

Directly opposed to all these schemes of necessity is the doctrine of contingency.

* This is sometimes called the liberty of indifference (nowadays called libertarian freedom, JMB), by which is meant, that the will, at the moment of decision, is self-posed among conflicting motives [or reasons], and decides one way or the other, not because of the greater influence of one motive over others, but because it is indifferent or undetermined, able to act in accordance with the weaker against the stronger motive, or even without any motive at all.
* Sometimes this is called the self-determining power of the will—meaning, the will is not determined by motives, for the reason of the will’s decisions is to be sought in itself. The will is a cause, not an effect; it requires nothing out of itself to account for its acts.
* Sometimes this is called the power of contrary choice, that is, that in every volition there is and must be power to the contrary. Even supposing all antecedents external and internal to have been precisely the same, the decision might have been the reverse of what it actually was.
* Contingence is therefore necessary to liberty. A contingent event is one which may or may not happen.
* The will is viewed as independent of reason, of feeling, and of God—[though in an act of will, the agent can state reasons for his actions, his actions are not determined by his reasons].

(C) *Certainty*

* Certainty opposes both necessity and contingency (as defined above). It teaches that a man is free not only when his outward acts are determined by his will, but when his volitions are truly and properly his own, determined by nothing out of himself but proceeding from his own views, feelings, and immanent dispositions, so that they are the real, intelligent, and conscious expression of his character, or of what is in his mind.
* This theory is often called the theory of *moral or philosophical necessity* (to be distinguished from physical necessity). It should not be called that, however, for:

(a) liberty and necessity are directly opposed [as defined by Hodge],

(b) certainty and necessity are not the same, and therefore they should not be expressed by the same word [again, as defined by Hodge],

(c) using the word necessity to express the idea of certainty brings the truth into reproach.

* The idea of moral certainty was expressed by the old Latin writers [and the Reformed orthodox] with the term *rational spontaneity* [note: not just “spontaneity,” but *rational* spontaneity]. This phrase expresses the idea that in every volition there are the elements of rationality and spontaneous actions. [‘spontaneous’ here means ‘proceeding from natural feeling or natural tendency without external constraint’].
* Wherever reason and the power of self-determination or spontaneity are combined in an agent, he is free and responsible for his outward acts and his volitions.
* This view of free agency includes the idea that the will is determined by the last judgment of the understanding, meaning that the views or feelings which determine the will are themselves determined by the understanding—that is, they are at least determined by the understanding in the sense that they are apprehended as suitable to satisfy some craving of my nature.
* In other words, all the desires, affections, or feelings which determine the will to act must have an object, and that object by which the feeling is excited and towards which it tends must be discerned by the understanding (this accounts for the rational character of our choices).
* Any volition that does not follow the last dictate of the understanding, as explained above, is the act of an idiot.
* Sometimes this conception of freedom is expressed by saying that *the will is as the greatest apparent good* (good here means that which is desirable, becoming, useful).
* Edwards affirmed this kind of freedom by saying that *the will is always determined by the strongest motive.* Hodge dislikes this manner of expression since the word ‘motive’ is wrought with ambiguity, and also because of the impossibility of actually testing the relative strength of motives.
* Hodge prefers to abide by this general statement: The will is not determined by any law of necessity; it is not independent, indifferent, or self-determined, but is always determined by the preceding state of mind; so that a man is free so long as his volitions are the conscious expression of his own mind; or so long as his activity is determined and controlled by his reason and feelings.

2. Definition of Terms

(A) *The Will*

* Sometimes the word *will* is used in the wide sense to include all the desires, affections, and even emotions (as when all the faculties of the soul are said to be included under the two categories of “understanding” and “will”).
* At other times *will* is used for the power of self-determination, or for that faculty by which we decide on our acts (thus only purpose and imperative volitions are acts of the will).
* Thus, to say that we have power over our *volitions* is very different than to say we have power over our *desires*.
* Will and desire must not be confounded.

(B) *Motive*

This word is often taken in different senses. It is defined to be

(In the *objective* sense of the word):

* Anything which has a tendency to move the mind.
* Any object adapted to awaken desire or affection.
* Any truth or conception which is suited to influence a rational and sensitive being to decision.

(In the *subjective* sense of the word), motive refers to:

* Inward convictions, feelings, inclinations, and principles which are in the mind itself, and which impel or influence the person to decide one way rather than another.
* It is only in this sense of the term that the will is determined by the strongest motive (of course, we have no criterion or standard by which to determine the relative strength of motives, other than their actual effect).
* To say that the will is determined by the strongest motive, only means that “the will” is not self-determined, but that in every rational volition the person is influenced to decide one way rather than another by something within himself, so that the volition is a revelation of what that person in himself is.

(C) *Cause*

The word *cause* sometimes means:

* The mere occasion.
* The instrument by which something is accomplished.
* The efficiency to which the effect is due.
* The end for which a thing is done, as when we speak of final causes.
* The ground or reason why the effect or action of the efficient cause is so rather than otherwise.

(Motives can be true causes, not as mere occasions, not as instruments, nor as the final end of something, but as the ground or reason why for the efficient cause, i.e., motives are the reasons which determine the agent to be thus or so, and not otherwise. Thus persons are the efficient cause of their choices or actions, but such choices or actions are not divorced from or undetermined by their motives or reasons).

(D) *Liberty of the Will* and *Liberty of the Agent*

A common misunderstanding arises from confounding liberty of the will with liberty of the agent, as if these statements are equivalent: ‘The will is free,’ and ‘The agent is free.’ (Sometimes what we mean by freedom of will is the freedom of the agent—that is, the person is free in willing). But we should not make the two ideas synonymous because:

* Predicating liberty of the will is liable to lead to our conceiving of the will as separated from the agent—as a distinct acting power in the soul (after all, the will is only the soul willing; a self-determination is a determination of the will; self-decision is a decision of the will).
* The two are not really equivalent. The person may be free, when his will is in bondage (thus we can have an enslaved will in a free agent—e.g., a man who has been for years a miser has a will in a state of slavery, yet the man is perfectly free, for he is self-controlled or self-determined).
* We really mean to say that the agent is free; the person is the responsible subject. Thus, we maintain that the person is free; but we deny that the will is free in the sense of being independent of reason, conscience, and feeling.

(Some Reformed writers, *contra* Hodge, would turn this distinction around, and argue that the will is strictly speaking *free* but the agent is enslaved to sinful desires and passions, or that the agent is determined by his motives and inclinations).

(E) *Liberty* and *Ability*

* It is also a mistake to confound liberty with ability. For example, Pelagius defined liberty as ability, so that in being free, a man possesses the ability at any moment to determine himself either for good or evil.
* Augustine offered up a fourfold distinction concerning human ability:
  1. posse peccare (able to sin)—Adam before the fall
  2. non posse non peccare (not able not to sin)—Adam and all humans after the fall
  3. posse non peccare (able not to sin)—believers united to Christ but not yet in glory
  4. non posse peccare (not able to sin)—believers in glory
* Liberty refers to self-determination, doing what one wants, not ability.
* Thus both fallen man and saints in glory have free agency, for each and all are free in their volitions.
* Free agency is the power to decide according to our character; ability is the power to change our character by an act of volition.

(F) *Self-determination* and *Self-determination of the Will*

* This terms are also often confounded, for advocates of libertarian freedom say by the latter expression—self-determination of the will—they intend to deny that the will is determined by the antecedent state of the mind, and to affirm that it has a self-determining power, independent of anything preexisting or coexisting. Libertarians argue that those who teach that when the state of the mind is the same, the volition will inevitably be the same, teach necessity and fatalism (denying liberty in any case), and reduce the will to a machine.
* Libertarians therefore argue that will is ‘self-moved’; it makes its *nisus* [strength, effort, ability] of itself, and of itself it forbears to make it, and within the sphere of its activity, and in relation to its objects, it has the power of selecting, by a mere arbitrary act [against various motives and reasons], any particular object. It is its own cause, accounted for in itself alone.
* A kind of self-determination is advocated or defended by all, for opponents of libertarian freedom do not deny that volitions are self-determinations, or that the mind is the efficient cause of its own acts, or that man is an agent, but they do deny that there is such thing as the self-determination of the will.
* We must affirm that the agent is self-determined, meaning (1) that he is the author or efficient cause of his own act; and (2) that the grounds or reasons of his determination are within himself—that is, he is determined by what constitutes him at the moment a particular individual, his feelings, principles, character, dispositions; and not by any external or coercive influence.
* The will isn’t its own power; it is not its own self-moving, arbitrary power; it is not self-determined, if it were, volition would cease to be a decision of an agent. For if the will were its own power, a decision of the will could be contrary to that agent’s whole character, principles, inclinations, feelings, convictions, or whatever else makes him what he is.

3. Certainty Consistent with Liberty

Hodge advocates a defense of certainty, not necessity, in maintaining free agency. All Augustinians maintain that a free act may be inevitably certain as to its occurrence. The certainty of such acts does not negate their freedom. God is the absolute free agent, yet it is also absolutely certain that he will do right.

For Hodge’s arguments in defense of this teaching, see his ‘Arguments from Scripture,’ ‘The Argument from Consciousness,’ ‘Argument from the Moral Character of Volitions,’ ‘Argument from the Rational Nature of Man,’ and ‘Argument from the Doctrine of a Sufficient Cause’ (*ST,* vol. 2: pp. 299-309).

**F. The Social Character or Manifestation of Sin**

See Erikson, *Christian Theology,* 2nd edition, pp. 657-674; Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932), wherein Niebuhr argues for a sharp distinction between the moral behavior of individuals and of social groups conceived along national, racial, or economic lines. To be sure, man is immoral as an individual, that is, individuals act sinfully and immorally; but man is more immoral and sinful in social groups and economic classes. Argues Niebuhr, whereas individuals can suppress self-interest to varying degrees in the interest of others, social groups cannot—sin is a more potent force in a collective. Consequently, social groups are morally inferior to individuals. Social groups and their sins are only suppressed by political force. (See especially chapters 1, 4, 5, 9, 10.) Also see Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel*, wherein, traveling the road of Ritschl’s theology, he argues for an entire reorientation to sin and redemption, essentially reducing Christianity to morality. Perhaps the best attempt at an evangelical and Reformed approach to social sin and social justice are Abraham Kuyper’s *The Problem of Poverty* (also entitled *Christianity and the Class Struggle*) and Nicolas Wolterstorf’s *Until Justice and Peace Embrace*.

**G. Common Grace and the Restraint of Sin**

1. Introductory Remarks

Against the rosy optimism of classic liberalism, that humans were basically good and capable of evolving into something increasingly better, a theological shift took place in the face of the horrors of WWI. As A.A. Hoekema observes, “Beginning with the works of Walter Rauschenbusch (1861-1918) and continuing with the writings of Karl Barth (1886-1968) and Reinhold Niebuhr (1893-1971), there emerged a much more realistic view of man as basically sinful and self-centered. It is not difficult to recount numerous stories of human horrors and petty meanness, as many novelists have done, like Dostoevsky’s portrait of unblinking meanness toward children in his novel *The Brothers Karamozov*, or the scary portrait of George Orwell’s “Negative Utopia” (in his *1984*), or Sophie’s terrible choice in William Styron’s haunting novel. The depth of the human capacity for evil boggles the mind. And yet how thankful we are that we don’t witness such depths of human depravity as typical. Many of us have kindly neighbors. Often we can trust people in our business dealings. Sometimes people we have never met before, upon seeing that we are in need of assistance, not only offer to help but do so unselfishly and at their own inconvenience. People who have nothing of religion in them, nothing of Christianity will share their last piece of bread. Why? Without trying to argue that people are good as such, how is it that people aren’t as bad as they could be? Why do some people act kindly and decently toward you, even though they know nothing of spiritual rebirth and the Ten commandments, whereas others who testify to their regeneration in the Spirit and know God’s commandments by heart, can behave so obnoxiously and ruthlessly.

In short, as we live our lives we do not seem consistently to experience either absolute human evil in the depths of its depravity, nor do with experience the full scope of the power of regeneration. How can we account for this—and for our purposes now, especially how can we account for this first phenomenon? How can we account for the decency and kindness and unselfishness we find (to some degree) in our fellow human beings, who “by nature are inclined to hate God and their neighbor”? For their nature is poisoned and corrupted, and unless they are born again, they “are totally unable to do any good and inclined toward all evil” (Heidelberg Catechism, Q/As 5, 7, 8).

Hoekema points out that Augustine had an answer to this question: “When [Augustine’s] Pelagian adversaries reminded him of the virtues of the heathen, he called these virtues ‘splendid vices’ (*splendida vitia*), since they were not practiced for God’s glory but for self-love and human praise” (*City of God,* Bk. 5, Chaps. 12-20).

Calvin follows somewhat in this line, but offers up a more robust and positive answer. Calvin squarely confronts the seeming conundrum: if this world and the humans in it are so radically fallen and depraved, how do we account for the truth, goodness, beauty, nobility, and fruits of civilization that is everywhere apparent? Surely we cannot ascribe these achievements to man’s native ability, for the ability to achieve these things has been lost in the fall (and this is why both H. Hoeksema’s and K. Schilder’s efforts to overthrow common grace and to account for positive human achievements from the good remnants in fallen human nature fails, for precisely the ability to do these things is what cannot be accounted for *from human nature*). Calvin, therefore, saw these achievements as rooted in God’s favor or grace that he termed a *gratia generalis Dei—*a general grace of God. We will treat his position at length below.

First we turn to a brief analysis of key biblical terms.

2. The Range of Meaning in the Biblical Words !x and ca,rij.

*Charis* in secular Greek and Hellenism

In secular Greek *charis* is what delights. It may be a state causing or accompanying joy. It is joyous being, the element of delight in the beautiful, the favor shown by fortune, i.e., what is pleasing in it. As a mood *charis* means “sympathy” or “kindness” with a reference to the pleasure that is caused. Aeschylus uses *charis* for the “favor” of the gods, but it isn’t a central religious or philosophical term. In Plato it as the meanings “good pleasure,” “goodwill,” “favor,” “pleasure,” “what pleases,” and “thanks.”

In Hellenism *charis* becomes a fixed term for the “favor” shown by rulers, with such nuances as “gracious disposition” or “gracious gift.” Philosophy discusses the “grace” and “wrath” of the gods. In recipients *charis* denotes “thanks.” In a second development Hellenism stresses the power in *charis.* This power, which comes from the world above, appears in the “divine” man and expresses itself in magic.

*Charis* in the LXX (OT usage)

In the OT *hen* is usually translated as *grace, favor,* and less frequently as *pleasant.* The LXX uses *charis* to translate !x. The verbal stem of the Hebrew word denotes a gracious disposition that finds expression in a gracious action (cf. Gen. 33:5; Ps. 119:29). The construction with accusative of person brings out the thrust, namely, gracious address to another. What is in view is the process whereby one who has something turns graciously to another who is in need. Initially the term is not theological. It may be used for having pity on the poor (Prov. 14:31) or the defenseless (Dt. 7:2). More weakly it may simply denote friendly speech (Prov. 26:25). Yet the main OT development relates to God, who is the subject in 41 of 56 instances; 26 in the Psalms, which call on God to hear prayer (4:1), to heal (6:2), to redeem (26:11), to set up (41:10), to pardon (51:1), and to strengthen (86:16) in corresponding needs. Thus the Hebrew term usually denotes the stronger coming to help the weaker who stands in need of help because of his circumstances or natural weakness. Only seldom does *hen* refer to the activity of God. It can refer to the undeserved gift of election (Gen 6:8; Exod 33:12, 13) and to the postponement in history of punishment (2 Kgs 13:23)—both are gracious acts of God.

Various writers on OT theology rightly point out that, over and above the occurrences of the concept of grace, the OT teaches that “every creature lives by the grace of God” (L. Koehler, *Old Testament Theology,* 1957, 124) and that Yahweh’s grace “produces everything that furthers life” (G. von Rad, *Old Testament Theology,* I, 1962, 229). Grace increases where sin abounds, for the Flood is followed by the Noahic covenant (Gen 8:21ff.) and the tower of Babel is followed by the Abrahamic covenant for the blessing of all the nations of the earth (Gen. 18:18).

In the LXX *charis* translates *hen* rather than *hesed* and usually denotes “attractiveness” or “favor” with God and others. It is not, as such, a theological term. Philo uses *charis* to refer to the power behind divine gifts. The content of *charis* derives from the understanding of God as Creator and Preserver, always in an active sense.

*Charis* in the NT

In the NT the term *charis* is used 155 times, mostly in the Pauline letters. It does not occur in Mt., Mk, or 1 and 3 John. In John it occurs only in 1:14ff.; and in 1 Thess. and Philemon only in salutations. Especially to be noted is the range of meaning of the word in the NT, for it can be translated *grace* (1 Cor. 15:10), *favor* (2 Cor. 9:15), *thanks* (1 Tim. 1:12), *gift* (2 Tim. 1:6), *benefit* (2 Cor. 1:15), and *joy* (Philemon 7).

In Luke *charis* is used in its OT sense of being in God’s favor (Lk 1:30; 2:40) and in the favor of men (2:52; cf. 1 Sam 2:26; also see Acts 24:27; 25:3, 9, where the term refers exclusively of human favor). Grace (*charis*) comes from God and gives success to the apostles’ mission (Acts 6:8; 11:23; 14:26; 15:40; 18:27). Grace (*charis*) enables men to believe (Acts 18:27). In Acts it is used in a secular sense in Acts 24:27; 25:3, 9, and more positively in Acts 2:47; 4:33. OT influence may be seen in the religious use in Luke 1:30; Acts 7:46; 7:10; Luke 2:40; 2:52; 6:32ff. *charis* characterizes the good news in Lk 4:22; Acts 14:3. It depicts the Spirit-filled man in Acts 6:8. In Jesus’ teaching the concept of grace in the sense of undeserved gift of God is expressed mostly indirectly. The theme of his teaching and his acts as a whole centered on God’s condescension to the weak, poor, helpless, lost (Mt 11:5; 28ff.; Mk 10:26ff.; Lk 15). Other central themes in his ministry are immeasurable debt (Mt 18:21-34), gracious reward in the kingdom of God (Mt 20:1-16), and pardon leading to a new life (Lk 13:6-8; 7:36-50; 19:9ff.). For Paul *charis* is the essence of God’s decisive saving act in Jesus Christ (Rom. 3:24ff.). Grace characterizes and even becomes shorthand to refer to the event and gift of salvation. We are saved by grace alone; it is shown to sinners; and it is the totality of salvation (see Rom. 3:23-24; 2 Cor. 6:1). Grace is also depicted as a state and a gift that no one has a proper claim to (see Rom. 5:20-21, 5:2; Gal. 1:6). Grace is sufficient (1 Cor. 1:29). Grace can refer to the gospel itself (Col. 1:6)

Conclusions from this Analysis

From this analysis it is clear that the biblical words usually translated “grace” in Scripture have a range of meaning that finds its center and focus in God’s work of salvation. However, the above analysis also makes perfectly clear that the range of meaning to the terms !x and ca,rij are not exclusively salvific; in fact these biblical words can refer to blessings or benefits (or gifts), or a favored status, that does not entail salvation as such. This observation is significant for the Reformed doctrine of common grace, for a key claim made by advocates of a general grace of God is that the word grace can be used in a way that refers to a kind of divine disposition and benefit to fallen sinners that comes up short of divine salvation.

\* \* \* \* \* \* \*

In order to treat the doctrine of common grace, we do well to consider Calvin’s own treatment and use of this concept. It should be noted that his Reformed contemporaries made varying use and came to varying evaluations of the term, if not the concept. Thus we turn to an exposition of Calvin’s position below. [See Venema’s notes; Berkhof, *ST*, pp. 432-446; A.A. Hoekema, *CGI,* pp. 187-202; also see Murray’s exegetical exposition and Kuyper’s material in the supplemental reading; Wayne Grudem is a modern evangelical who, in his Systematic Theology, treats the subject, see pp. 657-666; noteworthy too is C. Van Til’s exposition of this topic].

3. Calvin’s Conception of a General Grace of God

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*The Diversity of Divine Intent and Effects of God’s Grace*

In his own treatment of divine grace, insofar as we have been able to discover, John Calvin (1509-1564), unlike many of his Reformed contemporaries, nowhere takes up a formal discussion of grace as a topic of theology.[[110]](#footnote-110) This is true both for saving grace and for an idea of general grace. This is not to say however that Calvin fails to distinguish between different aspects of divine grace. In fact, Calvin sometimes uses words like “special” or “peculiar” in order to set off the idea of a common grace of God from the (typical) salvific grace that God bestows to elect sinners alone. At other times, however, he will employ these adjectives in reference to saving grace. It is not difficult to find clear instances of this very thing. For example, in disputing the notion that all people are “equally the children of God,” Calvin argues that, since in Adam all lost eternal life, the blessing of divine adoption is “an act of special grace,” from which it follows that all those who are not the recipients of this “special grace” are “hated of God and “thus estranged and alienated from Him.”[[111]](#footnote-111) Here saving grace is special grace. In another context however Calvin calls general or common grace special grace. Thus, in commenting on the effect of the fall on human nature, Calvin maintains that though some are “born fools or stupid, that defect does not obscure the general grace of God [*generalem Dei gratiam*].”[[112]](#footnote-112) Indeed, this is according to “God’s kindness,” and so we are delivered from “the destruction of our whole nature.” Then he observes:

Some men excel in keenness; others are superior in judgment; still others have a readier wit to learn this or that art. In this variety God commends his grace to us, lest anyone should claim as his own what flowed from the sheer bounty of God. For why is one person more excellent than another? Is it not to display in common nature God’s special grace [*specialis Dei gratia*], which, in passing many by, declares itself bound to none. . . .Still, we see in this diversity some remaining traces of the image of God, which distinguish the entire human race from the other creatures.[[113]](#footnote-113)

Here we see Calvin linking what are sometimes called natural gifts to divine grace. But this grace is not at all salvific in character. Nonetheless, Calvin calls this type of grace, a kind of uncommon common grace, “God’s special grace.” Still in another context Calvin argues that believers enjoy life in a twofold way. On one level they experience God’s blessings as his creatures, while on another level they live and move as God’s children. “The former grace is the common possession of everyone, but the latter is granted specially to the elect.” And again, “The former is in a certain way implanted in our nature, but the latter is given to man as a supernatural gift, so that he may cease to be what he was and begin to be what he had not yet become.”[[114]](#footnote-114) Thus saving grace in this context is special and a gift that is supernatural in character. Likewise, Israel’s very existence is according to God’s kindly labor, being “divinely made by peculiar grace,” which corresponds to God’s sovereign election.[[115]](#footnote-115)

We see, then, that Calvin clearly recognizes that *divine grace* is bestowed upon fallen human beings with diverse intent and effects, which is to say that Calvin distinguishes saving grace from a divine grace that God imparts for another and distinct purpose. In fact, Calvin uses a variety of words to describe this non-saving grace of God, such as terms like “kindness” and “beneficence.” Thus when he affirms God’s providential governance of human society, Calvin observes that the Lord is “kindly and beneficent toward all in numberless ways,” though this does not deny the reality of God’s severity toward the wicked and his clemency toward the godly, which is manifested in various ways almost every day.[[116]](#footnote-116) Here we note that Calvin is not saying that a non-salvific kindness or beneficence of God *always* comes to believers and unbelievers in an identical fashion, but he does assert that this kindness rests upon *all people*, so presumably upon elect and reprobate alike.

Calvin’s appeal to a universal (non-saving) grace of God is manifest in numerous contexts and in virtually every genre of his writings.[[117]](#footnote-117) For example, in his sermon on Deut. 33:1-3—commenting on the phrase, “Yet loveth he the people”—Calvin says the following: “Moses then doeth here compare all men and all the Nations of the earth with the linage of Abraham which God had chosen: as if hee shoulde say, that Gods grace is spreade out everie where, as wee our selves see, and as the Scripture also witnesseth in other places.”[[118]](#footnote-118) The “spread” or “scope” of divine grace is indeed, according to Calvin, “everywhere.” For although God confers “special blessings” (*specialis gratia*) to his chosen people, thereby showing himself to be their Father, his benefits are also “extended in common to all mankind” (*quae communiter ad humanum genus patent*). Indeed, “God exercises his beneficence towards the whole human family.”[[119]](#footnote-119) Calvin even calls the regular succession of night and day a “beautiful arrangement” that exhibits “the incomparable goodness of God towards the human race.”[[120]](#footnote-120) Likewise, the regularity of the seasons “clearly indicate with what care and benignity God has provided for the necessities of the human family.”[[121]](#footnote-121) For Calvin, then, God’s providential provision, bringing forth seedtime and harvest, expresses a divine “benignity.” Similarly, commenting on Psalm 31:19, Calvin asserts that God most certainly knows how to provide and take care of his own children inasmuch as he exercises “his beneficence to aliens from his family.” In this connection, Calvin specifically contests Augustine’s contention that “those who unbelievingly dread God’s judgment have no experience of his goodness.” Calvin’s calls that notion “most inappropriate.”[[122]](#footnote-122)

For Calvin, “heavenly providence” can testify to “fatherly kindness.” An example of this is seen in Psalm 107. Chance occurrences are in fact nothing of the sort, not even for those who have no knowledge of God. Many people find themselves in “desperate straits.” But God is a help to the poor and the lost; he protects those who wander in desert wastelands and brings them to refuge; he supplies food to the hungry, sets prisoners free, leads those shipwrecked back to port, cures the sick, bringing them back from death. God likewise can either scorch the earth or make it blossom with rain. Psalm 107 further depicts God as lifting up the humble and casting down the proud. These examples, each and all, exhibit God’s kindness to the human race. Yet that doesn’t mean God’s kindly care is recognized for what it is. Since most people are, as it were, lost in error, this “dazzling theater” of God’s kindliness blinds them by its very reality and so they fail to comprehend and profit from benefits that should bring them to praise God; on the contrary, the mouths of the wicked and reprobate are stopped.[[123]](#footnote-123)

Calvin further asserts that God must be acknowledged as “the fountain of every good.” Thus, he offers this rather broad synopsis:

. . . not only does [God] sustain this universe (as he founded it) by his boundless might, regulate it by his wisdom, preserve it by his goodness, and especially rule mankind by his righteousness and judgment, bear with it in his mercy, watch over it by his protection; but also . . . no drop will be found either of wisdom and light, or of righteousness or power or rectitude, or of genuine truth, which does not flow from him, and of which he is not the cause.[[124]](#footnote-124)

The practical consequences of this is that all people ought to ascribe all these blessings to God, for “until men recognize that they owe everything to God, that they are nourished by his fatherly care, that he is the Author of their every good, that they should seek nothing beyond him—they will never yield him willing service.”[[125]](#footnote-125)

Against opponents who view divine predestination as unjust, and therefore charge God with cruelty for not extending his grace to a wider scope, Calvin offers a reply in the form of some queries:

How was it that whole nations were not utterly destroyed daily, until no more peoples existed? How was it that the whole world was not destroyed, if such a thing were possible, a hundred times a year? How was it that during those same 2,000 years so many glorious proofs of God’s patience and mercy towards men were manifested?[[126]](#footnote-126)

Notes Calvin, even the apostle Paul celebrates God’s patience and longsuffering toward the “vessels of wrath fitted for destruction.”[[127]](#footnote-127) Thus, in Calvin’s view, the preservation of the human race is itself an expression of divine mercy, which means it is wholly undeserved, unmerited, and unearned.

In Calvin’s teaching on divine grace, he manifestly distinguishes a *grace of forgiveness* from a divine goodness that is *common to all*. For example, in his comments on Psalm 145:9—”Jehovah is good to all, &c.”—Calvin explains that the Psalmist in effect says that God not only forgives sin according to his fatherly indulgence and clemency, but he also “is good to all without discrimination, as he makes his sun to rise upon the good and upon the wicked [Matt. 5:45].” While the wicked know nothing of the divine forgiveness of sin, their bondage to sin and innate depravity “does not prevent God from showering down his goodness upon them,” even though they are not “at all sensible of it.”[[128]](#footnote-128) What is more, as he says in his lectures on Zechariah, although God “deals very bountifully with the unbelieving,” it is without effect—that is, so far as God being acknowledged as the author of such blessing. Calvin says that as God “pours forth his grace without any benefit” (*profundit sine fructu gratiam suam*), it is as though “he rained on flint or on arid rocks.” Therefore no matter how generously God may confer “grace on the unbelieving, they yet render his favour useless, for they are like stones.”[[129]](#footnote-129) What is useless about this divine grace is not that it fails to achieve its specified aim, but in achieving that aim it fails to bring forth any knowledge of God or change of heart unto the mending of one’s sinful ways.

