

# Covenants — Covenant of Works (Critiqued)

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"The purpose of this book is to review these various challenges and disagreements and to suggest that the strengths of covenant theology can best be retained by separating the two key ideas: first, union with Adam/Christ; and second, God's covenantal dealings with his people."

— A.T.B. McGowan, Adam, Christ and Covenant: Exploring Headship Theology, (APOLLOS: An Imprint of Inter-Varsity Press, London England, 2016), 2.

"One key problem we have identified in some forms of covenant theology is the use made of the law-grace dichotomy."

— A.T.B. McGowan, Adam, Christ and Covenant: Exploring Headship Theology, (APOLLOS: An Imprint of Inter-Varsity Press, London England, 2016), 2.

"Thus, LCF intentionally deleted WCF 7:2 entirely and revised LCF 7:2 to accommodate this deletion. It also intentionally deletes the phrase "covenant of works" when employing WCF 19:1 and SD 6:1. However, it does not remove every vestige of this doctrine. "Nevertheless, these deletions are significant and strategic. They express distance. The Baptist fathers do not deny a pre-fall covenant with Adam. Yet, at the very least, they decline to confess a covenant of works, as defined in WCF 7:2, 19:1 and in SD 6:1. Thus, the covenant of works doctrine does not have the same prominence in LCF that it has in the Westminster Standards and Savoy Declaration."

— Greg Nichols, Covenant Theology – A Reformed Baptistic Perspective on God's Covenants, 325.

"Should we invent a probation period, as with Adam? Where does Scripture encourage such a contrivance? If it weren't for death, which provides a convenient "probation period," none would ever even conceive of such a scheme. Yet they forget that men actually did keep it, they wouldn't die. Thus, this whole scheme of hypothetical potency is nonsense."

— Greg Nichols, Covenant Theology – A Reformed Baptistic Perspective on God's Covenants, 330.

"Hoeksema accurately presents the features and fulfillment of the covenant of works as the Westminster Standards define it. Now we consider three of his critiques of the covenant of works doctrine. First, Hoeksema argues that the covenant of works is based on speculation, not mandated by Scripture. He says that God's threat of death for disobedience does not necessarily imply a promise of immutable life or of heavenly translation. He says that this threat necessarily implies only that by obedience Adam would continue to live and never die, no more. Clearly, this critique is cogent. Second, Hoeksema argues that no mere man could ever merit any special reward from God. All Adam could ever have said was: "I am an unprofitable servant." Adam could not by obedience have merited anything more than what he already had. This is true enough. However, God condescends to commend and reward the sincere obedience of his people, although they do not merit such a reward: "you shall be rewarded at the resurrection of the just," etc. Third, Hoeksema argues that the supposed promise of heavenly life is "inconceivable" without violating the design of creation. He says the covenant of works devalues creation and pits Genesis 2:17 against the creation mandate in Genesis 1:28: "be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it." How would translation to heavenly life after a probation period behave with Adam's vocation? Hoeksema has a vital insight and valid concern."

— Greg Nichols, Covenant Theology – A Reformed Baptistic Perspective on God's Covenants, 332.

"It will be our contention that John Murray's reconstruction of the notion of a covenant of works into what he called the 'Adamic administration' went part of the way towards dealing with an incipient problem within covenant theology but that a further step has to be taken, namely, turning aside from emphasis on the covenants and refocusing attention upon Adam and Christ as the two 'heads' of administration. This then leaves us free to see the covenants of promise as a gracious outworking of God's relationship to his people, rather than as a counterpoint to a covenant of works."

— A.T.B. McGowan, Adam, Christ and Covenant: Exploring Headship Theology, (APOLLOS: An Imprint of Inter-Varsity Press, London England, 2016), 2-3.

"The vital element of covenant theology is that all human beings are either 'in Adam' or in Christ and that death or salvation come by means of our relationship with one or other of these 'representative heads'. In this chapter we shall argue that it is perfectly possible to maintain this representative headship without the need for a covenantal underpinning to make it work. We shall further argue that, in covenant theology, the representative headship has been smothered by the felt need to subsume it under various covenants, thus undermining rather than enhancing its importance. We shall seek to liberate this key theological concept from these strictures by demonstrating a way in which Reformed theology can retain the relationship between Adam and Christ at the center of its understanding of creation and redemption and keep most of the strengths of covenant theology, while at the same time moving beyond the current expressions of that theology and avoiding many of its problems and mistakes. The system of theology which emerges

from this partial reconstruction we are calling 'headship theology.'

— A.T.B. McGowan, *Adam, Christ and Covenant: Exploring Headship Theology*, (APOLLOS: An Imprint of Inter-Varsity Press, London England, 2016), 111.

"In short, then, everything which is achieved by covenant theology can be achieved by 'headship theology'. The word 'covenant' can then be liberated from the strictures of non-biblical terminology to be interpreted in its context, when dealing with the various covenants mentioned in Scripture. In other words, 'covenant' remains a vital word and concept in Reformed theology as a useful descriptor of God's relationship with his people but it need not be invested with a significance which is not claimed by the Scripture itself, or made to bear a weight it was never intended to bear. The union between Adam and all who are in him and the union between Christ and all who are in him stands by itself, on the basis of Romans 5 and I Corinthians 15, and does not require the use of covenant terminology to make it effective for purpose."

