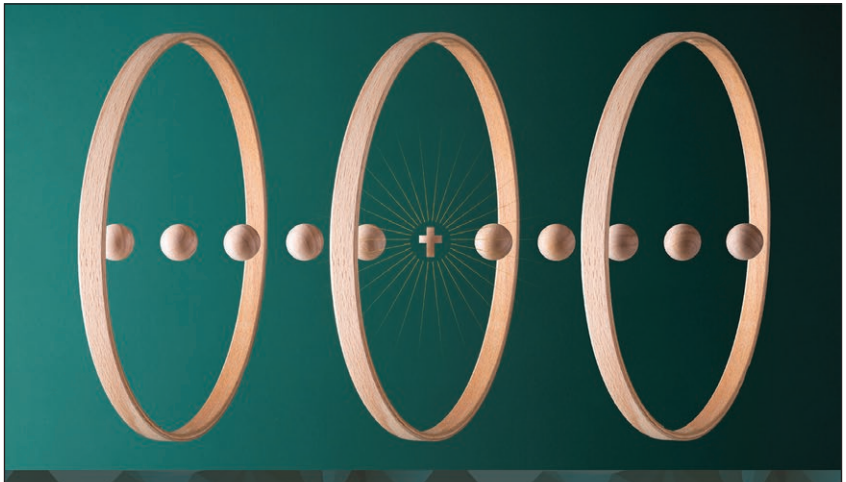

SPECTRUM MULTIVIEW BOOKS

BRENT E. PARKER *and*
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COVENANTAL AND DISPENSATIONAL THEOLOGIES

FOUR VIEWS ON THE CONTINUITY OF SCRIPTURE

WITH CONTRIBUTIONS FROM
Michael Horton, Stephen Wellum, Darrell Bock,
and Mark Snoeberger

ivp | InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Taken from *Covenantal and Dispensational Theologies*
by Brent E. Parker and Richard J. Lucas.

Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.
www.ivpress.com

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Covenant Theology

MICHAEL S. HORTON

Although there are many versions of "covenant theology" in use today across various disciplines of biblical studies and theology, I use it here to refer to the system of doctrine of classic, confessional Reformed orthodoxy. Highlighting both continuity of the one covenant of grace stretching from Genesis 3:15 to Revelation 22:21, covenant theology also recognizes the distinction between covenants based on the principle of law ("Do this and you will live") and those based on the principle of promise ("I will do this and you will live"). Behind these covenants lies the eternal covenant of redemption (*pactum salutis*) between the persons of the Trinity that provides the foundation for God's gracious purposes in Christ the Mediator.

Many evangelicals today, especially in North America, identify Reformed theology with the "TULIP" acrostic (i.e., the "Five Points of Calvinism"). However important these doctrines indeed are in Calvinist soteriology, they are not the center, much less the circumference, of Reformed theology. Since the nineteenth century, intellectual historians sought to identify an all-controlling idea from which all the parts of various systems are deduced. This method was highly contrastive (exaggerating distinctive emphases over against other systems) and reductionistic. Consequently, "Calvinism" was characterized by friend and foe by the sovereignty of God, often in contrast with other systems. B. B. Warfield recognized the dangers in such an approach—especially false contrasts of Reformed and Lutheran systems.[1]

[1]B. B. Warfield, *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991), 5:353-66. Challenging searches for "the formative principle of either type of Protestantism,"

I. John Hesselink observes, "Reformed theology is simply covenant theology."[2] But this is not to reduce the former to the *idea* of covenant as an organizing principle, the font of distinctiveness from all other systems. Precisely because Reformed theology recognizes different types of covenants, it cannot be reduced to a single idea. The Bible itself consists of two constitutions or covenant charters, Old and New, uniting by one unfolding covenant of grace from Genesis 3:15 to Revelation 22:21. Covenant theology is the architectural design or framework of Scripture itself. Unlike a central dogma, the framework of a building is spread out among a network of crossbeams and studs; even when invisible to the naked eye, the framework connects all the parts. My goal in this brief essay is to expose that covenantal framework.

ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN

Beyond affirming "covenant theology," we must define it. If dispensationalism (from a Reformed perspective) adds too many divisions in God's unfolding plan, the opposite danger—probably the dominant one in much of contemporary New Testament (NT) scholarship and systematic theology—is to reduce biblical history to a single covenant. The mature consensus among Reformed churches is summarized succinctly in the seventh chapter of the Westminster Confession of Faith:

> 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. 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. Man, by his Fall, having made himself incapable of life by that covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the covenant of grace: wherein he freely

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Warfield says that predestination for Calvinism "is one of its logical consequences," not a central dogma. If one is looking for a "central dogma," Warfield suggests, it is, for Reformed theology, "complete dependence upon the free mercy of a saving God." Its doctrine of predestination is simply "Augustinianism" (356). "Just as little can the doctrine of justification by faith be represented as specifically Lutheran . . . Calvinism asks with Lutheranism, indeed, that most poignant of all questions, What shall I do to be saved? And answers it as Lutheranism answers it" (356).

[2]I. John Hesselink, *On Being Reformed: Distinctive Characteristics and Common Misunderstandings* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant, 1983), 57.

> offered unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ, requiring of them faith in him, that they may be saved, and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto life, his Holy Spirit, to make them willing and able to believe.

But how did this architectural system develop, and what are its basic components?

Law and gospel. The most basic distinction is that between law and gospel. Influenced in part by Augustine's *Spirit and Letter*, Martin Luther said that whoever can make this distinction well should be given a doctorate.[3] "As the Reformers saw it," Otto Weber notes, "Paul was really understood here . . . [as] the distinction between law and Gospel, between the letter and the spirit, was brought to full theological validity."[4]

Law and gospel are commands distinguished from promises. Yet it goes deeper than a mere cataloging of Scripture into indicatives and imperatives. *God* is the speaker, and he is doing different things through the words he employs. Through the law God kills—extinguishing all hope of being justified by one's own will and effort—and through the gospel God makes alive, justifies, and sanctifies. Philipp Melanchthon, Luther's associate and author of the Augsburg Confession (1531), added a "third use" of the law—to guide believers in godly living, which attained confessional status in the Book of Concord (Solid Declaration VI). Article 4 of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession (1531) states, "All Scripture ought to be distributed into these two principal topics, the law and the promises." This is not a Marcionite opposition between Old and New Testaments, the article adds, since the free remission of sins in Christ is found along with the law in the Old Testament (OT).[5] According to the fifth article of the Formula of Concord, "We believe, teach, and confess that the distinction between the law and the Gospel is to be maintained in the Church with great diligence."[6]

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[3]Martin Luther, *Dr. Martin Luthers Sämmtliche Schriften* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1968), vol. 9, col. 802.

[4]Otto Weber, *Foundations of Dogmatics*, trans. Darrell L. Guder (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), 1:88.

[5]F. Bente, ed. *Triglot Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. W. H. T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia, 1921), Apology IV (II).5, 135.

[6]*Triglot Concordia*, FC Epitome V, (II).1, 503.