*The Restraint of Sin*

Another way in which a general grace of God manifests itself is through the restraint of human sin. Calvin discusses sin’s restraint in a variety of contexts, addressing the restraint of human evil both in an external and internal sense. For example, in his *Institutes* Calvin remarks that in every era we observe people who, guided by nature, exhibit virtuous traits and even strive after the same their whole life long. This being so does not, however, mitigate human depravity and corruption, though it does hold it in check. For amid this defilement of human nature, says Calvin, God’s grace (*gratia Dei*) plays a restraining role—”not such grace as to cleanse it, but to restrain it inwardly.” Calvin’s reasoning on this score is clear, and it relates directly to the radical and far-reaching effects of original sin. “For if the Lord gave loose rein to the mind of each man to run riot in his lusts, there would doubtless be no one who would not show that, in fact, every evil thing for which Paul condemns all nature is most truly to be met in himself [Ps. 14:3; Rom. 3:12].”[[130]](#footnote-130) Human inclinations, being altogether wicked, if not curbed, would burst as a flood. While God is pleased to heal this disease in his elect, others he restrains, like putting a bridle on them so that they do not “break loose,” for in his prescience the Lord reckons “their control” to serve the common welfare—that is, “to preserve all that is.”[[131]](#footnote-131)

Calvin addresses himself to this question also in his commentary on Isaiah.

We know how great is the wantonness of the human mind, when every man is hurried along by ambition, and, in short, how furious the lawless passions are when they are laid under no restraint. There is no reason, therefore, to wonder if, when the judgment-seats have been laid low, every man insults his neighbour, cruelty abounds, and licentiousness rages without control.[[132]](#footnote-132)

Following this observation Calvin bids us to wisdom, for if we understood our predicament as human beings and how prone we are to wanton lusts and mutual destruction, indeed, how terrible life could be, then we would be far more appreciative of “the kindness of God” (*Dei beneficium*) in preserving us “in any tolerable condition” and keeping us from sorrowful ruin.[[133]](#footnote-133)

Calvin also connects this restraining mercy of God to God’s providence. Believers take comfort in knowing that God’s providential operation extends to all persons, such that, all are under God’s power, “whether their minds are to be conciliated, or their malice to be restrained that it may not do harm.” In numerous ways God intervenes in the common affairs of men to protect his own people and frustrate, or altogether thwart, the evil schemes of the wicked. Moreover, “it is his care to govern all creatures for their own good and safety; and even the devil himself, who, we see, dared not attempt anything against Job without His permission and command [Job 1:12].” Thus, what ought to find recognition in God’s servants, likewise ought to be acknowledged by all persons, namely, all blessings and benefits are from God, filling us with “[g]ratitude of mind for the favorable outcome of things, patience in adversity, and also incredible freedom from worry about the future.…”[[134]](#footnote-134) But as Calvin observes elsewhere, unbelievers fail to render back to God the gratitude that is his due. “God’s beneficence” is manifest in countless ways, even when others help us in the midst of misfortune or inanimate creatures benefit us, for it is right to reason that God directs hearts and objects as “instruments of his kindness.” Indeed, by divine blessing alone “all things prosper.”[[135]](#footnote-135)

Believers also find “never-failing assurance” in knowing that God, according to his providence, works in the midst of the rough-and-tumble of the world for their welfare. Especially comforting is the knowledge that “the devil and the whole cohort of the wicked” are entirely held in check by God. He is sovereign over their fury and it belongs to him to set limits to their rage, “lest they licentiously exult in their own lust.”[[136]](#footnote-136)

Calvin also treats the matter of sin’s restraint as a function of civil government. Indeed, God has established the magistrate in order to make human social cooperation possible: “. . . to adjust our life to the society of men, to form our social behavior to civil righteousness, to reconcile us with one another, and to promote general peace and tranquility.”[[137]](#footnote-137) For Calvin, the function of the civil authority may be likened in importance to the necessities of bread, water, sun, and air. He also argues that the function of the state is to prevent idolatry and protect pure religion, as it must also safeguard that the public peace is not disturbed. In this way personal property is kept safe, trade and social intercourse secured, and honesty and modesty preserved. “In short, it provides that a public manifestation of religion may exist among Christians, and that humanity be maintained among men.”[[138]](#footnote-138) Sometimes Calvin identifies this sin-restraining function of the magistrate with God’s beneficence or clemency. “Let us, therefore, know that everything which we find to be profitable for the support of life flows from the undeserved goodness of God.”[[139]](#footnote-139) He calls a well-regulated commonwealth “a singular gift of God,”[[140]](#footnote-140) and bids us to take heed “lest, by our ingratitude, we deprive ourselves of those excellent gifts of God” that a well-regulated commonwealth brings—that is, the gifts of bodily support, military forces, skillful governors, prophetic office, mechanical arts, and all such ornaments of God which the magistrate affords and provides.[[141]](#footnote-141) Conversely, remarks Calvin, “when the Prophet threatens, and pronounces it to be a very severe punishment, that these things shall be taken away, he plainly shows that those eminent and uncommon gifts of God are necessary for the safety of nations.”[[142]](#footnote-142) We observe, then, that for Calvin such gifts are not bestowed to all nations in an altogether equal measure, but the magistrate is indeed a gracious provision of God to the nations, and so upon the elect and non-elect alike. “Hence it is evident that they who direct or apply their minds to sap the foundations of civil government are the open enemies of mankind, or rather, they are in no respect different from wild beasts.”[[143]](#footnote-143)

*Virtues in Unbelievers*

Earlier we alluded to the fact that Calvin recognizes that unbelievers, despite the corrupting effects of original sin and their own unregenerate state, exhibit certain virtues. Calvin briefly discusses the evil Catiline and the noble Camillus.[[144]](#footnote-144) Are we to conclude, given Camillus’s positive character, that human nature, if appropriately nurtured and disciplined, is capable of genuine goodness? In view of Calvin’s pungent doctrine of human depravity, along with his own readiness to make use of secular writers and their positive contributions to the various disciplines of human knowledge, how might his theology account for this seeming conundrum? Indeed, Calvin acknowledges that “the endowments resplendent in Camillus,” for example, “were gifts of God and seem rightly commendable if judged in themselves.” Since humans lack the capacity to improve themselves unto moral integrity and uprightness, their own seeming virtues tainted by vice, Calvin looks for a different solution to this problem. He is confident about his own answer.

Here, however, is the surest and easiest solution to this question: these are not common gifts of nature, but special graces of God, which he bestows variously and in a certain measure upon men otherwise wicked. For this reason, we are not afraid, in common parlance, to call this man wellborn, that one depraved in nature. Yet we do not hesitate to include both under the universal condition of human depravity; but we point out what special grace the Lord has bestowed upon the one, while not deigning to bestow it upon the other.[[145]](#footnote-145)

However, such “gifts” and “graces” do not mount up to any sort of merit in God’s eyes, since no matter how finely persons may conduct themselves, their own ambitions are always at work and serve as motive, thereby blemishing and sullying all virtues before God so that “they lose all favor.” Calvin’s conclusion is that “anything in profane men that appears praiseworthy must be considered worthless.” In short, those who are not regenerated and reconciled to God do not live for or seek God’s glory in any of their actions. Therefore, their virtues are a “vain show”; and although they earn praise “in the political assembly and in common renown among men,” God’s assessment is more sober. For such virtues, as far as acquiring righteousness before God, possess “no value.”[[146]](#footnote-146) Thus what is “valueless” about such virtues wrought in fallen and unredeemed people is that they might, in any way, obtain for sinners some meritorious status before God or could function in any way to reconcile fallen sinners to God, from whom they are altogether estranged.

Calvin doesn’t wish to say, however, that these virtues (which do not “mitigate human depravity and corruption”) have nothing to do with God’s grace. For he explicitly states that “here it ought to occur to us that amid this corruption of nature there is some place for God’s grace [*gratia Dei*]; not such grace as to cleanse it, but to restrain it inwardly.”[[147]](#footnote-147) This inward restraint of sin is part and parcel of an outward restraint as well, which functions negatively in holding in check the full possibilities of human evil and positively in preserving the created order, along with the benefits of human talents which God kindly and freely imparts as he pleases. For, according to Calvin, almost everyone exhibits a talent for some art or task, and these talents, in having their origin in human nature, have their origin in God. Natural gifts, such as human reason itself, are demonstrations of divine grace.

Therefore this evidence clearly testifies to a universal apprehension of reason and understanding by nature implanted in men. Yet so universal is this good that every man ought to recognize for himself in it the peculiar grace of God [*peculiarem Dei gratiam*]. The Creator of nature himself abundantly arouses this gratitude in us when he creates imbeciles. Through them he shows the endowments that the human soul would enjoy unpervaded by his light, a light so natural to all that it is certainly a free gift of his beneficence [*beneficentiae*] to each! Now the discovery or systematic transmission of the arts, or the inner and more excellent knowledge of them, which is characteristic of few, is not a sufficient proof of common discernment. Yet because it is bestowed indiscriminately upon pious and impious, it is rightly counted among natural gifts.[[148]](#footnote-148)

Thus, we may see the “admirable light of truth” shining even in secular writers and thinkers. To be sure, the human intellect is wholly fallen and perverted, nevertheless it is also “clothed and ornamented with God’s excellent gifts.” For Calvin, all truth comes from the Holy Spirit, “the sole fountain of truth,” which explains why the natural man—that is, fallen sinners, unredeemed and unsanctified—are nonetheless capable of insight and discernment. This means that whatever gifts unbelievers display in the arts and sciences, or mathematics, along with their skill in jurisprudence for safeguarding civic order—all such gifts are from the Spirit of God.[[149]](#footnote-149)

*Divine Love for All*

Another way in which Calvin addresses the matter of a general grace of God is how he talks about God’s love for those who are not the objects of his redemption. For he says, “God hates none without a cause.” Yet, insofar as sinners—elect and reprobate alike—are God’s workmanship, the Lord “embraces them in his fatherly love.”[[150]](#footnote-150) Indeed, not only does God in some sense love all his creatures, and so cares and provides for them, even more, he acts as a “foster father” to all men, whom he has fashioned after his own image. Man excels every other creature of God’s hands. Thus Calvin does not refrain from saying that God “doth love all people.” But Calvin does qualify that affirmation, for he distinguishes that general or universal love of God from God’s love for his church. Inasmuch as the non-elect remain God’s enemies, his love for them comes to no redemptive realization. This means, as Calvin explains, that as his “creatures” God loves them; as “sinners,” however, he hates them.

For all the children of Adam are enemies unto God by reason of the corruption that is in them. True it is that God loveth them as his creatures: but yet he must needes hate them, because they be perverted and given to all evill.[[151]](#footnote-151)

In short, since sin is wholly opposed to God’s nature, he must declare “irreconcilable war with the wicked.” This, however, actually serves to comfort the church, for the righteous find assurance in knowing that God will not allow evil to prevail or allow the wicked to escape justice.[[152]](#footnote-152) Thus, while God may offer innumerable proofs of his love towards the whole human race, he confines his “especial or peculiar love to a few, whom He has, in infinite condescension, been pleased to choose out of the rest!”[[153]](#footnote-153) Moreover, his covenant with Abraham, and the formation of Israel into a nation as “his holy and peculiar people,” betokens his love expressed in free adoption versus a divine love “generally.”[[154]](#footnote-154) Meanwhile, according to this general, non-redemptive love, God, as Creator and Father of the whole human race, extends his care and blessing to the nations, even as he showed his concern for the ancient city of Nineveh, giving them “the common light of day, and other blessings of earthly life.”[[155]](#footnote-155) God also shows his goodness and love for the “brute creation,” being bountiful to the beasts of the earth, so much so that even the ravens and wild asses (the less desirable animals) are under his care.[[156]](#footnote-156)

*Ingratitude in the Face of Grace*

In order to gain an accurate and full picture of Calvin’s understanding of common grace, we must also take note of his remarks concerning the ingratitude of the wicked in the face of this divine mercy. For what we must not miss is that the sin of ingratitude is possible only because a genuine divine kindness or blessing, or expression of mercy, is actually imparted to the non-elect. Which is to say, if a general grace of God is not genuine grace—fully recognizing that it is not salvific grace—if it is, instead, a divine subterfuge, a mere scheme, in order to damn the wicked further, then God takes on sinister characteristics. In fact, some have tried to interpret Calvin’s view along these lines.[[157]](#footnote-157) The problem with this path of interpretation, however, is that a sinner cannot be held more liable or become more guilty before God, if the divine grace that is ignored or neglected, or otherwise abused, *isn’t grace*.

In Calvin’s portrayal and analysis of this issue, however, what we discover is that the weightier penalty which awaits those who fail to praise God for common blessings is linked directly to the reality of those blessings. In other words, the reality of a general grace of God corresponds to the reality of its neglect by unbelievers, for the reality of the one is commensurate with the reality of the other. For example, even though the reprobate are not the objects of regeneration, they are the objects of many other divine blessings, leaving them without excuse. Thus Calvin argues that since there are countless proofs of God’s love towards the whole human race, any and all failure to acknowledge God as the bestower of these blessings testifies to the ingratitude of those who are perishing or coming to perdition.[[158]](#footnote-158) Or as Calvin says in another place, since “the whole order of things in nature shows the fatherly love of God,” exhibiting his condescending care “for our daily sustenance,” all ought to confess “the divine goodness” and “the mystery of his works.” But human depravity and ungratefulness leads people to look proudly and deliberately to secondary causes and so “avert their eye from God.”[[159]](#footnote-159) Indeed, God will at length “take vengeance” on human ingratitude “when he sees his grace perishing through indifference.”[[160]](#footnote-160)

Calvin also associates this theme to divine providence. Although God has clearly revealed himself in the fashioning and continuing government of the universe, people show their “foul ungratefulness” in refusing to acknowledge and comprehend the many benefits and favors that surround them in an overwhelming manner.[[161]](#footnote-161) The creation itself, along side God’s providential care, display his glory like “so many burning lamps.” Although people live their lives bathed in such undeniable “radiance,” they will smother this light with their own darkness and render themselves “inexcusable.” Alluding to Acts 14:15-17, Calvin notes that God justly allows people to go their own (wayward) way, but he hasn’t left himself without witness, for he sends benefits from heaven, giving rain and fruitful seasons, filling human hearts with food and gladness. “Therefore, although the Lord does not want for testimony while he sweetly attracts men to the knowledge of himself with many and varied kindnesses [Allen: abundant benignity], they do not cease on this account to follow their own ways, that is, their fatal errors.”[[162]](#footnote-162) What is more:

They have within themselves a workshop graced with God’s unnumbered works and, at the same time, a storehouse overflowing with inestimable riches. They ought, then, to break forth into praises of him but are actually puffed up and swollen with all the more pride. They feel in many wonderful ways that God works in them; they are also taught, by the very use of these things, what a great variety of gifts they possess from his liberality. They are compelled to know—whether they will or not—that these are the signs of divinity; yet they conceal them within.[[163]](#footnote-163)

Thus, our very constitution as human beings testifies to God’s goodness to us, for we are fashioned in a glorious way, created with the higher and better gifts, so much so that signs of divinity are attached to our human creaturehood. In fact, to be created human versus some lower creature bespeaks divine blessing as well.[[164]](#footnote-164)

We see, then, that with Calvin common grace receives a rather comprehensive treatment, not because he takes it up as a singular topic of theology, but because he integrates and interweaves this idea into numerous other theological topics. Next we turn to an analysis and summary of conclusions regarding Calvin’s understanding of common grace in relation to some of his Reformed theological collaborators.

Conclusions

The idea of a general grace of God in Calvin’s theology, as I have sketched it here, demonstrates that the Genevan Reformer evidences both continuities and discontinuities with some of his Reformed contemporaries. We wish to explore what those continuities and discontinuities are in a moment. First, however, we must observe that Calvin scholarship, insofar as it has addressed itself to Calvin’s teaching regarding divine grace, and a general grace of God in particular, has not given any attention to how Calvin’s own Reformed contemporaries were addressing the same issue and therefore how Calvin’s position was either a novelty or a commonplace or something of a hybrid within the Reformed movement. We have discovered that among the contemporaries of Calvin whom we have examined, each addresses, to some degree, the idea of divine grace. Moreover, each of them has something to say about a “general grace,” and each even makes “grace” a formal topic of theology. In that light, it is remarkable that Calvin does not do the same. Not that this constitutes an oversight on his part, for Calvin is quite clear about the meaning of grace, standing in the Augustinian tradition and conceiving of saving grace in a wholly monergistic fashion. Nonetheless, in not giving his attention to a formal discussion of divine grace, Calvin fails to provide himself and his readers with a strict vocabulary for describing and referring to a saving versus a non-saving or general grace of God.

We must also observe that twentieth-century scholarship on Calvin’s understanding of common grace, no matter which trajectory of interpretation one wishes to consider—that of Bavinck and Kuiper, who argue for a full-fledged doctrine of common grace in Calvin’s thought, or that of Douma and Campbell-Jack, who see only the beginnings of such a doctrine, not to mention the interpreters, like Hoeksema, who see any notion of a common grace of God as hostile to and contradictory of Calvin’s whole theological project—this scholarship has failed to consider that Calvin’s views on and theological formulation of the idea of common grace is just one of several Reformed formulations—all of which may be quite congruous with one another and united in expression or perhaps at odds with one another at certain points. Our point is simply to observe that the scholarship on this aspect of Calvin’s theology, insofar as I have been able to discover, has not reckoned with this question. This essay represents an initial, and admittedly brief, attempt to read Calvin on the question of common grace in light of the views of some of his fellow Reformed collaborators.

So what conclusions may be drawn by way of comparison between Calvin and his Reformed contemporaries in their respective treatments of divine grace, and a general grace of God in particular? While we acknowledge that we have not surveyed every instance in Calvin’s writings where he addresses the question of common grace or other issues that become interwoven with it—such as, God’s love for his creatures in distinction from his special love for his church—and while we also have not examined all of the writings of Bucer, Bullinger, Musculus, or Vermigli on all these issues or related doctrines, nonetheless, from the range of material we have considered, the following conclusions, I think, accurately reflect how Calvin’s treatment of a general grace of God both agrees with and differs from some of his Reformed contemporaries.

I will first note those areas of commonality in Calvin’s thought with that of his colleagues, and then spell out how his treatment of a general grace of God differs from the other Reformed writers we examined, namely Bucer, Bullinger, Musculus and Vermigli.

First, Calvin, along with Bucer, Bullinger, Musculus and Vermigli, affirms that the idea of divine grace may properly be stretched beyond the narrow range of human salvation. We have seen, for example, that although Bucer formally defines grace in salvific terms, he acknowledges that all good gifts are divine gifts, graciously given. The depths and scope of human depravity is affirmed, while not denying that fallen human beings can act with “decency and rectitude.” God remains the source of every good in human life. Bullinger and Musculus likewise offer strict and formal definitions of grace. They do so only after they have examined the range of meaning that the biblical terms for grace have in Scripture. That simple exercise, however, demonstrates that the biblical concept of divine grace cannot be narrowly confined to individual salvation, strictly speaking, though of course divine redemption remains the most prominent and vital aspect of the biblical concept of grace as elicited by the biblical terms. Even, Vermigli, who, among the writers we examined, is most hostile to the idea of a general grace of God, does not deny that the unregenerate are granted divine “illuminations,” which are of grace. For his part, Calvin, demonstrates a readiness to use the word grace in a variety of ways, so that grace can refer both to divine salvation and to non-salvific blessings. In fact, in using terms like “special,” “particular,” “peculiar,” and the like, in reference to grace—something he does in reference to the idea of saving grace in contradistinction from the non-saving variety, and vice-versa—Calvin shows that he conceives of the biblical term “grace” as possessing a wide range of meaning—as wide as the difference between that which brings salvation and that which brings only temporal blessings or benefits.

Second, for both Calvin and his Reformed colleagues, grace—whether conceived as saving or non-saving in scope—remains a free gift of divine mercy. It is not earned, merited, warranted, or deserved by fallen human beings in any capacity. Thus the gifts that are bestowed to fallen people, whether these gifts be understood as part of the original, unfallen, creation order or as in some way a particularly given talent or ability, or as the station one has in life, bringing some degree of happiness, or as the general welfare of civil order and justice, securing safety and physical wellbeing, all such gifts, and many others, remain *gifts*, which by definition are undeserved and unearned. God freely bestows these blessings to the unregenerate, and by implication, to the reprobate. In so doing all persons owe a debt of gratitude to God for such gifts. Thus the word “grace” invariably emerges in the respective discussions of these theologians. No other word quite suffices to express the fact that what is given to undeserving sinners, even if what is given is not the gift of salvation, is not their due. It is of grace.

Third, Calvin, with his Reformed contemporaries, views the virtues in the unregenerate as a fruit of a general grace of God. Thus Bullinger speaks of heathen writers offering wisdom that conforms to the Ten Commandments. In fact, the virtues that unbelievers exhibit are “not altogether done without God.” Calvin, in particular, develops this idea and offers the fullest exposition of it. In doing so, he is implicitly accounting for, or providing a theological solution to, a recurring conundrum for Reformed writers, namely, how can humans be totally depraved and simultaneously capable of noble acts of self-sacrifice and other upright deeds which bring blessing both to themselves and others? This idea is related as well to the bestowal of natural talents and other human abilities, for the wide and diverse variety of such gifts makes for a well-ordered and productive society. Calvin, again, more than his colleagues, fully expands on this idea and roots it directly to the grace of God. Although Vermigli would shy away from using the word “grace” to describe this, even he acknowledges that God is the author of these blessings, terming them gifts and graces.

Thus we see how the idea of a general grace of God is not altogether uncommon in Reformed theology in the middle of the sixteenth century. The gifts that befall fallen man, the blessings that bedeck his life, and the benefits that allow the human project—even in its rebellion against God—to move forward are *divine gifts, divine blessings,* and *divine benefits.* Musculus associates or roots the idea of

this general divine grace in the Noahic covenant. Calvin and his colleagues, to greater or lesser degrees, recognize that the preservation of the world, with its diversity of benefits, is an act of God’s grace. Moreover, for Calvin, this grace is not unrelated to the arm of divine providence, which functions as the muscle behind God’s merciful disposition, bringing about the state-of-affairs that blesses life.

Having said that, and having examined the major areas of consensus between Calvin and his Reformed contemporaries, we must also consider those areas where Calvin’s treatment of common grace seems to diverge from one or more of these collaborators in the Reformed movement.

First, whereas Bucer, Bullinger, Musculus and Vermigli are concerned to offer a formal definition of divine grace—Bullinger and Musculus doing so only after an extended analysis of the biblical words—Calvin never gets around to performing this theological service for his readers. This is probably due to the fact that whereas his contemporaries treat “grace” as a formal topic of theological discussion and analysis, Calvin does not give the concept such a place in his theology. Consequently we discover that both with respect to the precision of language regarding “grace” and the kind of issues that emerge in connection with considering “grace,” Calvin seems almost to operate in a different theological climate than that of his Reformed contemporaries. For example, in considering divine grace, Bucer, Bullinger, Musculus and Vermigli each offer a specifically Augustinian definition of grace. Vermigli, for instance, calls it “the good will of God, that comes voluntarily of his own accord, whereby he holds us dear in Jesus Christ and forgives us our sins, gives us the Holy Ghost, a perfect life, and everlasting felicity.” The concern of these theologians is to distinguish grace, rightly understood, from synergistic misconceptions and outright Pelagian abuses. Since at that time the locution “general grace” had, for some, a specifically Pelagian aroma, Reformed theologians were guarded in how they used those words. Some, like Vermigli, were hesitant to use the term, whereas others, like Bullinger and Musculus, were careful to define it. Thus we see Bullinger and Vermigli explicitly attacking a notion of “general grace” that identifies grace with nature along Pelagian lines. Calvin, on the other hand, does not even seem to be aware of a problem on this score. Not that he uses the locution “general grace” in a strict or formal sense, though the phrase does occur from time to time in his writings. He simply doesn’t concern himself with Pelagius’ abuses of the gifts of creation, whereby grace is turned into natural gifts—natural gifts which all people innately possess, giving them the ability to secure salvation for ourselves For Calvin, divine grace finds expression in a variety of ways and has a variety of objects and aims. Thus, when he wishes to distinguish saving grace from a non-saving grace, he resorts to talking about a peculiar grace of God, or a general grace, or a grace to all, or he will use a variety of other words that function as near synonyms for divine grace, such as divine kindness, beneficence, goodness, etc.

In any case, although Calvin shows little interest in formal definitions of grace, his own treatment of grace, accumulatively, elicits a consistent and clear-cut conception. For, as we have seen, Calvin does think about saving grace in a conceptually distinct way from a general grace of God.

Second, whereas his contemporaries do little or nothing with the idea of divine love and the restraint of sin as aspects of a general grace of God, or as related to this grace, Calvin makes much of both of these ideas. In this respect, his treatment of common grace is much richer, theologically more complex, and even more highly developed than that of his Reformed colleagues—at least this conclusion seems valid given the materials we have examined. We do note, however, that as Calvin addresses the idea of a common grace of God in many varied contexts and in many varied writings, he often, though not always, comes to speak of the restraint of sin in that connection or he associates common grace with the idea of a universal divine love in distinction from God’s love for his church. It seems, then, that Calvin was quicker to interrelate the idea of a general grace of God to other theological doctrines than was the case with some of his Reformed colleagues.

Third, a specific example of this is how Calvin connects the idea of common grace to God’s providence. We do not observe Bucer, Bullinger, Musculus and Vermigli doing this kind of thing. Clarity is important at this point, however. We are not saying that providence may simply be identified with a general grace of God. Indeed, this would be inappropriate, for divine providence as Calvin talks about it can also express divine judgment. However, providence puts common grace into action; it gives expression to God’s kindly and merciful disposition toward sinners in the common events and circumstances of day-to-day life. Calvin calls all sinners to see this providential operation of God for what it is toward them—gracious! Human ingratitude betokens the reality of what has been graciously bestowed. Thus, Calvin, unlike what we have been able to discern from his Reformed contemporaries, treats this general grace of God in relation to other pivotal doctrines of theology.

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**III. Man under the Covenant of Grace**

*Literature*: L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 262-301; Muller, *Dictionary*, 119-122; Rohrs, 86-102; Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 260-279; idem, *Reformed Dogmatics,* vol. 3, 193-232; Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, 354-377; A.A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, 367-377; Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics,* 371-409; especially F. Turretin, *Institutes,* Vol. 2, Topic XII, 169-269; and H. Witsius, *Economy of the Covenants,* vol. 1. Also see G. Vos, “*De Verbondsleer in de Gereformeerde Theologie*,” English translation “The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology*,*” in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos* (P&R, 1980, [234-267]); Wilhelmus à Brakel, *Our Reasonable Service*, I, 427-63; John Dick, *Lectures on Theology,* I, 488-520; W.G.T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 3rd ed., 487-88; 678-81; Robert L. Dabney, *Systematic and Polemic Theology*, 440-63.

*Confessional Materials*: Westminster Confession, chapter VII.3-6; Westminster Larger Catechism, Q/As 30-36; Formula Consensus Helvetica, canons XIII; XXIII-XXV.

**A. Introduction**

Who can stand before the judgment of God? Indeed, who can say in the words of Proverbs 20:9, “I have made my heart pure; I am clean and without sin”? Given God’s threatening verdict of condemnation, some hope that there is no God (Ps. 14:1); or if God does exist, that he takes no notice of evil deeds (Ps. 10:11; 94:7), or that as a God of love he simply will not punish wrong doing (Ps. 10:14).

In fact, God is a just judge, and unless he comes to rescue, redeem, and save lost and fallen people, they perish under his wrath forever. The good message is that God has revealed himself not only as just judge but also as compassionate savior; and he has revealed to us both our predicament and the way of rescue. Moreover, out of his immeasurable love and the overflowing goodness of his mercy, God has established the way of redemption according to his eternal plan. For if we as fallen human beings would be saved, God must condescend to seek us, find us, lead us back, bring us home, and provide the way of reconciliation. This is why in the whole work of salvation it is God, and God alone, who manifests himself as the seeking and calling One, and as the speaking and acting One. The whole of redemption begins and ends in him. He is the Alpha and Omega, not only of creation but also of redemption. This must be so, for he is God: of him, and through him, and to him are all things (Rom. 11:36).

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The plan of salvation is grounded in God’s decree of election, but it is presented under the form of a covenant, as Scripture repeatedly makes clear—for the Bible itself is divided into testaments. Moreover, the elements of a covenant are included in this plan. There are parties, mutual promises or stipulations, and conditions. Whatever this arrangement and relationship may be called, it has the ingredients of covenant.

The covenant of grace is denominated such because in the mysterious love of God for sinners, who deserve only his wrath and curse, God reaches out to reestablish fellowship and bring reconciliation; moreover, this covenant promises salvation according to divine grace and the work he achieves through his Son on behalf of the elect, not on their own works or anything meritorious on their part. It is wholly an unmerited gift. Last, the covenant of grace is *of grace* because its benefits are secured and applied not in the course of nature, or in the exercise of the natural powers of the sinner, but by the supernatural influence of the Holy Spirit, granted to the sinner as an unmerited gift.

**B. Synopsis of the Covenant of Grace from the Westminster Confession of Faith & the Larger Catechism**

See WCF chapter VII, sections 3-6; LC, Q/As #30-36; HFC, canons 13, 14; see Muller’s definition, pp. 120-121.

