

Interpreting the Covenant of Works

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The Westminster doctrine of the Covenant of Works is not a Reformed *sine qua non*, for though it was common to believe in a Covenant of Works by the 17th century, Reformed Confessions of the 16th century did not include the Covenant of Works. As John Murray explained:

Towards the end of the 16th century the administration dispensed to Adam in Eden, focused in the prohibition to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, had come to be interpreted as a covenant, frequently called the Covenant of Works, sometimes a covenant of life, or the Legal Covenant. It is, however, significant that the early covenant theologians did not construe this Adamic administration as a covenant, far less as a covenant of works. Reformed creeds of the 16th century such as the French Confession (1559), the Scottish Confession (1560), the Belgic Confession (1561), the Thirty-Nine Articles (1562), the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), and the Second Helvetic (1566) do not exhibit any such construction of the Edenic institution. After the pattern of the theological thought prevailing at the time of their preparation, the term ‘covenant,’ insofar as it pertained to God’s relations with men, was interpreted as designating the relation constituted by redemptive provisions and as belonging, therefore, to the sphere of saving grace.¹

Important as it is, therefore, to the theology of the Westminster Standards, the fact that other Reformed Confessions often neglect even to mention a Covenant of Works indicates that it should *not*, contrary to the opinions of some, be made a test of Reformed orthodoxy. Even if one wished to make it a test of orthodoxy, he would face the question of which version of the Covenant of Works should be the standard, for there is more than one interpretation of the Covenant of Works among those who hold it. Add to this that John Murray, one of the most important representatives of Westminster orthodoxy in the 20th century denied the Covenant of Works altogether.

In part due to the influence of John Murray, a great deal of recent debate about Reformed theology and the Gospel has centered in the doctrine of the Covenant of Works. If we include James Jordan — an important Reformed Biblical theologian whose views are distinct — and John Murray — and we must because his importance as a Presbyterian theologian and the impact he has had on American Presbyterian theology is far too great to ignore — there are at least four positions among orthodox Reformed thinkers and teachers. First, there is what appears to be the majority view that the Covenant of Works is a gracious covenant. Works are required, but the entire arrangement is so designed that we are most impressed with God’s condescending goodness. Second, there is the view of Meredith Kline and his disciples that the Covenant of

¹ John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray: 4, Studies in Theology*, “Covenant Theology,” (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1982), pp. 217-18.

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Works is a strictly legal covenant whose reward must be earned in terms of plain and pure merit. Third, there is John Murray's view which may be said to deny the language of the Covenant of Works more than the substance of the thing. Murray says there is no covenant in the Garden, but he obviously believes in the kind of Adamic headship that the Westminster Standards and other Reformed Confessions require. Fourth, there is the view of James Jordan, who has been influenced by Meredith Kline's view of creation as a covenantal act, but who understand the original covenant in a manner different from Kline. Like Murray, Jordan denies a Covenant of Works, but also like Murray, he affirms Adamic headship, a period of probation and other features of a Covenant of Works. These four positions are significantly diverse but all fall within the realm of Reformed and even Westminster orthodoxy.

The Covenant of Works: A Gracious Covenant

First, there is what may be considered the majority view among Presbyterian and Reformed writers on the Covenant of Works. These writers typically emphasize that though it is called a Covenant of Works, the grace of God in giving the covenant is evidenced in numerous particulars, especially in two respects: one, that Adam owes God obedience simply by virtue of being His creature so the gift of the covenant is a special sign of God's goodness, and two, that God promises a reward — eternal life — which so far outweighs any merit that may be thought to accrue to Adam's obedience. Joseph Morecraft III has written recently on the Covenant of Works and emphasized grace so fully it takes him eight pages to list and explain the various aspects of God's grace in the Covenant of Works.² He even states,

The principles of grace that shine out so brightly in the gospel of Christ, revealed in the New Testament, are intimated and introduced in the very beginning of history, at the fountain head of the human race, in the first covenant God ever made with man, in Eden before the Fall, with Adam as the covenant representative of the human race.³

The emphasis on grace in Morecraft's exposition may be greater than is common in traditional expositions, but it is thoroughly in accord with the spirit of the classic Reformed accounts such as that of Francis Turretin who sees the Covenant of Works as a gracious covenant.⁴ Alexander Hodge, in his exposition of the Westminster Confession goes so far as to say the following.