The Zurich Reformer Ulrich Zwingli was not entirely sympathetic with this distinction.[7] However, all other Reformed leaders not only agreed with Luther's distinction but with its importance. "We wish to affirm that Gospel should be distinguished from law and law from Gospel," wrote Peter Martyr Vermigli. "But this cannot be done by those who ascribe justification to works, and confuse them."[8] Even Zwingli's successor, Heinrich Bullinger (1504–1575), concurred, including the distinction in the Second Helvetic Confession: "The Gospel is indeed opposed to the law. For the law works wrath and pronounces a curse, whereas the Gospel preaches grace and blessing."[9]

Like Melanchthon, Calvin continued to speak of law and gospel in two senses: (1) as referring to the OT and NT and (2) as referring to condemnation and justification. This important nuance is found explicitly even in Paul, where he refers to "law" in both of these senses even in the same sentence: "But now the righteousness of God has been manifested *apart from the law*, although *the law and the Prophets* bear witness to it" (Rom 3:21). Calvin himself acknowledges these two senses: "The law has a twofold meaning; it sometimes includes the whole of what has been taught by Moses, and sometimes that part only which was peculiar to his ministration, which consisted of precepts, rewards, and punishments." The goal of his ministry was to lead the people of God "to despair as to their own righteousness, that they might flee to the haven of divine goodness, and so to Christ himself. This was the end or design of the Mosaic dispensation. . . . And whenever the word law is thus strictly taken, Moses is by implication opposed to Christ: and then we must consider what the law contains, as separate from the gospel."[10] And, along with Melanchthon and the Lutheran

[7]W. P. Stephens, *The Theology of Ulrich Zwingli* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986), 166-67: "I understand gospel here to be everything which God has made known to us through his own Son. It is also gospel when he says: You shall not be angry with one another." So everything in Scripture may be considered "gospel" (164-65). At the same time, ironically, Zwingli stressed (with Luther prior to the antinomian controversy) that the Law is not for believers, since they look to Christ alone and are guided by the Spirit (166-67).

[8]Peter Martyr Vermigli, "Locus on Justification," in Frank A. James III, introduction to Peter Martyr Vermigli, *Predestination and Justification: Two Theological Loci*, trans. and ed. Frank A. James III, The Peter Martyr Library, vol. 8 (Kirksville, MO: Truman State University Press, 2003), 115.

[9]The Second Helvetic Confession in *The Book of Confessions* (Louisville: Presbyterian Church USA, 1999), 73-74.

[10]John Calvin, *Commentaries upon the Acts of the Apostles; Commentaries upon the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, trans. and ed. John Owen (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 386-87.

tradition, the Reformed churches also taught an abiding third use of the law: namely, to guide believers in this life.

As early as the first page of his *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism* Zacharius Ursinus (primary author of the Heidelberg Catechism) stated, "The doctrine of the church is the entire and uncorrupted doctrine of the law and gospel concerning the true God, together with his will, works, and worship."[11] He then elucidates what was to be a typical Reformed statement of the distinction that was held in common with the Lutheran confession:

> The doctrine of the church consists of two parts: the law, and the Gospel; in which we have comprehended the sum and substance of the sacred Scriptures. . . . For the law is our schoolmaster, to bring us to Christ, constraining us to fly to him, and showing us what that righteousness is, which he has wrought out, and now offers unto us. But the gospel, professedly, treats of the person, office, and benefits of Christ. Therefore we have, in the law and gospel, the whole of the Scriptures comprehending the doctrine revealed from heaven for our salvation. . . . The law prescribes and enjoins what is to be done, and forbids what ought to be avoided: whilst the gospel announces the free remission of sin, through and for the sake of Christ.[12]

Furthermore, because it is grounded in the covenant of creation, "The law is known from nature; the gospel is divinely revealed."[13] Theodore Beza included in his *Confessio* a section on "Law and Gospel" as "the two parts of the Word of God," adding the warning that "ignorance of this distinction between Law and Gospel is one of the principle sources of the abuses which corrupted and still corrupt Christianity."[14]

Law-gospel and covenant theology. As biblical theologian Geerhardus Vos observed, "The contrast of law and gospel is brought to bear on the contrast between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace."[15] While essential, the law-gospel distinction by itself is static. For example, what

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[11]Zacharius Ursinus, *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. and ed. G. W. Willard (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1985), 1.

[12]Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism,* 2-3.

[13]Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 3.

[14]Theodore Beza, *The Christian Faith*, trans. James Clark (Lewes, UK: Focus Christian Ministries Trust, 1992), 41-42.

[15]See Vos's essay, "The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology," in Geerhardus Vos, *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001), 237, including n4.

happens when we are preaching through Deuteronomy and meet its inexorable demands and threats? Most basically, one should be able to distinguish the law from the gospel and recall that life is not to be sought in the law. However, the passages promise life on the basis of obedience. Are we simply to impose a universal rule on these passages? It becomes essential to be able to distinguish not only law and gospel but different covenants in which the law is functioning. There are commands in the NT and gospel promises in the Old. The question is which functions as the *basis of the covenant blessings*.

The distinction between covenants of law and covenants of promise is evident as far back in the tradition as Irenaeus.[16] The bishop of Lyons grouped various periods of history under "two covenants": Sinai and the new covenant.[17] The first he identifies as a period—"the law of works"—reigning from Moses to John the Baptist.[18] The covenant of grace, which was promised to Abraham through his single offspring, Christ, is the basis for the new covenant, which he calls a "new economy of liberty."[19] It is important to note that this emphasis on distinct covenants was part of a strategy to refute the ahistorical speculations of Gnosticism. Ever since, an interest in covenant theology has gone hand in hand with an interest in the historical development of God's plan from promise to fulfillment. And the story of Abraham, with the promise of a worldwide family, has been a central feature of that broader narrative.

The first appearance of a special emphasis on the covenant motif is in the anti-Anabaptist polemics of Zurich under Zwingli.[20] "Christian people are also in the gracious covenant with God, in which Abraham stood," he argued. Therefore, "it is clearly proved that our children are no less God's than Abraham's."[21] Zwingli's case for infant baptism rested to a large extent on the unity of a single covenant of grace spanning the whole of redemptive

[16]For relevant passages, see especially Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 1: The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Edinburgh: T&T Clark/Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), 3.10.4, 3.12.11, 4.11.2, 4.14.2, 4.25.1, 4.31.1, 4.38.1. See J. Ligon Duncan, *The Covenant Idea in Ante-Nicene Theology* (PhD diss., New College, University of Edinburgh, 1995).
[17]Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.12.12.
[18]Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.25.1.
[19]Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.10.4.
[20]See Stephens, *The Theology of Ulrich Zwingli*, 206-17.
[21]Quoted by Stephens, *The Theology of Ulrich Zwingli*, 209.

history.[22] While recognizing the unity of the covenant of grace, Zwingli's antipathy to the law-gospel distinction encouraged him to blend the Abrahamic and Sinai covenants.[23]