1. Preliminaries

It is important to note that when Reformed theologians speak of the covenant of grace, sometimes they will focus upon the testamentary character of this covenant, which has to do with its saving essence or its efficacious promise of salvation, while others emphasize the historical unfolding of this covenant in its varied administrations. Failure to keep both dimensions of this the biblical materials in play pertaining to the covenant of grace has led to untold heartache among the Reformed, especially among the Reformed in the Netherlands over the last one-hundred-fifty years.

It should be observed that Reformed theology has never been a static enterprise. Even confessional theologians and believers who are devoted to the theological expression of Reformed doctrine as formulated in the confessional documents do not merely parrot an earlier generation of writers, i.e., those whom we call forefathers. The theological enterprise is to be addressed fresh to each generation. We are to take the funded capital of our theological past and apply it to the present, while we continue to study the Scriptures anew as well as the cultural situation in which we find ourselves and to which we must bring the biblical testimony to the labor of the gospel. Blind traditionalism (gazing longingly at the past but blind to the present) is ignorance and dead orthodoxy. Wide-eyed progressivism (gazing at the future but blind to the past) is ungrateful arrogance and theological suicide.

Those warnings serve us in connection with what has become, surprisingly, a divisive doctrine in the Dutch Reformed churches—the covenant of grace. The division comes to expression in the following points of dispute:

(a) The human party of this covenant, i.e., who constitute the human parties of this covenant: the elect in Christ? believers and their seed? or a combination view, which incorporates each of the above in different respects?

(b) The nature of the promise of the covenant of grace: Is it principally a testamentary bestowal? an objective proposal awaiting subjective ratification? Or, again, a combination view which incorporates each of the above in varying ways?

(c) The status of baptized covenant children: Are they reckoned as saved? as regenerated? as those for whom Christ has died? Or are we to regard them as being saved upon reaching years of maturity and actively believing in Christ, etc.?

(d) The ground(s) for baptizing covenant children: Is it the covenant promise? Is it the divine command? Is it in any sense related to the faith-posture of the parents?

(e) The meaning of baptism: Does it promise effect regeneration? Does if signify a conditional promise? Does it promise what is conditional? Is it merely an offer of salvation without guarantees?

2. Definitions:

(A) Focusing on the historical dimension of this covenant: S. Maresius, VIII, 4: “The covenant of grace is one by which God the Master of all freely promises remission of sin, redemption from all misery, life (in a word) and blessedness eternal and heavenly through Christ, upon condition of repentance and faith”; F. Burman, 476: “The covenant of grace is a gratuitous agreement between God and the sinner, in which by His free good pleasure God assigns to a fixed seed through the injunction of repentance and faith, righteousness and an inheritance in the Mediator. Man moreover concurs in this promise and mandate through faith, and hence possesses the right to ask for the heavenly inheritance”; J. H. Hottingerus, *Cursus theologius Methodo Altingiana* (Heidelberg, 1660), 240: “The Gospel covenant is a free pact between an offended God and offending man, entered upon through the mediation of Christ the *qea,nqrwpoj*. In him God for Christ’s sake freely promises man remission of sins, regeneration by the Spirit and eternal life. In his turn relying on the same grace man accords faith and repentance to God who makes this the condition.”

(B) Focusing on the testamentary character of this covenant: The Westminster Larger Catechism: “Q. 31. *With whom was the covenant of grace made?* A. The covenant of grace was made with Christ as the second Adam, and in him with all the elect as his seed.” Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man,* II.i.5: “The covenant of grace is a compact or agreement between God and the elect sinner; God on his part declaring his free good-will concerning eternal salvation, and everything pertaining thereto, freely to be given to those in covenant, through and because of Christ the mediator; and man on his part consenting to that good-will by a sincere faith.” “Moreover, as we restrict this covenant to the Elect, it is evident we are speaking of the *internal,* mystical, and spiritual *communion* of the covenant. For salvation itself, and everything belonging to it, or inseparably connected with it, are promised in this covenant, all which, none but the Elect can attain to. If, in other respects, we consider the *external* economy of the covenant, in the communion of the word and sacraments, in the profession of the true faith, in the participation of many gifts, which, though excellent and illustrious, are yet none of th effects of the sanctifying Spirit, nor any earnest of future happiness; it cannot be denied, that, in this respect, many are in covenant, whose names, notwithstanding, are not in the testament of God” (III.i.5).

1. Conditionality and the Covenant of Grace

Reformed theologians have typically been careful to consider whether the covenant of grace does or does not rest upon a condition. This reflects, too, the diverse way in which Reformed writers present the formal definitions of this covenant. In general they affirm its unconditionality, though most of them will admit that it is administered through conditions of a sort. Petrus van Mastricht (*Theoretico-practica theologia* [Utrecht and Amsterdam, 1725], V.i.37) offers a helpful analysis of this question by distinguishing between this covenant’s *finis* (end) and its *media* (means): “I think we must distinguish most carefully between those promises of the covenant of grace which are of the nature of means to an end, such as are the obtaining of redemption through Christ, regeneration, conversion, the conjunction of faith with purpose of amendment; and those which are of the nature of an end, e.g., justification, adoption, glorification, etc. If this is done, we seem bound to say that the promises of the covenant of grace of the first kind are plainly absolute. It involves a manifest contradiction to require of man dead in sins a preliminary condition for the redemption of Christ, like redemption, etc. But promises of the second class, like justification, adoption, etc. are altogether conditioned, yet in such a way that the satisfaction of conditions depends not upon the strength of *liberum arbitrium* (free choice), but on the absolute promises of this covenant.”

**[Class presentation expositing WCF]** A careful presentation and exegesis of the text of Westminster.

***Excursus*: Wollebius on the Covenant of Grace**

Johannes Wollebius (1586-1629)

*Compendium Theologiae Christianae*

(1626*)*

Translated by J. Mark Beach

***Chapter 21***

**The Covenant of Grace**

The fruit and benefit of calling (*vocatio*) is the outward communion of both the covenant of grace and the church.

The outward communion of the covenant of grace is that by which they who are called are judged (*censere*) to be in the covenant and God’s people, yet analogically, as some are truly in the substance [of the covenant] (*in rei veritate*), others in outward profession only.

In the covenant of grace we must consider both the offering (*oblatio*) and the sealing (*obsignatio*) of it. The offering of the covenant of grace is that whereby God promises himself as a Father in Christ to the called (*vocatis*) if they perform the obedience of sons and daughters.

Canons

1. We understand by the word covenant not that general [covenant] which God made with all creatures, nor the covenant of works made with our first parents, but the covenant that God, out of pure mercy, made with us after the fall.
2. Therefore the covenant of grace is called a testament (*testamentum*, diaqh,kh) or disposition (*dispositio*), because by this [covenant] God has assigned to his children an heavenly inheritance to be obtained through the meditation (*interveniente*) of his own Son’s death. Hebrews 8:10: [o[ti au[th h` diaqh,kh h]n diaqh,somai] “For this is the covenant that I will make…, etc.; and chapter 9:15, 16: “And for this reason he is the mediator of the new covenant by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance. For where there is a testament, there must also of necessity be the death of the testator.”
3. The efficient cause (*causa efficiens*) of this [covenant] is jointly the entire Holy Trinity, but particularly Christ, the God-man (qea,nqrwpoj), that messenger of the covenant. Malachi 3:1: “Behold, I send my messenger [that is, John the Baptist], and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight.”
4. *Th*e matter (*materia*) of the covenant of grace is the agreement (*pacta*) of the two parties, God and man. God promises that he will be our God in Christ the Lord; man promises the obedience of faith and life.
5. The form (*forma*) [of the covenant] consists in a mutual obligation, but such that they are relatives of an unequal nature. For the promise and obligation on God’s part is free (*gratuita*) but on man’s part it stands out as a debt and duty.
6. The goal (*finis*) of the offering of the covenant is the same as general calling (*vocationis* *communis*), the glory of God and the salvation of the elect.
7. The subject (subjectum) or object (*objectum*) to whom this covenant is offered is all who are called (*vocati*), but properly the elect alone (*soli electi*). This covenant is offered to all who are called, but the elect alone enjoy the promises of the covenant.
8. We are to consider the administration (*administratio*) of the covenant of grace from its adjuncts.
9. The administration, with respect to time, is distinguished into the old and new covenant or testament.
10. The Old Testament is the covenant of grace administered in the time prior to Christ’s manifestation.
11. It is administered under a threefold form: (1) [the time] from Adam to Abraham; (2) from Abraham to Moses; and (3) from Moses to Christ.
12. The differences between the first and second form of administration are as follows: (1) the first was made by words of promise, quite brief but also quite clear; the second has not only a promise but also an express condition of obedience; (2) the first had only the rite of sacrifice; the second had the rite of circumcision as well; (3) the first was proposed to the whole human race; but the second was restricted to Abraham’s posterity alone.
13. The difference between the third [administration] and the former two is this: the third is more perfect and truly testamentary since it is enlarged not only with the Passover but also with many other types of Christ’s death.
14. The New Testament is the covenant of grace administered with Christ now being manifested.
15. The New and Old Testament agree in substance (*substantia*), for Christ is the same Testator in both, the same promise of grace in Christ is in both, and in both the same obedience of faith and life is required.
16. Consequently, those who set up parallel distinctions between the Old and New Testament, the covenant of works and the covenant of grace, the law and the gospel are mistaken. For in both [the Old and New Testament] the testament (*testamentum*) or covenant (*foedus*) is the covenant of grace; and the law and gospel are urged in both.
17. However, the administration of the Old and New Testament differs [in a number of ways]: (1) *in time*, because the Old Testament is administered prior to Christ being exhibited, but the New is administered with Christ now being exhibited; the former was to continue only until Christ; the latter forever; (2) *in place* or *scope*, for the former was offered only to the people of Israel, the latter extends itself throughout the whole world; (3) *in clarity*, because the free (*gratuitae*) promise concerning Christ is more clearly preached and sealed in the New Testament, the shadows of types and ceremonies being abolished; (4) *in facility*, because the administration in the Old Testament was more laborious than in the New Testament; (5) *in sweetness*, for in the Old Testament the perfect obedience of the law is more often urged, not indeed to the exclusion of the promises of the gospel, but to the end that, by that rigorous exaction of obedience, they might be compelled, as by a schoolmaster, to seek Christ; but in the New Testament the promises of the gospel are more frequent, yet not excluding the law, which drives us to new obedience, to be performed by the grace of regeneration.
18. Hence, it is therefore manifest in what sense the new covenant is opposed to the old by Jeremiah. Jeremiah 31:31-34a: “ ’Behold, the days are coming,’ says the Lord, ‘when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah – not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day thatI took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them,’ says the Lord. ‘But this isthe covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days,’ says the Lord: ‘I will put my law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No more shall every man teach his neighbor and every man his brother, saying, “Know the Lord,” for they all shall know me, from the least of them to the greatest.’ “

\* \* \* \* \* \* \*

**C. Features of the Covenant of Grace**

What is the covenant of grace? As to it substance and salvific essence, this covenant of grace is a gratuitous pact entered into *in Christ* between God offended and man offending. In it God externally offers grace and salvation in Christ, promising the remission of sins and salvation to the elect gratuitously on account of Christ; man, however, relying upon the same grace promises faith and obedience. In summary form, the covenant of grace is God’s bestowal of grace and glory in Christ upon the sinner upon condition of faith—a condition that God himself fulfills in elect sinners.

Observations:

1. The *author* of this covenant is God, established by his own goodness, gratuitous love, and free good pleasure (cf. Eph. 2:7). God could have abandoned all people to curse and damnation without hope of pardon. Therefore, God alone can rescue us by substituting a new covenant in place of the former—and he did this moved wholly from himself, for neither the merit not the misery of man impelled him. Indeed, if innocent man could merit nothing with God, how much less the guilty sinner!
2. *The Parties* of the Covenant
   * 1. God offended – God acts here as merciful Father and Redeemer, as one to be appeased, who through his love of benevolence wished to reconcile offending men to himself (Rom. 5:8; Eph. 2:4).
     2. Man offending – Man is viewed here as an offending sinful creature, as dead in sin, helpless, a child of wrath, alienated from God and life with him. This covenant is not extended to each and every sinner—which is clear from history and the decree of reprobation. Thus God enters into covenant with believers and their seed; or more precisely, the essence and the reality of the promise is with the elect
     3. Christ, the Mediator, here has a place, reconciling offending man with his offended God. In fact, without Christ no covenant could exist between God and man due to the intervention of sin. In his mercy God secured a way to sustain his justice, and so he provided his only Son as Mediator to take on our flesh, bear our sin, standing in our place, partaking wholly of divinity and humanity.
3. *The Parts* of the covenant of grace. The chief [or principal] parts of the covenant are the stipulation/demand (*stipulatio*) and promise (*promissio*) of God and the consent (*adstipulatio*) and requirement (*restipulatio*) of man. Of course, these are technical Latin terms that do not find an adequate translation in English. But we are able to discern their meaning: a *stipulatio* involves the demanding of a guarantee from a prosepective debtor by a formal question, or the contract created when the latter gives an affirming answer, hence the idea of a condition based upon certain requirements being met. Meanwhile, *restipulatio* is the action of demanding a counter-guarantee from the stipulator. *Adstipulatio* means that the one party consents to or affirms the condition, and in so doing may counter-demand the promised blessings (*restipulio*).
4. The covenant of grace entails, as the ground and guarantee of it, *the covenant of redemption*—i.e., that pact between the Father and the Son (or the Triune God) to carry out the work of redemption. This covenant is just another aspect or part of one and the same pact or covenant in its testamentary character.

**D. *Pactum Salutis* *or*  the Covenant of Redemption**

*Pactum Salutis* = *covenant of redemption.* This doctrine came to fruition in the seventeenth century among the Reformed. In Reformed federalism the *pactum salutis* referred to the pretemporal or eternal intratrinitarian agreement of the Father and the Son concerning the covenant of grace and its ratification in and through the work of the Son incarnate. The Son covenants with the Father, in the unity of the Godhead, to be the temporal Surety (*sponsor*) of the Father’s *testamentum* in and through his work as the Mediator. In that work, the Son fulfills his *sponsio* or *expromissio* (suretyship), i.e., his guarantee of payment of the debt of sin in ratification of the Father’s *testamentum.* More simply: the pact between the Father and the Son contains the will of the Father giving his Son as a *lutrwth,j* (Redeemer and head of his mystical body), and the will of the Son offering himself as the Guarantor or Surety (Heb. 7:22) to accomplish that redemption for his members.

The roots of this idea of an eternal intratrinitarian *pactum* are clearly present in late sixteenth-century Reformed thought, but the concept itself derives from Cocceius’s theology and stands as his single major contribution to Reformed dogmatics. Although seemingly speculative, the burden of the *pactum salutis* is to emphasize the eternal, inviolable, and trinitarian foundation of the temporal covenant of grace, much in the way that the eternal decree underlies and guarantees the *ordo salutis—*the way of salvation, and all of history.

Charles Hodge argues that there is a profound mystery contained in this covenant, concerning which we are not privy. Part of the mystery is the mystery of the Trinity itself, for the three divine persons are *persons,* and so distinct from one another and yet wholly united in purpose and will, and to each all the attributes of divinity belong. Because of this distinctiveness of personhood, such that the Father, Son, and Spirit can commune with one another as distinct persons, the Father may send the Son, and give Him a work to do, and promise Him recompense. And certainly this aspect of the *pactum*, though incomprehensible to us, is nonetheless clearly taught in Scripture.

Obviously, just as God’s decree and all that is contained in it is the expression of God’s eternal will, so the *pactum*, which likewise gives the divine decree content, is from eternity.

Sometimes Scripture merely alludes to this idea, rather than the idea being expressly asserted. There are indeed passages which are equivalent to such direct assertions. This is implied in the frequently recurring statements of the Scripture that the plan of God respecting the salvation of elect persons was of the nature of a covenant, and was formed in eternity (Mt 25:34). Paul says that it was hidden for ages in the divine mind; that it was before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4-5; Rom. 16:25; Col. 1:26). Christ speaks of promises made to him before his advent; and that he came into the world in execution of a commission which he had received from the Father (John 17:4; 19:30). The parallel so distinctly drawn between Adam and Christ is also proof of the point in question. As Adam was the head and representative of his posterity, so Christ is the head and representative of his people (Rom. 5:12-21; 1 Cor. 15:22-23). And as God entered into covenant with Adam, so he entered into covenant with Christ. Or, another way of saying it, God cannot possibly enter into a covenant of grace with his people, apart from the Mediator that he himself bestows as the head of his people. The covenant of redemption, then, logically precedes the covenant of grace.

In fact, according to C. Hodge, the proof of the doctrine of the *pactum salutis* actually has a much wider foundation. When one person assigns a stipulated work to another person with the promise of a reward upon the condition of the performance of that work, there is a covenant. Nothing can be plainer than that all this is true in relation to the Father and the Son. The Father gave the Son a work to do; He sent him into the world to perform it, and promised him a great reward when the work was accomplished (Phil. 2:9-11; Rev. 5:12-14). Thus we see parties entering into mutual obligations, with promises, and a condition. These are the essential elements of a covenant—however it is denominated.

* Psa. 40:7-8 – The apostle expounds this Psalm as referring to the Messiah, for Christ the Messiah comes in order to do the Father’s will, i.e., to execute the purpose, to carry out the divine plan of salvation.
* Heb. 10:10 – Christ came in execution of a purpose of God, to fulfill a work which had been assigned to him.
* John 17:4 – Christ finishes the work God gave him to do.
* Luke 2:49 – From the start he had to be about his Father’s business.
* John 17:18 – Here and repeatedly Christ refers to being sent into the world by his Father to achieve the work assigned to him.
* Gal. 4:4 – Christ comes in the fullness of time to fulfill his messianic commission.
* 1 John 4:9-10 – He is sent to be the propitiation for our sins.

Francis Turretin appeals to the following texts in support of this kind of arrangement:

* Isa. 42:1, 6 – The servant of the Lord is chosen by God to be a covenant for the people.
* Isa. 49:1-6, 8 – The servant of the Lord is commissioned and called before being born in order to bring salvation to the ends of the earth.
* Psa. 110:4 – Christ is appointed the work of the priesthood, after the order of Melchizedek.
* Isa. 61:1-2 – The Messiah proclaims the Lord’s favor (a covenant of grace and forgiveness).
* Psa. 2:6-8 – The Messiah has the nations for his inheritance, according to God’s appointment.
* John 10:18 – Jesus has authority to lay down his life by the command of God.

Texts that depict the Son’s acceptance of this work include:

* Heb. 10:7 – Christ comes to do the will of the Father.
* Gal. 4:4 – Christ comes in the fullness of time, sent of God.
* John 15:10 – Christ bids us to obedience, even as he obeyed the Father and abides in his love.
* John 17:4-5 – see above.

Christ clearly comes to execute a work of redemption, for he was sent of the Father to fulfill a plan, all according to the plan of salvation. Special promises are made to the Son by the Father, too, granted in the accomplishment of the work assigned him—including his deliverance from death and exaltation; that his is the name upon every name; that the kingdom would be all in all (Eph. 1:20-21; Phil. 2:9-10; Rev. 11:15; 1 Cor. 15:24-28; Rom. 11:36).

A key text is **Luke 22:29**, which expressly mentions an agreement or a covenant of sorts: “And I appoint unto you a kingdom, as my Father hath appointed unto me” (KJV). The Greek is kavgw. diati,qemai u`mi/n kaqw.j die,qeto, moi o` path,r mou basilei,an. The Vulgate rendered it this way: “et ego dispono vobis sicut disposuit mihi Pater meus regnum.” The seventeenth-century Dutch Reformed theologian, Herman Witsius, in his comprehensive work on the covenants, offers this Latin rendering, “Et ego testamentaria dispositione addico vobis Regnum, sicut dispositione testamentaria addixit mihi illud Pater,” which certainly brings out the force of the Greek more than any English translation, for his Latin could be translated as: “And by a testamentary arrangement I confer unto you a kingdom, as by a testamentary arrangement my Father has conferred unto me.” Another possible translation is this: “And I engage by covenant unto you a kingdom, as my Father has engaged by covenant unto me.” The key term in this locution is the Greek word *diati,qemai* [lit. to make covenants or wills], which Witsius renders “by testamentary arrangement I confer…”—meaning, just as the elect obtain a kingdom by virtue of some covenantal or testamentary arrangement, likewise Christ (See *Economy of the Covenants*, II.2.2.). “To engage” is to pledge or promise or bind oneself to do something, so Christ pledges to grant us a kingdom by covenant as the Father has pledged by covenant to him.

Another key text is Hebrews 7:22, where Christ is spoken of as “a surety of a better covenant or testament.” Witsius elaborates on the nature of this suretyship (*Sponsor*) of Christ, for it consists in this: “that [Christ] *himself undertook to perform that condition* [*praestare conditionem illam*]*,* without which, consistently with the justice of God, the grace and promises of God could not reach unto us; but being once performed, they were infallibly to come to the children of the covenant: unless then we would make void the suretiship of Christ, and gratify the Socinians, the very worst perverters of scripture, it is necessary, we conceive of some covenant [*Foedus*], the conditions of which Christ took upon himself; and that, having performed them, he might engage to us for the Father, that we should certainly have grace and glory bestowed upon us” (*Economy,* II.2.4.).

**Zechariah 6:13** has sometimes been appealed to as an important text in support of the *pactum salutis*. Most exegetes today regard Zech. 6:13 as a faulty proof-text for the *pactum*, taking the words, “the counsel of peace shall be between them both,” to refer not to two persons, namely, the Branch and Yahweh, but to the two offices—the royal and priestly—that are united in the one who is the Branch. As Herman Bavinck states: this text has nothing to do with a covenant relationship between the Father and the Son; instead, it points to the harmonious relation between the kingship and priesthood of the Messiah (these being united in one person) unto the establishment of peace for his people (*GD*, III: §44, section 346).

But some earlier Reformed theologians offered a different exegesis. Witsius, for example, argues as follows: Being a messianic prophecy, the parties referred to in this text are “the Branch” on the one hand and “the Lord” on the other. This branch (or Messiah), as one who comes from God (Isa. 4:2; Zech. 1:12), performs his duties and offices according to the counsel that exists between him and the Father, with the aim of bringing us *peace.* He is the new root of a new offspring, whose office is to build the temple of the Lord, that is, “the church of the elect,” the house of God (1 Tim. 3:15). Christ, then, lays the foundation of this house by his cross, and he cements it with his blood. With his resurrection, he has ascended to glory and performs his kingly and priestly duties from there. Consequently, “He now does what his session gives him a right to do, he makes intercession for his people” (Rom. 8:34). But in this connection Witsius raises what he regards as the key question: What is the origin of all this? Why do things unfold in this way? The answer to such questions brings us back to Zechariah 6 and “the counsel of peace” (*consilium pacis*)—that is, the pact that exists between the one who is called the Branch and Jehovah, whose temple Christ builds and on whose throne he now sits (Rev. 3:21). Thus Witsius arrives at an exegetical conclusion, with a theological formulation: “. . . what else can this counsel be, but the mutual will of the Father and the Son, which we said is the nature of the covenant? It is called a counsel, both on account of the free and liberal good pleasure of both, and of the display of the greatest wisdom manifested therein. And a counsel of peace, not between God and Christ, between whom there never was any enmity; but of peace to be procured to sinful man with God, and to sinners with themselves” (*Economy,* II.2.7). Matthew Henry offers this exegesis as well, but notes that another interpretation might be valid along the lines most modern exegetes follow.

Witsius is not unaware that his appeal to this text in support of the idea of the *pactum salutis* is contested, but he finds the proposed alternative understanding of this text unpersuasive and therefore unacceptable (*Economy,* II.2.8-9). In fact, Witsius is not alone in this exegesis. J. Cocceius predates him in taking this interpretation, followed by Vitringa, and the idea can be traced as far back as Jerome. Among modern exegetes who hold this view (that is, post-Enlightenment exegetes) include: Reuss and Pusey. The best case I’ve found supporting the use of Zech. 6:13 as teaching the *pactum salutis* comes from Charles H. H. Wright (*Zechariah and His Prophecies*, 1879, pp. 145-158). He demonstrates that the Cocceian exegesis is not as precarious as modern commentators suggest.

[See Berkhof, pp. 265-271.]

**E. The Saving Benefits of the Covenant of Grace**

There are four principal benefits:

1. Reconciliation and communion with God

This includes peace with God and a most intimate fellowship with him. For God is appeased, and he gives himself to us so that we may, as a consequence, glory in him as our God and portion (Ps. 16:5; 73:26; 119:57; Hos. 2:23); for he is our Father who adopts us as part of his family (2 Cor. 6:18).

1. Communication of All Good Things

All the good things of God, and whatever pertains to him, are made ours, for we are his children. As the apostle Paul says, “All things are yours, and you are Christ’s; and Christ is God’s” (1 Cor. 3:21; 23). Thus all God’s promises are ours—for the present and the future (see Rom. 8:28ff.).

1. Conformity to God

Another benefits of the covenant of grace is that we are transformed after the image of Christ, that we may be “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet. 1:4; cf. Mt. 13:43; 2 Cor. 3:18; and as John says, “we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.”—1 John 3:2). Thus we conform to God in holiness and moral virtues, and in life and happiness (see Mt. 5:48; 1 Pet. 1:15; John 14:19).

1. The Love of God for Eternity

A fourth principal benefit is the constancy and eternity of the love of God and of our union with him. If all of the above blessings were temporary, they would be compromised and diminished. But in fact God grants his love to us with all perpetuity and everlasting duration (Ps. 48:14). Praise the Lord!

Many other special benefits and promises are contained in the covenant of grace, such as the bestowal of the Holy Spirit (Ezk 36:27; Acts 2:1ff.); the remission of sins (Jer. 31:34; Mt. 26:28; Rom. 3:25); regeneration and the inscription of the law on our hearts (Jer. 31:33; 2 Cor. 3:3); adoption (2 Cor. 6:18); the gift of a new heart (Ezk 36:26); and perseverance (Jer. 32:40; John 10:27-30).

**F. Duties of the Offending Man**

To be the people of God includes similar far reaching and various obligations and dispositions. Chief among these, by way of summary, is separation from the world and consecration to God (Dt 7:6-7; 26:17-18; 1 Cor. 6:19-20; 2 Cor. 5:14-15; 6:17-18; Rom. 14:7-9). Thus we seek to love and worship God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. But we hope in vain for all the divine blessings promised in the covenant of grace, including eternal communion with God in love, *unless* we perform the prescribed duties of *faith and repentance.*

Concerning Faith and Repentance

The two principal duties of faith and repentance involve a twofold action, for faith embraces the promises of God, while repentance fulfills the commands of God. Faith answers to the promise of grace—”Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31); repentance is commanded by the good message of the law—”Walk before me, and be thou perfect” (Gen. 17:1). For as there are two special benefits of the covenant on God’s part (namely, the remission of sins and the writing of the law on our hearts), so on the part of man two duties ought to correspond or answer them—our faith, which applies the pardon of sins to ourselves; and our repentance (or the desire for sanctification), which puts the law written on our hearts into practice by walking in its statutes (as Christ says, “Repent ye, and believe the gospel” (Mk. 1:15).

Although God commands these two duties as works due from man, still God promises them as his gifts to us. Thus faith and repentance are here to be considered at the same time both as the duties of man and as the blessings of God: “I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes” (Ezk 36:27). It is the singular privilege of this covenant above the covenant of works (or nature) that *the fulfillment of the conditions themselves depend upon the grace of God and pass over into promises.* This is the reason why it cannot be made void, like the first covenant (which was founded upon man’s strength). The covenant of grace, on the contrary, remains efficacious and eternal. It *depends entirely upon God* and all things in the covenant are gratuitous (as also the very conditions). What these conditions are, and what relation they bear, the following section explores.

**G. The Nature of Conditionality in the Covenant of Grace**

In order to understand the nature of conditionality in the covenant of grace, it is very important to make the right distinctions. For the idea of condition can mean many different things. Note the following ways the idea of condition or conditionality can be employed, listed under various propositions.

1. The covenant can be conditional

*Either* proposition **(r):** antecedently and *a priori* for that which has the force of a meritorious and impulsive cause to obtain the benefits of the covenant.

*Or* proposition **(s):** concomitantly and consequently *a posteriori* for that which has the relation of means and disposition in the subject, required in the covenanted.

2. *Either* proposition **(t):** natural, flowing from the strength belonging to nature.

*Or* proposition **(u):** supernatural and divine, depending upon grace.

3. The covenant promise is twofold

*Either* proposition **(v):** concerning the ends—i.e., salvation.

*Or* proposition **(w):** concerning the means—i.e., faith and repentance (because each is a gift of God).

4. The covenant can be considered

*Either* proposition **(x):** in relation to its institution by God.

*Or* proposition **(y):** in relation to its first application to the believer.

*Or* proposition **(z):** in relation to its perfect consummation.

