



Several Quick Arguments that the Covenant of Works is not Gracious

by William J. Baldwin

The tide of Reformed opinion is that the first covenant God made with Adam was somehow gracious. The grace, it is argued, enters in one or both of two places: 1) God was not bound to offer Adam any reward for his obedience but could have required such obedience from him without any reward. That God chose to offer a reward through a covenant is considered gracious. 2) The reward God offered is so out of proportion to the obedience required that the size of the reward constitutes a further act of grace.

A veritable All-Star team of Reformed heroes have subscribed to one or both of those points, asserting or implying grace in the covenant of works: William Ames, Johannes Cocceius, Frances Turretin, the Westminster Divines^[1], John Owen, Thomas Boston, R. L. Dabney, Geerhardus Vos, John Murray, Louis Berkhof, Anthony Hoekema, Sinclair Ferguson, Richard Gaffin. Only a handful -- Johannes Heidegger, Herman Witsius, Charles Hodge -- hold out against this tide. And Witsius does so after much agonizing. He knows what he's up against.

In recent years we have begun reaping the whirlwind of the majority report's philosophical speculations. Daniel Fuller, pursuing these thoughts, has obliterated Scripture's antithesis between works and grace, replacing that sharp distinction with a continuum. Thus has the door been opened not only for introducing grace into works, but necessarily as well for introducing works into grace. A new history of redemption is being written in which [Romans 11:6](#) lies on the cutting-room floor.

And quite ahead of his time, R. L. Dabney has been on record for over 100 years as denying that the work of Christ merited the salvation of his people (the logical corollary to stipulating grace in the covenant of works):

Nor would we attach any force to the argument, that if Christ made penal satisfaction for the sins of all, justice would forbid any to be punished.... Christ's satisfaction is not a pecuniary equivalent, but only such a one as enables the Father, consistently with His attributes, to pardon, if in His mercy He sees fit.... There would be no injustice to the man, if he remaining an unbeliever, his guilt were punished twice over, first in his Savior, and then in Him.

Systematic Theology, Lecture XLIII.4 (p. 521).

This is more than a rejection of an argument for limited atonement (a doctrine Dabney affirmed on other grounds); this is a rejection of the gospel. And it flows quite naturally from the thought that the first Adam could not have merited God's favor except by some condescension on God's part. So Dabney maintains consistently that the second Adam could not have earned salvation by a "pecuniary equivalent" but that God accepts Christ's obedience as "in His mercy He sees fit." Dabney's statement is appalling; but observe this well: his crime is a foolish consistency that his theological forbears eschewed.

If other Reformed theologians have stopped short of Dabney's conclusion, perhaps they have only done so by avoiding the foolish consistency that was the hobgoblin of Dabney's smaller mind. The chickens have come home to roost. These are the necessary theological brats of a theological speculation that thought it was only preserving the sovereignty and freedom of God.

For the minority report to prevail we need to establish two points by way of refutation:

- 1) God created man in covenant with himself because the image of God requires, presupposes, and implies a covenant relationship. Thus the covenant is not some *donum superadditum* that God imposed out of his mere good pleasure on man in a "state of nature." [2]
- 2) The reward of eternal life is not disproportionate. It is, in fact, the only just reward for fulfilling a covenant of works.

Seven arguments are here presented to establish those points -- arguments from the justice of God, the nature of sin, the light of nature, the purpose of man, the meaning of the Sabbath, the antithesis of grace and works, and the work of the second Adam. These headings suggest the seriousness with which this author views the error in question. Basic doctrines are at stake.

1. The Justice of God

The reward of blessedness was offered to Adam, not by condescension or "grace," but as a matter of justice. If offending the infinite holiness of God

merits hell, then pleasing an infinitely holy God merits heaven. God by nature must render to each man according to his deeds. We know that God is just and therefore will by no means clear the guilty (Exodus 34:7). God *must* punish sin or deny his own nature. By the same token, he *must* reward righteousness. Note Psalm 58:10,11:

The righteous shall rejoice when he sees the vengeance;
He shall wash his feet in the blood of the wicked
¹¹So that men will say,
"Surely there is a reward for the righteous;
Surely He is God who judges in the earth."

