

How I Regard God's Covenants and Justification
(In View of Current Reformed Discussions)
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By Ralph Boersema

I welcome criticisms and suggestions for improvements of this statement. RB

1. To describe these doctrines it is important to clarify terms being used. For example, many Reformed people today understand Christ's merits not to refer to his passive obedience, but to righteousness thought to be produced by his active obedience. John Calvin and Zacharius Ursinus, on the other hand, applied the term to Christ's death and suffering for his people, as did others of that generation (Cf. *Belgic Confession 24, last sentence*). In the current discussions there are often misunderstandings due to lack of terminological clarity and due to presumption concerning the meaning of terms .
2. I pray that greater clarity in describing concepts will lead to better reception of Reformed teaching among believing Roman Catholics and Lutherans, but I am not presently aware of elements of validity in these religions that were missed by Reformed theologians in the 16th century.
3. It is important to respect the mystery in God's dealings with man. He operates in ways that harmoniously combine perspectives that human understanding cannot harmonize. Reformed theology has long respected the incomprehensible harmony of God's sovereignty and man's responsibility and similar incomprehensible mysteries such as pertain to the Trinity and to the two natures of Christ. . We must note similar mysteries in the harmony of God's eternal predestination and his historical covenants. In history the Lord pledges to sanctify his people by the blood of Christ (1 Cor. 1:2; 7:14), and at the same time he works out his decretive will by which not all covenant people are eternally elect (Rom. 9:6-13; Heb. 10:29). Our theology must avoid trying to explain away the mystery.
4. We must neither insist that all members of the covenant people are born again, nor affirm that the covenant is really only with the eternally elect.
5. A covenant is an oath-bound commitment that establishes a bond between, at least, two parties. The nature of the relationship depends on the terms of the covenant and on the parties involved (Gen. 21:31; 26:3; Deut. 7:8; Heb. 6:16-17).
6. The covenant relationship between God and his people can be described as a divinely established relationship of union and communion between God and his people in the bonds of mutual love and faithfulness. God's covenants establish bonds of steadfast love that cannot be reduced to administrations of blessings and curses or of conditional promises or of outward participation in the means of grace (Deut. 7:12 ; Isa. 54:10; Jer. 31:3; Ezek, 16:8; Mal. 1:2; Rev. 3:9).
7. Covenants define historical relationships. I caution against applying covenant concepts to the Trinity in pre-history. I recognize that the term Covenant of Redemption has an honored place in Reformed theology. However, I recommend that care be taken in projecting historical concepts into pre-history and applying characteristics of eternal relationships to historical ones. When this is done, it

- should be on the basis of specific biblical revelation and not simply by drawing conclusions from theological concepts.
8. All God's covenants with man incorporate both blessings and curses (Gen. 2:16-17; Deut. 30:19; Heb. 6:5-9). All are breakable in the present history, also those that God describes as everlasting (Isa. 24:5). If the covenant is said to be with Christ and the eternally elect in him, this is true only as a description of the final outcome. During the present history the covenant is with all who credibly profess faith in the Lord and with their households (Gen. 17:7,12; Acts 2:37-39; 16:31; 1 Cor. 1:16).
 9. The covenant with Abraham was with him and his descendants and the Old (Mosaic) covenant was with the nation of Israel. However, membership in these covenants was not based on descent or nationality, but faith and love expressed in obedience. The unfaithful were cut off (Gen. 17:18-21; Dan. 9:4; 1 Cor. 10:1-5; Heb. 4:2). Correspondingly, circumcision symbolized heart commitment and not identity with the nation (Lev. 26:40-42; Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Rom. 2:25-29; 4:11). Paul's opponents did not have an understanding of circumcision that would have been correct for the Old Covenant.
 10. Circumcision and baptism both point to the death of the old man and the resurrection of the new (Col. 2:11-13).
 11. All God's covenants with his people incorporate both promise and law. The promises are God's pledges and the laws describe what man must pledge to do (Gen. 17:7; 26:5; Exod. 24:12; 1 Kings 8:56; Acts 2:39; Gal. 6:2).
 12. All God's covenants with his people are unconditional from one perspective and conditional from another. The love and faithfulness that are pledged by both God and man are unconditional while at the same time God's blessings and the continuation of the covenant are conditioned on man's faithfulness and perseverance (Gen. 17:7,8,13,14,19; Exod. 19:5; 20:5,6; Lev. 26:15-45; Num. 30:2; Deut. 17:2-5; 30:15-20; 1 Chron. 16:15,17,34; Ps. 105:8,10; 132:12; Isa. 55:3; Heb. 10:26-31).
 13. Covenant pledges (promises) and covenant signs and seals express commitments and must not be confused with predictions about final outcomes or with God's eternal decrees. Just as in the marriage covenant spouses pledge unfailing love, but can be released of this commitment if the other party commits adultery, so God makes his covenant pledges of mercy and faithfulness to his people, but can be released of these promises when his people persist in breaking faith with him. What actually takes place in history is strictly in accord with what God has determined in his eternal predestination and his plan includes the determination that some of the covenant people will fall away (Heb. 3:12; 4:11; 6:4-8; 2 Pet. 1:10).
 14. Baptism and the Lord's Supper signify and seal what is pledged in the covenant and do not themselves effect what is signified. It is the Holy Spirit who applies what is promised when and to whom he wills (John 3:5-8; Rom. 2:25-26).
 15. We do not know the hidden things of God (Deut. 29:29). Following the pattern of Scriptural language (e.g., 1 Cor. 1:2-9), when a church is faithful, we must address the whole church from covenant perspective, that is, according to what God has pledged to do for his people. The whole church, including the children,