— A.T.B. McGowan, *Adam, Christ and Covenant: Exploring Headship Theology*, (APOLLOS: An Imprint of Inter-Varsity Press, London England, 2016), 128.

"Towards the end of the 16th century the administration dispensed to Adam in Eden, focused in the prohibition to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, had come to be interpreted as a covenant, frequently called the Covenant of Works, sometimes a covenant of life, or the Legal Covenant. It is, however, significant that the early covenant theologians did not construe this Adamic administration as a covenant, far less as a covenant of works. Reformed creeds of the 16th century such as the French Confession (1559), the Scottish Confession (1560), the Belgic Confession (1561), the Thirty-Nine Articles (1562), the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), and the Second Helvetic (1566) do not exhibit any such construction of the Edenic institution. After the pattern of the theological thought prevailing at the time of their preparation, the term 'covenant,' insofar as it pertained to God's relations with men, was interpreted as designating the relation constituted by redemptive provisions and as belonging, therefore, to the sphere of saving grace."

— John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray: 4, Studies in Theology, Covenant Theology*, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1982), 217-218.

"This administration has often been denoted "The Covenant of Works". There are two observations. (1) The term is not felicitous, for the reason that the elements of grace entering into the administration are not properly provided for by the term works. (2) It is not designated a covenant in Scripture. Hosea 6:7 may be interpreted otherwise and does not provide the basis for such a construction of the Adamic economy. Besides, Scripture always uses the term covenant, when applied to God's administration to men, in reference to a provision that is redemptive or closely related to redemptive design. Covenant in Scripture denotes the oath-bound confirmation of promise and involves a security which the Adamic economy did not bestow."

— John Murray, *Collected Writings*, Vol 2, 49.

"[T]he vast majority of contemporary OT scholars totally dismiss any idea of an Adamic covenant."

— Paul Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath: Covenant in God's Unfolding Purpose* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2007), 54-55.

"It seems best to conclude, therefore, that while Adam and Eve were certainly involved in a divine-human relationship both before and after the fall, neither the pre-lapsarian relationship nor post-lapsarian relationship was understood in terms of a 'covenant'. This explains not only the lack of scriptural warrant for any such Adamic covenant, but also the insurmountable fact that the biblical narrator clearly chose not to employ the word 'covenant' prior to Genesis 6:18."

— Paul R. Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath: A Biblical Theology of Covenant* (Downers Grove, IL, Intervarsity Press, 2007), 58.

"Nevertheless, while the conclusion that Genesis 1-3 must portray an antediluvian covenantal relationship is a non sequitur, Dumbrell and others are obviously correct to recognize several clear echoes of the creation narrative in the Noahic covenant. But these echoes suggest merely that God intended, through Noah, to fulfil his original creative intent; they did not presuppose the existence of a covenant between God and inanimate creation or indicate that the material in Genesis 1—3 must be understood covenantally."

— Paul R. Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath: A Biblical Theology of Covenant* (Downers Grove, IL, Intervarsity Press, 2007), 75.

"Those who believe in the Covenant of Works understand that within the arrangement between God and Adam there was an "implicit promise of blessing for obedience." But our question is, "How can you be certain if it is not stated explicitly?" ...It may seem like a logical deduction to connect the Tree of Life to a promise. But before we can make that connection, we must go to Scripture with these questions: Does Scripture tell us that the tree signified this? Does God's Word say that there was a "time of testing" or "probation period" anywhere in the text of Genesis? Does God ever say that Adam only had to obey the command for a certain period of time? Does God ever say that if Adam did obey the commandment that God would allow him to eat from the tree of life? Does the text say that if Adam and Eve obeyed that they would be

"established in righteousness forever and...have their fellowship with God made sure forever"? There might have been a probation period and there might have been a covenant, but if Scripture doesn't tell us this, then we must not speculate about these things."

— Steve Lehrer, *New Covenant Theology: Questioned Answered* (n.p.: Steve Lehrer, 2006) 41.

"NCT does not believe that it is wise to refer to God's relationship with Adam as a "covenant." NCT holds that God gave Adam a command with a promise of punishment if broken. And because this situation is not called a covenant by the authors of Scripture, we must think twice about describing it by that name ourselves."

— Steve Lehrer, *New Covenant Theology: Questioned Answered* (n.p.: Steve Lehrer, 2006) 41.

"This administration has often been denoted 'The Covenant of Works.' There are two observations. (1) The term is not felicitous, for the reason that the elements of grace entering into the administration are not properly provided for by the term 'works.' (2) It is not designated a covenant in Scripture. Hosea 6:7 may be interpreted otherwise and does not provide the basis for such a construction of the Adamic economy. Besides, Scripture always uses the term covenant, when applied to God's administration to men, in reference to a provision that is redemptive or closely related to redemptive design."

— John Murray, *The Adamic Administration*, in *Collected Writings of John Murray 4 Vols.* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977), 249.

