

## **Should We Speak of a Covenant of Works?**

Our Presbyterian sister churches call the relationship God had with Adam and Eve a covenant of works. Our Three Forms of Unity do not use this expression, but there are Reformed teachers who subscribe to them that favour this idea. In this article we discuss whether it is good to describe the first relationship between God and man as a covenant of works.

### **A Covenant in Eden?**

Since covenant terminology is not found in Genesis one to three, many Reformed brothers follow the example of the Three Forms of Unity and do not speak of a covenant at all in the Garden of Eden. There are, however, a number of other concepts also not mentioned in these first chapters that, by comparing with the rest of Scripture, can be seen to have applied to Adam and Eve from the beginning -- the command to love God, for example. Thus it can be pointed out that characteristics of a covenant relationship are present in these chapters, even though covenant terminology is not yet used, and many find it helpful to speak of a covenant when comparing the Adamic administration with other periods in history.

In a covenant, the parties involved establish a bond of loyalty, promising to be committed to each other in love. In his covenant with Abraham, for example, the Lord promised to be Abraham's God and the God of his descendants and promised that he and his people would be God's people. As is typical of God's covenants, he also set before Abraham blessings and curses and confirmed the covenant with signs. Such elements are also found in Genesis 1-3. God was committed to Adam and his descendants to be their God and they were his people who served him in loving loyalty. The Lord set life and death before Adam, blessing and curse signified in the tree of life and the tree of knowledge, life or death, according to loyalty to the Lord and his requirements -- just as we find in later administrations that are called covenants. The comparison can be expanded more and other arguments can be presented, but these points are sufficient to show why most Reformed theologians speak of a covenant between God and man in the beginning.

### **A Principle of Works?**

Whether or not we use the concept of covenant, we now ask, should the relationship between God and Adam be called a covenant of works or be understood to be based on a principle of works? It is true that works were integral to this relationship, but it is not helpful to regard works as that which particularly distinguishes it from God's later covenants with his people.

Our Presbyterian brothers confess that:

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 (Westminster Confession of Faith 7.2).

It is certainly true that God required Adam and his posterity to bring forth works of perfect obedience to him and that if they would disobey they would die on that very day. God's blessings were surely conditioned on full obedience to the law. Never could man expect to continue in fellowship with the Almighty and inherit his rewards if he would not love God with all his heart, soul, strength, and mind and his neighbour as himself. Adam was called to walk by faith in the works God had prepared for him. Obedient works were essential to the first administration.

For a correct understanding of the Adamic administration, however, we need to avoid some notions that are often associated with the idea of works. We must not think that God established a work contract (a principle of works) with mankind such that life would be wages that Adam would earn through faithful labour, especially not as the means by which man would be accounted as righteous. The Lord did constitute his children to be stewards of the earth and he does give rewards for faithful stewardship according to work that is produced, but this must not be confused with justification and it must be viewed as ever the result of God's unconditional love. Man could never purchase rewards from God. The Lord never is indebted to man and under obligation to pay value to man in exchange for merits produced by him.

### **Adam's Justification before the Fall**

People who speak of a covenant of works often think that Adam was to have been justified after meriting God's approval by accomplishing perfect works of obedience to the law. This turns things around. Adam was not created morally neutral. He did not have to produce works in order to earn justification. No, Adam was created in perfect righteousness and holiness. These were divine gifts he and Eve had from the beginning. God's children were counted as just from the beginning and lived in perfect communion with their God from the first day of their existence. They were righteous and in righteousness were called to serve the Lord perfectly by the strength and faith with which he empowered them.

The test God presented in the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was a test of whether they would remain faithful, obedient and righteous, not whether they would produce works that would make them righteous. It was about *remaining* true not about *becoming* true to the Lord.

### **God's Blessings have Always Been Gifts**

Eternal life is presented in Scripture as an inheritance, not a purchase. An inheritance is a gift. God's children are his servants, but from the beginning they are also beloved children, members of the family. Adam did not have to earn his way into the Lord's family and work to buy the inheritance. As diligent children Adam and Eve rejoiced to lovingly toil in their Father's vineyard, trusting that the promised blessings were theirs as gifts from their Father. This is to be contrasted with the idea that in the covenant of works man was first a servant with a job to be performed, so that he could be confirmed in

righteousness after completing the job and thus be received as a son upon earning the inheritance. An inheritance is a gift, not a purchase, and servants do not earn the right to become children through the work they perform.