But, once again, as the tradition matured, a consensus coalesced around the covenant of works/grace distinction.[24] The former was also called the covenant of law, nature, and life. All of these terms highlighted the same idea: that the first covenant was a commandment of life based on law ("Do this and you shall live; disobey and you will surely die"), made with Adam as covenant head in a state of nature prior to grace.[25]

Yet behind these two covenants stood a third: the *covenant of redemption*. This is an eternal pact between the persons of the Trinity for the salvation of the elect from the mass of condemned humanity. Reformed theologians pointed out that Jesus speaks of having been given a people by the Father before all ages (Jn 6:39-44; 10; 17:1-5, 9-11). In addition, Paul speaks of God's "eternal purpose in election" (Rom 8:28-31; 9:11; Eph 1:4-5, 11; 3:11; 2 Tim 1:9), the writer to the Hebrews speaks of the "unchangeable oath" that rests on God's promise rather than on human activity (Heb 6:17-20), and represents Jesus as announcing in his ascension, "Here am I, and the children God has given me" (Heb 2:13 NIV). Thus, lying behind the covenants with human beings in history, it is this eternal covenant, grounded in the free love and mercy of the Trinity, that gives the covenant of grace its absolute and unconditional basis.

COVENANT OF WORKS

Prior to the fall, these formative theologians argued, humanity in Adam was neither *sinful* nor *confirmed* in righteousness. Adam was on trial: would he follow his covenant Lord's pattern of working and resting, subduing and

[22]He pursues this line of argument in *Baptism, Rebaptism, and Infant Baptism* (1525), *A Reply to Hubmaier* (1525), *A Refutation* (1527), and *Questions Concerning the Sacrament of Baptism* (1530).

[23]Stephens, *The Theology of Ulrich Zwingli*, 215.

[24]Ironically, even a Roman Catholic theologian like Cardinal Contarini recognized in Scripture a structural distinction between covenants. See Aaron Denlinger, *Omnes in Adam ex pacto Dei: Ambrogio Contarini's Covenantal Solidarity and His Influence on Post-Reformation Reformed Theologians* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010).

[25]I prefer "covenant of creation" because it accommodates a wider concept than the idea of a legal trial. Although this probation is essential to it, it is just as important to recognize the filial communion of God and humanity under Adam's representation.

reigning, or would he go his own way and seek his own good apart from God's Word? Created for obedience, he was entirely capable of maintaining himself in a state of integrity by his own free will. In this perspective, love and law are not antitheses; law prescribes in concrete terms what love looks like in relation to God and fellow humans.

Most Calvinists today (one hopes) would recognize a denial of the doctrine of unconditional and particular election as an injury to the Reformed system. Yet exceptions to the covenant of works have been taken by some conservative Reformed theologians of great standing, even though, as Berkhof noted, a rejection of this doctrine was considered "heresy" in the seventeenth century.[26] After all, the idea appears in Article 14 of the Belgic Confession (1564) as "the commandment of life," and more fulsomely in the seventh chapter of the Westminster Confession on "the covenant of works." Since Reformed teaching is summarized in the confessions and catechisms rather than in the views of individual theologians, it is to these subordinate standards that one must look in order to define our consensus.[27]

The Second Helvetic Confession teaches that the moral law given at Sinai was nothing other than the natural law that was given to Adam and is inscribed on the conscience of everyone: "And this law was at one time written in the hearts of men by the finger of God (Rom 2:15), and is called the law of nature (the law of Moses is in two Tables), and at another it was inscribed by his finger on the two Tables of Moses, and eloquently expounded in the books of Moses (Ex 20:1 ff.; Deut 5:6 ff.)."[28]

We should "have no difficulty in recognizing the covenant of works as an old Reformed doctrine," says Vos, with Ursinus's *Larger Catechism* as an example.[29] "It is in the Reformed doctrine of the covenant of works that God's glory, the original rectitude of humanity in creation, and the imputation of Christ's active as well as passive obedience can be maintained."[30] "If we are not mistaken, the instinctive aversion which some

[26]Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 2:212.

[27]Vos, *Redemptive History*, 243-45. Noting a growing tide of sentiment against the covenant of works at the turn of the twentieth century, Geerhardus Vos replies with great evidence that this too is from early days and enjoyed a wide consensus across the Reformed family: British as well as Continental.

[28]The Second Helvetic Confession, in *Book of Confessions,* 72.

[29]Vos, *Redemptive History*, 237, including n4.

[30]Vos, *Redemptive History*, 243.

have to the covenant of works springs from a lack of appreciation for this wonderful truth."[31]

Warnings against confusing the gospel with the law went hand in hand with those against turning the covenant of grace into a covenant of works. Peter van Mastricht (1630–1706) warns against those (he has Rome chiefly in view) who would turn the gospel into a "new law," neglecting both the real demands of the law and the real freedom of the gospel. The "works of the law" demand "most punctilious obedience ('cursed is the man who does not do all the works therein')." Only in this context, says Mastricht, can we possibly understand the role of Jesus Christ as the "fulfiller of all righteousness."

> Heb. 2.14-15 (since the children are sharers in blood and flesh, he also in like manner partook of the same; that through death he might bring to nought him that hath the power of death, that is, the devil). . . . If you say the apostle is speaking of a covenant not in Paradise, but the covenant at Sinai, the answer is easy, that the Apostle is speaking of the covenant in Paradise so far as it is re-enacted and renewed with Israel at Sinai in the Decalogue, which contained the proof of the covenant of works.[32]

The covenant with Adam is clearly in the form of "do this and you shall live," and the NT clearly contrasts the covenants of law and promise.[33] In addition to the exegetical arguments, Mastricht adduces the intrasystematic importance of the doctrine:

> To very many heads of the Christian religion, e.g., the propagation of original corruption, the satisfaction of Christ and his subjection to divine law Rom. 8.3-4 (what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God, sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh, that the requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit) Gal. 3:13 (Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us . . .), we can scarcely give suitable satisfaction, if the covenant of works be denied.[34]

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[31]Vos, *Redemptive History*, 244.
[32]Cited by Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics: Set Out and Illustrated from the Sources*, rev. and ed. Ernst Bizer, trans. G. T. Thomson (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1950), 289-90.
[33]Cited by Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 289-90.
[34]Cited by Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 290.