"... it must be asked whether the system used to unify the whole of biblical teaching, and the categories used to make it historical, are faithful to the nature of the truth which they present or whether some alien systematic principle has been employed. At these points federal theology "is weighed in the balance and found wanting."

— W. Wilson Benton, Jr., *Federal Theology: Review for Revision*, in *Through Christ's Word*, ed. W. Robert Godfrey and Jesse L Boyd III (Phillipsburg, N. J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1985), 201.

"... the very terminology used in relation to covenant making in the Old Testament would seem to indicate that there was no covenant in Eden before the fall . . . [Note Genesis 15:7-17 and Jeremiah 34:18]. There is no record of any such sacrificial procedure in connection with Adam's establishment in the garden. Not only so, it is contrary to the entire situation, as death was foreign to the earthly scene prior to the entrance of sin."

— H.L. Payne, *Amillennial Theology as a System*, Th.D. Dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1948.

"Efforts to find direct exegetical support for designating this relationship a covenant have generally yielded questionable results."

— Thomas E McComiskey, *The Covenants of Promise: A Theology of the Old Testament Covenants* (Leicester: IVP, 1985), 214.

"Nowhere do we find any proof in the Scriptures for the contention that God gave Adam the promise of eternal life if he should obey that particular command of God."

— Herman Hoeksema, *The Triple Knowledge: An Exposition of the Heidelberg Catechism* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1970), 108. Cited by Williamson, Sealed, 54.

"We agree that the Bible is structured around two covenants. However, the two covenants that you keep talking about, namely, a covenant of works with Adam in the garden of Eden and a covenant of grace made with Adam immediately after the fall, have no textual basis in the Word of God. They are both theological covenants and not biblical covenants. They are the children of one's theological system. Their mother is Covenant Theology and their father is logic applied to that system. Neither of these two covenants had their origin in Scripture texts and biblical exegesis. Both of them were invented by theology as the necessary consequences of a theological system."

— John Reisinger, *Abraham's Four Seeds*. (Frederick, Md.; New Covenant Media, 1998) 129.

"Nowhere will you discover in the law of Moses, either eternal life or the gift of the Spirit promised to those obeying the precepts of the law, as it is evident, they are promised in the law given by Christ."

— Racovian Catechism 5, 1652, 133; quoted by Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, Phillipsburg, P&R, 1992 (1696), vol. 2, 192.

"First, the idea of pact was important to the development of Covenant Theology. The seventeenth-century covenant theologians defined covenant as an agreement between God and man. John Murray has rightly criticized their mistaken understanding of the biblical usage. Murray argues in a biblico theological manner that the Bible presents God as initiating the covenant. A covenant is a divine administration of grace and promise, and unlike a pact it is not dependent on man's response. The Lord in his grace may forgive the rebellious covenant people, overlook their transgressions, and in his sovereignty renew the covenant on his own terms. More recently James B. Torrance has explained how Federal

Theology confused covenant with contract and displaced the "covenant-God" with a "contract-God." This resulted, according to James Torrance, in an inversion of the law over grace, which explains the legalism associated with Covenant Theology and also the bifurcation of nature and grace."

— William VanGemeren, *Theological Systems and the Testaments, Systems of Continuity, in John Feinberg's, Continuity and Discontinuity (Essays in Honor of S. Lewis Johnson, Jr.): Perspectives on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments.* 0 ed., e-book (Crossway, 1988), 42.

"They begin by arbitrarily establishing the grounds for proving the existence of a covenant; from this they proceed to set up a covenant nowhere mentioned as such in Scripture yet of greater significance and outreach than all those which are specifically mentioned; then to complete the circle of fallacy they arbitrarily declare, again without Scriptural support, that the covenant thus introduced includes all those which are plainly set forth in the Word and so claim the passages related to the bona fide covenants as argument for their own invention."

— H.L. Payne, *Amillennial Theology as a System, Th.D. Dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1948.* 148.

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— James B. Torrance, *The Covenant Concept in Scottish Theology and Politics and its Legacy, SJT 34 (1981): 239.*

Covenant of Works is a gracious covenant. Works are required, but the entire arrangement is so designed that we are most impressed with God's condescending goodness. 2. Second, there is the view of Meredith Kline and his disciples that the Covenant of Works is a strictly legal covenant whose reward must be earned in terms of plain and pure merit. 3. Third, there is John Murray's view which may be said to deny the language of the Covenant of Works more than the substance of the thing. Murray says there is no covenant in the Garden, but he obviously believes in the kind of Adamic headship that the Westminster Standards and other Reformed Confessions require. 4. Fourth, there is the view of James Jordan, who has been influenced by Meredith Kline's view of creation as a covenantal act, but who understand the original covenant in a manner different from Kline. Like Murray, Jordan denies a Covenant of Works, but also like Murray, he affirms Adamic headship, a period of probation and other features of a Covenant of Works. These four positions are significantly diverse but all fall within the realm of Reformed and even Westminster orthodoxy."

— Ralph Allan Smith, *Interpreting the Covenant of Works, 1-2.*