* As for numbers 1 and 2, if conditionality is understand according to propositions **(r)** or **(t)**, the covenant of grace is rightly *denied* to be conditioned. It is wholly gratuitous, depending upon the sole good pleasure and will of God, and upon no merit of man. Nor can the right to life be founded upon any action of ours, but only on the righteousness of Christ.
* But if in numbers 1 and 2 the conditionality of the covenant is understood according to proposition **(s)**, that is, for the instrumental cause, receptive of the promise of the covenant, and for the disposition of the subject, admitted into the fellowship of the covenant (which flows from grace itself), it *cannot be denied* that the covenant is conditional (in that sense). Thus condition understood according to proposition **(u)** is likewise to be affirmed. Observe concerning the salvation promised in the covenant:
  1. It is proposed with an express condition (John 3:16, 36; Rom. 10:9; Acts 8:37; Mk 16:16).
  2. Unless it was conditional, there would be no place for threatenings in the gospel, for the neglect of faith cannot be culpable if not required.
  3. Otherwise it would follow that God is bound in this covenant to man and not man to God (which is absurd and contrary to the nature of covenants).

* As for number 3, if the promises of the covenant are understood concerning the *end* **(v)**, no one can deny that they are conditional because the promises are always made under the condition of faith and repentance (which are nonetheless fruits of God’s gracious working).
* But if in number 3 the promises of the covenant are taken for the promises concerning the *means* **(w)** (namely, the means of faith and repentance, or regeneration and conversion), these promises *certainly cannot* be conditional, but are simple and absolute because otherwise there would be granted a progression into infinity and the condition of the condition would always be demanded (which is absurd).
* As for number 4, if the covenant is viewed in relation to the first institution by God in Christ **(x)**, it has no previous condition, but rests upon the grace of God and the merit of Christ alone.
* But if in number 4 the covenant is considered in relation to its acceptance and application to the believer **(y)**, it has faith as a condition (for the believer is united to Christ by faith, and so is brought into the fellowship of the covenant).
* If, however, in number 4, the covenant is considered in relation to its consummation with faith **(z)** (i.e., obedience and holiness), it has the relation of both *condition* and *means* because without them no one shall see God. Again, it should be noted that it is God who is at work in us to will and to work according to his good pleasure (Phil. 2:13).

Further Observations:

That faith is a condition of the covenant must be understood relatively and instrumentally, not absolutely and according to its nature and essence. For faith is actually contained under obedience as being commanded by the law (just like the other virtues), and so it cannot be contradistinguished from obedience. Faith cannot, then, be the one “good work” that is accepted for righteousness, for in fact faith is only the smallest part of the obedience which is to conform to righteousness. Rather, faith is instrumental, inasmuch as it embraces Christ and looks to him for righteousness, and through him obtains the right to eternal life. Moreover, Scripture clearly distinguishes faith from “the works of the law”; thus, if faith were a good work unto righteousness, this distinguishing would fail.

Following out the biblical portrait, it is clear that Christ is our righteousness, faith being that which bonds us to Christ by the Holy Spirit. Thus, salvation is of faith, because it is of grace. The unique role of faith is seen in how it functions distinct from other virtues: whereas all other virtues seem to give something to God, faith alone is purely receptive (Eph. 2:8); and so all boasting is excluded by the law of faith (Rom. 3:27). Bear in mind, too, that in the first moment of justification, there is nothing in sinful man except faith—for nothing good can proceed from what is unrighteous in itself. This is why the sinner must look away from himself (and anything he might offer), and by faith looks solely to Christ, trusting in the satisfaction and righteousness of the Mediator. Similarly, faith consists with the gift of eternal life and divine inheritance according to the testament of God. This is to say, not even faith counts as a work that secures the inheritance; rather, the promised inheritance secures faith, being a blessing bestowed upon sinners dead in their sin. Thus faith consists only with the promise of the gospel, which sets life before man, not as something to be acquired (like the law), but as already purchased by Christ’s death.

In short, Christ is our righteousness, in whom we have redemption and life. This being so, faith materially (as a good work) is excluded, but not faith instrumentally (as a hand apprehending and receiving) (see 1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Cor. 5:21). Faith is therefore to be understood as that which is the means and instrument of our union with Christ, for we only receive the blessings of the covenant as bonded or united to him. That such faith is genuine faith can be perceived not so much *a priori* as *a posteriori* from its operations, consisting of fervent love of Christ, a burning desire for him, coupled with a sense of his love for us, bringing us to flee carnality, to come to and continue in repentance, and an abiding struggle against sin and our sinful nature. Moreover, true faith produces a deep longing for the healing that only the Great physician can provide; thus there is a presumption of unrighteousness but a desire for sanctification. True faith looks to Christ alone for salvation; trusts his work on our behalf; and finds assurance in God’s mercy. Faith looks to the Surety—not itself, or even its best intentions.

The promises of the covenant of grace are wholly gratuitous, and in no respect conditional. In other words, that a covenant of grace even exists, with promises, is completely gracious on God’s part, entirely at his initiative, and finally the conditions rest in the divine promises, for God meets the conditions and works the blessings in his own.

**H. The Covenant of Grace in its Historical Development and Theological Significance**

The divine decree—that is, the divine counsel of redemption—cannot be separated from the covenant of grace, for the covenant of grace is the actualization of God’s divine plan of salvation. Thus the historical development and unfolding of the covenant of grace is according to God’s eternal plan. A number of matters are to be observed in this connection:

1. The covenant of grace is everywhere and at all times one in *essence*, but always manifests itself in new forms and goes through differing dispensations. Essentially and materially it remains one, whether before, or under, or after the law. It is always a covenant of grace. The one, great, all-inclusive promise of the covenant of grace is: I will by your God, and the God of your people. That is comprehensive and includes everything, the whole accomplishment and application of salvation, Christ and his benefits, the Holy Spirit and his gifts. A single straight line runs from the mother-promise of Gen. 3:15 to the apostolic blessing of 2 Cor. 13:13. In the love of the Father, the grace of the Son, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit is contained the whole of salvation for the sinner. This promise, at its core, is not conditional, but is as positive and certain as anything can be. God does not say that he will be our God *if* we do this or that thing. But he says he will put enmity, that he will be our God, and that in Christ he will grant us all things. God never forgets his promise. Thus we see that the covenant of grace is unchangeable in its essence, though it does take several shapes in several dispensations. At Sinai the covenant of grace is established with Israel as the seed of Abraham. Israel is to live as a holy nation, and it is to make use of the law for this purpose, for the law is her schoolmaster and disciplinarian, to lead her to Christ. The promise is older than the law, and the law did not come to replace the promise, but to prepare for the fulfillment of the promise in the fullness of time. In Christ the promise gets its fulfillment, the shadow becomes reality, the letter becomes spirit, and servitude becomes freedom. The covenant of grace in all its dispensations is always the same gospel (Rom. 1:2; Gal. 3:8), the same Christ (John 14:6; Acts 4:12), the same faith (Acts 15:11; Rom. 4:11), and always the same benefits of forgiveness and eternal life (Acts 10:43; Rom. 4:3).

2. In all its dispensation, the covenant of grace has an organic character—that is to say, God forms a people. Yes election and salvation have fundamentally to do with individual souls, but God saves souls to form a family. The elect are one in Christ (Eph. 1:4; 3:11; 1 Pet. 2:9). Christ is head of his people. And God is gathering together under one head, Christ, his renewed humanity.

3. The covenant of grace realizes itself in a way which fully honors man’s rational and moral nature. God saves us by changing us, by transforming and healing us, and being so healed and transformed, we indeed exercise our rational and moral faculties in response to him. This accounts for the fact that the covenant of grace, which really makes no demands and lays down no conditions that God doesn’t take up to fulfill *for us* and *in us*, nevertheless comes to us in the form of a commandment, admonishing us to faith and repentance (Mk 1:15). Taken by itself the covenant of grace is pure grace, and nothing else, and excludes all works. It gives what it demands, and fulfills what it prescribes. The gospel is sheer good tidings, not demand but promise, not duty but gift. But in order that as promise and gift it may be realized in us, it takes on the character of moral admonishment in accordance with our nature. Thus it wants our own rational and moral nature in action in the way of faith which willingly accepts God’s promises and thanks him for his saving gifts.

4. Inasmuch as the covenant of grace enters into the human race in this historical and organic manner, it cannot here on earth appear in a form which fully answers to its essence. Not only does there remain much in the true believers which is diametrically opposed to a life in harmony with the demand of the covenant, (‘Walk before my face and be upright’; ‘Be holy for I am holy’), but there can be also persons who are taken up into the covenant of grace as it manifests itself to our eyes and who nevertheless on account of their unbelieving and unrepentant heart are devoid of all the spiritual benefits of the covenant. That is the case now not only, but has been so throughout all ages. Thus not all were Israel that were of Israel (Rom. 9:6), for it is the children of the promise, not the children of the flesh, that are counted for the seed (Rom. 9:8; 2:29). And in the NT church there is chaff in the grain, evil branches on the vine, and earthen as well as golden vessels (Mt 3:12; 13:29; John 15:2; 2 Tim.2:20). Thus there are two sides to the one covenant of grace. One of these is visible to us; the other also is perfectly visible to God, and to him alone. We have to keep the rule that we cannot judge the heart, but only the external conduct, and even of that defectively.

5. If the covenant of grace is separated from election, it ceases to be a covenant of grace and becomes again a covenant of works. Election implies that God grants man freely and out of grace the salvation that man has forfeited and that he can never again achieve in his own strength. But if this salvation is not the sheer gift of grace but in some way depends upon the conduct of men, then the covenant of grace is converted into a covenant of works. Man must then satisfy the condition *from himself* in order to inherit eternal life. Here grace and works are at opposite poles. If salvation is by grace, it is no longer by works, or otherwise grace is no longer grace (see Rom. 11:6). Thus election does not oppose the covenant of grace but is in fact the basis and guarantee, the heart and core, of the covenant of grace. Without this, believers would be robbed of all comfort. Election makes it a covenant *of* *grace,* for what could it possibly be without election?

The Difference between the Old and New Dispensations of the Covenant of Grace

As for the teaching or doctrine given to us in the Old and New dispensations of the covenant, there is a difference beyond the mere idea that Christ was veiled in the OT and unveiled in the NT.

1. Broadly (and more properly) considered the old dispensation of the covenant contains the doctrine of grace, promising salvation and life to the people openly (indeed, under the condition of perfect obedience rendered to the moral law and the threatening of transgressors with death, together with the intolerable burden of ceremonies and the yoke of the most restricted Mosaic polity). However, all of this was finally and reservedly under the condition of repentance and faith in the promised Messiah. In the old dispensation three things are embraced: (1) old doctrine, partly legal and partly gospel; (2) an old, servile form of worship and ecclesiastical service, laborious, and a shadow of the reality awaited and to come; and (3) the old method of external polity bound to one people and place.
2. Narrowly or strictly (and less properly) considered the old dispensation of the covenant denotes the covenant of works or the moral law given by Moses—which also consists of the unbearable burden of legal ceremonies being added, absolutely and apart from the promise of grace. We mustn’t forget that the law is the law—the standard of God’s righteousness never changes and anything less than righteousness cannot stand before God’s justice and holiness. Thus the law in the strict sense, detached from the promise of Christ—call it naked law—, denotes the covenant of works inasmuch as that covenant called us to live before God perfectly and to love him with all our hearts, etc. Anything less than perfect obedience is unrighteousness and robbery of God, for we are not giving God what is rightfully due him.

Observations:

Thus broadly considered, the covenant of grace in its old dispensation is properly and in itself *of grace.* For according to the scope and intention of God as the lawgiver, the law of Moses, the legal ceremonies, and the external polity were not stipulated in order to abolish the promises of the covenant, but in order to lead to their fulfillment—that is, to bring us to Christ.

But strictly considered, where the covenant of grace in its old dispensation comes to signify or bear an identity with the covenant of works, functioning in this way, such a signification must be understood as accessory and accidental (not belonging to *the essence* of the covenant), for identity with the covenant of works springs from *a misuse of the law of Moses*, with all its stipulations, while the true goal and purpose of the law is ignored, and instead *a false one is devised*.

The true end of the covenant of grace *under the law* was always Christ, who is righteousness for every believer (Rom. 10:4). But those who became self-righteous did not obtain *the end* or reach this blessed goal. Instead, the program and intention of the law was subverted, with a false intention taking over, so that the law was thought to be given in order that by its observance covenant members, being capable of this very thing, might be justified before God and saved (Rom. 10:3-5). In his letters, the apostle Paul everywhere disputes against this error (where the law is misused and given a false end), strongly opposing this errant notion with the promise of the covenant.

The so-called New Perspective on Paul is likewise to be challenged at this point, for in fact it is not the case that the Judaism that Jesus and Paul confronted was a healthy religion of divine grace, living out of God’s mercy, opposed to legalism. Instead, as the words of John the Baptist make clear, even before Jesus is manifested as the Messiah, the verdict upon both the multitudes and the religious leaders is one of condemnation. John the Baptist likens the people and their leaders to a brood of vipers, needing to repent, for people and leaders alike falsely and wrongly presume upon their covenant status as Abraham’s children (see Mt 3:7ff.; Lk 3:7ff.). Moreover, the so-called “covenantal nomism” that NPP proponents believe best describes the Judaism of this period, entails a kind of synergism or semi-Pelagianism, for even if the Jews of that period believed that they were brought into the covenant by God’s grace, they did not believe that divine grace kept them in the covenant—only a person’s faithful obedience kept him or her in the covenant! This amounts to a religion wherein one’s relationship with God is characterized as *in by grace; kept in by works.* In precisely this way it fails the test of what may properly be reckoned as a condition in the covenant of grace, and sinks into legalism.

The New Covenant

The new covenant can be taken in a twofold manner as well. Broadly conceived it stands for the covenant of grace made with sinners, coming under the dispensation of the law, prior to Christ’s advent, and under the dispensation of the gospel, subsequent to Christ’s advent.

As for the covenant of grace under the Mosaic stipulations, Turretin observes that if the OT and the Mosaic covenant are taken strictly and absolutely as to the legal relation, then they differ in *entire substance* from the New Testament. In this way, the law and Moses are opposed to grace and to Christ (John 1:17), or after the manner of Paul: opposing the letter to the Spirit, or the ministration of condemnation to that of righteousness (2 Cor. 3:6, 7). Thus, taken in a broad sense, functioning as a pedagogue, clothed with the divine promises and driving us to Christ, who is the very substance of the promise, in this relation the Mosaic covenant did not differ as to *substance*, but only as to manner of dispensation in the covenant of grace.

Carefully to be noted here is F. Turretin’s remarks concerning the diversity of expression found among Reformed writers in this connection. Says Turretin:

Those of our [Reformed] party (as Rollock, Piscator, Trelcatius and others) who make two covenants diverse in substance, take the old covenant strictly, not only separating the promise of grace from it, but opposing the one to the other. In this sense, Paul seems to take it frequently (as 2 Cor. 3; Gal. 4), so that the old covenant is the covenant of works and the new the covenant of the gospel and of faith. On the other hand, they [of our Reformed party] who maintain only one (as Calvin, Martyr, Ursinus) take the word covenant more broadly, as embracing also the promise of grace (although somewhat obscurely). Because the promise was dispensed in different ways before and after Christ, they distinguish it into two—the old and new—by a distribution not of genus into species (as the former), but of subject according to accidents (which the others do no deny); thus they differ only as to the different use of terms, but not as to the thing itself (as Calvin observes, *Institutes*, 2.7.2, pp. 350-51) (Turretin, *Inst. Elen. Theo.*, XII.8.vi).

Charles Hodge takes up this topic as well. He writes the following:

“The third dispensation of this covenant [the covenant of grace] was from Moses to Christ. All that belonged to the previous periods was taken up and included in this. A multitude of new ordinances of polity, worship, and religion were enjoined. … We have the direct authority of the New Testament for believing that the covenant of grace, or plan of salvation, thus underlay the whole of the institutions of the Mosaic period, and that their principal design was to teach through types and symbols what is now taught in explicit terms in the gospel. Moses, we are told (Heb. iii.5), was faithful as a servant to testify concerning the things which were to be spoken after.

“Besides this evangelical character which unquestionably belongs to the Mosaic covenant, it is presented in two other aspects in the Word of God. First, it was a national covenant with the Hebrew people. In this view the parties were God and the people of Israel; the promise was national security and prosperity; the condition was the obedience of the people as a nation to the Mosaic law; and the mediator was Moses. In this aspect it was a legal covenant. It said, ‘Do this and live.’ Secondly, it contained, as does also the New Testament, a renewed proclamation of the original covenant of works. It is true now as in the days of Adam, it always has been and always must be true, that rational creatures who perfectly obey the law of God are blessed in the enjoyment of his favour; and that those who sin are subject to his wrath and curse. … It is in fact nothing but a declaration of the eternal and immutable principles of justice. If a man rejects or neglects the gospel, these are the principles … according to which he will be judged. If he will not be under grace, if he will not accede to the method of salvation by grace, he is of necessity under the law.

“These different aspects under which the Mosaic economy is presented account for the apparently inconsistent way in which it is spoken of in the New Testament. (1.) When viewed in relation to the people of God before the advent, it is represented as divine and obligatory. (2.) When viewed in relation to the state of the Church after the advent, it is declared to be obsolete. It is presented as the lifeless husk from which the living kernel and germ have been extracted, a body from which the soul has departed. (3.) When viewed according to its true import and design as a preparatory dispensation of the covenant of grace, it is spoken of as teaching the same gospel, the same method of salvation as that which the Apostles themselves preached. (4.) When viewed, in the light in which it was regarded by those who rejected the gospel, as a mere legal system, it was declared to be a ministration of death and condemnation. (2 Cor. iii.6-18) (5.) And when contrasted with the new or Christian economy, as a different mode of revealing the same covenant, it is spoken of as a state of tutelage and bondage, far different from the freedom and filial spirit of the dispensation under which we now live” (*Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, pp. 374-376).

**I. External and Internal Membership in the Covenant of Grace**

[See Berkhof’s discussion on the dual aspects of the covenant, pp. 284-289]. The following material is excerpted from: J. Mark Beach, “Christ and the Covenant: Francis Turretin’s Federal Theology as a Defense of the Doctrine of Grace” (Ph.D. diss., Calvin Theological Seminary, January 2005): 252-274. See below the discussion under the particular scope of the covenant of grace.

**J. The Redemptive Scope of the Covenant of Grace**

Turretin takes up another controverted issue surrounding the covenant of grace when he considers the objects of this covenant, that is, those with whom God enters into a covenantal relation for their salvation. The question has to do with the focus and scope or amplitude (*amplitudo*) of the covenant of grace. This topic has generated a great deal of discussion in the literature surrounding seventeenth-century federalism, for it meets with much criticism by historians of doctrine and contemporary theologians who see the classic Reformed doctrine of predestination as compromising the intentions of the federal theologians themselves and finally subverting a right understanding of the covenant of grace.[[165]](#footnote-165) Turretin’s concern, however, like many federal theologians, is to safeguard the gracious character of divine salvation against any sort of Pelagianizing tendencies. This means that both the doctrine of predestination and the doctrine of the covenant must be given proper force; and since for Turretin God’s revelation forms a unity of divine truth (contrary to Beardslee’s anachronistic criticism that Turretin failed to have a critical view of Scripture), these doctrines should be related to one another and to other teachings of Scripture without compromising or diminishing any of them.[[166]](#footnote-166)

**1. Opponents of the Particularity of the Covenant of Grace**

The opponents Turretin targets here come in a diverse form, for he aims his polemical darts not only at the Remonstrants, following out the controversy at the national Synod of Dordrecht (1618-19), but he also challenges theologians identified with Moïse Amyraut (1596-1664) and the school of Saumur, opponents whom Turretin regards as “our men.” Inasmuch as the Genevan church and the Academy of Geneva was embroiled in controversy surrounding Amyraldian and Salmurian ideas, Turretin wages a polemic to defend Reformed orthodoxy against what he regarded as compromises to the good deposit of the faith. For the theologians of Saumur and their sympathizers (some of whom were Turretin’s colleagues at the Academy) evidenced, in Turretin’s view, suspect (even dangerous) tendencies of language and thought that needed to be confronted and rigorously disproved.[[167]](#footnote-167) Again, for Turretin, what is at stake in the controversy is the gracious nature of divine salvation or the meaning of “grace” in the covenant of grace.

In waging his polemic to defend the gracious nature of salvation, Turretin affirms that redemption, since it is a divine project, cannot meet with failure—that is, God saves those whom he intends to save and therefore the redemptive scope of the covenant of grace is particular. His opponents argue the contrary. “The patrons of universal grace,” says Turretin, assert that this covenant is inclusive of all humans. “They draw an argument from the universality of Christ’s death, which they place as a foundation under the covenant of grace,” for, states Turretin (representing their view), they believe that Christ was sacrificed for all so that God might have “the power of contracting a new covenant with the human race.”[[168]](#footnote-168) This is an important topic pertaining to the evangelical covenant inasmuch as Turretin, like all Reformed theologians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, upholds the Augustinian doctrine of predestination, which asserts that not all fallen human beings are the objects of God’s saving mercy, and that according to his own good pleasure in divine election.[[169]](#footnote-169)

Turretin, then, is concerned to answer the Remonstrants on this matter, as well as to demonstrate the inadequacies of the Salmurian school pertaining to this question.

Specifically, Turretin turns to the Remonstrant contention at the Synod of Dordrecht (1618-19) concerning the merit of Christ’s death and its salvific scope, which stated that the merit of his death reconciled God the Father to the whole human race, on account of which God was able, and in fact willed, to enter into “a new covenant of grace with sinners and men exposed to damnation.” According to the Remonstrants, this new covenant is universal in character, exclusive of no nation or individual, so that even the nations living under the Old Testament dispensation were as much exposed to the covenant promises as Israel herself. Moreover, if the nations would meet the required conditions, they too could enjoy the blessings of the covenant.[[170]](#footnote-170)

Meanwhile Turretin also sets forth the position of certain universalistic proponents, arguing that not only do the Lutherans answer with the Remonstrants on this question, some of “our men”—that is certain Reformed writers of the Salmurian school—likewise advocate a “universal grace.” He quotes Paul Testard (1599-1650) who claims that God established with “the whole human race” not only the covenant of nature, which after the flood was renewed in the Noahic covenant, but the Abrahamic covenant and the new covenant in Christ as well—these too, like the others, are universal in nature. The covenant of grace, then, has not been entirely hidden from any nation or individual. Consequently, there must needs exist three species of the divine call: the real (*realem*) by works, the verbal (*verbalem*) by the gospel, and the internal (*internam*) by the Spirit.[[171]](#footnote-171) Turretin also offers a quotation from Moïse Amyraut to the same effect: “The degree of love and mercy by which God was induced to make such a covenant with sinners, bears upon them all equally. The consequence, therefore, is that it should be considered to have been made with all me.”[[172]](#footnote-172)

Turretin takes care to point out that the covenant of grace can be conceived in two distinct ways—”either with regard to its promulgation or external presentation in objective grace; or with regard to its bestowal or internal reception in subjective grace.” This helps to bring clarity to the question at hand, for Turretin maintains that those who are traveling the Pelagian path (such as the Socinians and Remonstrants) view the covenant as universal in both ways. “They assert that sufficient objective and subjective grace is given to each and all that they may be saved if they will.” The Amyraldians, however (whom Turretin reckons as among the Reformed), refer the universality of the covenant to objective grace only, denying that it refers to subjective grace.[[173]](#footnote-173) As Peter Wallace aptly observes, Turretin recognizes that whereas the Arminians “insist that sufficient grace is granted to all both objectively and subjectively,” the Amyraldians allow the “universality of the covenant only to objective and not to subjective grace.”[[174]](#footnote-174)

**2. The Particular Scope of the Essence of the Covenant of Grace**

Turretin asserts that the “common” and “received opinion” among the Reformed is opposed to universalism, for the covenant is particular, at least with respect to its “internal essence” (*essentia interna*), being established with “the true elect members of Christ”—this in distinction from its “external dispensation” (*externa dispensatio*), which can include those who are non-elect. Turretin is careful to enlarge upon this distinction.

The former answers to the internal calling and the invisible church of the elect (which is constituted by it). The latter, however, answers to the external calling and the visible church of the called. In the latter respect the covenant is regarded only as to promulgation and presentation by the external call; and as to external benefits, which flow from that presentation, in the preaching of the word; the administration of the sacraments and the participation in sacred things (of which as many as in the people or in the church retain the same profession, become partakers; and thus it is extended even to many reprobates who remain in the visible church). In the former respect, it is further extended to the acceptation and conferring and reception of all federal benefits and internal communion with Christ by faith. In this sense, it pertains to none other than the elect, who are really partakers of the covenant according to God’s intention, in whom he fulfills the very conditions of the covenant and to whom he not only offers but actually confers the benefits of the covenant. In whatever manner this covenant is regarded, they [the Reformed] deny it to be universal, not only as to acceptation and bestowal, but as to promulgation or presentation (which although at one time wider and more general, still never was absolutely universal, nor can be so called).[[175]](#footnote-175)

Here Turretin sets forth a common distinction employed by seventeenth-century federal theologians. In the words of Witsius:

as we restrict this covenant to the Elect, it is evident we are speaking of the *internal*, mystical, and spiritual *communion* of the covenant. For salvation itself, and every thing belonging to it, or inseparably connected with it, are promised in this covenant, all which, none but the Elect can attain to. If, in other respects, we consider the *external* economy of the covenant, in the communion of the word and sacraments, in the profession of the true faith, in the participation of many gifts, which, though excellent and illustrious, are yet none of the effects of the sanctifying Spirit, nor any earnest of future happiness; it cannot be denied, that, in this respect, many are in covenant, whose names, notwithstanding, are not in the testament of God.[[176]](#footnote-176)

As to the internal essence of the covenant—that is, its salvific outcome and communion with God—covenant theologians argued that only persons who are elect enjoy those said privileges, for unto them alone is the testamentary character of this covenant applied. These persons are the recipients of the internal call of the gospel by the Spirit’s regenerating and renewing work. They do not receive merely the external blessings and privileges of the covenant but God works in them the salvific essence of the covenant, such that they receive and accept all its blessings, for they enjoy rebirth and come to faith and repentance; they trust in Christ as their surety and have the forgiveness of their sins; they are united to Christ by faith and meet all the conditions of the covenant because Christ fulfills those conditions in them. The result is that Christ does not merely offer but actually confers the blessings of the covenant upon them. Thus, as to its internal essence, Turretin argues that the evangelical covenant is particular and applies to the elect alone.

However, persons who are not among the elect and yet have received the sign of the covenant of grace are counted within this covenant with respect to its external dispensation or outward administration. They, with the elect, are part of the visible church, but they are not part of the invisible church. Thus the external call of the covenant comes to them, offering them its promises and blessings. In receiving the outward sign and seal of the covenant, all of God’s promises are presented to them in the way of faith. They likewise participate in the benefits of being part of the visible church and are the recipients of the church’s ministry, both of the word and the sacraments. But the saving essence of the covenant—including rebirth, faith and repentance, union with Christ, the remission of sins, and peace and communion with God—is neither worked in them nor bestowed upon them. They receive only the outward administration of the covenant of grace. Thus, for Turretin and virtually all federal theologians of the seventeenth century, the covenant of grace may not be viewed as universal in scope, but is particular inasmuch as the saving grace of God, therein promised through Christ as Surety, is effectuated in the elect alone.[[177]](#footnote-177)

Turretin clarifies this issue by asserting that the question concerns the “purpose and intention” of the covenant of grace, whether it is universal in scope or restrictive in its compass. (Turretin and Reformed orthodoxy affirm the latter; the opponents opt for the former.) The question also pertains to the call to faith itself, particularly whether the testimony of general revelation summons persons to the covenant of grace inasmuch as the gospel has not been proclaimed to or set before all people. (Turretin and the Reformed orthodox deny that general revelation has this function; their opponents affirm it.) The question focuses not so much upon Christ as savior, but whether adults must needs know him in order to be saved. (Turretin and the Reformed orthodox maintain that such knowledge is requisite and that no adult person is saved without a knowledge of Christ; their adversaries deny that such knowledge is necessary). Lastly, the question is not about a kind of general grace of God, “whether God is every day bestowing upon individuals various blessings by which he testifies his goodness and grace to miserable sinners,” for all are agreed that this is so; rather, the issue is whether such blessings are salvific, “flowing from the covenant of grace and the merit of Christ, and are dispensed by God, as Father and Redeemer, with the intention of their salvation. (Turretin and the Reformed orthodox deny this; their opponents affirm it.)[[178]](#footnote-178)

**3. The Particularity of the Covenant of Grace Expounded and Defended**

Having clarified the question, Turretin proceeds to defend and expound the particularity of the covenant under seven headings. The first is the covenant’s destination (*destinatio*). According to God’s eternal counsel and will, he never proposed to pity the whole human race; rather, he selected and appointed persons to salvation from the common mass of fallen humanity in Adam. Inasmuch as God’s eternal purpose does not comprise a universal covenant, likewise no such covenant appears in time.[[179]](#footnote-179)

Turretin next moves to the procurement (*procuratio*) of the covenant, for the covenant of grace is founded on and procured by Christ’s work of satisfaction, which is particular—being made “only for those in whose place (according to the ordination of God) he was bound to substitute himself as surety.”[[180]](#footnote-180)

Turretin also exposits the particularity of the covenant on the basis of the promises stipulated within it (*promissiones fœderis*), for the promises belong only to those to whom the promises are given.