Even those who found themselves on opposite sides in many debates, like Cocceius and Voetius, jointly emphasized the absolute and unconditional foundation of the covenant and saw the law-gospel distinction as integral for its preservation.[35] Herman Witsius's *Economy of the Covenants* (1677) also argues that to deny the covenant of works or to confuse it with the covenant of grace entails a fatal confusion of law and gospel.[36]

"Leave your country and family," was the divine call to Abraham (Gen 12:1), like the sovereign command to the disciples, "Leave your nets and follow me" (Mt 4:19-20). Whatever stipulations—requirements and demands—that God will put upon his people, they will never—can never—be the basis for his judgment of their status before him. Herman Bavinck notes that even circumcision was commanded not as a prerequisite for covenant membership but as a sign and seal of the covenant of grace to believers and their children.[37] "The covenant is neither a hypothetical relationship, nor a conditional position; rather it is the fresh, living fellowship in which the power of grace is operative," Vos observes.[38]

Within this wide consensus, there were debates especially over the relationship of the Sinai covenant to the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. All agree that after the fall, any relationship that God establishes with human beings involves grace. Therefore, the national covenant with Israel cannot be a mere repetition of the covenant of works before the fall. Indeed, the covenant of grace (with the eternal covenant of redemption behind it) is the only secure basis even for God's commitment to strive with the ungodly in his common grace and to endure patiently Israel's repeated violations. Even when human disobedience brings history to a stand-still, God keeps it moving again by his gracious promise, toward the advent of the serpent-crushing Messiah.

Further, there is general agreement that the basis of Israel's inheritance of the land is God's unconditional grace. At Sinai, for example, Moses is the

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[35]Johannes Cocceius, *Summa Theologiae* (Leiden, 1662), 22.1. Louis Berkhof points out that "in those days"—the seventeenth century—"a denial of the covenant of works was regarded as a heresy" (*Systematic Theology*, 212).

[36]Herman Witsius, *Economy of the Covenant Between God and Man: Comprehending a Complete Body of Divinity*, trans. William Crookshank (London: R. Baynes, 1822; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage, 2010).

[37]Herman Bavinck, *Sin and Salvation in Christ*, vol. 3 of *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006), 203-4.

[38]Vos, *Redemptive History*, 256.

mediator, Israel swears the oath, and blood is splattered on the people. "Behold the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words." (Ex 24:8). In contrast, Yahweh is the promise-maker with Abraham in Genesis 15, and he passes alone through the pieces in a vision. The Abrahamic covenant rather than the Mosaic covenant establishes the terms according to which people from every nation now share in the Israel of God. When the people enter the land, God warns them, they are not to imagine that they won it because of their righteousness or greatness; recalling their stubborn rebellion in the wilderness, God reminds them that he is giving them the land because of his promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and not because of their faithfulness (Deut 7:6-11; 8:17; 9:4-12).

However, most Reformed treatments (fortified by rabbinical references) have seen clear echoes of the original covenant in the Sinai covenant. As the quote from Mastricht above illustrates, Reformed orthodoxy found in the Sinai covenant further proof of the original covenant of works. Adam and Eve were called to found a holy priesthood and extend the holy nation from its Edenic capitol. Like the Decalogue, Genesis 1 begins with a preamble and historical prologue identifying Yahweh as the great king whose exploits justify his right to impose the treaty. The stipulation given to Adam is reduced to one: refraining from eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, with the sanctions of life for obedience and death for disobedience. "Do this and you shall live" is the formula in both covenants. Furthermore, the Tree of Life is the sacrament of everlasting immortality, the prize for fulfilling the trial and following Yahweh's pattern of faithful labor and victorious entrance into the Sabbath enthronement. After the fall, the royal family was exiled from the holy land but with the promise of the gospel after exile.

At the same time, there are obvious differences between the Adamic and Sinaitic covenants. God's election of Israel (unlike the covenant with Adam) presupposes a condition of sin, where his act of deliverance and gift of the land are the fulfillment of his merciful promise (see Deut 9:4). Even when Israel sinned, God was patient, and even after executing his sentence (exile from the temporal land), he promised a greater future. Therefore, the Sinai covenant must be in some sense an administration of the covenant of grace.

These two points were expressed in the consensus of the Westminster Confession: these "two covenants were differently administered in the time of the

law . . . and the time of the gospel."[39] And yet, the Sinai covenant is a *different administration* of the *one covenant of grace*. Fleshing out this difference has provoked—and will continue to provoke—different arguments. Yet this distinction-with-unity represents a remarkable breadth of consensus.

Interestingly, Vos notes that although the Sinaitic covenant is based on law, it is only such in the interests of holding out the promise of the covenant of grace:

> When the work of the Spirit by means of the law and gospel leads to true conversion, in this conversion the longing for this lost ideal of the covenant appears as an essential part. From the above we can also explain why the older theologians did not always clearly distinguish between the covenant of works and the Sinaitic covenant. At Sinai it was not the "bare" law that was given, but a reflection of the covenant of works revived, as it were, in the interests of the covenant of grace continued at Sinai.[40]

There are not two different ways of salvation but two promises: the one being temporal, pertaining to national security in the land, and the other pertaining to everlasting salvation for Israel and the nations.

It is God's land, not Israel's, and he will share it with them only as long as they keep covenant. If they defile the land, then it will vomit them out as it did the Gentile idolaters. The conditional language is evident throughout the Torah: "If you do this, you will live; if you fail to do this, you will die" (Lev 18:5; Deut 4:1; 5:33; 6:24-25; 8:1; 30:15-18; Neh 9:29; Ezek 18:19; 20:11-21, etc.). The form and content are those of a suzerainty treaty and are evident also in the covenant between God and Adam (Gen 2:16-17).

Thus, immediately on the heels of Joshua's announcement that God had fulfilled his Abrahamic pledge concerning a temporal land and nation, the celebration turns rather somber. From the Abrahamic covenant we turn to the renewal of the Sinai covenant sworn by the people (the basis for "long life in the land"). To borrow E. P. Sanders's terminology, we turn from the terms of "getting in" (divine election and grace) to the terms of "staying in" (the nation's obedience).[41]

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[39]Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 7.

[40]Vos, *Redemptive History*, 255. See also Meredith G. Kline, *By Oath Consigned: A Reinterpretation of the Covenant Signs of Circumcision and Baptism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1968), 23.

[41]This is the thesis of E. P. Sanders's *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* (London: SCM, 1977).

The people are ready now to renew the oath, but Joshua's response is astonishing. Rather than congratulate them on their fidelity, he issues a solemn warning about what they are embarking on:

> But Joshua said to the people, "You are not able to serve the LORD, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm and consume you, after having done you good." And the people said to Joshua, "No, but we will serve the LORD." Then Joshua said to the people, "You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the LORD, to serve him." And they said, "We are witnesses." He said, "Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your heart to the LORD, the God of Israel." (Josh 24:19-23)

Echoing the fathers, who were breaking the law just as Moses was descending with the tablets, the heirs of the conquest were fumbling with their idols in their pockets even as they were swearing off idols. Joshua went through with the swearing-in ceremony but repeated the severe threats "if you deal falsely with your God" (Josh 24:19-27). As Vos states, "The covenant with Israel served in an emphatic manner to recall the strict demands of the covenant of works. . . . It truly contained the content of the covenant of works. But—and one should certainly note this—it contains this content as made serviceable for a particular period of the covenant of grace."[42] Although the Sinaitic covenant is based on law, it is only such in the interests of holding out the promise of the covenant of grace. The ultimate promise of a worldwide family of Abraham in a renewed creation is unconditional in its basis, while the continuing existence of the national theocracy as a type of that everlasting covenant depended on Israel's obedience. Therefore, the Sinai covenant was an administration of the covenant of grace in that it served to further the interests of that gracious promise.