This covenant [the Covenant of Works] was also *in its essence a covenant of grace*, in that it graciously promised life in the society of God as the free-granted reward of an obedience already unconditionally due. Nevertheless it was a covenant of works and law with respect to its demands and conditions.⁵

² "The Covenant of Works," pp. 115-122.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

⁴ With respect to God, Turretin writes, the Covenant of Works "was gratuitous," "a gratuitous promise." *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1992), vol. 1, p. 578.

⁵ A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1958), p.122. Emphasis added.

The Covenant of Works: Strict Merit

Common though this view may be, it has been vigorously challenged. With regard to the Covenant of Works, Meredith Kline regards all mention of grace as a serious distortion of the Biblical doctrine. His disciple, Bill Baldwin, claims that respected Reformed theologians such as William Ames, the Westminster Divines, Francis Turretin, John Owen, Thomas Boston, R. L. Dabney, John Murray, Louis Berkhof, and Anthony Hoekema — in holding that the Covenant of Works was a gracious covenant, are in fact compromising the idea of a Covenant of Works and thereby endangering the Reformed faith.⁶ He even accuses Robert Lewis Dabney of rejecting the Gospel.⁷ It will strike most readers as odd, to say the least, that the framers of the Westminster Confession are included in a list of some of the most respected names in Reformed theology as men whose views distort the theology of the Covenant of Works. How can these things be?

From Kline's perspective, the problem with all of these theologians appears when they allow for any modicum of grace in the Covenant of Works. For Kline, grace in a Covenant of Works compromises the nature of the covenant and in so doing, undermines the Reformed doctrine of grace and justification. This requires more explanation, for it may not be immediately apparent. To begin with, in Kline's view, serious trouble arises when the original creation is not regarded as a covenant of pure law. Baldwin explains why the creation must be pure law.

Creation only reveals law, not grace. This is because creation reveals the nature of God but not his free decisions (excepting, obviously, the free decisions to create, what to create, and how to providentially care for it once it's been created). If God is under no obligation to grant a covenant of works to a creature in his image, then the decision to do so is not necessitated by his nature but according to his mere good pleasure. If that is so, then creation cannot reveal this covenant. But Paul says it does. Therefore the covenant must be necessitated by God's nature.⁸

The reasoning here may be less than altogether persuasive, but the point is that if the covenant is given in creation itself, then it is not a free decision, a gift added later, but an aspect of creation that reveals who God is. Creation itself is seen as a covenantal act. In a pre-redemptive situation under a Covenant of Works, it can only be God's justice that is revealed in the covenant, for man does not need "grace." Grace a distinct matter entirely. The implications of this are expounded more clearly in the following.

To speak of a continuum of grace and works is nonsense. Adam would have obtained his reward by works or by grace; there is no middle ground. Romans 11:6

⁶ Bill Baldwin, "Several Quick Arguments that the Covenant of Works is not Gracious" in the Upper Register, http://www.upper-register.com/ct_gospel/several_quick.html.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid. The covenant is said to be "necessitated by God's nature" and therefore it is not a free gift. This may raise questions, but even if we granted this without argument, is it not odd to go on to say that because the covenant reveals God's nature it must be a matter of pure law? If there is a covenant relationship among the Persons of the Trinity that lies behind the creation of the world into a covenant relationship, is "law" the one and only appropriate word to describe that relationship?

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says exactly this regarding election according to God's grace: "And if by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace." The *Textus Receptus* addition to this statement is probably an interpolation, but it is logically implied: "But if it is of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work." God either elects by grace or according to works, never by a combination. God rewards according to grace or works, not some mixture. If Adam was to be received into eternal life by grace, then the covenant with him was all of grace. But if it was of works, it was not in any sense by grace, or work is no longer work.⁹

Thus, Kline objects to the use of the word grace in part because grace and works are opposing systems for obtaining the blessing of the covenant. It is also important for Kline that any use of the word "grace" for the prelapsarian arrangement utterly confuses theological categories since "grace" implies redemptive arrangements. Furthermore, according to Kline, the parallel between Adam and Christ demands that both covenants be conceived in terms of strict justice.

Grace is of course the term we use for the principle operative in the gospel that was missing from the pre-Fall covenant. Properly defined, grace is not merely the bestowal of unmerited blessings but God's blessing of man in spite of his *demerits*, in spite of his forfeiture of divine blessings. Clearly, we ought not apply this term *grace* to the pre-Fall situation, for neither the bestowal of blessings on Adam in the very process of creation nor the proposal to grant him additional blessings contemplated him as in a guilty state of demerit. Yet this is what Fuller and company are driven to do as they try to create the illusion of a continuum between the pre-Fall and the redemptive covenants. Only by this double-talk of using the term *grace* (obviously in a different sense) for the pre-Fall covenant can they becloud the big, plain contrast that actually exists between the two covenants (cf. Rom. 4:4).