It is God's judgment of the wicked that the Psalmist points to as proof that God also rewards righteousness. You can't have one without the other. For God to fail in rewarding righteousness would be as heinous as failing to punish sin. And if sin can only properly be punished by hell, then righteousness can only properly be rewarded by heaven.

2. The Nature of Sin

Sin presupposes covenant. Paul says, "Sin is not imputed where there is no law" (Romans 5:13). And John says, "Sin is the transgression of the law" (1 John 3:4). These are covenantal definitions of sin. Sin cannot be *imputed* apart from a covenant because sin by definition is the transgression of a covenant.

If we say that Adam was created in the image of God, we are saying he was created a morally responsible being. But he was not confirmed in righteousness and was therefore capable of sin. If sin is defined covenantally--as in Scripture (above) and in the Westminster Standards as well ([WSC 14](#), [WLC 24](#), [WCF 4.2](#))--then the very fact that Adam was created capable of sinning proves that he was created in covenant with God. To speak of a man created apart from covenant is to speak of a creature without the image of God, with no moral capacity, who nonetheless looks and acts like a man. Such a beast may proceed from the imagination of the theistic evolutionist, but not from Scripture.

In other words, if Adam was created a moral being, he was created a covenantal being. The two concepts cannot be divided.

A second argument may also be adduced under this heading. Sin, by its nature, prevents the enjoyment of a sinless God. All who sin fall short of God's glory (Romans 3:23). Thus, those who don't sin do *not* fall short of God's glory. Otherwise Paul's statement makes no sense. Paul would simply be saying that we--who by *nature* fall short of the glory of God--also happen to fall short by sin as well. Understood correctly, the verse maintains that if Adam had not sinned he would necessarily have entered into God's glory, i.e. eternal life.

Summary: Adam was created in the image of God, but lapsably. He was capable of sin. He was created in covenant with God because sin is impossible apart from covenant. Therefore, the covenant between God and Adam could not have been added "graciously" at a later time. The covenant was involved in the warp and woof of who Adam was, as created. It's just the nature of the (non-)beast.

3. The Light of Nature

The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all who practice unrighteousness. Unbelievers therefore know the decree of God that those who practice such things deserve death. They have the work of the law written on their hearts (Rom 1:18,31; 2:15). The sanctions of the covenant of works are revealed in nature, hard-wired into creation itself. Adam would have known them apart from special revelation. How can the *sanctions* of the covenant be hard-wired into creation without the covenant being hard-wired as well?

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

4. Man's Chief End (The Teleological Argument)

Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever (*WSC 1*). *WLC 1* expands "... *fully* to enjoy him forever." But if the covenant of works is gracious, then God could theoretically create a man and give him no ability to fulfil his purpose. This would be capricious and unjust. If I said that God created porcupines to fly, it would rightly be pointed out that porcupines have no ability to fly and any reasonable definition of their purpose must take that into account. Assuming porcupines have not forfeited their right to fly, then flying cannot be their created purpose. The abilities of the porcupine determine the way in which it glorifies God. So if man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever, he must as originally constituted have had the means to fulfil his purpose. The logical implications of [WSC 1](#) contradict the statement of [WCF 7.1](#).

5. The Meaning of the Sabbath

Hebrews 4:3a,4-6a:

For we who have believed do enter that rest.... For He has spoken in a certain place of the seventh day in this way: 'And God rested on the

seventh day from all His works';⁵ and again in this place: 'They shall not enter My rest.'⁶ Since therefore it remains that some must enter it....

The passage's argument depends upon the notion that God, in resting on the 7th day, extended an offer of entry into that rest. The author invokes God's sabbatical rest, reminds us that "they" (i.e. unbelievers, cf. 3:19) were prohibited from entering, and concludes that *some* must enter it or the offer implicit in that sabbatical is a sham. God's resting on the 7th day constitutes an offer to Adam that he may fully enjoy God by entering into that same rest.