Like Adam, Israel had a mission to undertake, a task to perform, a destiny to realize not only for itself but for the whole world, and this vocation was Israel's to either keep or lose. "But like Adam they transgressed the covenant" (Hos 6:7). And yet, God does exercise mercy time and again when Israel

[42]Geerhardus Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *Anthropology*, ed. and trans. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2013), 130.

goes astray, but on the basis of his promise to Abraham and "sure mercies to David," of an heir of both whose saving reign will extend to the ends of the earth. God was always "slow to anger" in executing the covenant curses, but the Sinai covenant itself not only did not have the power to bring everlasting freedom from sin and judgment; it was never even intended to do so. Like Hamlet's play-within-a-play, the nation was formed as a theater company to direct faith by type and shadow to the one descendant of Abraham and Sarah in whom all the families of the earth would be blessed.

In summary, then: because of the eternal covenant of redemption, God's promise takes priority over all human disobedience—without setting aside God's law. "There is no gift that has not been earned by Him," as Vos observes.[43] Early on, Robert Rollock (first principal of the University of Edinburgh) points out that it is only by Christ's fulfilling the covenant of works that justification is not a legal fiction. Christ's active obedience in fulfilling the covenant of works therefore became an essential basis for articulating and defending the doctrine of justification, Vos concludes.[44] Therefore, we are indeed saved by works, but by Christ's fulfillment of the law as the Last Adam, our covenant head. This is how God can be both "just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus Christ" (Rom 3:26). Hence, we are confident when we confess our sins that God is not only merciful but "*faithful and just* to forgive us our sins and cleanse us of all unrighteousness" (1 Jn 1:9).

Contemporary Reformed interpretations. With the triumph of the Enlightenment in theological academies, federal theology survived and indeed flourished in churches and confessional seminaries. Nearly a century ago Geerhardus Vos recognized the extent to which modern biblical scholarship has confirmed the basic federal scheme, including "the much ridiculed 'covenant of works.'"[45] This verdict is even more accurate since the research of the last fifty years comparing ancient Near Eastern treaties and biblical covenants. These studies recognize clearly the distinction between covenants of law and covenants of promise in Scripture.[46]

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[43]Vos, *Redemptive History*, 248.

[44]Cited by Vos, *Redemptive History*, 249.

[45]Vos, *Redemptive History*, 193.

[46]Much of this comes in the wake of Viktor Korošec's *Hethitische Staatsvertraege* (1931). See, for example, G. E. Mendenhall, *Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (Pittsburgh: The Biblical Colloquium, 1955); Moshe Weinfeld, "The Covenant of Grant in the Old Testament

Yet while scholars from Jewish, Roman Catholic, and other traditions (or none) recognize this distinction in Scripture, it is, ironically, modern Reformed theologians who have led the way in questioning it. Karl Barth found his theological voice in part by acquainting himself with Calvin and the tradition of Reformed orthodoxy while teaching at Göttingen.[47] Nevertheless, his view of the older theology was especially critical precisely in its federal scheme. He regarded the notion of a covenant between the persons of the Trinity as leading dangerously toward tritheism.[48] He also regarded the distinction between a covenant of works and a covenant of grace as the first "fatal historical moment" in Reformed theology, presupposing a distinction between law and gospel instead of a single covenant of grace.[49] The second "fateful moment" in Reformed orthodoxy was "the introduction of an understanding of revelation as a sequence of stages."[50]

Over the last quarter of the twentieth century a spate of sharp critiques of federal theology emerged especially among students of Barth. The most notable is what has come to be called the "Calvin vs. the Calvinists" thesis.[51]

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and the Ancient Near East," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 90 (1970). See also Delbert R. Hillers, *Covenant: The History of a Biblical Idea* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969); Steven L. McKenzie, *Covenant* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000); Dennis J. McCarthy, S.J., *Treaty and Covenant: A Study in the Ancient Oriental Documents and in the Old Testament*, Analecta Biblica 21 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1963); Dennis J. McCarthy, S.J., "Three Covenants in Genesis," *CBQ* 26 (1964): 184; Meredith G. Kline, *Treaty of the Great King* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1963). One of the best studies pointing out the differences between covenants of law and promise is by the eminent Jewish scholar Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (New York: HarperOne, 1987). Even Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI) follows this line of interpretation, though he (like Levenson) finally assimilates the gospel to the law. See my interaction with both scholars in *Covenant and Salvation: Union with Christ* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 9-90.

[47]Karl Barth, foreword to Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, v.

[48]Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956–1975), IV/1, 65.

[49]Karl Barth, cited by Daniel L. Migliore's introduction to Barth's *The Gottingen Dogmatics*, ed. Hannelotte Reiffen, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 1:xxxviii.

[50]Migliore, introduction to *Gottingen Dogmatics*, 1:xxxviii.

[51]Brian G. Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969); R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979); Holmes Rolston III, "Responsible Man in Reformed Theology: Calvin Versus the Westminster Confession," *SJT* 23 (1970): 129-56; Alan Clifford, *The Atonement and Justification* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); J. B. Torrance, "Contract or Covenant: A Study of the Theological Background of Worship in Seventeeth-Century Scotland," *SJT* 23 (1970): 51-76 and "The Concept of Federal Theology—Was Calvin a Federal Theologian?," in Wilhelm H. Neuser, ed., *Calvinus Sacrae Scripturae Professor* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 15-40; Basil Hall, "Calvin Against the Calvinists," in *John Calvin*, G. E. Duffield, ed., Courtenay Studies in Reformation Theology

According to these theologians, federalism represents a departure from the emphasis of Calvin on a one-sided and unconditional covenant of grace. As such, it is a legalistic system in which the nature-grace dichotomy of Roman Catholic and Protestant scholasticism is said to have corrupted Reformed theology early in its infancy. Through federalism Calvinism devolved into an introspective scrupulosity and a voluntaristic emphasis that contrasts sharply with Calvin's interest in a gracious promise.

The "Calvin vs. the Calvinists" thesis presupposes a deep discontinuity that has been challenged by a formidable body of recent scholarship.[52] First, in its critical, even polemical, approach to Calvin's contemporaries and heirs, it fails to see the latter especially as contributing to a refinement of ideas that are already present in Calvin.[53]

Second, there is no justification in the sources for viewing federal theology as "legalistic," any more than the law-gospel distinction. Calvin asserts the main features of the covenant of works.[54] In a number of places, Calvin refers to Christ's having "merited" salvation for his people by his obedience, once more emphasizing the satisfaction of law as a necessary prerequisite for everlasting life.[55] The charge of legalism is fraught with theological

(Appleford: Sutton Courtenay Press, 1966); Charles Bell, *Calvin and Scottish Theology: The Doctrine of Assurance* (Edinburgh: Handsel, 1985).