Not grace but simple justice was the governing principle in the pre-Fall covenant; hence it is traditionally called the Covenant of Works. God is just and his justice is present in all he does. That is true of gospel administrations too, for the foundation of the gift of grace is Christ's satisfaction of divine justice. If you are looking for an element of continuity running through pre-Fall and redemptive covenants (without obliterating the contrast between them), there it is — not grace, but justice. In keeping with the nature of God's covenant with Adam as one of simple justice, covenant theology holds that Adam's obedience in the probation would have been the performing of a meritorious deed by which he earned the covenanted blessings.¹⁰

Though Kline is opposing the theology of Daniel P. Fuller, much of what he says applies equally well to the traditional conception of the Covenant of Works, for the "double-talk of using the word *grace*" is far more common among Reformed theologians than Kline's view.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Meredith Kline, "Covenant Theology Under Attack." This article is Kline's critique of the theology of Daniel P. Fuller. http://www.upper-register.com/ct_gospel/ct_under_attack.html. Emphasis in original.

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One of Kline's biggest problems is defining the word "merit." It is not a Biblical word and there are serious problems with the medieval conceptions of merit standing behind the language of the Westminster Standards and much Reformed discussion. Essentially two basic conceptions of merit have emerged. One, *condign merit*, is merit in the strict sense of the word. The other, *congruous merit*, is not strictly meritorious, but is accepted as such in God's generosity.¹¹ According to Lee Irons, Reformed theology has regrettably imported the notion of congruous merit into its view of the Covenant of Works.¹² For Kline, however, neither of these conceptions works well in considering the Covenant of Works because of the parallel between Adam and Christ. What Kline suggests is that we *redefine the notion of merit*. Lee Irons puts the new definition in these words: "merit is *constituted* only by fulfillment of the stipulations of a divinely-sanctioned covenant."¹³

On Kline's conception of the Covenant of Works, then, Adam in strict covenantal justice would have merited life if he had obeyed the covenant. His disobedience brought the curse upon the whole race of man. Christ, to save us, entered into what is for Him a Covenant of Works, but for us a Covenant of Grace. Jesus had to win the blessing of the covenant according to the strictest merit of the covenantal arrangements. It is that merit which is imputed to us in Christ and on the grounds of that merit we are declared just.

If Kline's view is correct, the *vast majority* of Presbyterian and Reformed theologians have expounded the Covenant of Works in a manner that *compromises the Gospel*. On the surface, that seems highly unlikely. But that is beside the point — which is that whether Kline's view is correct or not, there is obviously a profound difference of interpretation here.

The Covenant of Works: Covenant Denied, Essence Preserved

Though Kline's view of the Covenant of Works suggests that outright denial of this covenant would threaten the doctrine of justification by faith, we have to account for the fact that John Murray, one of the most distinguished proponents of Reformed doctrine in the 20th century and a recognized defender of the Reformed view of justification by faith, quite clearly denied the Covenant of Works. He was not alone. Not only among those influenced by Murray, but also among the Dutch Reformed in Europe, there are more than a few theologians and pastors who no longer hold to the Covenant of Works.

What, then, about the parallel between Adam and Christ that Romans 5 sets before us. If Adam was not in a Covenant of Works, how could the merits of Christ be imputed to us for our justification? How could Christ and Adam even be conceived of as two heads of the race apart from the covenantal idea? Did Murray deny all of this? As a matter of fact, Murray did see Adam as a representative head of the human race and regarded Adam's time in the Garden as a probationary test. Christ, the last Adam, came as a new representative head and likewise faced a probationary period of testing, upon the completion of which the blessings of the covenant became His. But Murray accepts all of these things without the notion of a Covenant of Works.

¹¹ This is a very simplistic and inadequate presentation; for a full and interesting introduction to the subject, see the essay by Lee Irons. "Redefining Merit: An Examination of Medieval Presuppositions in Covenant Theology." http://www.upper-register.com/ct_gospel/redefining_merit.html

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

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This suggests that one may deny the Covenant of Works in the strictest sense of the term, but preserve the essential notions of the Covenant of Works. With this in mind, it is important here to note again, as we said above, that the traditional notion of “merit” is not Biblical. Given Kline’s revised definition of merit as something constituted “by fulfillment of the stipulations of a divinely-sanctioned covenant,” we might say that what is required is not “merit” but just *covenant faithfulness* or *covenant obedience*. A view of the Edenic arrangement that includes representation and the imputation of Adam’s disobedience satisfies the essential demands of the Westminster doctrine.