The question then arises on what condition that offer was extended. The structure of the creation story provides the answer. First God worked, then he rested. So Adam, being in the image of God and thus called to emulate God, must first work and then enter into rest. The heavenly archetype indicates the connection between Adam's labors and his eschatology. Hebrews 4:10 makes this connection explicit: "For the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His."

6. The Antithesis of Grace and Works

To speak of a continuum of grace and works is nonsense. Adam would have obtained his reward by works or by grace; there is no middle ground. Romans 11:6 says exactly this regarding election according to God's grace: "And if by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace." The *Textus Receptus* addition to this statement is probably an interpolation, but it is logically implied: "But if it is of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work." God either elects by grace or according to works, never by a combination. God rewards according to grace or works, not some mixture. If Adam was to be received into eternal life by grace, then the covenant with him was *all* of grace. But if it was of works, it was not in any sense by grace, or work is no longer work. Adam would have *earned* his entry into heaven, just as Paul says: "Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt." (Romans 4:4). There can be no talk here of grace, even of God graciously offering the covenant when he didn't have to, or of offering more reward than was necessary. Then the wages are debt only because God has chosen to obligate himself (in which sense even *our* reward in Christ must be counted as debt and there is no longer any distinction between the principle of entry into life offered to Adam and to us.)

7. The Work of the Second Adam

If the first Adam couldn't have merited heaven, then the second one *didn't*. As Meredith Kline points out,

The parallel which Scripture tells us exists between the two Adams would require the conclusion that if the first Adam could not earn anything, neither could the second. But, if the obedience of Jesus has no meritorious value, the foundation of the gospel is gone." [3]

Without the assurance that Christ *earned* our salvation, that he *paid* our debt, we are robbed of the comfort of the gospel. 1 John 1:9 joins Romans 11:6 on the cutting-room floor: "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and *just* to forgive us our sins." John not only invokes the covenant faithfulness of God to keep his promises; he says the *justice* of God demands our forgiveness because Christ has already paid the penalty. This is exactly what Dabney denies in the quote in paragraph 4 of this paper. Romans 8:34 also fails to make the team: "Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died..." We can take no comfort from that thought unless the death of Christ on our behalf *must* turn aside the condemning wrath of God. Paul, in pointing to that death as the removal of condemnation, assures us that it must.

Remember your history: Reformed theologians understood the covenantal framework of the work of Christ long before they understood that Romans 5 therefore meant that Adam was in covenant as well. Follow their lead and finish what they began, understanding the work of Adam through the work of Christ. If Christ merited eternal life, so Adam--as originally constituted--might have done as well.

This is exactly what Charles Hodge argued:

The word "condition," however, is used in two senses. Sometimes it means the meritorious consideration on the ground of which certain benefits are bestowed. In this sense perfect obedience was the condition of the covenant originally made with Adam. Had he retained his integrity he would have merited the promised blessing. For to him that worketh the reward is not of grace but of debt. In the same sense the work of Christ is the condition of the covenant of redemption. It was the meritorious ground, laying a foundation in justice for the fulfillment of the promises made to Him by the Father. But in other cases, by condition we merely mean a *sine qua non*. A blessing may be promised on condition that it is asked for; or that there is a willingness to receive it. There is no merit in the asking or in the willingness, which is the ground of the gift. It remains a gratuitous favour; but it is, nevertheless, suspended upon the act of asking. It is in this last sense only that faith is the condition of the covenant of grace. There is no merit in believing.

Systematic Theology, Chapter 2, § 5, para 3 ("The Condition of the Covenant").

Conclusion

I hope the reader has begun to see what's at stake in speaking of grace in the covenant of works: God is no longer just, Sin no longer requires punishment, The image of God has no moral component, God in brute and capricious force could create man for an impossible purpose, grace and works become confused so that we not only speak of grace in the covenant of works but works in the covenant of grace and thus return to the Tridentine orthodoxy of Rome; and the sacrifice of Christ itself avails only because God decides to let it.