must be addressed as having full fellowship with God. Children must not be treated with a wait-and-see attitude until they make a credible profession of faith. The whole church must be comforted by God's promises and love (1 John 2:24-25) and, at the same time, they must be warned against falling away (1 John 2:15-19). Covenant children must neither be presumed to be regenerate nor presumed to be non-regenerate until they profess their faith. They are all holy and not unclean (1 Cor. 7:14). Theirs is the same holiness as that of their believing parents.

16. Infant children of believing parents belong to the family of God from the beginning, not on the basis of presumed regeneration or some kind of latent or potential faith, but by virtue of God's covenant with them. I appreciate and agree with the statement of the famous Synod of Dort (1618-1619) when it affirmed that:

We must judge concerning the will of God from His Word, which declares that the children of believers are holy, not by nature but in virtue of the covenant of grace, in which they are included with their parents. Therefore, God-fearing parents ought not to doubt the election and salvation of their children whom God calls out of this life in their infancy (*Canons of Dort* I.17)

17. The sacraments are signs and seals of the covenant and seal it to God's people in both its unconditional and its conditional senses. God's people have sealed to them his promises of loving faithfulness, but the signs and seals do not deny that his people can break the covenant and God can consequently curse them and cut them off.
18. I appreciate the intent of making a distinction between God's covenant in its broader sense and its narrower one or similar distinctions such as the covenant in its administration and its fruition. Nevertheless, I think the broader/narrower distinction is invalid and other distinctions should be used with care. They must not be understood to suggest that there are covenant children and some adult professors of the faith for whom God's covenant pledges are more limited than for other members of the covenant people. Such distinctions can only be used as descriptions of what happens in history, but not as definitions of the covenant. As definitions they do not do justice to the pledge character of covenants. Such distinctions confuse commitments and outcomes. This problem can be seen if similar terms are applied to the marriage covenant. With regard to serious couples, does it ever make sense to speak of a marriage in a broader or external sense in contrast to a narrower or internal one? Marriages that end in divorce are governed by the very same vows as all marriage covenants.
19. I appreciate the intent of distinguishing between the church visible and the church invisible. Nevertheless, Biblical language is better reflected by speaking of only one church and describing it as yet unfinished and having defects and blemishes in the present age, such as hypocrites among its members.

20. Justification is relational and forensic, treating of peace and fellowship with God and of legal standing before God, of moral righteousness (Rom. 5:1; 5:16,18). The relational and legal aspects of justification are not in tension and neither should receive more emphasis than the other.
21. Righteousness treats of being morally and judicially right and good, as opposed to wrong and evil. It describes status and character. A person or action can be characterized as righteous or can have approved status (right standing). Righteousness is not a substance or commodity. It is not spiritual capital, a product of works that, in justification, receives eternal life as value in exchange for work rendered,.
22. Although one needs to be righteous in Christ to be in covenant with God, righteousness cannot be reduced to covenant membership.
23. For justification, the righteousness that can stand before the tribunal of God is that which expresses itself in perfect obedience to the whole moral law (Matt. 12:36; James 2:10). God refers to his children as righteous, not because he accepts imperfect works as though they were perfect, but because these people are righteous in Christ and because their works reflect faith in the Lord and trust in him for salvation and forgiveness.
24. A distinction between innocence and righteousness is invalid. Adam and Christ were righteous from the beginning. They were not merely guiltless, needing to produce righteousness before being counted as righteous. The argument that Christ's passive obedience (without the merits of active law-keeping) only renders us guiltless is inconsistent with this truth.
25. For Adam and for Christ good works of obedience to God's moral law did not produce righteousness. Although a judgment that one is to be counted as just is according to his works, righteousness is not the product of obedience. Rather, obedience and good works are fruit and evidence of righteousness. The order must not be reversed. Righteous character bears fruit of righteous works. The right-standing of the righteous precedes the works that demonstrate their righteousness. Although lost by law-breaking, right-standing with God is not gained by law-keeping, but maintained by it. This is seen in Adam's probation which was not a command to do something, but *not* to do something. This reality makes the idea of earning justification through perfect works invalid.
26. In the first covenant, perpetual, perfect, personal obedience was required of Adam and all mankind. This is true also after the fall, but it is accomplished only by Christ.
27. Although Adam was called to perform a stewardship as image-bearer of God and man did have a job to complete, the probation, as encapsulated in the prohibition to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, was a test of faithfulness and righteousness, not a job to be performed. Correspondingly, it is not the case that one can be judged to be righteous only after a job has been completed.
28. The successful passing of the probation was necessary for entitlement to eternal life, but passing the probation would not earn or purchase life eternal. I attribute this entitlement to God's benevolent faithfulness to his promises and see the necessity of obedience as faithfulness to man's vows and as the way of receiving