Now they belong not to each and all, but only to the elect and believers, upon whom the blessings comprehended under those promises are conferred. For those promises are absolute, not conditional, springing from the mere grace of God, not depending on any condition in man. This not only the notion of a testament given to that covenant indicates, but also the nature of the promises, which not only concern the end, but also the means and conditions themselves (which thus exclude every condition). And although the promise of the covenant is conditionally proposed and applied to individuals, it does not follow that the promise itself depends upon man’s will and so is not absolute. That conditional promise is a consectary of an absolute promise and it is thus commanded as the duty of man that it may be produced at the same time and at once in the elect as the gift of God.[[181]](#footnote-181)

Here we see Turretin returning to the question of conditionality and emphasizing again that God fulfills the conditions stipulated in that covenant in those whom he has chosen for eternal life. The promises of the covenant are themselves absolute, not conditional, for they do not depend upon anything in the human creature. Turretin calls the conditional proposals and promises of this covenant a “consectary” (*consectarium*) or a logical consequence of the absolute promise of God. God then fulfills his promises in the way of such conditional proposals. But in every case, he is the agent who, in making promises entirely derived from and according to his grace, fulfills his promises in the elect, for he realizes not only the end but also the means and conditions of his promises; indeed, he fulfills the means and conditions in his elect in order likewise to fulfill the end—namely their salvation. In fact, this covenant cannot be conceived as universal in scope precisely because the promises contained within it are not conditional in a way that renders their outcome dependent upon humans. Salvation is wholly a divine work. If God had designed to save all people, then the amplitude of the covenant of grace would have been universal in extent. However, what is decisive for Turretin and for all the Reformed orthodox in the seventeenth century is that salvation, as God’s enterprise, means that those who are saved, in keeping with the promises of the covenant of grace, come under the parameters of his redemptive plan or purpose. They are saved by Christ’s work alone, for “he merited not only salvation and glory for them, but also the grace of the Spirit, regeneration and faith,”[[182]](#footnote-182) that is, he works and perfects in them the graces of faith and rebirth according to the conditions of the covenant.

A question emerges here, however, that has caused a great deal of confusion within the contemporary literature surrounding the federal conception of the covenant of grace—namely the state of those who are reprobated of God (the non-elect) and yet receive the sign of God’s promise in covenant of grace. Here Turretin briefly addresses the relationship between the evangelical covenant and divine predestination. First he acknowledges that a distinction can be made between the covenant of grace viewed as “absolute upon the performance of the condition” and as “conditional.” It is to be taken for granted, he says, that God entered into a covenant relationship with a class of persons from whom he demands a fulfillment of the covenant’s conditions but unto whom he does not confer the fulfillment of those conditions in and for them. In other words, in receiving the sign of the covenant and being brought under its stipulations, God calls them to faith and repentance but does not work that grace in them. But Turretin is quick to point out that to speak in this way is repugnant to the covenant of grace, which is altogether unlike the covenant of nature in this respect: whereas the legal covenant promises life upon a condition which it exacts from man but does not effectuate in him, the evangelical covenant promises salvation and life upon condition of faith which it both demands from fallen human beings and works in them. Turretin argues that Jeremiah 31:31-33 confirms this, for forgiveness and the writing of the law upon the heart, which is nothing less than regeneration, are blessings of the new covenant. Thus Turretin is most concerned to speak properly of the conditionality of the evangelical covenant:

Now although it may be called conditional in a certain sense (inasmuch as it has a condition subordinated to it, although to be absolutely fulfilled by God, by whose intervention the thing promised is granted), still it is properly absolute, both *a priori* (because it has no cause except the perfectly free will of God) and *a posteriori* (because God determined to give to all the elect [*fœderatus*] certainly and infallibly the condition itself without another condition).

Then Turretin draws the lines between divine election and the covenant of grace clearly and distinctly:

No one (except absurdly) will say that this can be extended to those whom God hated from eternity and decreed to pass by (by granting them neither his word nor faith, the two means of salvation).[[183]](#footnote-183)

Because of the testamentary character of the covenant of grace, God fulfills the covenant in those whom he has chosen from eternity to be united to Christ and share in all the benefits of his redemptive program. Federal theologians of the seventeenth century, Turretin included, in adhering to an Augustinian doctrine of predestination, recognized that the guarantee or internal seal promised in the covenant would meet fulfillment only in those whom God had eternally decreed to participate in Christ, for salvation is a divine work from first to last. If God actually promised to the reprobate the internal essence or essential blessing of the covenant—namely peace and communion with God through Christ—then either he would need to fulfill this promise in them, in which case the reprobate are not reprobate (which is an absurdity), or since they are reprobate he would need to deny to them what is promised, in which case God is unfaithful to his own promises or incapable of saving those whom he promises to save (which is also an absurdity, not to mention a blasphemous idea).

Consequently, in addressing this issue, the testamentary character of the covenant holds sway. Although the covenant of grace, like all covenants, has two sides, with mutual obligation, this manner of speaking is not meant to imply an equality among the parties, as in human covenants. This is only to say that although seventeenth-century covenant theologians used terms like “contract” or “pact” or “agreement,” this (merely) represents an effort to remain close to the root and cognate meanings of the biblical terms. In addition, such terms enable them to set forth biblical obligations and exhortations as covenantal demands. This is in keeping with the nature of God’s law, which remains stable or constant in its demands in both the covenant of nature and the covenant of grace, and so for all eternity. God’s nature requires that the creatures who are created in his image relate to him according to the dictates of his law. God does not deny his nature in dealing with human beings. On the contrary, he requires them to live before him uprightly and obediently. Since humans departed from this obligation in the covenant of nature, coming under the sanction of death and accursedness, the remedy provided by God in the covenant of grace is through Christ as surety, as the one who fulfills the requirements of divine law, including suffering the threatened sanction of accursedness and death, in order to rescue others and welcome them back into fellowship with God.

For Turretin, the question is basic and uncomplicated: either Christ did this for all persons, and so all persons will be saved (which Scripture contradicts and simple observation confirms), or Christ did this for those whom the Scriptures calls God’s chosen or the elect. Thus the covenant of grace is particular in focus, for Christ truly saves those whom he intends to save, according to the testamentary nature of his sacrificial work and the covenant of grace.

The fourth defense that Turretin offers in support of the particularity of the covenant of grace is what he calls its “promulgation” (*promulgatio*)— “if the covenant of grace were universal, then its promulgation would also have to be universal, or else God would fail in his purposes.”[[184]](#footnote-184) But, the fact, that has never happened, for it has never been universally published or broadcast to all people. Instead, multitudes are without any knowledge of it and remain so; and inasmuch as the covenant of grace has not been revealed to all people—with entire nations having no comprehension of it—its dissemination is shown to be particular, not universal.[[185]](#footnote-185)

The fifth argument for the non-universal character of the evangelical covenant is that no one is saved without some knowledge of Christ (*cognitio Christi*), for faith must have an object, and there is no faith in Christ except the word is preached and heard (see Rom. 10:17). With respect to adults, “Christ does not save except as known and apprehended by faith” (Turretin cites Isa. 53:11; John 6:29, 40; 17:3). If however knowledge of Christ is unnecessary for salvation, then the gospel is superfluous. Moreover, “since multitudes still at this day are without it, it cannot be said that they were included in the covenant of grace, which is founded upon Christ.”[[186]](#footnote-186)

Turretin further explores and defends the restrictive scope of the covenant by considering, sixthly, the signification of the sealing of the covenant (*obsignatio fœderis*). Since the sealing of the covenant of grace is particular, both externally (by means of the sacraments which belong to the church alone) and internally (by the Spirit who is given only to the members of Christ) (Eph. 1:13), a universal conception of the covenant is excluded. What is more, strictly and properly speaking, the covenant of grace applies or is sealed for the salvation of the elect alone. For some within the church are called, wherein the offer of the seal of the covenant is set forth and signified but the real application or sealing of the covenant is for the elect alone, that is, for believers. Says Turretin, “So far is the covenant from being sealed for salvation unto unbelievers that on the contrary their own condemnation is sealed because they pronounce judgment upon themselves.”[[187]](#footnote-187)

The seventh and final defense Turretin offers concerning the covenant’s particularity focuses upon the absurdity of confounding nature with grace (*Ab absurdo, quia confunditur natura cum gratia*). As Wallace observes, Amyraut, for his part,

found himself returning to a natural theology, affirming the natural ability but moral inability of man to respond to God’s general revelation. Turretin pounces on this, contending that the assertion of a universal call to the covenant of grace confounds nature and grace, all for the sake of a universal objective grace which is subjectively impotent![[188]](#footnote-188)

As Turretin already argued, general revelation is insufficient to lead fallen persons to God as redeemer. He reinforces that argument by contending that nature (or the created order) does not set forth a universal call or invitation to the covenant of grace. Those who maintain that it does, Turretin avers, confound nature (*Naturam*) with grace (*Gratia*), knowledge (to. gnwsto.n) with faith (tw|/ pistw|/), which means “we must ascribe to the voice of nature and of creatures, the preaching of the divine mercy manifested in Christ alone by the Scriptures.”[[189]](#footnote-189)

The futility and problems of this line of thought earns Turretin’s complete denunciation.

And since universal objective grace is vain and illusory without subjective grace, we must either say that sufficient strength is restored to each and all, by which they can (if they will) obey God and be received into the covenant (which is nothing else than to sacrifice to the idol of free will and wholly to abolish discriminating grace, against Paul; as if something is or can be in us which is our own [according to Pelagius] and does not proceed from the unmerited grace of God, 1 Cor. 4:7; or that God intends something under an impossible condition which neither man can have of himself, nor does God, who alone can, will to bestow upon him).[[190]](#footnote-190)

We see, then, that Turretin responds to the Amyraldian scheme not only by affirming the particularity of the evangelical covenant but by demonstrating that, inasmuch as there a single covenant of grace, it must be singular in its intention and promulgation. It is repugnant to the nature of the covenant of grace that it be conditional, for this is nothing other than an reintroduction of the covenant of works, whereby God promises life and salvation on the basis of a condition.[[191]](#footnote-191) Given human depravity and man’s moral impotence, no one can fulfill the condition on his own. In fact, this condition doesn’t depend on man; rather, it depends on God to give what man cannot do. Thus he “determined to give to all the elect certainly and infallibly the condition itself without another condition.”[[192]](#footnote-192) We also see that Turretin refuses the Pelagian highway. There is nothing in humans from creation that can serve to bring them to Christ or the way of salvation. The creation itself, and their own increated capacities, are hopelessly compromised by the fall; and because of human depravity people cannot obey God if they will, for their depravity infects their will and what they desire. Salvation is a divine project, completely and altogether. Besides, the created order (or nature), while offering an irrefutable witness to God’s majesty and presence (so much so as to leave persons without excuse in failing to acknowledge God), does not testify of the way of redemption in Jesus Christ.

**4. Scriptural Proof of the Particularity of the Covenant of Grace**

In moving on to the “sources of explanation” for answering this question, Turretin musters his arsenal of biblical arguments in support of the particularity of the covenant. The first gospel promise, in Genesis 3:15, is not universal but particular in scope, for the seed of the woman is set in opposition to and is distinct from the seed of the serpent. The woman’s seed refers to Christ and those “who are Christ’s” (Heb. 2:14, 15)—that is, “to the seed taken individually and antonmastically, to whom this primarily belongs; secondarily, to the seed taken collectively for his mystical body or believers. . . .” Moreover, throughout the New Testament believers, excluding unbelievers, are understood as the woman’s seed (Turretin references Rom. 16:20; 1 John 2:14; 5:4, 18; 2 Cor. 2:14; Heb. 2:14, 15; Rev. 12:11). The seed of the serpent are called, at least morally and figuratively, children of the evil one (Turretin cites John 8:44; 1 John 3:8; Acts 13:10; Matt. 3:7). Inasmuch as an abiding enmity exists between these opposing seeds, the one cannot be inclusive of the other. What is more, Christ works faith in those whom he saves in order to conquer the devil.[[193]](#footnote-193)

Turretin next turns to Genesis 6:18, and the covenant God established with Noah and the rest of the human race, and all breathing creatures in the preservation of the world from a flood. Although this covenant is universal in scope, it does not follow that the covenant of grace is of the same extent, for the working of salvation in Noah and his line is finally limited to Japheth (Gen. 9:26). John 1:9 likewise cannot rightly be construed as supporting universalism.[[194]](#footnote-194)

For Turretin, the definite nature of Christ’s atonement has clear implications pertaining to this question as well, for matters must be considered or treated in their proper relation. Thus, some things may only be affirmed provided some condition is present, otherwise its affirmation must be denied.

For example, it can indeed be affirmed that the pagans are commanded and bound to believe the gospel, if it were announced to them; but it is not true that they are commanded and bound to believe the gospel, although not announced to them. It can indeed be affirmed that Christ died for them, if the gospel should be announced to them and if on hearing the gospel they would repent and believe, because then they would belong to the elect and the covenanted. But it cannot be affirmed (nor is it true) that Christ died for them, even if they do not believe and repent, or hear the gospel; for then the argument is drawn from the conditional to the absolute.[[195]](#footnote-195)

Turretin here demonstrates that the covenant of grace is not universal since not all repent and believe the gospel; moreover, the gospel has not been propagated to all.[[196]](#footnote-196) But more to the point, it is a mistake to affirm the universal character of the evangelical covenant based upon the conditional nature of the gospel’s appeal (“if you believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, you will be saved”). For the condition does not establish the absolute. Only if the condition is fulfilled can one draw the conclusion that its antecedent applied to them, which when applied to this question means that inasmuch as particular persons repent and believe, they may say that Christ died for them. But if they refuse to repent or believe, they may not affirm that the covenant of grace is established with them, at least not in its essential salvific reality.

Turretin also argues that an expression of God’s goodness or patience to pagans, a kind of general grace of God, does not imply that “the mercy and placability of God were revealed to them.” Without Christ and his atoning work no such notion can be sustained. What is more, the covenant of grace is not merely about the revelation of God’s placability or appeasement but of actual “reconciliation” and friendship with God (katallagh/j), which is to say that it is of little use to know that God can be placated unless we also know that he has been placated.[[197]](#footnote-197) To be sure, varied “temporal blessings” testify to God’s existence and providential beneficence (Acts 14:17), but these do not yield knowledge of God’s saving grace in Christ in keeping with the promises of the covenant of grace. As Turretin observes: “Now it is one thing to testify his beneficence and forbearance (*anochēn*) towards men by the giving of bodily goods or by a suspension and delay of merited punishment (arising from the goodness and wisdom of God, the Creator and governor, in the order of nature); another to show his mercy in the remission of sins and the communication of spiritual and eternal goods (which cannot be done without Christ).”[[198]](#footnote-198) Turretin appeals to Calvin’s exposition of Acts 14:17 as a confirmation of his own view, namely that the testimony of nature is insufficient to lead sinners to salvation.[[199]](#footnote-199) Turretin also considers Acts 17:26, 27, demonstrating that although this passage intimates that God is clearly manifest in the works of creation and providence and that those who seek him may find him, it does not teach that God thereby intends to effectually or “savingly” call sinners to himself by this testimony.[[200]](#footnote-200)

While it is true that “where sin abounded, grace abounded more” (Rom. 5:20), that does not mean that the covenant of grace must extend as widely as the covenant of nature, for the comparison is that of “intensity and efficacy.” For the salvation of one person is greater than the loss of thousand. And while it is also true that Adam represented all persons in the covenant of nature, bringing all into ruin by his fall, again that does not mean that the covenant of grace must extend to every person for their restitution. The seed of the woman is clearly distinct from and more limited in scope than the common ruin in which persons find themselves in Adam.[[201]](#footnote-201)

What is more, the promises of the covenant of grace simply have not been promulgated to all, as is plain already in the Old Testament (Turretin cites Deut. 7:7, 8; Psa. 147:19, 20; Acts 14:16; 17:30). The same is true in the New Testament, for many nations have not had the privilege (even to this day) to hear the gospel. It is clear from Scripture that the “the promises are only relatively and limitedly universal from the twofold manner of the divine dispensation; the one external as to obligation (which is extended indiscriminately to classes of individuals, although not to individuals of classes); the other internal (as to application and fruit) with respect to all and each believer, without distinction of nation, sex or age and condition.”[[202]](#footnote-202) Thus, the texts that seem to teach an unrestrained universalism actually have restrictions placed on them. Universalism can refer to believers from both Jews and Gentiles (not including unbelievers) (Rom. 3:22, 23; 10:12; Acts 10:43; 13:43; John 3:16); or it can refer to promises that are only received by faith (a divine gift not bestowed to all) (Gal. 3:14; Rom. 4:13). For not all persons have faith; only the elect are given this gift (2 Thess. 3:2; Tit. 1:1, 2). What might first appear universal in scope is reserved for “the children of promise” (Rom. 9:6, 7). If God intended the salvation of all people, all would infallibly be saved. But inasmuch as he did not elect all from eternity, and inasmuch as he does not bestow in time the gift of the gospel and of faith (the very gifts requisite for receiving the blessing of salvation), it is evident that the promise is not universally extended.[[203]](#footnote-203)

This does not mean, however, that the certainty of salvation is threatened or in some way compromised, for the federal promises, though not absolutely universal in scope and given to all, are universal with respect to believers. Here Turretin appeals to a practical syllogism as contributing to that consolation believers may know, “whose major is founded on Scripture and minor is built upon the testimony of the believer’s heart.” The practical syllogism (*syllogismus practicus*) as explained by Muller “states the logic of assurance in terms, first, of the scriptural promise, and, second, of the inward, spiritual fruits of the application of Christ’s work by the Holy Spirit.” Or stated differently, “the major [premise] must be read in Scripture, the external Word (*Verbum externum*),” and “the minor” premise must be read in the heart, “the internal Word (*Verbum internum*).”[[204]](#footnote-204) Turretin follows this logical construction exactly, and states it this way: (1) *the Major:* “the gospel promises pertain to each and all believers”; (2) *the Minor:* “now I believe;” (3) *Conclusion:* “therefore they pertain to me.”[[205]](#footnote-205) In addition to his argument drawn from the practical syllogism, Turretin points out that consolation or assurance is not actually strengthened in the universalistic schema; rather, it is weakened, for if the promises apply to believers and unbelievers alike, indiscriminately, that is, to those being saved and to those being damned, all assurance of salvation is undermined. “For what foundation of consolation can be in that which is common to those who will be saved and to those who will be lost?”[[206]](#footnote-206)

Turretin also appeals to Calvin at this juncture, particularly the Reformer’s denial that God willed all men to be saved. Calvin makes the simple point that inasmuch as God has not revealed the gospel to all people (the very thing without which one cannot be saved), it is evident that he does not intend, according to his eternal purpose, to save all persons. He has not illumined all hearts with his Spirit, but has bestowed that gift to a few.[[207]](#footnote-207)

It should be observed that Turretin’s vigorous denial of the universality of the covenant of grace, along with his rigorous polemic to defend its particular scope, is born of a desire to safeguard the efficacious nature of the covenant of grace, which is simultaneously a desire to uphold its testamentary and gratuitous character. In other words, Turretin is jealous to show that God doesn’t fail in his salvific purpose, that he doesn’t intend or try to save certain persons whom he fails to save—as if they are unsavable, somehow beyond his reach. If that were true, the believer’s confidence in his or her own salvation would be undermined, for the inescapable implication would be that any person who is an object of God’s mercy and saving intention might prove to be unsavable, or, in being saved, subsequently fall away; and in that way and to that degree sin would prove to be greater than God’s grace. Moreover, in that way and to that degree the covenant of grace would be thwarted in its purpose and so would fail, at least partially, in its intention. Such a notion cuts against the grain of the covenant as a divine testament, even as it emasculates Christ’s suretyship.[[208]](#footnote-208) In fact, federal theologians of the seventeenth century, like their Reformed predecessors of the sixteenth century, were resolute (believing the gospel itself to be at stake in this matter) in affirming that no class of persons and no individual person is beyond the reach of God’s ability to save them, but certain persons may well be outside the scope of God’s purpose to save them, something altogether inscrutable to us.[[209]](#footnote-209)

Turretin’s discussion of the *syllogismus practicus* further demonstrates his concern to protect the believer’s assurance of salvation or to fortify the believer in the certainty of his or her election. Like Calvin and other Reformed theologians, he points believers to the promises of the gospel in Christ. The major premise of the syllogism is what God has revealed in his word—the promises of the covenant of grace, with Christ as the believer’s surety, and union with Christ forming the heart of the doctrine of salvation. The minor premise is not so much an examination of perfection, or evidence of an ever-victorious faith over every sin and temptation; rather, it is an examination of the presence of faith itself, of repentance and change of heart. That this syllogism was open to abuse, and could be used actually to undercut rather than underscore one’s assurance, is continually disputed. The Belgic Confession, for example, pulls the believer in a different direction when it states that the believer’s assurance is not necessarily supported by his or her fruits of faith.

Although we do good works we do not base our salvation on them; for we cannot do any work that is not defiled by our flesh and also worthy of punishment. And even if we could point to one, memory of a single sin is enough for God to reject that work. So we would always be in doubt, tossed back and forth without any certainty, and our poor consciences would be tormented constantly if they did not rest on the merit of the suffering and death of our Savior.[[210]](#footnote-210)

It should be observed, however, that it is possible to construe the *syllogismus practicus* as arguing for something as modest as what is depicted in the Belgic Confession. For this confession rests the believer’s assurance in the way of faith, which rests “on the merit and suffering and death of our Savior.” That is simply the exercise of faith, the manifestation of its presence which the syllogism asserts in its minor premise. Nonetheless, the *syllogismus practicus* focuses the question, at least at a certain stage, upon the believer’s subjective convictions about the sincerity of his or her faith. The goal, in any case, is that believers would find assurance by resting on God’s promises, centered in Christ as the Guarantor of the evangelical covenant.

**k. The Mosaic Covenant and Whether that Economy Is a Republication of the Covenant of Works?**

(Note: We have addressed this issue already under “H” above, but we give it more focused attention at this point due to the controversial nature of the topic in more current theological discussion.) This is a question that has more recently been pressed by pastors and theologians who follow the thinking of Meredith Kline. It must be said that Kline’s writing on this topic do not reflect the precision that characterized either Calvin, for example, or a majority of writers among the Reformed in the seventeenth-century, or, say, a theologian like Herman Bavinck. Kline has every right to attempt something new. His work can be judged according to its scriptural merits. However, it is unfortunate that many of his followers and advocates have felt compelled to accommodate older sources in an effort to gain some pedigree for Kline’s position. This is to move backwards in historical theology and its development, wherein many recent historical theologians have labored for a historiography that does not seek to make older sources fit a modern program or agenda. Kline, certainly in the totality of his covenant thinking, brings strange fire to the Reformed camp. It is only with the greatest difficulty, by means of a skewing of sources, that older writers can be made to speak in Kline’s idiom.

**Premises concerning the Mosaic Economy**

Reformed discussion on this matter has always known some diversity of viewpoints. However, this is not to leave the matter wide open. The Reformed, for example, typically repudiated specifically Lutheran, Anabaptist, and Arminian understandings of this issue. Since the advent of modern Dispensationalism, the Reformed have been careful to clearly distinguish the Reformed position from Dispensational thinking and to controvert the same. By way of preliminary discussion, in particular five issues are of vital importance in addressing this question:

**(1)** It must be said, and without compromise insisted upon, that the Mosaic economy is *in substance* a covenant of grace. As such it is woven into the very fabric of the single covenant of grace already proclaimed in Paradise (Gen. 3:15), and therefore participates in the benefits of God’s gracious preservation of the world according to the promises of the Noahic covenant; and thus does not make void or annul or stand in opposition to, but in substance is part of the Abrahamic covenant.

**(2)** The Mosaic economy is a distinct administration of the one covenant of grace, being nationalistic in form, including within it distinct ceremonial and civil laws which were imposed upon the people of God, Israel, as a nation and part of her distinct calling to be a light to the nations and to live after a manner consistent with faith, love for God and for one’s neighbor.

**(3)** The Moral Law, which so notably characterizes this economy, is the same, for content, as the natural law written on the human heart, but suppressed, twisted, corrupted, and subverted through unrighteousness and hardness of heart. Let it not be missed that that Law is prefaced by the Gospel-word of its preamble. God first delivered his people from bondage out of Egypt, then he gave them his Ten Commandments.

**(4)** The Mosaic economy in formally and specifically imposing the Law of God—inclusive of the moral, civil, and ceremonial legislation—sought to govern God’s people in the way of obedience and, being God’s law, imposed penalties for failure to keep it—for disobedience to divine law never proceeds with impunity. No one, not in Paradise, not under Moses, not in Jesus Christ, not in eternal glory, may disobey God’s holy and righteous will, his Law, with immunity. There is always hell to pay for disobedience. The Mosaic law did not invent penalty for disobedience. A case in point is the flood—although the law of Moses was unknown inasmuch as it had not been formally imposed, God nonetheless judged the world for its evil and wickedness. Similarly, there are many examples both after the fall and prior the flood, as well as examples in the lives and struggles of the Patriarchs and their families (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) wherein we learn that God judges and punishes sin even though the laws of Moses were in the very distant future. Thus, the laws of Moses do not introduce a conditionality of blessing or curse into God’s ways with humans heretofore unknown. The Mosaic economy formally presents the law and formally sets forth conditionality, but it does not impose a reality hitherto unknown or unrecognized. (Below we will address the idea of conditionality and the fulfillment of conditions at length.)

**(5)** The Mosaic economy does not negate or more void or nullify the Abrahamic covenant, as Paul so eloquently argues in Galatians 3. Promise precedes law; grace runs ahead of the call to obedience; divine deliverance comes before the call to conformity; justification is logically prior to sanctification; forgiveness leads obedience; and adherence to the Law of Moses (the moral, ceremonial, and civil) cannot invalidate or put on hold divine grace as established and ratified in the Abrahamic covenant.

**Premises concerning God’s Law**

With this ground work, we next more directly address the question of the nature of God’s Law. It is important to premise number of specifics in this regard as well, for failure to have a grasp of the nature of God’s Law skews the entire discussion regarding whether the Mosaic economy brought about a republication of the covenant of works. Here we observe, once more, a set of key ideas.

**(1)** The Law of God is holy, righteous, and good (Rom. 7:12); this is a non-negotiable. Any writer or teacher that suggests that the Law of God is some sort of obstacle or adversary to the Christian life or Christian living, or as if the Law as such is opposed to grace and the gospel is off the mark and a propagator of error. The Law of God is God’s will. The Law of God reflects and declares God’s holiness and goodness. The Law of God is righteous—it is in the right, stands in the right, calls us to the right, marks out the right path, the right way, and shows up all unrighteousness. There is nothing wrong with God’s Law and therefore there is nothing negative concerning the Law of God as such.

**(2)** The Law of God is written on the heart of all sinners, though this law, often called “natural law,” does not function without opposition from willful disobedience, the sinner’s love for sin, and suppressing, to varying and inconsistent degrees, according to varying circumstances, the truth of the law written on their hearts in unrighteousness. Thus, on the one hand the natural law gives even fallen human beings a sense of equity, orders to families and civil society to varying degrees, and accounts for human conscience—as sense of right and wrong, at least in a relative sense. None of this mounts up to a saving knowledge of God; none of this, absence the gift of the common grace of God, is able to function aright; and none of this is able, on its own, to even order families and society. In fact, persons can so perpetually opposed the law written on their heart that they come to have a “seared conscience” (1 Tim. 4:2). Natural law is, however, sufficient as to leave fallen human beings without excuse before God.

**(3)** The Law of God, being written on human hearts, means that Adam was likewise guided and shaped by the natural law in the paradisal situation. Inasmuch as God stipulated a positive command concerning the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and inasmuch as Adam needed to be told specifically about trees taking on symbolic and sacramental functions, including the tree of life, the law, natural law did constitutes the covenant of works as such—although the natural law is taken up into it. Even without a covenant of work, Adam as created by God, being an image bearer of God, owed God all that is due God as God. He owed this to God even without the promise of blessing or reward or any other gift as a reward. “Owed obedience” comes from the nature of the Creator/creature relationship as such. Reward is another matter. Moreover, humans cannot merit before God in any case. Thus, the requisite obedience that Adam owed God prior to the establishment of that covenant of works could never issue forth in a fruition of blessedness except God condescend in the way of a covenant, i.e., the covenant of works, which, in turn, takes up the natural law into its stipulations, for Adam could not keep the commandment regarding the tree of the knowledge of good and evil while he violated the law of nature written on his heart. We must remember that the law of nature is the same in content as the Ten Commandments.