[52]See esp. Richard Muller, *After Calvin: Studies in the Development of a Theological Tradition* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); *Christ and the Decree: Christology and Predestination in Reformed Theology from Calvin to Perkins* (Durham: Labyrinth, 1986); "The Covenant of Works and the Stability of Divine Law in Seventeenth-Century Reformed Orthodoxy," *CTJ* 29 (1994), 75-101; Paul Helm, *Calvin and the Calvinists* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1982); Joel Beeke, *The Assurance of Faith: Calvin, English Puritanism and the Dutch Second Reformation* (London: Peter Lang, 1991); Lyle Bierma, "Federal Theology in the Sixteenth Century: Two Traditions?," *WTJ* 45 (1983), 304-21; "Covenant or Covenants in the Theology of Olevianus?," *CTJ* 22 (1987): 228-50; J. Mark Beach, *Christ and the Covenant: Francis Turretin's Federal Theology as a Defense of the Doctrine of Grace* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007); Cornelis P. Venema, "Recent Criticisms of the 'Covenant of Works,' in the Westminster Confession of Faith," *MAJT* 9 (1993): 165-98; Vos, *Redemptive History*, 234-67.

[53]Richard Muller, *Calvin and the Reformed Tradition,* 13-24.

[54]Calvin, *Institutes* 1.15.8.

[55]A host of citations from his commentaries would suffice, but see John Calvin, *Institutes* 1.15.8. The Belgic Confession says that Adam "transgressed the commandment of life" (Art. 14), terminology that was used in the emerging covenant theology (especially by Bullinger and Martyr) as interchangeable with "covenant of works." In Articles 22 and 23, Christ is said to have "merited" our salvation. All of this anticipates the fuller development of the federal scheme. It is Christ's merits, not our obedience—not even our faith, that is the ground of our salvation. "In fact, if we had to appear before God relying—no matter how little—on ourselves or some other creature, then, alas, we would be swallowed up" (Art. 23).

assumptions that run counter to the historical fact that those most committed to the federal scheme were also the most ardent opponents of neonomianism (i.e., seeing the gospel as a "new law"). Vos observes that a denial of the covenant of works characteristically went hand in hand with a denial of Christ's active obedience and therefore his imputed righteousness as the ground of justification.[56]

Some conservative Reformed theologians have also criticized the federal scheme. Unlike Barth, John Murray was eager to maintain the distinction between law and gospel.[57] Yet for Murray, there is no covenant between God and humans that is not gracious.[58] This meant rejecting the idea of a covenant of works with Adam. Despite Murray's clear commitment to the traditional doctrine of justification, the warnings of the older Reformed theologians proved to be accurate: Murray's successor at Westminster Seminary, Norman Shepherd, came to conflate law and gospel as well as justification and sanctification.[59] Influenced by Shepherd's views, a movement emerged in conservative Reformed and Presbyterian circles during the 1990s. Known as Federal Vision, this relatively small but vocal circle of writers challenged the traditional Reformed (federal) system, particularly its distinction between law and gospel and the covenants of works and grace.[60]

What all of these critiques of federalism have in common is a theological aversion to a law-gospel distinction and a suspicion that one must choose between a unilateral gift of grace and conditions for enjoying its blessings. Herman Bavinck stated well the view that most federal theologians would affirm when he said that the covenant of grace is "unilateral in its basis and destined to become bi-lateral in its administration."[61] Clearly, there are conditions, but the question is how they function in different covenants. In a law-covenant (e.g., Adamic and Sinaitic), the principle of inheritance is "do

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[56]Vos, *Redemptive History*, 245.

[57]John Murray, *Principles of Conduct* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1957), 181.

[58]John Murray, "The Adamic Administration," in *Collected Writings of John Murray*, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976), 2:47-59.

[59]Norman Shepherd, *The Call of Grace: How the Covenant Illuminates Salvation and Evangelism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002).

[60]Steve Wilkins and Duane Garner, eds., *The Federal Vision* (Monroe, LA: Athanasius, 2014). A superb critique of this view is offered in Guy Prentiss Waters, *The Federal Vision and Covenant Theology: A Comparative Analysis* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2006).

[61]Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:225.

this and you will live." In the covenant of grace, God promises to regenerate, justify, sanctify, and glorify the elect. Thus, the condition of faith for justification is not a "work" that merits a reward but a gift of grace (Eph 2:1-9). Only those who continue in repentance and faith will be saved, but God promises to complete what he has begun (Phil 1:6; 2:12-13). There are commands to be obeyed, responsibilities to be assumed, in this fellowship with the triune God. And yet the believer's obedience is always the fruit, never the root, of God's gracious purpose and promise in Christ.

As the Reformed tradition faced different contexts—both in time and place—there could be a spectrum of emphases. At its best, the Reformed tradition has been able to emphasize mutual obligation without surrendering to neonomianism and the absolute, unconditional, and unilateral basis of the covenant without succumbing to antinomianism.[62] And if that is possible, then the tension that exists in federal theology may be a sign that we are dealing with a relationship in history between God and human beings that is as complex and real as it is presented in the Bible.

COVENANT OF GRACE

It is the covenant of redemption that lies behind both the *historia salutis* (the history of God's redeeming acts) and the *ordo salutis* (the application of redemption), as in Romans 8:29-30. This eternal purpose of the triune God is realized in history through the promise of salvation in Christ (Gen 3:15) and in the promises to Abraham (Gen 15) and David (2 Sam 7). Also similar in form is the Noahic covenant, with God swearing a self-maledictory oath (with the rainbow as the sign), although in content this was a common grace rather than saving grace covenant.[63] Because of the covenant of grace, and the Messiah's having fulfilled the covenant of works, "There still remains the promise of a Sabbath rest" (Heb. 4:1, 9). Thus, the eternal covenant of redemption is worked out in history through covenants of law (Adamic and Sinai covenants) and covenants of promise (the *protoeuangelion* of Genesis 3:15, Abrahamic, Davidic, and new covenants).

[62]For a cogent study of this delicate balance in historical practice, see John von Rohr, *The Covenant of Grace in Puritan Thought* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1986).

[63]For a contemporary Reformed defense of this point, see David VanDrunen, *Divine Covenants and Moral Order* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 95-132.

It is in this context that we better understand the prophets. Through Jeremiah, God prosecutes the terms of the Sinai covenant: "And the men who transgressed my covenant and did not keep the terms of *the covenant that they made before me*, I will make them like *the calf that they cut in two and passed between its parts*" (Jer 34:18; emphasis added). Once again, this curse formula fits the terms of Sinai: the people swearing the oath, assuming its sanctions, in sharp contrast with the Abrahamic promise in Genesis 15. "Like Adam, they broke the covenant" (Hos 6:7). Yet the "new covenant" promised in Jeremiah 31:32 "will not be like the covenant I made with their fathers in the wilderness." The promises are everlasting and global, not temporary and limited to one nation. Paul's distinction between the covenants of law and promise in Galatians 3:17-18 and elsewhere merely elaborate this difference. God as the oath-maker and mediator, with the families of all the earth being blessed by the singular "seed" of Abraham ("meaning Christ," Gal 3:16).