I do not say that those who hold to grace in the covenant of works make such shambles of the gospel. I am simply saying this teaching implies much that must appall every believer. We must reject the logical results of this teaching. And rejecting them, we must reject the root from which they spring.

NOTES

1. Implied at [WCF 7.1](#). But see [WLC 1](#) and [24](#), and especially [WCF 4.2](#) for indications that the Divines believed or implied that Adam was created in covenant with God. The Westminster Standards are a human document and from time to time contradict themselves. E.g. they suggest that the covenant of grace is with the elect in one place ([WLC 31](#)) and in another with the visible church ([WLC 166](#)). I think we must recognize some tension in the Standards respecting the present discussion as well. [\[Return to Text\]](#)

2. The position I am taking is sometimes framed as though God was *obligated* to enter into a covenant with Adam. That statement makes people nervous with respect to God's sovereignty (although no one in Reformed circles objects to the idea that God is *obligated* to punish sin). I have found it more communicative to say that the image of God is covenantal. Adam was in covenant with God *by definition*. Then we can affirm that God was not obligated to create a creature in covenant with himself. But when he freely chose to create Adam, he *did* create a creature in covenant with himself. Batteries included. No further assembly required. [\[Return to text\]](#)

3. Meredith Kline, "Covenant Theology Under Attack." The [full text](#) may be found [here](#). An [expurgated version](#) appeared in *New Horizons*, February 1994. The original article was a review of Daniel Fuller's *Unity of the Bible*. It contained some statements critical of John Murray, whom Kline felt had opened the door for this kind of approach. The editor of *New Horizons* required that these be removed before publication. [\[Return to text\]](#)

QUOTES

Westminster Confession of Faith 7.1

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. [\[Return to Note 1\]](#) [\[Return to Point 4\]](#)

Westminster Shorter Catechism 1

Question 1: What is the chief end of man?

Answer: Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.

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Westminster Larger Catechism 1

Question 1: What is the chief and highest end of man?

Answer: Man's chief and highest end is to glorify God, and *fully* to enjoy him forever. [Emphasis mine]

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Westminster Larger Catechism 24

Question 24: What is sin?

Answer: Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, any law of God, given as a rule to the reasonable creature.

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Westminster Shorter Catechism 14

Question 14: What is sin?

Answer: Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God.

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Westminster Confession of Faith 4.2

After God had made all other creatures, he created man, male and female, with reasonable and immortal souls, endued with knowledge, righteousness, and true holiness, after his own image; having the law of God written in their hearts, *and power to fulfil it*: and *yet under a possibility of transgressing*, being left to the liberty of their own will, which was subject unto change. Beside this law written in their hearts, they received a command, not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; which while they kept, they were happy in their communion with God, and had dominion over the creatures. [Emphasis mine]

[\[Return to Note 1\]](#) [\[Return to Point 2\]](#)

Westminster Larger Catechism 31

Question 31: With whom was the covenant of grace made?

Answer: The covenant of grace was made with Christ as the second Adam, and in him with all the elect as his seed.

[\[Return to Note 1\]](#)

Westminster Larger Catechism 166

Question 166: Unto whom is Baptism to be administered?

Answer: Baptism is not to be administered to any that are out of the visible church, and so strangers from the covenant of promise, till they profess their faith in Christ, and obedience to him, but infants descending from parents, either both, or but one of them, professing faith in Christ, and obedience to him, are in that respect within the covenant, and to be baptized.

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Romans 11:6

And if by grace, then it is no longer of works; otherwise grace is no longer grace.

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This paper was written on April 7th, 1997 by William J. Baldwin. Bill Baldwin is a ordained minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) with a commitment to the centrality of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and a desire to nourish by that Gospel, strengthened to good works. He studied under Meredith G. Kline, a professor at Westminster Theological Seminary in California.

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