**(4)** The Law of God is commonly distinguished as the moral law, the ceremonial law, and the civil law. The moral law is summed up in the Ten Commandments, but is inclusive of all that derives by way of application from those commands, which means that it includes not only the negative to be avoided but the positive that is implied as its opposite. The ceremonial law refers to those stipulations and requirements which governed the religious rituals, fasts, and feasts of the community. Inasmuch as Israel was called to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exod. 19:6), the requirements for worship and her life as God’s people were specific and exacting, even burdensome. In back of this was a standard of holiness, and the question of being clean and unclean, under pardon and consecrated or walking before God clothed in guilt. Finally, the civil law refers to the laws given by Moses to order Israel’s political, civic life as a nation, and included legislation treating various social or civil crimes and requisite punishments for violations of the same. The Reformed have long regarded these laws, like those of the ceremonial law, as obsolete given that Christ is the reality that has fulfilled the shadows and types depicted in the ceremonial law, and as the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise, Christ himself be his Seed, the scope of the Mosaic economy has burst the boundaries of the Jewish nation and is altogether inclusive of all the nations of the earth, rendering the civil laws inapplicable, though a sense of equity is to be learned and gleaned from them.

**(5)** The Law of God is often distinguished as having three uses: First, a teaching use, exposing sinners in their sin; second, a restraining use, wherein the threat of punishment, such as the laws of the state which, under threat of fines, imprisonment, and even punishments of hard-labors or capital punishment for capital crimes, thwarts wrong-doers, giving them pause and holding disorder and lawlessness in check; and third, as a guide to gratitude, i.e., providing a positive map showing believers the way of love and devotion to God as those who are freed from the threat and penalty of the law.

**(6)** Christ fulfilled the Law of God as the Last Adam. He did so in his role as Mediator and Savior and therefore as one standing in the place of the sinner. His fulfillment of the law is principally *pro nobis* (for us). He entered the world, in the miracle of the Incarnation, as a member of the covenant community—thus under the promise of the covenant of grace and so also under the Mosaic economy of that covenant, himself being subject to its requirements, mandates, privileges, and obligations. However, as the Christ, as the Mediator, he is himself the substance of the promise of the covenant of grace. He is himself, in his person and work, the fulfillment of that promise, and he is the source of every blessing of that covenant. As such, there is no blessing of the covenant of grace that is not in and through him. Moreover, there is no stipulation, requirement or negative sanction of the Mosaic economy that he has not fulfilled. And one more “moreover,” the covenant of grace in its entirety is for the fulfillment of the original covenant of works—as the divine answer and remedy to bring about the fruition of blessing promised in the original covenant of works. Therefore, as will become clear below, it is a highly untenable position to argue that the Mosaic covenant, being in substance part of the covenant of grace, operates as a covenant of works for the fruition of the vanquished and abrogated covenant of works, since life by that covenant is impossible and its continuing validity is only that of penalty, a sentence of death, and cursed.

**Diverse Answers to this Question** [*Note*: this section of notes is partial and unfinished**]**

* + - 1. ***The Lutheran View.*** The Lutheran position bears certain marks of clarity but runs the danger of a Marcionism with its radical disjunction between the Old and the New Testaments: Law and Gospel. Calvin’s emphasis on the unity between the Testaments is wholly lacking. Johann Gerhard insists on the substantial difference between the Old and New Testaments (also see contemporary Lutheran writers, such as Francis Piper, *Christian Dogmatics, vol. 3* and Edward W.A. Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*).

John Owen characterizes the Lutheran view as follows: “The Lutherans . . . insist on two arguments to prove, that not a twofold administration of the same covenant, but that two covenants substantially distinct, are intended in this discourse of the apostle.

1. Because in the Scripture they are often so called, and compared with one another, and sometimes opposed unto on another; the *first* and the *last*, the *new* and the *old*.
2. Because the covenant of grace in Christ is *eternal, immutable,* always the same, obnoxious unto no alteration, no change or abrogation; neither can these things be spoken of it with respect unto any administration of it, as they are spoken of the old covenant (Owen, Hebrews VI, 73-74).
   * + 1. ***Certain Anabaptist Answers.*** Unfinished and incomplete
       2. ***Certain Arminian Views.*** Unfinished and incomplete
       3. ***Modern Dispensationalist View.*** “A dispensation is a period of time during which man is tested in respect of obedience to some *specific* revelation of the will of God. Seven such dispensations are distinguished in Scripture” (Scofield Reference Bible, p. 5). The first dispensation is that of Innocency. The others are, respectively, Conscience (Gen. 3:23); Human Government (Gen. 8:20); Promise (Gen. 12:1); Law (Exod. 19:6); Grace (John 1:17); and Kingdom (Eph. 1:10). Under the dispensation of Law, Scofield writes as follows: “The Fifth Dispensation: Law. This dispensation extends from Sinai to Calvary—from the Exodus to the Cross. The history of Israel in the wilderness and in the land is one record of the violation of the law. The testing of the *nation* by law ended in the judgment of the Captivities, but the dispensation itself ended at the Cross. (1) Man’s state at the beginning (Ex. 19:1-4). (2) His responsibility (Ex. 19:5, 6; Rom. 10:5). (3) His failure (2 Ki. 17:7-17, 19; Acts 2:22, 23). (4) The judgment (2 Ki. 17:1-6, 20; 25:1-11; Lk. 21:20-24) (Scofield Ref. Bible, 94). Then he writes: “The Mosaic Covenant, (1) given to Israel (2) in three divisions, each essential to the others, and together forming the Mosaic Covenant, viz.: the Commandments, expressing the righteous will of God (Ex. 20:1-26); the ‘judgments,’ governing the social life of Israel (Ex. 21:1-24); and the ‘ordinances,’ governing the religious life of Israel (Ex. 24:12-31). These three elements form ‘the law,’ as that phrase is generically used in the New Testament (e.g. Mt. 5:17, 18). The Commandments and ordinances formed one religious system. The Commandments were a ‘ministry of condemnation’ and ‘death’ (2 Cor. 3:7-9); the ordinances gave, in the high priest, a representative of the people with Jehovah; and in the sacrifices a ‘cover’ (see ‘Atonement,’ Lev. 16:6, note) for their sins in anticipation of the Cross (Heb. 5:1-3; 9:6-9; Rom. 3:25, 26). The Christian is not under the conditional Mosaic Covenant of works, the law, but under the unconditional New Covenant of grace (Rom. 3:21-27; 6:14, 15; Gal. 2:16; 3:10-14, 16-18, 24-26; 4:21-31; Heb. 10:11-17). Moreover, Scofield establishes a dichotomy between Law and Gospel or Law and Grace, offering the following summary of the dispensation of grace: “(1) Grace is ‘the kindness and love of God our Saviour toward man . . . not by works of righteousness which we have done’ (Tit. 3:4, 5). It is, therefore, constantly set in contrast to law, under which God demands righteousness from man, as, under grace, he gives righteousness to man (Rom. 3:21, 22; 8:4; Phil. 3:9). Law is connected with Moses and works; grace with Christ and faith (John 1:17; Rom. 10:4-10). Law blesses the good; grace saves the bad (Ex. 19:5; Eph. 2:1-9). Law demands that blessings be earned; grace is a free gift (Deut. 28:1-6; Eph. 2:8; Rom. 4:4, 5)” (Scofield Ref. Bible).
       4. ***Reformed Views.*** Even among the Reformed there has not been complete agreement on how best to describe and define the Mosaic covenant. Francis Roberts offers an analysis of this discussion as it unfolded among the Reformed in the seventeenth century. Roberts observes that there are four distinct positions that have been staked out concerning the nature of the Sinaitic covenant. The first mentioned view is that this covenant is a covenant of works; the second argues that it is a mixed covenant, partly of works and partly of grace; the third maintains that Mosaic covenant is a covenant subservient to the covenant of grace—and in that sense a kind of third covenant; and finally the last argues that the Sinaitic covenant is *in substance* a covenant of grace—or what Roberts prefers to call a covenant of faith (*God’s Covenants,* 739). I have in fact listed five distinct views, and it is possible that Meredith Kline’s staked out position actually constitutes a distinctively sixth view.

At this juncture, by way of introduction, I refer readers to John von Rohr’s summary commends, which are apt, along with some the materials to which he refers as this question was taken up by various Puritan writers in the seventeenth century. He states the following:

Several conclusions were possible [on this question about the status of the Law given by Moses at Sinai], and Puritan theologians differed to some extent on this matter. A few held that the Mosaic covenant was given as a continuation of the covenant of works. Although this view was advanced largely by Antinomians, negative toward all efforts to join law and saving grace, it was also supported by near-Arminian John Goodwin and orthodox divine William Pemble. The mandates of Sinai were a renewal of the covenant law of Eden, now more clearly and explicitly imposed upon the Hebrew people. A second group saw the Mosaic Law as a covenant for Israel subservient to the covenant of grace. Such divines as John Cameron, Samuel Bolton, and Peter Bulkeley wrote in this way. Although under the covenant of grace, declared particularly to Abraham, Israel had fallen on idolatrous ways. God’s giving of the Law at Sinai, therefore, was for the curbing of this sin and the restoration of covenant faithfulness. Indeed in this sense it was given to prepare Israel for the future coming of Christ.

The largest body of Puritan divines, however, viewed the Mosaic Law not as a subservient covenant, but as a genuine part of the covenant of grace itself. John Ball, Anthony Burgess, Thomas Blake, and Samuel Rutherford, among others, spoke in this manner, seeing the Law of Sinai as providing the rule of life for those who, already in the covenant, were seeking to walk in the way of the Lord. The Mosaic Law could not be a covenant of works as was the first covenant with Adam, for now it was given to sinners unable to obey out of their own strength, nor was it simply a temporary expedient for Israel’s healing. It was, rather, an enlargement of the covenant with Abraham, where the first word was that God will be his God and the God of his descendants, and the second that they shall be obedient as God’s people. Here now in the Law that way of obedience is more clearly revealed. But even within the Decalogue itself those emphases on grace and law are combined. When the commandments were given, the opening declaration was a reminder of God’s graciousness: “I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.” Abraham and Moses belong together. The main body of Puritan divines saw the Law given to Israel as part of the covenant of grace (von Rohr, *The Covenant of Grace in Puritan Thought*, pp. 50-51).

* + - 1. **The Mosaic Covenant as a Covenant of Works.** This view maintains that the Mosaic covenant was given by God *as a covenant of works.* This means that the Old and New Testament differ not only in degree but in kind, not only in a distinction in administrations of the covenant of grace, but specifically *in substance*—the former being a covenant of works (given the Mosaic legislation) and the latter being a covenant of grace. Says Roberts, some who advocate this view maintain that “God conferred grace to the fathers before Moses, not by covenant, but only by promise: accounting all that Moses comprehends under covenant, to be the covenant of works and Old Testament.” This obviously stands directly at odds with the everlasting covenant *of grace* God established with Abraham. Roberts asserts, “After the covenant of works was broken by Adam’s fall, it cannot be proved that God did at any time after set on foot a covenant of works in the church of God” (739). Roberts cites the following texts in support of this assertion: Rom. 4:13; Gal. 3:16-19; Eph. 2:12; Gen. 6:18; 15:5, 6, 18; Rom. 4:11-18; Heb. 11:7.

***Philip Carey’s* Solemn Call**

On Carey’s views, and a sharp polemic waged against it, see John Flavel, “Vindiciae Legis et Foederis: or, a Reply to Mr. Philip Carey’s Solemn Call” in *The Works of John Flavel*, vol. 6 (Banner of Truth),pp. 318-378.

* + - 1. **The Mosaic Covenant as a split or mixed covenant, being partly a covenant of works (genuinely so), and partly a covenant of grace.** [This material needs much more elaboration and development.]

***Synopsis Purioris Theologiae***

Roberts wrongly, I think, refers to the renowned *Synopsis purioris theologiae*, written by the theological faculty of Leiden University, as if this document advocates the view that the Mosaic covenant is a covenant of works. In fact, it does not. It is probably better described as advocating something of the split view, such that the Mosaic covenant is partly on the one covenant and partly of the other.

***Samuel Petto*** (1624-1711)

Likewise, even a writer like the Puritan, Samuel Petto, does not fit neatly or clearly under the view that the Sinaitic covenant is a covenant of works. He writes, “It is usually said, that they are two administrations or dispensations of the same covenant [the new and better covenant and the covenant at Mount Sinai]: I think, they are not merely one and the same covenant, diversely administered, but they are two covenants” (Petto, 103). Since the Mosaic covenant is not to be regarded as of the fabric of the covenant of grace, but a distinct covenant from it, Petto queries what kind of covenant is the covenant made at Mount Sinai? “In general, it was a covenant of works, as to be fulfilled by Jesus Christ, but not so to Israel. Or, it was the covenant of grace as to its legal condition to be performed by Jesus Christ, represented under a conditional administration of it to Israel” (p. 113). If this sounds a bit complicated, maybe even confused, testifies to the manner in which he has split its requirements between Christ and Israel. First, Petto says it is a covenant of works *for Christ—*not for Israel; then he says it is the covenant of grace “as to its legal condition to be performed by Jesus Christ”—i.e., Christ fulfills the works of the Law on our behalf, thereby purchasing redemption for us (that is the grace part), but as it stands this covenant is a covenant of works. Yet the entirety of the covenant, according to Petto, as it is a distinct covenant from the covenant of grace is that it requires perfect obedience, a condition to be fulfilled by those with whom it was made, Israel, and so it is not a gracious covenant. Nonetheless, he is explicit in denying that the Mosaic covenant is a covenant of works *for Israel* or that God intended a way of salvation on those terms to his people Israel (see pp. 113ff.).

* + - 1. **The Mosaic Covenant as a subservient, third covenant.** This is the view of John Cameron. See pages 301-324 of my book on Turretin, wherein he briefly engages this view. See Lim’s summary of Roberts’ discussion of this view, pp. 202-208, or Roberts own work, pp. 748-753.

***John Owen*** (1616-1683) [This material needs much more elaboration.]

Another author whose view is hard to categorize is that of the prince of the Puritans, John Owen. However, even if he is not an adherent of John Cameron’s views as such, it seems at times that he fits this scheme, though perhaps he is better placed under “b.” In any case, according to Owen, when God established his covenant with the nation Israel at Sinai, it did not void the one unifying covenant of grace that first came to expression in Gen. 3:15 and was formalized with Abraham in Gen. 12, 15, and 17. “The *church of Israel* was never absolutely under the power of that [Sinaitic] covenant as a covenant of life; for from the days of Abraham, the promise was given unto them and their seed” (Hebrews VI, 62). Owen rejects that Socinian notion that the gospel was absent during the old covenant period. Such an idea is “senseless and brutish.” He states explicitly that the Mosaic covenant, with its laws, “did not abolish or supersede the efficacy of any promise that God had before given unto the church. Any to say that the first promise, and that given unto Abraham, confirmed with the oath of God, were not the promises of eternal life, is to overthrow the whole Bible, both Old Testament and New” (Hebrews VI, 98).

Owen did not believe the Mosaic covenant was given was given with the intention that Israel should ever seek her salvation and justification by means of her obedience to the law. He believed Moses revived the covenant of works, but not in order to counter the promise. Owen is sound in saying that the only way of reconciliation with God was ever and always “one and the same,” namely through Jesus Christ (Hebrews VI, 71). In fact, the Old Testament “declares the doctrine of justification and salvation by Christ” (Hebrews VI, 98). The way of salvation “was always the same, as to the substance of it, from the beginning” (Hebrews VI, 74).

Nonetheless, Owen argued that the Mosaic covenant was not a distinct administration of the one covenant of grace; rather, it was itself a covenant distinct from the covenant of grace. “Wherefore we must grant *two distinct covenants*, rather than a twofold administration of the same covenant merely, to be intended” (Hebrews VI, 76), for the Mosaic economy showed that it was incapable of bringing Israel to salvation—salvation was by way of the promise in the Old Testament but not by way of the Sinaitic covenant (Hebrews VI, 77).

For Owen, the Sinaitic covenant serves both the old covenant of works and the covenant of grace. The Sinaitic covenant is not a new establishment of the covenant of works; rather, it revives various features of that covenant. God was not, however, proposing that Israel gain eternal life through her obedience to the law. Owen recognizes and affirms that the Mosaic law call us to obedience and show us the threat of curse, which in turn call us to the divine promises, and thus to seek life in them (Hebrews VI, 80). Owen offers this solution to the issue, fully acknowledging that his view departs from the majority opinion.

That whilst the covenant of grace was contained and proposed only in the promise, before it was solemnly confirmed in the blood and sacrifice of Christ, and so *legalized* or established as the only rule of the worship of the church, the introduction of this other covenant on Sinai did not constitute a new way or means of righteousness, life, and salvation; but believers sought for them alone by the covenant of grace as declared in the promise. This follows evidently upon what we have discoursed; and it secures absolutely that great fundamental truth, which the apostle in this and all his other epistles so earnestly contendeth for, namely, that there neither is, nor ever was, either righteousness, justification, life, or salvation, to be attained by any law, or the works of it, (for this covenant at mount Sinai comprehended every law that God ever gave unto the church,) but by Christ alone, and faith in him.

That whereas this covenant being introduced in the pleasure of God, there was prescribed with it a *form of outward worship* suited unto that dispensation of times and present state of the church; upon the introduction of the new covenant in the fullness of times, to be the rule of all intercourse between God and the church, both that covenant and all its worship must be disannulled. This is that which the apostle proves with all sorts of arguments, manifesting the great advantage of the church thereby (Hebrews VI, 82).

* + - 1. **The Mosaic Covenant is a national covenant with Israel, being a covenant of sincere piety, supposing both the covenant of works and the covenant of grace.** Sometimes persons will propose Herman Witsius (1636-1708) as an advocate of the view that the Mosaic covenant is a covenant of works inasmuch as he occasionally has language that seems to point in this direction. But this is a serious misreading of his view as is evident from a simple presentation of his position from book four of his *Economy of the Covenants*. Witsius’s staked out position is best described under the heading we have supplied from his own words.

He raises the question whether the Mosaic covenant should be regarded as a covenant of works or a covenant of grace. He premises a few things first: “And *first*, we observe, that, in the ministry of Moses, there was a repetition of the doctrine concerning the law of the covenant of works. For both the very same precepts are inculcated, on which the covenant of works was founded, and which constituted the condition of that covenant….” Here Witsius cites the familiar words from Lev. 18:5: “You shall therefore keep my statues and my ordinances, which if a man do he shall live in them.” He also recalls the threatening words of Deut. 27:26: “cursed by he that confirms not all the words of this law to do them.” This is the curse of the law as opposed to faith and the covenant of grace (Gal. 3:10, 12). The requirement of obedience looms large under the Mosaic economy while the promises of saving grace were “more rare and obscure.” Because of this the ministry of Moses is called “the ministration of death and condemnation” (2 Cor. 3:7, 9) (Bk. IV.4.xlvii).

“*Secondly,* We more especially remark, that, when the law was given from mount Sinai or Horeb, there was a repetition of the covenant of works.” Witsius states that the manner in which the law was given, with the signs of thundering and lightning, the shaking of the mountain and thick smoke had the divine design to strike fear in sinful human hearts. The boundaries set around the mountain likewise bespoke the separation between the Holy God and the unholy sinner. Clearly here we see a deliberate contrast and opposition of mount Sinai and mount Zion (Exod. 19:1, 16 and Heb. 12:18-22) (Bk. IV.4.xlviii).

“*Thirdly*, We are not, however, to imagine, that the doctrine of the covenant of works was repeated, in order to set up again such a covenant with the Israelites, in which they were to seek for righteousness and salvation. For, we have already proved, B. I, chap. ix. § XX. that this could not possibly be renewed in that manner with a sinner, on account of the justice and truth of god, and the nature of the covenant of works, which admits of no pardon of sin. … The Israelites were, therefore, thus put in mind of the covenant of works, in order to convince them of their sin and misery, to drive them out of themselves, to shew them the necessity of a satisfaction, and to compel them to Christ. And so their being thus bought to a remembrance of the covenant of works tended to promote the covenant of grace” (Bk. IV.4.xlix).

“*Fourthly*, There likewise accompanied this giving of the law the repetition of some things belonging to the covenant of grace. For, that God should propose a covenant of friendship to sinful man, call himself his God (at least in the sense it was said to the elect in Israel), take to himself any people, separated from others, for his peculiar treasure, assign them the land of Canaan as a pledge of heaven, promise his grace to those that love him and keep his commandments, and circumscribe the vengeance denounced against despisers within certain bounds, and the like; these things manifestly discover a covenant of grace: and without supposing the suretiship of the Messiah, it could not, consistently with the divine justice and truth, be proposed to man a sinner.” Witisus quotes Calvin’s comments on Exod. 19:17 to the effect that even God’s warnings and the threatening character of divine holiness did not preclude meeting God in devotion based on matters in the law “besides precepts and threatenings” (Bk. IV.4.xlvii–l).

In fact, Witsius is explicit in how he regards the Mosaic economy—it is a *national covenant* made with the nation of Israel, which does not negate the covenant of grace, and which cannot simply be identified as a covenant of works. Rather, given the premises he set forth, he writes that this covenant “was not formally the covenant works …. [n]or was it formally a covenant of grace….” (Bk. IV.4.li & liii). It is not a covenant of works, first, given that a covenant of works “cannot be renewed with the sinner.” God would never propose a way of salvation with sinners, for their justification, requiring perfect obedience, which the human party is wholly incapable of performing. This is contrary to God’s truth and justice. Moreover, the sinner needs pardon—and the covenant of works has no such provision. The notion that the Mosaic economy is a covenant of works is dead on arrival. This is a stillborn notion. Moreover, says Witsius, God never required perfect obedience from Israel as a condition of this covenant. Once more, this would be requiring of sinful and broken people what they cannot possible perform. They could never claim reward upon condition of perfect obedience. Instead, God called them under Moses to “sincere obedience,” which functions according to “reverence and gratitude.” In addition, Moses did not “conclude Israel under the curse, in the sense peculiar to the covenant of works, where all hope of pardon is cut off, if they sinned but in the least instance” (Bk. IV.4.li).

To be sure, the “carnal Israelites” [*carales Israëlem*] perverted God’s intention in placing his people under the Mosaic economy and “mistook the true meaning of that covenant,” thereby embracing it “as a covenant of works, and by it sought for righteousness.” But this is a perversion of that covenant, not its proper function. Paul clearly says that Israel wrongly pursued this covenant “not by faith” but by “works of the law.” This is altogether mistaken. Witsius calls on Calvin for support, namely, that the Jews had corrupted the divine intention, acting as hypocrites, creating bondage for themselves and servitude, failing to be led by the law as a pedagogue to Christ. “The design of the apostle therefore, in that place [Gal. 4:24, 25], is not to teach us, that the covenant of mount Sinai was nothing but a covenant of works, altogether opposite to the gospel-covenant; but only that the gross Israelites [*crassos Israëitas*] misunderstood the mind of God, and basely abused his covenant; as all such do, who seek for righteousness by the law” (Bk. IV.4.lii).

Those who regard Witsius as an advocate of taking the Sinaitic covenant to be a republication of the covenant of works have clearly ignored his explicitly formulated position. Such a notion, for Witsius, is wholly untenable. This is not to say, however, that Witsius simply, without any qualification, identifies the Mosaic economy with the covenant of grace. He does not, as noted above, regard the Mosaic covenant a “formally a covenant of grace.” Before elaborating on his explanation of this thesis, it is important to note that Witsius is explicit in arguing (and here he stands in company with the overwhelmingly dominant, consensus Reformed position) that *in substance* the Mosaic covenant is part of the covenant of grace.

Witsius formulates this view in book three of his *Economy of the Covenants.* “It is a matter of the greatest moment [*Maximi res momenti est*], that we learn distinctly to consider the covenant of grace, either as it is in its *substance* or essence [*in* substantia *& essentia*], as they call it, or as it is in divers ways proposed by God, with respect to *circumstantials* [circumstantialia], under different economies. If we view *the substance* of the covenant, it is but only *one*, nor is it possible it should be otherwise. There is no other way worthy of God, in which salvation can be bestowed on sinners, but that discovered in the Gospel.” Witsius holds unequivocally that God set forth one way of salvation subsequent to man’s fall, and that through the blood of Christ, an everlasting testament, and first published immediately after the fall into sin. This is not to deny that “if we attend to the circumstances of the covenant, it was dispensed *at sundry times and in divers manners,* under various economies, for the manifestation of the wisdom of God” (Bk. III.2.i).

Witsius argues pointedly and comprehensively for three key ideas, namely that to all the elect of God, *living in any period of time* (and this, then, includes the elect living under the Mosaic economy) that (1) one and the same eternal life was promised under the covenant of grace; (2) that Jesus Christ was presented as the one and same author and bestower of salvation (as bestower salvation is a gift, not earned or merited by us); and (3) that all who became partakers of it, and all who would later become partakers of it, do so in no other way than by a true and living faith in him. Says Witsius, “If we demonstrate these three things, none can any longer doubt, but that the covenant of grace must be, as to its substance, only one from the beginning” [*quod ad rei substantiam attinet, ab ævo unum duntaxat esse*] (Bk. III.2.ii). In remainder of this chapter Witsius unfolds his polemic in defense of these three theses (see Bk. III.2.iii–xliii).

Having completed this short detour to show that Witsius clearly holds that the Mosaic economy, though not formally either a covenant of works or a covenant of grace, it is of one fabric with the covenant of grace and as to its essence or substance none other than the covenant of grace. Now we return to why he argues that though its essence is evangelical and gracious it is nonetheless not “formally a covenant of grace.”

Witsius explains that what was lacking in the covenant made at mount Sinai, keeping it from being formally a covenant of grace, is not the absence of promises but the absence of the gift of grace granting the Israelites the “strength to obey” the law of God. Thus what marks this economy off from being “formally” a covenant of grace is that the new covenant, distinct from the old, the covenant of grace fulfilled in Jesus Christ versus the dispensation under Moses, is the gift of a heart and will to love God and obey his law. This is explicitly stated by Moses in Deut. 29:3: “But the Lord has not given you a heart to understand, or eyes to see, or ears to hear until this day” (NAB). In short, this covenant stipulated obedience but did not grant the power to obey (Bk. Iv.4.liii). For Witsius, this is why the Mosaic economy, while in its substance and essence is of the same fabric of the covenant of grace, is nonetheless not “formally a covenant of grace.”

Calling the Mosaic covenant “a *national covenant* between God and Israel, whereby Israel promised to God a sincere obedience to all his precepts, especially to the ten words; God, on the other hand, promised to Israel, that such an observance would be acceptable to him, nor want its reward, both in this life, and in that which is to come, both as to the soul and body.” Thus the obedience required is not the obedience stipulated in the original covenant of works, namely *perfect and complete* obedience; and therefore likewise the reward cannot be strictly earned or merited on those terms. Furthermore, God gratuitously accepts “such an observance” as “acceptable to him.” What is critical to Witsius’s understanding of the Mosaic economy is that it is grounded on the covenant of grace. “This reciprocal promise,” he writes, “supposed a covenant of grace. For, without the assistance of the covenant of grace, man cannot sincerely promise that observance; and yet hat an imperfect observance should be acceptable to God is wholly owing to the covenant of grace.” Having make this point explicit, and a crucial point it is for Witsius, he also observes that the Mosaic economy “supposed the doctrine of the covenant of works, the terror of which being increased by those tremendous signs that attended it….” Thus, the agreement or reciprocal promise between God and Israel under Moses is a consequence of both the covenant of grace and the covenant of works—but “formally” it is neither the one or the other. This makes it, then, according to Witsius, “a covenant of sincere piety, which supposes both” (Bk. IV.4.liv).

This brings Witsius to his own conclusions on the matter agitating and perplexing in his day, namely whether the Ten Commandments should be regarded as nothing but a “form of the covenant of grace?” Witsius is clear, the law so narrowly defined, the moral law of the Ten Commandments, is not a covenant and it is not accurate to call the law, so defined, a covenant. The law, considered under the strict confines of the Ten Commandments, is not a question of mutual agreement but rather “a prescription of duty fenced on the one hand by threatenings, taken from the covenant of works; on the other, by promises, which belong to the covenant of grace. Although Scripture will sometimes call the Ten Commandments a covenant, strictly and properly the covenant is “made *upon* these ten words or *after the tenor of those words*.” They are called a covenant by “synecdoche” (Bk. IV.4.lv).

“The ten words, or commandments, therefore, are not *the form of a covenant properly so called,* but *the rule of duty:* much less are they *the form of the covenant of grace* because that covenant, in its strictest signification, consists of mere promises, and, as it relates to elect persons, has the nature of a testament, or last will, rather than of a covenant strictly speaking, and depends on no condition; as we have at large explained and proved, B. III. chap. I § VIII. &c.” Witsius also maintains that Jeremiah 31:33 and 32:38-40 show that “the form of the covenant of grace consists in absolute promises, as does Isaiah 54:10 (Bk. IV.4.lvi).

Witsius offers these final words:

Least of all can it be said, that the ten words are *nothing* but the form of the covenant of grace, since we may look upon them as having a relation to any covenant whatever. They may be considered in a twofold manner. 1st. Precisely, *as a law.* 2ndly. As an *instrument of the covenant.* As a *law*, they are the rule of our nature and actions, which he has prescribed, who has a right to command. This they were from the beginning, this they still are, and this they will continue to be, under whatever covenant, or in whatever state man shall be. As an *instrument of the covenant* they point out the way to eternal salvation; or contain the condition of enjoying that salvation: and that both under the covenant of grace and works. But with this difference; that under the covenant of works, this condition is required to be performed by man himself; under the covenant of grace it is proposed, as already performed, or to be performed by a mediator. Things, which those very persons, with whom we are now disputing, will not venture to deny” (Bk. IV.4.lvii).