In Murray’s view, it is essential to the argument of the apostle Paul that Adam and Christ be conceived of as two representative heads of two different humanities. The old human race in Adam is condemned in their head. The new human race in Christ is justified and accepted because of His righteousness. Jesus obeyed the covenant and fulfilled its terms perfectly. His righteousness is imputed to those who believe in Him. In this simple exposition, all of the essential elements of the Reformed view are included, but it is stated in terms that avoid the notion of a Covenant of Works. However, it seems that what Murray does, in fact, is to verbally deny a covenant relationship with Adam — since for Murray the word “covenant” implies redemptive arrangement — and then important all the elements of a covenant into his “Adamic Administration.” Although Murray would, like most Reformed writers, emphasize the graciousness of the original arrangement, in substance he affirms a Covenant of Works or something very close to one.

The point to be observed here is that orthodox Reformed thinkers are not bound to confess the Covenant of Works idea *per se*, nor are they bound to one particular interpretation of that Covenant. What they are bound to is the notions of representation, probation and imputation that are the foundation of the parallel headships of Adam and Christ.

A Covenant of Glory

James Jordan has challenged the traditional view of the Covenant of Works more deeply than Murray, while at the same time following Kline’s insight into the covenantal nature of the original creation, the fruit of a Biblical-theology approach to the creation account. Kline discovered covenantal aspects of the creation story that had been neglected and, in the opinion of many, thoroughly refuted Murray’s notion that there is no covenant in the Bible before the covenant given to Noah, which is when the word is first used.

Jordan, however, takes Kline’s approach one step further. He observes that the tree of life is not forbidden in the Garden, which implies that access to the tree of life is not the reward of the covenant in the Garden. It is, rather, an aspect of the blessing of that covenant freely offered to Adam and Eve from the beginning. Adam is not in a situation in which he is trying to earn life as a reward of obedience. Nor is he attempting to be justified on the basis of merit. If he were not accepted by God as righteous from the beginning, how could he be in the sanctuary of God enjoying face to face fellowship with God? What Adam lacked was the full glory of covenant blessing, including confirmation in holiness, represented in the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Jordan’s view does not deny that Adam was on probation nor does it detract from his representative headship. The parallel between Adam and Christ is preserved also. But the

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construction is not the traditional one of two contrasting covenants, one of works the other of grace. Jordan explains as follows.

Ultimately, then, there is only one covenant in two stages. Adam failed to keep the terms of the Adamic Covenant, and thus never came to the Melchizedekal Covenant; instead he came under the judgment of the Adamic Covenant (death [exile]), and began moving toward the inexorable kingly judgment of the Melchizedekal Covenant (damnation). Jesus, however, kept the Adamic Covenant and was advanced to the kingly glories of the Melchizedekal Covenant.

The One Covenant deformed by sin and death is the “Old Covenant.” The One Covenant matured by faithfulness and life is the “New Covenant,” which exists in glory.¹⁴

Jordan’s view, like Kline’s, sees the gift of the covenant as an expression of God’s nature, but for Jordan, it is an expression of the inter-Trinitarian love. Adam is created into a covenant relationship with God and he is to mature in that relationship until he becomes more like God so that he, too, understands good and evil and is able to rule in kingly glory. The prohibition of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, since it was a matter of probation, was temporary and for the purpose of educating Adam. The temptation from the serpent should have awakened Adam to the nature of good and evil, just like the test of naming the animals awakened Adam to the broad bio-cultural gap between himself and the animal world, preparing him for the blessing of a wife. If Adam had passed the test, he would, presumably, have been dressed in robes of glory and allowed access to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for he would have matured to the place that he understood its meaning.

The fall of Adam into sin meant that his posterity fell with him and that man could not be redeemed from the ultimate curse unless a substitute took the penalty for them. It was because of sin that the law, which should have been the way of life, became a burden and the means of condemnation. Because of the fall, man is under a curse and the works demanded by the covenant as an expression of faith and love can be twisted into a perverse form of attempting to place God under obligation to bless us. From all of this, Christ came to redeem us.