Once the last Adam has successfully fulfilled this Adamic covenant ("For their sakes I sanctify myself that they may be truly sanctified," John 17:19), the benefits of this feat are dispersed by the Spirit according to a *gracious* covenant. This covenant was proclaimed in Genesis 3:15, and the covenants with Abraham and David belong to it as it is now fulfilled in the new covenant. Covenant theology has always therefore been eschatologically oriented, convinced that creation was the beginning rather than the goal of human existence. Humankind was created to pass through the probationary period and attain the right to eat from the Tree of Life, leading the whole creation in triumphal procession into the consummation. Only in the fulfillment of the covenant of creation by the last Adam is the destiny of the image-bearer finally attained and dispensed through the covenant of grace.

There are commands in the new covenant and gospel promises in the old covenant. In fact, the whole purpose of the latter was to foreshadow the coming of Christ. Yet the Sinai covenant itself was a parenthesis in redemptive history. Its distinction from the Abrahamic covenant is obvious in several respects: (1) Moses is the mediator; (2) the people swear the oath, confirmed by the blood that Moses splashed on them. "All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient." (Ex 24:7-8); (3) the covenant is entirely conditional upon the people's fulfillment of their pledge; (4) the

sanctions (blessing and curse) are temporal, with "long life in the land" for obedience and excommunication and exile for disobedience; (5) this covenant establishes a geopolitical nation, a theocracy, of Abraham's ethnic descendants separate from the nations.

By contrast, in the promise that God made to Adam and Eve after the fall (Gen 3:15) and the covenants with Abraham—the foundations of the new covenant—(1) God himself is the guarantor and mediator; (2) God swears the oath, confirmed by the theophany of passing between the parts in a vision as a self-maledictory oath; (3) the covenant is based entirely on God's fulfillment of his pledge; (4) the sanctions are everlasting life or death; (5) this covenant establishes a worldwide family of spiritual offspring through Abraham and Sarah's single offspring. In addition, the covenant with David is of this type (2 Sam 7). The "sure mercies to David" ground God's assurance that even though Israel is condemned according to the terms of the Sinai covenant, he will fulfill his greater promises to Abraham and David. Through Isaiah, God invites his people to a feast, free of charge. The call is not to *do* and therefore live, but "*Hear*, that your soul may live; and I will make with you *an everlasting covenant, my steadfast, sure love for David.* Behold, I made him a witness to the peoples [nations], a leader and commander for the peoples. Behold, you shall call a nation that you did not know, and a nation that did not know you shall run to you, because of the LORD your God, and of the Holy One of Israel, for he has glorified you" (Is 55:3-5, emphasis added). While the national covenant is always the basis for prophetic curses, hope beyond exile is always tied to the oath that God swore to the fathers: Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

The contrast between these covenants can be established from Torah directly, but they are also confirmed by the way in which the NT interprets the Sinai covenant and distinguishes it from the new, which rests on the Abrahamic promise. Paul proclaimed to fellow Jews that the promise that God will raise up David (Jer 30:9) is fulfilled in Jesus: "And as for the fact that he raised him from the dead, no more to return to corruption, he has spoken in this way, 'I will give you the holy and sure blessings of David'" (Acts 13:34). David still rests in his tomb, but his greater descendant is alive. "Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man

forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses" (vv. 38-39).

According to Hebrews 8, the ordinances of the old covenant "serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things," not the reality itself.

> For when Moses was about to erect the tent, he was instructed by God, saying, "See that you make everything according to the pattern that was shown you on the mountain." But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second. (Heb 8:5-7)

After quoting the prophecy of Jeremiah 31, which says that the new covenant is "not like the covenant" that Israel broke, the writer concludes, "In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away" (v. 13). Then in chapter 12 the writer announces that we have come *not* to Mount Sinai but to the heavenly Jerusalem through the blood of Christ (vv. 18-24).

In short, the Abrahamic promise is as far from the original (Adamic) covenant as anything could possibly be. Furthering the promise of Genesis 3:15, God alone swears to bless the families of the earth through a single offspring of Abraham and Sarah and confirms this oath by passing in a self-maledictory oath between the pieces of animal carcasses (Gen 15:1-17). This was a common way of confirming secular treaties, where the suzerain, having liberated a helpless people, annexed them to his kingdom and caused the vassal-ruler to pass through the pieces.[64] Yet what is astonishing in Genesis 15 is that Yahweh himself is the *only* party swearing the oath, and rather than causing Abraham—the vassal—to pass between the parts, Yahweh passes *alone* through the pieces.[65]

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[64]Hillers, *Covenant*, 40-41, notes: "'Just as this calf is cut up, so may Matiel be cut up,' is the way it is put in the text of an Aramaic treaty from the eighth century B.C." Hillers adds, "From this ceremony is derived the Hebrew idiom for making a treaty, *karat berit*, 'to cut a treaty,'" a formula also found in Homer. Dennis J. McCarthy, S.J., notes that the political idiom "to cut a covenant" was used as early as the 1400s BCE in Aramaic and Phoenician as well as Hebrew records (*Treaty and Covenant*, 52-55).

[65]George Mendenhall, *Law and Covenant*, points out that the Decalogue and Joshua 24 fit these forms of a suzerainty treaty. Mendenhall summarizes, but "it can readily be seen that the covenant with Abraham (and Noah) is of completely different form." Not even circumcision is a condition.

The promise—of an earthly people and land and of blessing for all nations in one offspring of Abraham and Sarah—was unconditional, an outright gift, with God himself as the mediator.[66] Even the obligations that God places on Abraham after he believes the promise and is justified are the reasonable response to, rather than conditions of, inheritance. The same is true of the covenant with David (2 Sam 7). Even "if we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself" (2 Tim 2:13). We "get in" and "*stay in*" by grace alone, in Christ alone, through faith alone. The many offspring have been unfaithful to the covenant that they swore, but Yahweh has been faithful to the covenant that he swore to Abraham. The promise of a worldwide family and inheritance of the whole earth was yet to be fulfilled not through the nation's obedience but through that of the single offspring of Abraham. It was this promise of a greater nation, temple, and kingdom based on better promises and a better mediator that lifted up the hearts of the downcast exiles in Babylon. Having fulfilled its typological function, the Sinai covenant is now obsolete and all people, Jews and Gentiles, inherit the earth through the Messiah's obedience. There are now no promises yet to be fulfilled with respect to the nation of Israel, although we long for the outpouring of the Spirit on the Jewish people as masses of Abraham's ethnic offspring embrace their Messiah (Rom 11:25-32).

So Paul is simply carrying through the bi-covenantal teaching of the prophets. In Galatians 4:21-26, Paul refers explicitly to "two covenants," identified as "promise" (the Abrahamic covenant) and "law" (Sinai). It was the prophets who said that the new covenant would not be like the Sinai covenant but would rest instead on God's immutable oath and sovereign grace (Jer 31:32). Failing to discern that the Sinai theocracy was a parenthesis within the history of the covenant of grace, Paul's agitators had subordinated the covenant of grace to the national covenant based on Israel's oath, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do" (Ex 19:8). In short, Galatians 3:3 suggests that Paul's critics embraced a "covenantal nomism," even as E. P. Sanders defines

On the contrary, Abram believed and was justified, with circumcision as a sign and seal of God's promise, like the rainbow in Genesis 9 (36).