It is important to remember that the question that has occupied Witsius here is the moral law strictly conceived. Is it a covenant of works or a covenant of grace? His answer: neither the one nor the other. The law, as bare law, functions within each of those covenant arrangements and remains of perpetual validity as the duty that human beings, in whatever state, including a state of glory, owe God and his creatures. In the remainder of Book IV of his *Economy of the Covenants* Witsius takes up numerous topics that reveal the evangelical or gospel nature of the Old Testament as he considers: types, Noah and the ark, the goats of expiation, the sacraments of Abraham, the sacrifices, circumcision, the Passover, passage through the Red Sea, the manna, the extraordinary sacraments of the wilderness period, the blessings of the Old Testament, and the falsely alleged imperfections of the Old Testament. These chapters make it abundantly clear that the Old Testament may not be characterized as a covenant of works, and in fact this dispensation of grace amply teaches the way of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, by the promised mediator alone.

Witsius also shows the real defects of the Old Testament economy, its abrogation, and the better benefits of the New Testament, concluding with an exposition of baptism and the Lord’s Supper as the sacraments of this New Testament of God in Christ’s blood.

* + - 1. **The Mosaic Covenant is *in substance* a covenant of grace, and in its broad sense, fitting within the Abrahamic covenant, functions as such.** The Mosaic covenant, strictly or nakedly conceived, lifted out of the context of the Abrahamic covenant—and floating free and independent of its proper and biblically specific content—thus considered in an abnormal and peculiar manner—bears the marks of the covenant of works as *naked* law (or raw law). But properly and rightly clothed, according to the scriptural portrait, in the world in which God gave and intended it, it is *essentially* of one piece with the covenant of grace. This is the consensus and overwhelmingly dominant Reformed conception. Indeed, the Puritan writer, Thomas Blake, makes the cogent comment that no professed believer, looking to Christ for salvation, “is under a Covenant of Works.” By definition, “he is under a Covenant of grace” (p. 262; see bibliography in my volume on Turretin).

***John Calvin*** (1509-1564)

We first mention Calvin as an early example of this view, though of course he does not use the exact nomenclature that later developed and became the commonplace terminology regarding this dispute. Here we simply sample some characteristic remarks from Calvin’s commentaries and lectures. Regarding the well-known and much quoted text which is commandeered to argue that the Mosaic covenant is a covenant of works, namely, Lev. 18:5 (“You shall therefore keep my statutes and my judgments; which if a man do, he shall live in them”), Calvin notes that these words sanction and confirm the law “by the promise of reward.” He elaborates: “The hope of eternal life is, therefore, given to all who keep the Law; for those who expound the passage as referring to this earthly and transitory life are mistaken. The cause of this error was, because they feared that thus the righteousness of faith might be subverted, and salvation grounded on the merit of works. But Scripture does not therefore deny that men are justified by works, because the Law itself is imperfect, or does not give instructions for perfect righteousness [on the contrary, the Law is perfect and does give instructions for perfect righteousness]; but because the promise is made of none effect by our corruption and sin [i.e., in spite of the promise of God to bless perfect obedience, the promise is subverted by our inability to carry out this call to obedience]. Paul, therefore, as I have just said, when he teaches that righteousness is to be sought for in the grace of Christ by faith (Rom. x. 4,) proves his statement by this argument, that none is justified who has not fulfilled what the Law commands. Elsewhere also he reasons by contrast, where he contends that the Law does not accord with faith as regards the cause of justification, because the Law requires works for the attainment of salvation, whilst faith directs us to Christ, that we may be delivered from the curse of the Law. Foolishly, then, do some reject as an absurdity the statement, that if a man fulfills the Law he attains to righteousness [Calvin’s point: the statement is sound and true, but conditional]; for the defect does not arise from the doctrine of the Law, but from the infirmity of men, as is plain from another testimony given by Paul. (Rom. viii. 3.) [There is no antinomian streak in Calvin, for the Law is holy, righteous, and good—but we are not!] We must observe, however, that salvation is not to be expected from the Law unless its precepts be in every respect complied with; for life is not promised to one who shall have done this thing, or that thing, but, by the plural word, full obedience is required of us. The pratings of the Popish theologians about partial righteousness are frivolous and silly, since God embraces at once all the commandments; and who is there that can boast of having thoroughly fulfilled them? If, then, none was ever clear of transgression, or ever will be, although God by no means deceives us, yet the promise becomes ineffectual, because we do not perform our part of the agreement” (Comm. Lev. 18:5). [In other words, the promise—the conditional clause of Lev. 18:5—is ineffectual for sinners since they are incapable of fulfilling this condition, namely the stipulated perfect obedience. This is not a covenant of works, however, for as Calvin reminds us, just prior to commenting on this text, that in fulfilling the whole Law, “we still deserve nothing,” that according to Luke 17:10. “However we may strive, therefore, even beyond our strength, and devote ourselves entirely to keep the Law, still God lies under no obligation to us, except in so far as He has Himself voluntarily agreed, and made Himself our spontaneous debtor. And this has been pointed out even by the common theologians, that the reward of good works does not depend upon their dignity or merit, but upon His covenant” [for example, Aquinas, Durandus, Duns Scotus, Gregory, Ockham, Biel, and many Romanists] (Calvin, Comm. Introduction to Lev. 18:5).

An interesting sidebar regarding this verse is how the study notes of the *Staten Vertaling* (the officially approved translation of the Bible into the Dutch language), worked up by the Synod of Dort and attached to this translation, treat this verse (which it turns out very much reflect Calvin’s exegesis of this text). The notes state: “This proverb teaches us three things: 1. the perfection of the doctrine of Law; 2. the righteousness of the works; 3. the reward promised by God for such righteousness; but since corrupt man is destitute of that righteousness, the reward is given of mere grace, through the atonement of Christ, when embraced by faith, see Is. 53:11; Rom. 3:20-23; etc. Compare annotation to Deut. 6:25. See also Ezek. 20:11, 13; Rom. 10:5; Gal. 3:12” (p. 67).

One more passage provides us with what is characteristic of Calvin’s understanding of the life of believers under the Mosaic economy, namely that the stipulation to obedience is clear, but the blessing was not based on bare obedience to the Law and the perfection demanded by it. On the contrary, these believers likewise lived under God’s care of grace, such that even their “works,” which are always imperfect and marred by sin, are pardoned and graciously rewarded by God. Consider Calvin’s comments on Lev. 26:3 (“If you walk in my statutes, and keep my commandments, and do them” … blessing is the reward): “I have indeed already observed, that whatever God promises us on the condition of our walking in His commandments would be ineffectual if He should be extreme in examining our works. … But since, however defective the works of believers may be, they are nevertheless pleasing to God through the intervention of pardon, hence also the efficacy of the promises depends, viz., when the strict condition of the law is moderated. Whilst, therefore, they reach forward and strive, reward is given to their efforts although imperfect, exactly as if they had fully discharged their duty; for, since their deficiencies are put out of sight by faith, God honours witht the title of reward what He gratuitously bestows upon them. Consequently, ‘to walk in the commandments of God,’ is not precisely equivalent to performing whatever the Law demands; but in this expression is included the indulgence with which God regards His children and pardons their faults. … [In effect, according to Mal. 3:17, it is] “as much as to say, that their obedience would not be acceptable to Him because it was deserving, but because He visits it with His paternal favour. Whence it appears how foolish is the pride of those who imagine that they make God their debtor, as if according to His agreement” (Comm. Lev. 26:3).

Calvin never envisions life under the Mosaic economy as devoid of divine grace and dependent upon human perfection, which is what a covenant of works requires. In fact, under the Sinaitic covenant, the gospel is clearly presented as a way of life under that covenant in the form of the shadows and types of Christ to come.

***Francis Turretin*** (1623-1687)

This of course must apply to believers who are saved by the work of Christ—either they belong to Christ in the way of faith, according to divine promise, or salvation is obtained in some other way. Earlier in the notes, and especially in my book on Turretin we find a clear articulation of the consensus view on this topic. See section “H” of these notes and from my book on Turretin pages 183; 197-214; 215-224; 251-299; 301-324.