Jordan’s suggested revision of the Covenant of Works is most radical because it fundamentally denies the notion of two contrasting covenants. It does not however deny Adam’s headship and representative character nor the imputation of Adam’s sin and Jesus’ righteousness to the people they represented. It falls, therefore, within the boundaries of Reformed orthodoxy.

¹⁴ *Biblical Horizons*, “Thoughts on the Covenant of Works (part 2),” no. 53, September 1993. On the internet at: <http://www.biblicalhorizons.com/bh/bh053.htm>. A fuller exposition of Jordan’s view of the covenant can be found in his *Through New Eyes*.

Conclusion

I have outlined here four views of the Covenant of Works, or, to speak more strictly, four views of God's relationship in the Garden of Eden. From the perspective of Kline's view, the other three views threaten to undermine the Gospel of grace. This may seem unduly harsh, but in fact, Morecraft has implied something quite similar by his quotation of Wilhelmus à Brakel at the beginning of his article on the Covenant of Works.

Acquaintance with this covenant is of the greatest importance, for whoever errs here or denies the existence of the covenant of works, will not understand the covenant of grace, and will readily err concerning the mediatorship of the Lord Jesus.¹⁵

Here we are told that to err in understanding, which Kline presumably does from Morecraft's perspective, or to deny the existence of the Covenant of Works, which both John Murray and James Jordan do, is a serious problem. Interpretations other than Morecraft's all fall under Brakel's condemnation as views that will not understand the covenant of grace or the mediatorship of Christ, a condemnation essentially similar to Kline's.¹⁶

John Murray did not condemn all competing views as distortions of the Gospel or as dangerous errors, but he did make a clear call for reformation. He courageously called his fellow Reformed theologians to reconsider a doctrine included in the very structure of the Westminster Confession's view of the covenant.

Theology today must always be undergoing a reformation. The human understanding is imperfect. However architectonic may be the systematic constructions of any one generation or group of generations, there always remains the need for correction and reconstruction so that the structure may be brought into close approximation to the Scripture and the reproduction be a more faithful transcript or reflection of the heavenly exemplar.¹⁷

In another place, Murray pointed to the problems that exist in Reformed formulations of the Covenant of Grace, which, like the Covenant of Works, has more than one interpretation in Reformed history.

This formulation became the occasion of ardent dispute when it was applied to the Covenant of Grace. This dispute concerned particularly the matter of condition, the question being: Is the Covenant of Grace to be construed as conditional or unconditional? The controversy continues up to the present time, and it is not apparent that a solution can be obtained without a reorientation in terms of a revised definition of the Biblical concept of covenant.¹⁸

¹⁵ "The Covenant of Works" in *The New Southern Presbyterian Review*, vol. 1, no. 2, Fall, 2002, p. 112.

¹⁶ Remarkably, Morecraft quotes frequently from John Murray as if Murray did not deny the existence of a Covenant of Works. He even puts the expression "covenant of works" in brackets beside the expression Murray uses for his revised view, "the Adamic administration." Morecraft, "The Covenant of Works," pp. 127-128.

¹⁷ The Covenant of Grace

¹⁸ "Covenant Theology" in *Collected Writings of John Murray, 4: Studies in Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1982), p. 217.

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Murray's point is well-taken and it applies to the present controversy. When those attempting to be faithful to Reformed orthodoxy find themselves condemned by their zealous brothers for reasons that fall far short of persuasive demonstration, we are either facing a duplicitous distortion of the Reformed faith so profound that it defies explanation, or a crisis in the traditional covenantal paradigm. Kline's denunciation of Morecraft, Murray, and Jordan as men whose views deny the Gospel does not stand up to investigation. None of these men hold views which take away a parallel between Adam and Christ, deny representation, imputation, or monergistic grace. The excess of zeal producing these condemnations and the frantic spirit displayed in the sloppy haste of their formulation — I am referring here especially to Baldwin — suggest the desperation of one facing a painful paradigm breakdown.

What we really need, as John Murray suggested, is a fundamental reformulation of the Reformed view of the covenant. The place to begin, in my opinion, is with our understanding of the covenant among the Persons of the Trinity, for the doctrine of God must always be the heart of a truly Biblical and Reformed systematic theology.¹⁹

¹⁹ For a fuller critique of Kline's view and more extensive argument for a reformulation of the doctrine of the covenant, see my, *The Eternal Covenant: How the Trinity Reshapes Covenant Theology* (Moscow, Id.: Canon Press, 2003).