There are then two notions commonly associated with the covenant of works that need to be questioned. One is that to be counted as righteous is something earned by works. The other, that an inheritance is purchased. . God's judgment concerning Adam's righteousness was according to works, but his perfect obedience was *fruit* of his original righteousness and not the means by which he would *merit* right-standing and acceptance by the Lord. Also, perfect obedience was essential to receiving the promised inheritance, but this was the expression of a son's faithfulness of service to his Father, not a means of purchasing blessings.

The Westminster Assembly contrasted the covenant of works with the covenant of grace. This, too, raises questions. Of course there is a big contrast between God's relation with man before the fall and this relationship after the first sin. Under the first administration there was no redemption or need for it and after the fall, the only way in which man could live in fellowship with God is by redemption through the blood of Christ. This redemption is certainly of grace. However, do we do well to characterize the contrast between the covenants as one between works and grace? Was there no grace before the fall into sin?

### **By Grace, Not by Works**

Proponents of the covenant of works usually see a connection between the covenant with Adam and what Paul writes in Romans 4:4-5: "Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness." They conclude that in the first covenant works are treated as meritorious and are counted as righteousness. Eternal life is received as wages for the labour rendered to God. Works merit wages. But was it really Paul's intention to teach this? Does the Bible really lead us to think that for Adam before the fall his obedience to the moral law would earn him wages from God? Does God count Adam's obedience to the moral law as labour that needs to be recompensed as justification? It is more likely that Paul is simply pointing out the contrast between his opponents' way of thinking and the Lord's way of justification. There is no need to conclude from this passage that Paul is teaching that God's relationship with man began with a covenant of works.

We are told that the covenant of works is based on the principle of merit, not of grace. Now it is true that there are ways in which we can regard Adam's obedience to be meritorious, but we must also consider that Adam lived by faith through grace. Before the fall, Adam's works were worthy of God's approval and judged to be righteous. In this sense, they were meritorious and they merited life in the sense that a righteous man deserves to live and not die. However, if the idea of merit is taken as deserving of a blessing because righteous works must be recompensed with eternal life for services rendered to the Lord, then we ask where such a teaching is to be found in Scripture. In

Genesis 1, the Lord first blesses Adam and Eve and then tells them to be fruitful and multiply, to fill the earth and subdue it, having dominion over all other creatures. Man receives a blessing before he is assigned work to perform. In fact, it is only because of the blessing that he can perform his works.

It is not only after a sinner is redeemed that God is at work in him both to will and to work to please the Lord (Phil. 2:13). This principle applied from the beginning. Adam and Eve also willed to please the Lord and worked this out only because God was at work in them and because he had made them righteous and already embraced them as just. They lived by grace, entrusting themselves to their Father in true faith. God promised to reward their work. However, if we take merit to refer to value that can be exchanged for something else of value, this reward would not have been of merit, but of grace.

On the other hand, if merit is understood simply as being worthy, we may say that good works merit approval and life only because they are fruit of God's grace. Man never earns acceptance by God and never places God in his debt such that the Lord is bound by a principle that requires him to repay man with eternal life because of the work produced. In the Garden of Eden God condescended to commit himself to his children in love. His blessings promised to man flowed from his own commitment of love, not as payment for worth or merits produced by man.

### **Grace before the Fall**

Grace is a gift. Adam and Eve were created by grace. Their original righteousness was a gift. They were counted as just from the beginning because of God's gift of righteousness. God's blessings and promises were gifts. The work assigned was a gift. God's relationship with man in which he embraced man with love and pledged eternal fellowship and loyalty was a gift. Adam and Eve's loyalty in which they committed themselves to love their God and express this in faithful obedience to the moral law, was a privilege to be fulfilled only through the gift of God's working in them. In other words, also before the fall, man lived by God's gifts, God's grace. This was not redemptive grace, granted in spite of sin, nor did it undermine the responsibilities God gave to Adam. Nevertheless, it was grace. Adam was to obey in thankful love and not as driven by efforts to earn acceptance by the Lord, and God did not withhold his blessings until they would be merited by man.