1. We will explore man’s original state further below in connection with the covenant of nature or covenant of works. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. John W. Cooper, *Body. Soul And Life Everlasting: Biblical Anthropology And the Monism-Dualism Debate*, Updated with a new preface by the author(1989; reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Leicester, England: Apollos, 2000), 10-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Ibid.* 12-13. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion,* vol. I (I.xv.6), edited by John T. McNeill, translated by Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 192. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Cooper, 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Thus in Proverbs 23: 16, the kidneys rejoice: “Yes, my inmost being [literally, kidneys] will rejoice when your lips speak right things.” [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Cooper, 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. All Biblical quotations are from the New King James Version. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Cooper, 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Ibid., 92.* [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See for example Mt. 22:37. Mk. 12:30, Lk. 10:27, 12: 19, Eph. 5:28-29, and I Thes. 5:23. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See for example Mt. 15:37, 27:50, Mk. 15:37, Lk. 23:46, 48, and Jn. 19:30. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 205. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology,* 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 539. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 192. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1907), 487. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. John Miley, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1989), 399-400. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Strong, 487. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Berkhof, 192. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Erickson, 537-557. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Strong, 484. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, *Anthropology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Calvin (I.vx.2), 184. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics,* vol. 2, *God and Creation.* edited by John Bolt, translated by John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 556. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Erickson, 537-557. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. J. Gresham Machen, *The Christian View o{Man* (Carlisle. PA: Banner of Truth, 1995), 141. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Berkhof. 194. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. All quotations from the confessions and catechisms are taken from *Ecumenical and Reformed Creeds and Confessions,* Classroom Edition (Hospers. IA: Siouxland Press, 1991). All emphases are added to the quotations. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology,* vol. 3, *Sin* & *Salvation* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2004), 75. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Miley, 403. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Machen, 143-144. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Hoekema, 222-226. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Brooks, *The Covenant of Grace Proved and Opened*, in *Works*, 5: 293. John Ball, *A Treatise of the Covenant of Grace*, p. 5, offers an additional perspective on this question: “[I]n making Covenant with the creature God is not tied to verball expressions, but often he contracts the Covenant in reall impressions in the heart and frame of the Creature, which is apparent in the Covenant so often mentioned with the unreasonable creature, and this was the manner of covenanting with our first parents in the state of Innocency: but is most observable in the restored reasonable creature, when God shall put his Lawes into their hearts, and write them in their inward parts, *Jer.* 31.33, and the more perfect the creature growes, the more reall shall the impression be. . . .” Also, p. 6: “We reade not the word Covenant betwixt God and man, ever since the Creation, both in Innocency, and under the fall: but we have in Scripture what may amount to as much.” [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Interestingly, the title of De Graaf’s work in Dutch is *Verbondsgeschiedenis*—literally translated this may be rendered, *Covenant history* or *History of covenant*, and that covenant history, for De Graaf, commences in Paradise. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Herman Bavinck makes this point well (see RD, III, ), also …. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. James B. 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 University for Christian Higher Education, 1982), 267; idem, “The Strengths and Weaknesses of the Westminster Theology,” in *The Westminster Confession in the Church Today*, ed. Alasdair I. C. Heron (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew, 1982), 48ff. These articles repeat almost everything Torrance had argued in his earlier article “Covenant or Contract? A Study of the Theological Background of Worship in Seventeenth-Century Scotland,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 23 (February 1970): 51-76. Note: this section of notes is taken verbatim from by Ph.D. dissertation, 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Torrance, “Calvin and Puritanism in England and Scotland,” 268. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Torrance, “Calvin and Puritanism in England and Scotland,” 268 fn. 9; idem, “Covenant or Contract?”, 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Torrance, “Calvin and Puritanism in England and Scotland,” 268-269. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Torrance, “Calvin and Puritanism in England and Scotland,” 269-270. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Torrance, “Calvin and Puritanism in England and Scotland,” 271; idem, “Covenant or Contract?”, 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Torrance, “Calvin and Puritanism in England and Scotland,” 272. Torrance cites Calvin’s *Institutio* II.ix.4 as proving that this was Calvin’s position as well. In fact, this citation offers virtually a mirror portrait of what characterized seventeenth-century federalism, as will be demonstrated in the body of this dissertation. Also see Torrance, “Strengths and Weaknesses of the Westminster Theology,” p. 49, where the same points are argued. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Torrance, “Strengths and Weaknesses of the Westminster Theology,” 47; idem, “Covenant or Contract?”, 68-69. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Torrance, “Calvin and Puritanism in England and Scotland,” 273-276; idem, “Strengths and Weaknesses of the Westminster Theology,” 46-47, 49-50; idem, “Covenant or Contract?”, 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Torrance, “Strengths and Weaknesses of the Westminster Theology,” 40; idem, “Calvin and Puritanism in England and Scotland,” 265. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Torrance, “Strengths and Weaknesses of the Westminster Theology,” 50-51. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Torrance, “Strengths and Weaknesses of the Westminster Theology,” 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Torrance, “Covenant or Contract?”, 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. Torrance, “Covenant or Contract?”, 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Torrance, “Strengths and Weaknesses of the Westminster Theology,” 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Torrance, “Covenant or Contract?”, 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Holmes Rolston, III, *John Calvin versus the Westminster Confession* (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1972), 16. Also see Rolston’s article “Responsible Man in Reformed Theology: Calvin versus the *Westminster Confession*,” *The Scottish Journal of Theology* 23 (1970): 129-156. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Rolston, *John Calvin versus the Westminster Confession*, 17-19. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Rolston, *John Calvin versus the Westminster Confession*, 21-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Rolston argues this point in his own (and in our judgment skewed) exposition of Calvin’s theology in chapter two, *John Calvin versus the Westminster Confession*, 23-37. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Rolston, *John Calvin versus the Westminster Confession*, 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Rolston, *John Calvin versus the Westminster Confession*, 133. Other representatives of this assessment of federal theology are David N. J. Poole, *The History of the Covenant Concept from the Bible to Johannes Cloppenburg: De Foedere Dei* (San Francisco: Mellan Research University Press, 1992), 255; Donald J. Bruggink, “Calvin and Federal Theology,” *Reformed Review* 13 (September 1959): 15-22; W. Wilson Benton, Jr., “Federal Theology: Review for Revision,” in *Through Christ’s Word: A Festschrift for Dr. Philip E. Hughes*, ed. W. Robert Godfrey and Jesse L. Boyd III (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1985), 180-204. For a similar assessment of federal theology on the Dutch scene, following in the line of Dillistone, Torrance, and Rolston, see Nico T. Bakker, *Miskende Gratie—Van Calvijn tot Witsius: Een vergelijkende lezing, balans van 150 jaar gereformeerde orthodoxie* (Kampen: Uitgeversmaatschappij J.H. Kok, 1991), 125-130, 170-177. See my summary of his views in “The Doctrine of the *Pactum Salutis* in the Covenant Theology of Herman Witsius,” *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 13 (2002): 107-109. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. See his commentary on Romans. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Turretin, *Institutio theologiae elencticae*, XVII.v.3; also cf. Wollebius, *Compendium theologiae christianae*, Bk. II.i.11. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Richard Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985). [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Turretin, *Institutio theologiae elencticae*, XVII.v.6. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Turretin, *Institutio theologiae elencticae*, XVII.v.7. A similar discussion is found in Wollebius, Bk. II.i.15. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Among writers who mostly fall under the Reformed umbrella and dislike and either wish to caution against, revise, or altogether reject the doctrine of the covenant of works, at least according to *their own portrait* of the doctrine are F. W. Dillistone, *The Structure of the Divine Society* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1951), 131ff.; Nico T. Bakker, *Miskende Gratie—Van Calvijn tot Witsius: Een vergelijkende lezing, balans van 150 jaar gereformeerde orthodoxie* (Kampen: Uitgeversmaatschappij J.H. Kok, 1991), 31-36; James B. Torrance, “Covenant or Contract? A Study of the Theological Background of Worship in Seventeenth-Century Scotland,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 23 (February 1970): 51-76; idem, “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 University for Christian Higher Education, 1982), 267; idem, “The Strengths and Weaknesses of the Westminster Theology,” in *The Westminster Confession in the Church Today*, ed. Alasdair I. C. Heron (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew, 1982), 48ff.; Holmes Rolston, III, *John Calvin versus the Westminster Confession* (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1972), passim; idem, “Responsible Man in Reformed Theology: Calvin versus the *Westminster Confession*,” *The Scottish Journal of Theology* 23 (1970): 129-156; John Murray, “The Adamic Administration,” *Collected Writings of John Murray*, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1976-1982), I: 47-59; Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1966), 214-226; Dennis Lee, “A Brief Study of the Doctrine of the Covenant of Works in the Reformed and Presbyterian Tradition: Pre-Creedal History, Varying Interpretations, and Critique,” *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal* 37 (November 2003): 55-81. Here we also mention S. G. De Graaf, “De Genade Gods en de Structuur der Gansche Schepping,” *Philosophia Reformata* 1 (1936): 17-29; idem, “Genade en Natuur,” in *Christus en de Wereld* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1939), 72-113, especially 87-96; idem, *Het Ware Geloof: Beschouwingen over Zondag 1-22 van de Heidelbergse Catechismus* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1954), 46-51; idem, *Promise and Deliverance*, trans. H. Evan Runner and Elisabath Wichers Runner, 4 vols. (St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada: Paideia Press, 1977-1981), I: 36-48;G. C. Berkouwer, *Sin,* Studies in Dogmatics, trans. Philip Holtrop (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 206-209; C. Van der Waal, *The Covenantal Gospel* (Neerlandia, Alberta: Inheritance Publications, 1990), 47-56; Clarence Stam, *The Covenant of Love: Exploring Our Relationship with God* (Winnipeg, Manitoba: Premier Publishing, 1999), 47-53; N. Diemer, *Het Scheppingsverbond met Adam: Het Verbond der Werken* (Kampen: Uitgave van J. H. Kok, 1932), 10-32; and insofar as he agrees with Diemer, Mark W. Karlberg, “Reformed Interpretation of the Mosaic Covenant,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 43 (Fall 1980): 1-57; idem, “The Original State of Adam: Tensions within Reformed Theology,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 87 (1987): 291-309; idem, “The Mosaic Covenant and the Concept of Works in Reformed Hermeneutics” (Ph.D. diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1980); also see Daniel P. Fuller, *Gospel and Law: Contrast or Continum: The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 18-64; Scott J. Hafemann, *The God of Promise and the Life of Faith: Understanding the Heart of the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001); Norman Shepherd, *The Call of Grace: How the Covenant Illuminates Salvation and Evangelism* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2000). For a cogent, albeit brief, survey and critique of many of these authors, see Rowland. S. Ward, *God and Adam: Reformed Theology and the Creation Covenant* (Wantirna, Australia: New Melbourne Press, 2003), 175-197. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology,* 3 vols., ed. James T. Dennison, Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 1992-1996), Topic VIII; A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (1879; reprint, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1972), 309-314; 367-377; idem, “God’s Covenants with Man—The Church,” in *Evangelical Theology: Lectures on Doctrine* (1890; reprint, Edinburgh: The Banner of Trust, 1976), 163-183; Robert L. Dabney, *Syllabus and Notes of the Course of Systematic and Polemic Theology,* 2nd ed. (St. Louis: Presbyterian Publishing Company of St. Louis, 1878), 300-305; A. Kuyper, A. *Dictaten Dogmatiek: collegedictaat van een der studenten. Vol. III: Locus de Foedere* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, *s.a* [1902]): 82-95; idem, *De Leer der Verbonden: Stichtelijke Bijbelstudien* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1909); Herman Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek,* 4th ed., 4 vols. (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1928), II, 524-550, in English trans. John Vriend, ed. John Bolt, *Reformed Church,* vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 563ff.; Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th revised and enlarged edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939, 1941), 211-18. We might extend this list: John Dick, Charles Hodge, J. H. Thornwell, Abraham Kuyper, Jr., W. G. T. Shedd, Geerhardus Vos, J. Gresham Machen, A. G. Honig, W. Heyns, Henry Beets, M. J. Bosma, Morton H. Smith, Robert L. Reymond, besides any number of British and Continental theologians from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. See Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics: Set Out and Illustrated from the Sources*, rev. ed., ed. Ernst Bizer, trans. G. T. Thomson (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1950; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), 281-300. Among those who have the rudiments of this doctrine, see John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion,* 2 vols., ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 2.i.3-11; and in this connection, see Peter A. Lillback, *The Binding of God: Calvin’s Role in the Development of Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 276-304; Wolfgang Musculus, *Loci communes* (Basel, 1560; 1563; 1573); idem, *Common Places of Christian Religion,* trans. John Man (London: Henry Bynneman, 1578); Zacharias Ursinus, *The Smaller Catechism* and *The Larger Catechism* (1562), trans. Lyle D. Bierma, in *An Introduction to the Heidelberg Catechism: Sources, History, and Theology,* Lyle D. Bierma, et al.,Texts and Studies in Reformation and Post-Reformation Thought, ed. Richard A. Muller (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005). As for the terminology used to define this doctrine, other terms include: the covenant of faith, the covenant of life, the paradisal covenant, the Edenic covenant, the covenant of creation, the covenant of nature. Interestingly, in spite of the different terminology, Reformed theologians were in general agreement about the essential features of this covenant, no matter the name assigned to it. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics,* II: 567. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics,* II: 569. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. A more recent translation of the Belgic Confession translates these words as follows: “For he transgressed the commandment of life, which he had received, and by his sin he separated himself from God, who was his true life, having corrupted his entire nature.” Original French text: “*Car il a transgressé le commandement de vie qu’il avait reçu, et s’est retranché de Dieu, qui était sa vraie vie, par son péché, ayant corrompu toute sa nature*….” [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Robert Rollock, *Catechism on God’s Covenants*, trans. and intro. Aaron C. Denlinger, in *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 20 (2009): Q & A 12, p. 111. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Quoted from Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics,* 296. “Adamus perfecta obedientia mereri nil potuisset; etenim Deus iure talem obedientiam potuit postulare ut supremus et absolutus Dominus homoque illam obedientiam debebat tum ob perfections divinas tum ob propriam felicitatem ac beneficia a Deo accepta maxima, adeoque obedientia vel perfectissima opus fuisset pure debitium. −− Vita aeterna proinde homini promissa ac repraesentata fuit *neutiquam ut merces.* −− (569): Adamus vitam aeternam a Deo petere potuisset nonnisi *vi pacti.*” See the discussion of this issue in J. Mark Beach, *Christ and the Covenants: Francis Turretin’s Federal Theology as a Defense of the Doctrine of Grace,* Historical Reformed Theology, eds. Herman J. Selderhuis, et al.(Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 113-119; 199-202. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Turretin, *Institutio theologiae elencticae*, XVII.v.3; also cf. Wollebius, *Compendium theologiae christianae*, Bk. II.i.11. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Richard Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985). [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Turretin, *Institutio theologiae elencticae*, XVII.v.6. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Turretin, *Institutio theologiae elencticae*, XVII.v.7. A similar discussion is found in Johannes Wollebius, *Compendium theologiae christianae* (Oxford, 1657), Bk. II.i.15; in *Reformed Dogmatics.* , trans. and ed. John W. Beardslee, III (Oxford University Press, 1965), 193-194. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. A. B. Van Zandt, “The Doctrine of the Covenants Considered as the Central Principle of Theology,” *The Presbyterian Review* 3 [1882]: 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 3 vols. (1888-1894); repr., third edition in one vol., Alan W. Gomes, ed. (Phillipsburg, New Jersey, 2003), 538. Also see Dabney, *SPT*, 300-305. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. The commandment of life, which some Reformed theologians call “the probationary statue,” certainly had a unique function, for in being a positive command it provided “a better test of implicit faith and obedience than a moral statue” could do. It “required obedience for no reason but the sovereign will of God.” However, and this is a point not to be missed, the violation of this positive command was also a violation of the moral law, for its violation reveals “contempt of authority, disbelief of God and belief of Satan, discontent with the existing state, impatient curiosity to know, pride and ambition” (Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 538). The probationary command, then, tested Adam in his implicit obedience to God. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Robert L. Dabney explains what would characterize man’s relationship with God if the covenant in Paradise was not established. “He [God] might justly have held him [Adam] always under the natural relationship; and Adam’s obedience, however long continued, would not have brought God into his debt for the future. Thus, his holiness being mutable, his blessedness would always have hung in suspense. 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” (*SPT*, 302; *italics* added). [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics,* II: 568. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics,* II: 569. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. First published in Dutch, 1992. J. van Genderen and W. H. Velema, *Concise Reformed Dogmatics*, trans. Gerrit Bilkes and Ed. M. van der Maas (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. Edwards, *Original Sin*, Yale edition, 389. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. Edwards, *Original Sin*, 389. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. Edwards, *Original Sin*, 390. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Edwards, *Original Sin*, 390. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. Edwards, *Original Sin*, 390-391. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. Edwards, *Original Sin*, 391. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. Edwards, *Original Sin*, 391ff., n. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. Edwards, *Original Sin*, 394-397. See Smith’s summary of Edwards’ arguments here, *Jonathan Edwards*, 95f. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. Edwards, *Original Sin*, 397. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. Edwards, *Original Sin*, 397-398. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. Edwards, *Original Sin*, 398. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. Edwards, *Original Sin*, 400. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. Edwards, *Original Sin*, 400. [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. Edwards, *Original Sin*, 401. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. Edwards, *Original Sin*, 401. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. Edwards, *Original Sin*, 402. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. Edwards, *Original Sin*, 403. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. Edwards, *Original Sin*, 404. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. Edwards, *Original Sin*, 404ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. Edwards, *Original Sin*, 409. [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
105. G. C. Berkouwer, *Sin,* Studies in Dogmatics, trans. Philip C. Holtrop ([1960] Grand Rapaids: Eerdmans, 1971), 325. [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
106. Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 182. [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
107. Berkouwer, *Sin,* 340-41. [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
108. Berkouwer, *Sin,* 341. [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
109. Cf. Berkouwer, *Sin*, 343f.; 347-53. [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
110. The standard work on Calvin’s theology is François Wendel’s *Calvin: Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*, trans. Philip Mairet (Repr., Durham, South Carolina: The Labyrinth Press, 1987); also see T. H. L. Parker’s *Calvin: An Introduction to His Thought* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1995), for a reliable analysis of Calvin’s *Institutes;* and for biographies on Calvin, see T. H. L. Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975) and Bernard Cottret, *Calvin: A Biography*, trans. M. Wallace McDonald (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000). Also see Richard A. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) for a contextual versus a merely dogmatic reading of Calvin. [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
111. John Calvin, *Calvin’s Calvinism: Treatises on the Eternal Predestination of God & the Secret Providence of God.* 2 vols. in 1, trans. Henry Cole (London, 1856-57; repr. Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Co., n.d) [1558], p. 271. [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
112. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* [1559], 2 vols., edited by John T. McNeill, translated by Ford Lewis Battles. Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), II.ii.17. All quotations from the *Institutes* are from the Battles translation unless otherwise indicated. *Joannis Calvini Opera Selecta.* Ediderunt P. Barth, W. Niesel, D. Scheuner. 5 vols. München, 1926-52; III:259: “Nam quod nascuntur moriones quidam, vel stupidi, defectus ille generalem Dei gratiam non obscurat. . . .”; hereafter cited as *OS*, followed by volume and page numbers. [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
113. Calvin, *Institutes*, II.ii.17. [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
114. John Calvin, *The Bondage and Liberation of the Will: A Defence of the Orthodox Doctrine of Human Choice against Pighius.* [1543], translated by G. I. Davies, edited by A. N. S. Lane. Texts and Studies in Reformation & Post-Reformation Thought. General editor, Richard A. Muller (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 167. [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
115. John Calvin, *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, trans. and intro. by J.K.S. Reid (London: James Clarke, 1961), 139; the French reads, fn2, p. 139: “For he [Pighius] does not consider that Jacob was truly made Israel by a special grace, in that he had been already elected in his mother’s womb.” *Ioannis Calvini Opera Omnia*, editors, B. G. Armstrong, et al., Series III: Scripta Ecclesiastica, Vol. 1: De Aeterna Dei Praedestinatione; De La Predestination Eternelle, edidit Wilhelm H. Neuser; French text edited by Olivier Fatio (Genève: Librairie Droz, 1998), 178: “Interea non cogitat peculiari gratia factum esse divinitus Israelem, qui in utero matris iam electus fuerat.” In the French, 179: “…que Jacob a esté vrayement facit Israel de grace speciale. . . .” Here it is clear that Calvin ties the idea of election to the locution *peculiar* or *special grace.* [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
116. Calvin, *Institues,* I.v.7; *CS*, III:51: “ut quum sit erga omnes innumeris modis benignus ac beneficus. . . .” [↑](#footnote-ref-116)
117. I have not searched for this language in his letters; perhaps it may be found there as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-117)
118. John Calvin, *Sermons of M. Iohn Calvin upon the Fifth Book of Moses called Deuteronomie,* translated by Arthur Golding (London, 1583; facsimile repr. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth, 1993), 1188. [↑](#footnote-ref-118)
119. Calvin, Comm. Psalm 74:16-17 [1557], CTS, 177. *CO*, 31:698. [↑](#footnote-ref-119)
120. Calvin, Comm. Psalm 74:16-17 [1557], CTS, 177. [↑](#footnote-ref-120)
121. Calvin, Comm. Psalm 74:16-17 [1557], CTS, 178. [↑](#footnote-ref-121)
122. Calvin, Comm. Psalm 31:19 [1557], CTS, 515. [↑](#footnote-ref-122)
123. Calvin, *Institutes*, I.v.8. Also see Calvin’s comments on this Psalm 107 in his commentary on the Psalms. [↑](#footnote-ref-123)
124. Calvin, *Institutes*, I.ii.1. [↑](#footnote-ref-124)
125. Calvin, *Institutes*, I.ii.1. [↑](#footnote-ref-125)
126. Calvin, *Calvin’s Calvinism, “*The Secret Providence of God” [1558], 340-341. [↑](#footnote-ref-126)
127. Calvin, *Calvin’s Calvinism, “*The Secret Providence of God” [1558], 340-341. [↑](#footnote-ref-127)
128. Calvin, Comm. Psalm 145:9 [1557], CTS, 276 [↑](#footnote-ref-128)
129. Calvin, Lectures on the Minor Prophets [1559], Zech. 12:10, CTS, 363. *CO,* 44:335. [↑](#footnote-ref-129)
130. Calvin, *Institutes*, II.iii.3; *CS*, III:274. [↑](#footnote-ref-130)
131. Calvin, *Institutes*, II.iii.3; *CS*, III:275. [↑](#footnote-ref-131)
132. Calvin, Comm. Isa. 3:5 [1551], CTS, 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-132)
133. Calvin, Comm. Isa. 3:5 [1551], CTS, 131, 132. *CO*, 36:83. [↑](#footnote-ref-133)
134. Calvin, *Institutes*, I.xvii.7. [↑](#footnote-ref-134)
135. Calvin, *Institutes*, I.xvi.1. [↑](#footnote-ref-135)
136. Calvin, *Institutes*, I.xvii.11. [↑](#footnote-ref-136)
137. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xx.2. [↑](#footnote-ref-137)
138. Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.xx.3. [↑](#footnote-ref-138)
139. Calvin, Comm. Isa. 3:3 [1551], CTS, 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-139)
140. Calvin, Comm. Isa. 3:4 [1551], CTS, 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-140)
141. Calvin, Comm. Isa. 3:3 [1551], CTS, 129. [↑](#footnote-ref-141)
142. Calvin, Comm. Isa. 3:4 [1551], CTS, 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-142)
143. Calvin, Comm. Isa. 3:5 [1551], CTS, 132. [↑](#footnote-ref-143)
144. See his *Institutes*, II.iii.4, and McNeill’s fn5. [↑](#footnote-ref-144)
145. Calvin, *Institutes*, II.iii.4. *OS* III:276: “Quanquam haec certissima est et facillima huius quaestionis solutio: non esse istas communes naturae dotes, sed speciales Dei gratias, quas varie et ad certum modum profanis alioqui hominibus dispensat. Qua ratione, non formidamus in vulgari sermone hunc bene natum, illum pravae naturae dicere. Nec tamen utrunque desinimus includere sub universali humanae pravitatis conditione: sed indicamus quid specialis gratiae in alterum Dominus contulerit, quo alterum non sit dignatus.” [↑](#footnote-ref-145)
146. Calvin, *Institutes*, II.iii.4. Also see Calvin’s comments in his Comm. Psalm 86:2 [1557], CTS, 381; and his remarks in his treatise *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God,* p. 134, where, in opposition to Pighius, he writes: “On my side, I admit that virtues which shine in the reprobate are laudable according to their own nature. . . .But as God looks upon the heart, which is the fount of works, a work, which is generally and in itself good, may be an abomination to God because of the vice latent in it.” *Ioannis Calvini Opera Omnia*, editors, B. G. Armstrong, et al., Series III: Scripta Ecclesiastica, Vol. 1: De Aeterna Dei Praedestinatione; De La Predestination Eternelle, edidit Wilhelm H. Neuser; French text edited by Olivier Fatio, p. 168: “Virtutes, quae in reprobis fulgent, suapte natura laudabiles esse fateor….Sed quia cordis fontem, unde fluunt opera, Deus respicit, nihil obstat, quominus opus, quod alioqui in se laudatur, ob vitium, quod intus latet, sit abominationi apud Deum.” [↑](#footnote-ref-146)
147. Calvin, *Institutes*, II.iii.3. [↑](#footnote-ref-147)
148. Calvin, *Institutes*, II.ii.14. *OS* III:257-258. [↑](#footnote-ref-148)
149. See Calvin’s discussion, *Institutes*, II.ii.15-16. [↑](#footnote-ref-149)
150. Calvin, Comm. Psalm 92:9-11 [1557], CTS, 502. [↑](#footnote-ref-150)
151. Calvin, *Sermons of M. Iohn Calvin upon the Fifth Book of Moses called Deuteronomie*, 1189. [↑](#footnote-ref-151)
152. Calvin, Comm. Psalm 92:9-11[1557], CTS, 502. [↑](#footnote-ref-152)
153. Calvin, *Calvin’s Calvinism* , “The Secret Providence of God” [1558], 268. *CO*, 37:289: “neque tamen hoc obstare quominus peculiarem suum amorem ad paucos restringat, quos ex multis eligere dignatus est.” [↑](#footnote-ref-153)
154. Calvin, Lectures on the Minor Prophets [1559], Mal. 1:2-6, CTS, 463. *CO,* 44:396: “. . . generali Dei amore. . .” [↑](#footnote-ref-154)
155. Calvin, Lectures on the Minor Prophets [1559], Jonah 4:10, 11, CTS, 142. [↑](#footnote-ref-155)
156. See, for example, Calvin’s Commentary on the Psalms [1557], CTS, such as: Ps. 22:9-10, pp. 369-370; Ps. 31:19, pp. 513-514; Ps. 36:6, p. 10; Ps. 104:1-12, p. 154; Ps. 145:14-15, pp. 277-278; Ps. 147:7-9, pp. 296-297. [↑](#footnote-ref-156)
157. For example, the third set of interpreters we examined earlier, Hoeksema, Engelsma, et al. [↑](#footnote-ref-157)
158. Calvin, *Calvin’s Calvinism* , “The Secret Providence of God” [1558], 268. [↑](#footnote-ref-158)
159. Calvin, Comm. Psalm 65:10[1557], CTS, 463. [↑](#footnote-ref-159)
160. Calvin, Lectures on the Minor Prophets [1559], Zech. 12:10, CTS, 361. [↑](#footnote-ref-160)
161. Calvin, *Institutes*, I.v.4. [↑](#footnote-ref-161)
162. Calvin, *Institutes*, I.v.14. [↑](#footnote-ref-162)
163. Calvin, *Institutes*, I.v.4. [↑](#footnote-ref-163)
164. See Calvin, *Institutes*, III.vii.6; III.xxii.1. [↑](#footnote-ref-164)
165. Among others, see Heppe, *Dogmatik des deutschen Protestantismus im sechzehnten Jahrhundert*, I:139ff.; also see chapter 1, fn. 8, as well as the two traditions thesis as argued by Trinterud, Greaves, and J. Wayne Baker and others; cf. chapter 1, fn. 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-165)
166. See Beardslee, “Theological Development at Geneva,” 517. [↑](#footnote-ref-166)
167. For a discussion of the rise of Amyraldianism in the Academy of Geneva and opposition to it, see Kiezer, *François Turrettini: Sa Vie et Ses Œuvres et Le Consensus*, 56-200; Beardslee, “Theological Development at Geneva,” 48-72; Martin I. Klauber, “The Context and Development of the Views of Jean-Alphonse Turrettini (1671-1737) on Religious Authority” (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1987), 22-83; idem, *Between Reformed Scholasticism and Pan-Protestantism: Jean-Alphonse Turretin (1671-1737) and Enlightened Orthodoxy at the Academy of Geneva* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press; London and Toronto: Associated University Press, 1994), 17-35, 37ff., 46ff.; Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy*,112-114; also Benedict, *Christ’s Churches Purely Reformed*,316-317; Wallace, “The Doctrine of the Covenant in the Elenctic Theology of Francis Turretin,” 160-161. On the dissolution of Reformed orthodoxy in Geneva, see the essays in *The Identity of Geneva: The Christian Commonwealth, 1564-1864*, eds. John B. Roney and Martin I. Klauber (Westport, Connecticut; London: Greenwood Press, 1998); also Dennison, “The Twilight of Scholasticism: Francis Turretin at the Dawn of the Enlightenment,” in *Protestant Scholasticism: Essays in Reassessment*, 244-255. [↑](#footnote-ref-167)
168. Turretin, *Institutio theologiae elencticae*, XII.vi.1. [↑](#footnote-ref-168)
169. Federal writers were fully predestinarian, a mark of all Reformed theologians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, *contra*, among many others, Miller, Trinterud, Baker and the “two traditions” thesis. For a demonstration of Bullinger’s predestinarianism see Venema, *Heinrich Bullinger and the Doctrine of Predestination: Author of “the other Reformed Tradition”?*,35-100. Bierma likewise demonstrates that Olevianus’s doctrine of the covenant did not temper or somehow ameliorate his doctrine of predestination, see *German Calvinism in the Confessional Age*, 83-84. Turretin epitomizes federal theology, yet also held firmly to the doctrine of predestination, see Topic IV. He devotes approximately an equal number of pages to the doctrine of predestination as he gives to expositing the covenant of nature and the covenant of grace. [↑](#footnote-ref-169)
170. Turretin cites the *Acta Synodi Nationalis . . . Dordrechti* (1620), Pt. I, pp. 115-16, on Article 2, “Concerning the Death of Christ”; also Johannes Arnoldus Corvinus, *Defensio Sententiae D. Iacobi Arminii . . . adversus . . . Tileno 3* (1615), p. 98; idem, *Petri Molinaei novi anatomici* (1632), p. 440. See Turretin, *Institutio theologiae elencticae*, XII.vi.2. [↑](#footnote-ref-170)
171. Turretin cites Testard’s *Eirenikon*, Th. 112 (1633), pp. 82-83; Th. 111, p. 82; Th. 113, pp. 83-84. See Turretin, *Institutio theologiae elencticae*, XII.vi.3. On Testard’s role in the controversies surrounding Salmurian ideas, see Brian G. Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy*, 84-99. [↑](#footnote-ref-171)
172. Turretin cites Amyraut’s “Thesis theologicae de tribus fœderibus divinis,” in *Syntagma thesium theologicarum in academia Salmuriensi variis temporibus disputatorum*, 220. See Turretin, *Institutio theologiae elencticae*, XII.vi.3. [↑](#footnote-ref-172)
173. Turretin, *Institutio theologiae elencticae*, XII.vi.4. [↑](#footnote-ref-173)
174. Wallace, “Doctrine of the Covenant in the Elenctic Theology of Francis Turretin,” 173. Wallace further states the following: “In other words, the Amyraldians only grant a hypothetical universalism in the atonement of Christ, but while there is a universal covenant by which their salvation is objectively accomplished, it is not subjectively applied, because the subjective covenant is particular. In opposition, Turretin states that the covenant is particular both objectively and subjectively.” [↑](#footnote-ref-174)
175. Turretin, *Institutio theologiae elencticae*, XII.vi.5. “Illud vocationi internæ, et Ecclesiæ invisibili Electorum, quæ per eam constituitur, respondet. Hoc vero vocationi externæ et Ecclesiæ visibili Vocatorum. Posteriori respectu fœdus attenditur tantum quoad *promulgationem* et *oblationem*, quæ fit per vocationem externam, et quoad beneficia externa, quæ ex illa oblatione fluunt, in prædicatione Verbi, administratione Sacramentorum, et communione Sacrorum, quorum participes fiunt, quotquot in populo vel Ecclesia eandem professionem retinent; Et ita ad multos etiam reprobos extenditur, qui in Ecclesia visibili manent. Priori vero ulterius extenditur ad acceptationem, et collationem et receptionem beneficiorum omnium fœderalium, et communionem internam cum Christo per fidem, quo sensu non ad alios pertinent, quam ad electos, qui reipsa fiunt fœderis participes ex Dei intentione, in quibus puta conditiones ipsas fœderis implet, et quibus non offert tantum, sed confert actu fœderis beneficia. Quocunque vero modo spectetur fœdus istud, universale fuisse negant, non modo quoad acceptationem et collationem, sed nec quoad promulgationem aut oblationem, quæ licet latior aliquando fuerit et generalior, nunquam tamen absolute universalis fuerit, vel dici possit.” [↑](#footnote-ref-175)
176. Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man*, III.i.5—*De Œconomia Foederum Dei cum Hominibus:* “Porro quum Fœdus hoc ad *Electos* restringimus, clarum est nos de *interna*, mystica, & spirituali fœderis *communione* loqui. Ipsa enim salus hoc fœdere promittitur, & omnia quæ sunt evco,mevnu tv swthri,uj & infallibilem cum salute nexum habent; quæ præter electos nemiui contingunt mortalium. Alias si *externa* Fœderis Oeconomia spectetur, in communione verbi & Sacramentorum, in professione veræ fidei, in participatione multorum donorum, quæ, utut eximia ac luculenta sint, non tamen effecta sunt Sanctificantis Spiritus, neque arrha secuturæ felicitatis; negari non potest, quin eo respectu multi fœderati sint, quorum tamen nomina in Testamento Dei non comparent.” Also see the Westminster Larger Catechism, Q/As 30-32; cf. Thomas Ridgley, *Commentary on the Larger Catechism; Previously Entitled A Body of Divinity*, I:449-451. For further references, see chapter 3, fn. 29. An early example of this sort of distinction can be found in Olevianus (see Bierma’s discussion in *German Calvinism in the Confessional Age*, 80-82, 84). [↑](#footnote-ref-176)
177. Louis Berkhof (*Systematic* Theology, 4rd edition [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939, 1941], pp. 284-285) is mistaken when he argues that Turretin, along with other Reformed theologians of the seventeenth century, failed to explain how the non-elect are within the covenant of grace in some sense and consequently could become “covenant-breakers.” In fact, Turretin employs the very distinction that Berkhof claims was used by other writers. The distinction is discussed at length by Samuel Rutherford, *Covenant of Life Opened*, Part I, chapter XV, pp. 118-128 (also see chapter XIII); Francis Roberts, *Mysterium & Medulla Bibliorum*, 97-102; andJohn Barret, *God’s Love to Man, and Man’s Duty towards God*, sect. 15, pp. 352-361. The special priviledges of those who belong to the covenant externally is briefly treated by Barret, see sect. 16, 362-364, as he also treats at length the particular and special benefits that apply to those who belong to the covenant internally, see sections 18, 19, pp. 451-477. [↑](#footnote-ref-177)
178. Turretin, *Institutio theologiae elencticae*, XII.vi.6. [↑](#footnote-ref-178)
179. Turretin, *Institutio theologiae elencticae*, XII.vi.7. Turretin treats the particular scope of Christ’s atonement under Topic XIV.xiv.1-54; also see Witsius, *De Œconomia Foederum Dei cum Hominibus*, II.ix.1-36; John Owen, “The Death of Death in the Death of Christ,” in *The Works of John Owen* (including exposition of *Hebrews*),23 vols. (1850-55; reprint, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1968, 1991), vol. X; also Gisbertus Voetius, “Problematum de merito Christi,” in *D. Gysberit Voetii Selectarum Disputationum*, ed. Abrahm Kuyper (Amsterdam: Joannem Adamum Wormser, 1887), 173-217; especially 191ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-179)
180. Turretin, *Institutio theologiae elencticae*, XII.vi.8. [↑](#footnote-ref-180)
181. Turretin, *Institutio theologiae elencticae*, XII.vi.9. “At non ad omnes et singulos, sed tantum ad electos et fideles pertinent, quibus bona promissionibus illis comprehensa conferuntur, quia promissiones istæ sunt absolutæ, non conditionatæ, quæ a sola Dei gratia oriuntur, non ab ulla conditione quæ sit in homine suspenduntur: quod non modo notio Testamenti, quæ Fœderi isti datur, indicat; sed et natura promissionum, quæ non tantum sunt de fine, sed et de mediis ipsis et conditionibus, quæ proinde omnem conditionem excludunt. Licet vero promissio fœderis singularibus personis conditionate proponatur et applicetur; non sequitur ipsam promissionem pendere a voluntate hominis, adeoque absolutam non esse; quia propositio illa conditionata est consectarium promissionis absulutæ; et ita imperatur tanquam officium hominis, ut producatur simul et semel in electis ut Dei donum.” [↑](#footnote-ref-181)
182. Turretin, *Institutio theologiae elencticae*, XII.vi.8. [↑](#footnote-ref-182)
183. Turretin, *Institutio theologiae elencticae*, XII.vi.10. “Quamvis vero conditionatum dici possit quodam sensu, quatenus conditionem habet sibi subordinatam, etsi a Deo absolute efficiendam, cujus interventu res promissa detur, absolutum tamen proprie est, tum a priori, quia nullam causam habet præter liberrimam Dei voluntatem, tum a posteriori, quia a Deo constitutum est ipsam conditionem sine alia conditione certo et infallibiliter omnibus fœderatis dare; quod ad eos extendi posse, quos Deus ab æterno odit, et quos præterire decrevit, nec Verbum nec Fidem, quæ duo sunt salutis media, indulgendo, nemo nisi absurde dixerit.” [↑](#footnote-ref-183)
184. Wallace, “The Doctrine of the Covenant in the Elenctic Theology of Francis Turretin,” 174. [↑](#footnote-ref-184)
185. Turretin, *Institutio theologiae elencticae*, XII.vi.11. Turretin treats Hos. 1:9; Rom. 9:25; Eph. 2:12; Psa. 147:19, 20; Acts 14:16; Rom. 10:14. He further treats objections from Psa. 147:19, 20 and Eph. 2:12, replying in connection with the former text that the revelation of God in nature is of a different species than special revelation, for although it testifies to God as creator, it cannot lead people to him as redeemer. As for his reply in connection with the latter text, Turretin says among other things that inasmuch as the gospel has never been preached to scores of persons and peoples, the covenant of grace does not apply to them. In fact, if God seriously intended their salvation, he would have made the gospel known to them. See *Institutio theologiae elencticae*, XII.vi.12-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-185)
186. Turretin, *Institutio theologiae elencticae*, XII.vi.15. [↑](#footnote-ref-186)
187. Turretin, *Institutio theologiae elencticae*, XII.vi.16. [↑](#footnote-ref-187)
188. Wallace, “The Doctrine of the Covenant in the Elenctic Theology of Francis Turretin,” 174. [↑](#footnote-ref-188)
189. Turretin, *Institutio theologiae elencticae*, XII.vi.17. [↑](#footnote-ref-189)
190. Turretin, *Institutio theologiae elencticae*, XII.vi.17. “Et cum vana sit et illusoria Gratia universalis objectiva sine subjectiva; Vel dicendum est vires sufficientes omnibus et singulis restitui, per quas possint, si velint, Deo obsequi, et in fœdus cooptari, quod nihil aliud est, quam liberi arbitrii idolo litare, et gratiam discriminantem, contra Paulum, penitus abolere, quasi aliquid sit vel esse possit in nobis, quod sit ex nobis, juxta Pelagium, et non ex indebita Dei gratia, 1 Cor. iv. 7; Vel Deum aliquid intendere sub conditione impossibili, quam nec homo habere ex se potest, nec Deus illi vult largiri, qui solus potest.” [↑](#footnote-ref-190)
191. Wallace, “The Doctrine of the Covenant in the Elenctic Theology of Francis Turretin,” 174. [↑](#footnote-ref-191)
192. Turretin, *Institutio theologiae elencticae*, XII.vi.10. [↑](#footnote-ref-192)
193. Turretin, *Institutio theologiae elencticae*, XII.vi.18-19. [↑](#footnote-ref-193)
194. Turretin, *Institutio theologiae elencticae*, XII.vi.20-21. [↑](#footnote-ref-194)
195. Turretin, *Institutio theologiae elencticae*, XII.vi.22. “v. g. Posset quidem affirmari, Paganos juberi et teneri credere Evangelio, si illis annunciaretur; sed verum non est illos juberi et teneri credere Evangelio, etsi non annuncietur ipsis. Posset quidem affirmari Christum pro illis esse mortuum, si ipsis annunciaretur Evangelium, et si audito Evangelio resipiscerent et crederent, quia tunc pertinerent ad electos et fœderatos. Sed non posset affirmari, nec verum est, Christum pro illis esse mortuum, etsi nec credant nec resipiscant, nec quicquam audiant de Evangelio, quia tunc ducitur argumentum a conditionato ad absolutum.” [↑](#footnote-ref-195)
196. Cf. Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xxi.1; *OS*, IV, 368-370. [↑](#footnote-ref-196)
197. Turretin, *Institutio theologiae elencticae*, XII.vi.23. See Wallace’s remarks (“The Doctrine of the Covenant in the Elenctic Theology of Francis Turretin,” 174-175): “The first option is impossible, because God’s common grace (what Turretin calls “various testimonies of his goodness and patience to the pagans”) does not reveal his mercy—only the satisfaction of Christ can do that. But even if it did point to God’s placability, it would still be insufficient for salvation, because it is not enough to know that God is willing to be reconciled to us, we must also know that he *is* (or at least will be) reconciled to us [XII.vi.23]. Hence we are left with the second option—that God intends something which he has no intention of accomplishing—which is a patent absurdity.” [↑](#footnote-ref-197)
198. Turretin, *Institutio theologiae elencticae*, XII.vi.24. *“Aliud vero est beneficentiam suam et avnoch.n testari erga homines per bonorum corporalium concessionem, vel per pœnarum debitarum suspensionem et dilationem; quod oritur ex bonitate et sapientia Dei Creatoris et Gubernatoris in ordine naturæ; Aliud misericordiam exhibere in remissione peccatorum et bonorum spiritualium et æternorum communicatione, quod sine Christo fieri nequit.”* [↑](#footnote-ref-198)
199. See Calvin’s commentary on Acts 14:17 in *Commentarii in Acta Apostolorum* (Amstelodami: Joannem Jacobi Schipper, 1667), 130. Also see *Formula Consensus Helvetica*, canons XVIII, XX. [↑](#footnote-ref-199)
200. Turretin, *Institutio theologiae elencticae*, XII.vi.25-26. In further arguing this point, Turretin touches on Heb. 11:6; Rom. 10:17; Acts 17:30; Col. 1:13; and refers to his treatment of Rom. 1:19, 20; 2:4 under Topic IV, Question 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-200)
201. Turretin, *Institutio theologiae elencticae*, XII.vi.27-28. [↑](#footnote-ref-201)
202. Turretin, *Institutio theologiae elencticae*, XII.vi.29. [↑](#footnote-ref-202)
203. Turretin, *Institutio theologiae elencticae*, XII.vi.29-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-203)
204. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms*, 293. [↑](#footnote-ref-204)
205. Turretin, *Institutio theologiae elencticae*, XII.vi.31. “Promissiones Evangelii ad omnes et singulos credentes pertinent; At ego credo; Ergo ad me etiam pertinent.” Turretin speaks of the *syllogismus practicus* in connection with the doctrine of election as well, where (*Institutio theologiae elencticae*, IV.xiii.4) he speaks of it as follows: “Whoever truly believes and repents is elect; now I believe, etc., therefore I am elect” (“Quisquis vere credit et resipiscit electus est; Atqui ego credo, &c. Ergo electus sum”). Also see Witsius, *De Œconomia Foederum Dei cum Hominibus*, III.iv.28. Calvin also comes to something close to the *syllogismus practicus* (see *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III.ii.38; III.xiv.18-20; III.xv.8; III.xxiv.4-5); as does the Heidelberg Catechism, Q/A 86—”and we do good so that we may be assured of our faith by its fruits. . . ; also see Canons of Dordrecht, Head V, art. 10. The Belgic Confession, art. 24, pulls in the opposition direction relative to the believer’s assurance of salvation. Joel R. Beeke takes up at length the question of assurance in Calvin and his heirs in *The Quest for Full Assurance: The Legacy of Calvin and His Successor* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1999), 29-30, 65-72, 78-81, 104-106, 131-142, 196-197. Some of the literature surrounding Calvin on this question includes Wilhelm Niesel, *The Theology of Calvin*, trans. Harold Knight (1956; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 169-181; Venema, “The Twofold Nature of the Gospel in Calvin’s Theology: The *duplex gratia dei* and the Interpretation of Calvin’s Theology,” 363-382; and on the confessions, see Jan Rohls, *Reformed Confessions: Theology from Zurich to Barmen*, 135-139. Also to be noted is Beza’s discussion of assurance in his *Confession de la Foy Du chrestienne* (Geneva, 1558), see the English translation by James Clark, *The Christian Faith*, 4.18-4.20. [↑](#footnote-ref-205)
206. Turretin, *Institutio theologiae elencticae*, XII.vi.31. [↑](#footnote-ref-206)
207. Turretin, *Institutio theologiae elencticae*, XII.vi.32. Turretin references Calvin’s *Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God* , trans. J.K.S. Reid (1961), p. 109, 149; *Calumniae Nebulonis*, CR 37.293; cf. also *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, III.xxii.2; III.xxiv.15; Comm. on First Timothy 2 (Eerdmans), pp. 205-20; (Baker), 49-72, especially v. 4, pp. 54-55. [↑](#footnote-ref-207)
208. Directly related to this idea is the permanency of the covenant of grace. See Cocceius, *Summa doctrinae de foedere et testamento Dei*, §§245-265; van Mastricht, *Theoretico-practica theologia*, V.i.24 (iv); also see Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 388-389, as well as Francis Roberts, *Mysterium & Medulla Bibliorum*, 139-158; Sedgwick, *Bowels of Tender Mercy Sealed in the Everlasting Covenant*,138-148; Patrick Gillespie, *Ark of the Testament Opened*,part II, 88-116. [↑](#footnote-ref-208)
209. Predestination is typically discussed in Reformed dogmatics, with a distinct treatment of both election and reprobation. See Turretin, Topic IV, especially questions 11, 14, 17; also Cocceius, *Summa Theologiae*, XIV, XXXVII-XXXIX; and the discussion of Cocceius’ treatment of this topic by van Asselt, *The Federal Theology of Johannes Cocceius*, 197-226; Witsius, *De Œconomia Foederum Dei cum Hominibus*, III.iv.1-30; van Mastricht, *Theoretico-practica theologia*, III.i-iv, especially chapter 4 on reprobation; Peter Martyr Vermigli, *Loci communes D. Petri Martyris Vermilii … ex variis ipsis autoris scriptis, in unum librum collecti & in quatuor Classes* distributi, editio secunda (London: Thomas Vautrolleris, 1583), 443-476; Musculus, *Common Places of Christian Religion*, 501-517;Zanchius, *H. Zanchius: His Confession of Christian Religion*, chapter III, 14-18; Polanus, *Substance of Christian Religion*,Bk. I, 16-17; Trelcatius, *Scholastica et methodica locorum communium s. theologiae institutio,* Bk. II, 31-38; Bucanus, *Body of Divinity, or: Institutions of Christian Religion*, 445-472;Ames, *Medulla ss. Theologiae,* Bk. I, chapter 25; John Downame, *Summe of Sacred Divinitie* (London, 1628), 285-307; Wollebius, *Compendium theologiae christianae*, Bk. I, chapter 4; Leigh, *Systeme or Body of Divinity*, 268-279; Rijssenius, *Summa theologicae elencticae,* chapter VI. Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 150-189. Also see Calvin, *Institutes*, III.xxi.5, 7; III.xxii.2. As noted above, for Calvin, the doctrine of election can be inferred from the historical fact that “the covenant of life” is not preached and propagated to all people; and where it is preached it meets with the diverse response of acceptance or rejection according to God’s eternal decision (III.xxi.1). See Wendel, *Calvin: Origins and Development of His Religious Thought*, 263-284; and Fred H. Klooster, *Calvin’s Doctrine of Predestination*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977). Cf. The Scots Confession (1560), art. 8; Second Helvetic Confession (1566), chapter 10, [1.], [2.]; Westminster Confession of Faith (1647), chapter 3, 3-8. Among later writers see Pictet, *Christian Theology*, 202-218; Ridgley, *Commentary on the Larger Catechism; Previously Entitled A Body of Divinity*, I:254-321; John Brown, *Systematic Theology of John Brown of Haddington*, 147-170. Also cf. Rohls, *Reformed Confessions*, 148-166; von Rohr, *Covenant of Grace in Puritan Thought*, 113-153; van Asselt, *Federal Theology of Johannes Cocceius*, 197-226. [↑](#footnote-ref-209)
210. Belgic Confession, art. 24, quoted from *Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition*, II, 417. The Second Helvetic Confession (chapter 10, [7.]) reminds believers to look for their election in Christ in responding to the call of the gospel: “For the preaching of the gospel is to be heard, and it is to be believed; and it is to be held as beyond doubt that if you believe and are in Christ, you are elected.” [↑](#footnote-ref-210)