- and not forfeiting what was promised. This entitlement is not earned, but received as a gift.
29. Justification entitles to life and liberty. It is wrong for a just man to be put to death or to be imprisoned. However, justification does not itself entitle to life eternal or indefectibility. These flow from justification (Tit. 3:7) and are received through Christ and his accomplishments (Rom. 5:21; 6:22-23), but, like adoption, sanctification, and glorification, they are not part of justification. The dynamics of justification should not be so construed as to provide for them. Justification should be limited to pardon of sin and to being counted as righteous.
 30. Merit is a term that can bring to mind different concepts. For justification, perfect works have merit in the sense of deserving approval and commendation and are necessary as expression of righteousness. That such works have merit for justification in a sense comparable to labor deserving wages can legitimately be questioned without being subversive of the Gospel. The Lord's favor issues from his love and is pledged to his people even before they do any work. They do not purchase acceptance by God through their labor or righteousness.
 31. The Romanist concept of merit, where grace is counted as meritorious and Christian works are viewed as producing spiritual credits must be rejected.
 32. One can speak of a principle of works in the Adamic covenant if it is understood to be the principle that Adam's works had to be perfect for him to be justified (counted as righteous). The necessity of perfect obedience cannot be questioned. In question, however, the validity of the "principle of works" understood as one by which Adam produced valuable labor to be repaid by justification and eternal life as wages for work rendered. Eternal life is an inheritance. Inheritances are received as gifts, not by purchase or as wages.
 33. Although living faith cannot exist without works, faith and works must be distinguished. Faith refers to knowledge, conviction and trust. Works, fundamentally, refer to doing, to activity. In this basic sense, faith is work (John 6:29) and faith and works are not in tension when it is God who is at work in a person.
 34. I hold that in the original relationship between God and man, man was totally dependent on God's grace and that he lived by faith in God. Although grace and faith gained new dimensions in God's salvation after the fall into sin, they were fundamental for man's walk with God from the beginning and are not applicable only to sinners (Luke 2:40).
 35. Contrasting the Adamic covenant with post-fall covenants as a contrast of a covenant of works and one of grace is problematic. I prefer names such as Covenant of Creation and Covenant of New Creation or Covenant of Original Favor and Covenants of Redemptive Grace.
 36. When Paul sharply contrasts faith and works (e.g., Rom. 3:20-28), he uses the terms not to refer to two functions exercised by a believer, but as shorthand for opposing principles. The contrast is between a presentation of a sinner's works as meritorious for justification and faith as trust in the Lord, specifically trust in Christ and his substitutionary atonement for justification.
 37. The idea that obedience to God's law merits justification by earning or purchasing it, is a misuse of the law. This idea should not be incorporated into the Adamic

