

# THE COVENANT OF WORKS

## INTRODUCTION

- The Reformed tradition has spoken of the relationship between God and Adam as a covenantal relationship.
  - Without the Covenant of Works, we cannot rightly understand man's relationship to God in the Garden.
  - Neither can we understand the gospel, for the work of our Lord Jesus Christ was a redeeming work necessitated by the Fall into sin.
- Introductory Textual Considerations
  - Gen 2:16–17—And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”
  - Hosea 6:7—But like Adam they transgressed the covenant; there they dealt faithlessly with me.
  - Romans 5:12–21
  - Gal 4:24a—Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants.

## THE NATURE OF THE FIRST COVENANT

- Scriptural Support
  - Gal 3:12—But the law is not of faith, rather “The one who does them shall live by them.”
  - Rom 10:5—For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them.
  - Rom 5:12–20
  - Gen 2:17—but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”
  - Gal 3:10—For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.”
- Westminster Standards
  - Westminster Shorter Catechism
    - Q. 12. What special act of providence did God exercise toward man in the estate wherein he was created?
    - A. When God had created man, he entered into a covenant of life with him, upon condition of perfect obedience; forbidding him to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, upon the pain of death.
  - Westminster Larger Catechism

- Q. 20. What was the providence of God toward man in the estate in which he was created?
- A. The providence of God toward man in the estate in which he was created, was the placing him in paradise, appointing him to dress it, giving him liberty to eat of the fruit of the earth; putting the creatures under his dominion, and ordaining marriage for his help; affording him communion with himself; instituting the Sabbath; entering into a covenant of life with him, upon condition of personal, perfect, and perpetual obedience, of which the tree of life was a pledge; and forbidding to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, upon the pain of death.
- Westminster Confession of Faith 7.2—The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam; and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience.
- To gain a grasp of the nature of this covenantal relationship, we must recognize several basic features.
  - First, recognize the relationship between Adam and God. These are two parties.
  - Second, within this arrangement, God imposes stipulations upon Adam. These are “perfect and personal obedience.”
  - Third, a reward is promised.
    - The reward is life (eschatological life).
    - Adam would have received consummate eschatological life upon the proper achievement of the stipulations of perfect and perpetual obedience.
  - Fourth, punishment is threatened for violating the stipulations.
  - Fifth, the relationship establishes a bond not only between God and Adam, but also between Adam and those whom he represents.
- Let’s revisit the various names this covenant has been given.
  - “Covenant of Works” emphasizes the principle according to which Adam was to pass probation and gain his reward.
  - “Covenant of Life” emphasizes the reward offered for obedience.
  - “Covenant of Creation” (and to some degree the “Covenant of Nature”) emphasizes that this was a prelapsarian arrangement given at the time of creation.

## THE COMPREHENSIVENESS OF THE COVENANT OF WORKS

- God deals with his people through a federal head.
  - Adam was the representative. God dealt with Adam while simultaneously dealing with all the people he represents. God *continues* to deal with his people through a federal head.
  - There are only two: Adam and the second and last Adam, Jesus Christ.
- God required perfect obedience. Successful passage through probation would involve complete conformity to God's standard.
- Given these two points and the historical reality of the Fall into sin, we can see our need of a Redeemer.
  - The Covenant of Works is comprehensive of our relationship to God. It is also comprehensive of all people.
  - After the Fall, we all have fallen into an estate of sin and misery. We also are subject to death as the wages of that sin.

## OBJECTIONS TO THE COVENANT OF WORKS

- Some have rejected the Covenant of Works because they believe it introduces a meritocracy or places God in man's debt. Others fail to recognize sufficient Scriptural support.
- S. G. De Graaf takes issue with the use of the term "works," because it was not the case that "man was expected to earn eternal life as a reward for doing good works as though eternal life was man's payment for services rendered." (*Promise and Deliverance*, 1.37). He prefers Covenant of Favor.
- G. C. Berkouwer rejects the idea that an antithesis could exist between the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace—such that the Covenant of Works would be about working or achieving the law whereas the Covenant of Grace is purely by God's mercy.
  - Berkouwer misses the eschatology of the Covenant of Works by thinking that the Covenant of Works was about obtaining God's favor, love, and/or communion.
  - Adam already possessed this. The Covenant of Works held out *eschatological* life.
- Herman Hoeksema presents something of an interminable probation. He recognizes a relationship between God and Adam, but Hoeksema rejects that it is an agreement that consists of a condition, promise, and penalty.
- John Murray
  - Murray describes his objections to the Covenant of Works in "The Covenant of Works: Three Problems" found in *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 2 of *The Collected Writings of John Murray*, pp. 47–59.
  - Murray takes issue with two parts of the "covenant of works" language.

- To elaborate, he identifies three problems in recognizing a covenant of works in Genesis 2.
  - First, Murray is surely not alone in believing that “works” does not accurately describe the relationship God established with Adam.
  - Second, Murray also argues that Scripture does not explicitly identify this relationship as a covenant.
  - Third, Murray insists that covenants are strictly arrangements God establishes *only after* the Fall into sin.
- Nonetheless, Murray argues for an Adamic Administration that is unique as a relationship between God and man.
  - This administration is sovereignly administered by God. And under it, Adam is the head of the human race. The condition for this administration is perfect obedience. He must resist temptation for a time of probation.
  - God gave Adam a promise, which we can infer from:
    - The threat of death. A reward is implied.
    - The parallel with Romans 5:12ff.
    - The symbolism of the Tree of *Life*.
  - Perfect obedience does not *merit* the reward, since this administration is informed by grace at a fundamental level.
  - God threatened spiritual, judicial, and physical death upon disobedience.
- Response to Murray
  - Murray takes issue with “covenant” and “works” as they might be applied to God’s relationship to Adam.
    - However, he has identified two parties, stipulations, a reward, and threats of punishment for violating the terms, and representation.
    - It seems he has just defined a covenant according to our definition.
  - Murray claims that Scripture nowhere explicitly calls the Adamic Administration a covenant.
    - All the features of a covenant are present. The terminology is not be present in Gen 2:15–17, but the elements of a covenant certainly are.
    - Perhaps Murray would be content with the language of “Covenant of Creation” at this point.