The characteristic feature of the Adamic administration was not that man had to earn right-standing with his God by means of labour that would purchase eternal life. God's promised inheritance would not be earned as a salary for performing the work of perfectly keeping God's moral law. Rather, the promised blessing was to be received as a gift. Adam and Eve were called to live by faith and not by sight. In this way God would lead them into the eternal inheritance in fulfillment of his promises as Adam, Eve, and their descendants would express their faith, hope, and love in perfect obedience to the whole law of the Lord. Absolute obedience to the law was necessary for man to continue to be counted as righteous and be received into God's glorious rest at the time appointed,

In this sense, eternal life was conditioned on obedience, but not in a sense of works earning wages or in a way that sets human merits over against God's grace.

Some theologians prefer to reserve the concept of grace to the Lord's mercy to sinners, arguing that the word grace is used in the Bible only for undeserved favour shown to sinners. Accordingly, some of them call God's initial relationship with Adam a covenant, but then a Covenant of Favour rather than grace. We need not make a big point of this. There are other terms, such as covenant, inheritance, and love, that are also not found in the Bible before the fall into sin, yet we use them with reference to the pre-fall condition. It is not wrong to speak of grace and faith before the fall. The term favour is actually not as clear as grace. A number of uses of favour do not express that the favourable attitude is undeserved or purely an expression of unconditional love.

### **A Relationship of Love, not of Merit**

Reformed brothers who speak of a covenant of works certainly recognize that the Lord's original relationship with Adam was not deserved. It would be wrong to give the impression that they teach that man's merits brought about this relationship. The Westminster Confession emphasizes that man could have no bond with God except by God's condescension. Nevertheless, these brothers hold that, in his condescension, God was pleased to establish a relationship with man by which man would earn justification through his works and purchase life. Although they recognized the priority of God's sovereignty and that he is never bound by anything outside of himself, they think that, in his good pleasure, he bound himself to man in such a way that man's inheritance would be merited by his works. This view fails to do justice to the relationship of love between God and his people.

Adam was God's servant, but God's relationship with him should not primarily be thought of as between an employer and an employee. There is more to God's condescension than what can be compared to an employer not being bound to hire an employee. The Lord's relationship with Adam was more like the bond of love between parents and children or a covenant of marriage between spouses. A husband showers gifts on his wife, not because she earns them or buys them from him through her works, but because of his love. And she receives them as gifts not as merited rewards. So was the original relationship between God and man -- one of unconditional love, not of purchase.

Speaking of a Covenant of Works to distinguish the first divine-human relationship from the covenant after the fall into sin does not accurately call attention to what characterized the first bond between God and his righteous children. If we want to call the Adamic administration a covenant, we could better speak of the Covenant of Original Favour as distinct from Covenants of Redemptive Grace after the fall. What is important is that man's justification, that is, his being counted as just has never been something achieved by him through producing labour to be repaid by God. As the Lord said to Job, "Who has first given to me, that I should repay him" (Job 41:11)?

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Notes:

1. Many who hold to the covenant of works regard the idea only as describing the necessity of perfect, personal obedience and do not think in terms of works earning wages, purchasing life eternal, or a job that merits justification. However, when theologians work out the covenant of works construction these are themes that come to the fore. The Westminster Confession, for example, states that Christ “purchased, not only reconciliation, but an everlasting inheritance in the kingdom of heaven..” (WCF 8.4-5). J. H. Thornwell (*Collected Writings* [rpt. Banner of Truth, 1974], Vol. 1, Lectures XI-XII) relates the covenant of works to servants, with each being rewarded or punished according to merits and demerits and relates grace to sonship. R. L. Dabney (*Systematic Theology*, 1871; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1985, 624-625) indicates that there can be no justification if the job has not been performed. C. Hodge tells us that “heaven is always represented as a purchased possession” (*Systematic Theology*, Wm.B.Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, MI, 1940, III, 164).

2. Dr. J. Faber wrote some editorials on this topic for Clarion. These can be read at <http://pro-rege.net/rfb/theology/justification..>