- Administration as if it properly applies to the righteous and is only to be rejected when applied to sinners (Gal. 2:21).
38. Law and gospel or law and grace can be contrasted as to the ability to deliver from condemnation (Rom. 8:2-4). Grace can also be contrasted with the misuse of the law when the law is thought to teach salvation by works of the law (Gal. 2:16). They must not be contrasted, however, as opposing, but God-approved principles for inheriting eternal life. In God's order law and grace are complementary and not opposing principles (Rom. 3:31; Gal. 6:2). The law of shadows and types is to be contrasted with the gospel of fulfillment of these laws by Christ through grace (Rom. 6:14-15; 7:6), but such law is not the same as God's law in Eden or as the perfect law of liberty (James 1:25), and the grace refers to the grace of Christ's fulfillment (John 1:17), not every sense of grace.
 39. The righteousness of Jesus Christ, imputed to believers, is the only ground or basis for justification of sinners (Rom. 3:20-28; 4:25; 5:8-10; Phil. 3:7-9).
 40. Living faith in Jesus Christ is the alone instrument of justification and it is never alone in the person justified. Man is not justified by works (neither as ground nor instrument), but as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead (James 2:26). The faith counted to a sinner for righteousness (Gen. 15:6), is faith working through love (Gal. 5:6), not just after justification, but also for justification. Yet, it is not the working of faith that justifies, but the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ.
 41. When James says that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone (James 2:24), he means that believers are justified by works and not by faith that is alone. Here he takes works, not as presenting worthiness to God to provide the ground for justification and not as infused grace thought to be an instrument for justification through sanctification, but as expression of living faith in Christ.
 42. Although faith is obedience (1 John 3:23), it is not the obedience or worthiness of faith that is counted as righteousness. Faith brings us into fellowship with Jesus Christ and it is only his righteousness that justifies sinners.
 43. Believers are justified exclusively on the ground of the imputed righteousness of Christ. Their own obedience contributes nothing to justification. Christ's substitutionary atonement is the obedience that absolves them of all sin and is accounted to them for righteousness apart from works (Rom. 4:6-8,25; 5:8-10,18,19; Gal. 2:21:). The whole of Christ's obedience, both active and passive, is indispensable for their justification. Sins of omission (failures with regard to active obedience) are fully covered by the satisfaction of Christ's death. Christ did not, through active obedience to the moral law, produce some kind of judicial credits (merits) to be imputed to believers for their justification.
 44. Believers are counted as righteous by God because their head, Jesus Christ, who represents them is righteous in character and has judicial right standing. He is their substitute, the Righteous for the unrighteous (2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Peter 3:18; 1 John 2:1). His obedience whereby he atoned for their sins is imputed to them in the place of their disobedience and that of Adam (their first head) that was previously theirs by imputation (Rom. 5:12-14,18,19).
 45. Although I think that Christ's representative headship as the Righteous one adds a dimension to our justification that goes beyond the forgiveness of sins, I

- appreciate Calvin's position that the non-imputation of sins is the whole of our justification (*Institutes*, 3.11.11,21). This was the view that was generally held by Reformed theologians of his generation and should not be minimized or regarded as subversive of the Gospel.
46. Since faith is part of God's gift of inward sanctifying renewal and is necessary for justification, I conclude that justification logically follows the inception of sanctification. Also, as seen in the following paragraph, there are aspects of justification that take place together with the process of sanctification. This is so even though justification is not a process of progressive inward renewal, nor is it grounded in sanctification in any way.
 47. The daily forgiveness of a believer's sins is an aspect of justification (Matt. 6:12; 1 John 1:9). It is a forensic act of God and not the inward renewal of sanctification. The same is true of the Final Judgment. It is a forensic act by which God declares who are counted as guilty and who are not. There is only one justification, however, and only one ground for this justification, namely, the person and work of Christ.
 48. The Final Judgment and all God's judgments that someone is to be counted as righteous is according to works (Rom. 2:6-11; 2 Cor. 5:10; Rev. 20:12,13). For justified sinners their works are manifestations of their faith in Jesus Christ as their Justifier.
 49. The Good News of salvation from sin through Jesus Christ is for all people and God desires all to be saved (1 Tim. 2:4). Christ laid down his life only for his sheep (John 10:11). Nevertheless, it can also be said that Christ's death is for all people, but then in the sense of the sincere offer of the Gospel (Luke 24:46-47; Heb. 4:2).
 50. I warmly embrace as teachers of sound doctrine, orthodox Reformed brothers who hold that Adam was called to earn eternal life; that the Adamic administration has appropriately been called a covenant of works; that Christ's active obedience is imputed to believers in the sense of earning justification, etc., and who may not agree with Dort about the salvation of children who die in infancy (*Canons of Dort*, I.17) or that our righteousness consists in the forgiveness of sins (*Belgic Confession*, 23), or that Christ's sacrifice is the *only* ground of our salvation (*Heidelberg Catechism*, L.D. 25).
 51. I reject the judgment of those who regard as unorthodox the teachings of people like me who hold that the first covenant should not be characterized as one of works in contrast with grace; that the visible/invisible church distinction can be problematic; that all God's covenants in history are *structurally* the same; that imputation of Christ's active obedience in a works/merit sense can legitimately be questioned, etc., and who may wish that the Westminster Standards would have expressed themselves differently on these points or may reject the teaching that Christ purchased an everlasting inheritance (WCF 8.5).
 52. The five points of Calvinism and the teachings that for justification our only righteousness is the imputed righteousness of Jesus Christ and that there is nothing that any man can do to contribute to his justification in any sense or at any point are essential to Evangelical orthodox teaching, while the points in the previous two paragraphs are not.