[66]Instead of making a name for themselves by their own achievements, as the Promethean builders of Babel attempted (Gen 11:4), Abram is given a new name by Yahweh and this becomes paradigmatic for the covenant of promise to the end of the age (Gen 35:10; Is 45:4; 62:6; Rev 2:17).

it ("getting in by grace, staying in by obedience").[67] But the law (i.e., the Sinai covenant mediated by Moses) was never intended as a means of justification before God (Gal 3:21).

After the advent of Christ, Paul seems to identify even Torah itself with the "elementary principles of the world" (στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου) in Galatians 4:3, 9 and Colossians 2:8, 20. Sarah and Hagar represent "two covenants," Paul says. "One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother" (Gal 4:24, 26). The act-consequence wisdom of the world—στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου—ingrained in our nature as God's image-bearers, and repeated in Torah, is that God will not acquit the guilty (Ex 23:7). However, Christ is now our "wisdom from God," "who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption" (1 Cor 1:24, 30). Christ has fulfilled the act-consequence principle at the heart of wisdom traditions, including Torah, becoming our righteousness. And now, the only sacrifice left *for us* is the non-bloody, living sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving.[68]

There are still commands in the covenant of grace, but in the case of Adam, David, and the new covenant, they are the appropriate response to salvation (including regeneration) rather than the basis, as in a law-covenant. In fact, it is only because of Christ's fulfillment of the law, bearing its curses on our behalf and being raised as the first-fruits of the new creation, that the deeper intention of the law—love of God and neighbor—is able to be realized in and through God's new society mediated by Christ. It is precisely this contrast that, according to the Reformed theologians, energizes so much of Pauline theology especially. Jesus is the faithful Israelite who fulfilled the covenant of works so that, through his victory, we could inherit the promises according to a covenant of grace.

The Abrahamic covenant rather than the Mosaic establishes the terms according to which people from every nation now share in the Israel of God. Paul writes, "My point is this: the law, which came four hundred thirty years

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[67]Thus, one can agree with the formula of Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, "getting in by grace, staying in by obedience" (93; cf. 178, 371). For his definition of "covenantal nomism," see 75, 543-56.

[68]On this comparison of the believer as a "living sacrifice" to the cereal or wave offering in Leviticus, see Laura Smit, "Justification and Sacrifice," in Michael Weinrich and John P. Burgess, eds., *What Is Justification About? Reformed Contributions to an Ecumenical Theme* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 145.

later, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise. For if the inheritance comes from the law, it no longer comes from the promise; but God granted it to Abraham through the promise" (Gal 3:17-18). Thus, in the covenant of grace God restores in his new creation what was lost in the old creation and could not be recovered according to the original principle that was established in nature and at Sinai. But because of the covenant of grace, and the Messiah's having fulfilled the covenant of works, there still remains the promise of a Sabbath rest (Heb 4:1, 9).

Consequently, there are not two "peoples," Jew and Gentile, but one new "person," with Christ as the head (Eph 2:15; cf. Gal 3:28). The church of Christ is the worldwide family of Abraham, united to its head through the faith that comes from hearing the gospel and is signified and sealed by baptism and the Supper. The church is "the Israel of God" (Gal 6:16), not because Israel has been cast off but because its tents have been enlarged, and those who were not the people of God are joined to Christ as a kingdom of priests (1 Pet 2:10; cf. Hos 1:10 with Rom 9:25).

As we recall Yahweh making all of the promises and then confirming them in a vision by passing between the pieces, assuming all of the burden for fulfilling his oath, we hear Jesus in the upper room issuing his last will and testament. Instead of splashing blood on the disciples in accordance with their words, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do," the Savior delivers to them the entire inheritance on the basis of his broken body and shed blood "given for you" (Mt 26:26-29). The new covenant is not therefore a renewal of the Sinai covenant but the better covenant, founded on better promises, with a better mediator. The law-covenant is now "obsolete" (Heb 8:13). Through Moses' intercession God relented from destroying Israel, but it did not bring them into the Promised Land and it did not keep them from exile. By Jesus' ministry and present intercession, however, believers not only *get in* but *stay in* by grace alone.

Thus, it is not only through the doctrine of justification that we are able to assure disquieted consciences that God is gracious to them, but on the wider basis of the Abrahamic covenant of grace. Not only at one point (justification), but from beginning to end, the relationship in which we stand before our God is founded on God's own oath, fulfilled in the work of his Son, made effective through the work of his Spirit. For Christ, by his

personal fulfillment of the covenant of creation, has won for us the right to eat from the Tree of Life. That inheritance which he attained according to a covenant of law is now ours according to a covenant of promise.

In summary, then: because of the covenant of redemption, God's promise takes priority over all human disobedience. The covenant of creation transgressed by humanity in Adam is fulfilled in Christ, our federal head, representative, and mediator. Instead of heeding the serpent's blandishments of self-glorification and immediate gratification like Adam in Eden and Israel in the wilderness, Jesus clung to his Father's Word (Mt 4:4). The Father finally has a faithful servant-son in whom he is well pleased (Mt 3:17; 12:18; 17:5) and, in him, a servant-people inherits Christ's obedience and victory. "There is no gift that has not been earned by Him," as Vos observes.[69] He adds that as early as Robert Rollock (1555–1599), Reformed theologians were demonstrating "how the work of the Mediator with respect to the covenant of grace was nothing but a carrying through in him of the covenant of works broken in Adam." By his active and passive obedience Jesus has not only borne our guilt but has fulfilled the law's demands so that his obedience may be imputed to us now. Not only forgiveness, but justification, is the prize of his victory.[70]

The Anglican Puritan John Preston adds that the covenant of grace is made to Jesus Christ as the active party, "the Seed himself, but the passive part consists of the promises made to us: 'You shall be taught; you shall be made prophets; you shall have your sins forgiven.'" He adds, "So the promise is made to us. How is the promise made to Abraham? It reads, 'In thee all the nations of the earth shall be blessed.' The meaning is that they are derivative promises. The primary and original promises were made to Jesus Christ."[71] According to Reformed orthodoxy, these "two covenants" and "two mountains" (Gal 4) meet in Christ, who as the covenantal *head* fulfills the Sinaitic law (already anticipated in the Adamic covenant) and as the covenant *mediator* dispenses the fruit of his labors to his heirs in a covenant of grace.[72]

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[69]Vos, *Redemptive History*, 248.

[70]Cited by Vos, *Redemptive History*, 249.

[71]John Preston, *The New Covenant* (1639), 374-75, cited in Vos, *Redemptive History*, 250.

[72]For a representative summary of this very position among the seventeenth-century federal theologians, see Witsius, *Economy of the Covenants*, 2.2.