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Mark W. Karlberg

The Original State Of Adam: Tensions Within Reformed Theology

Dr. Karlberg, who teaches theology at Chesapeake Theological seminary, is rapidly becoming known as an expositor of the Reformed faith, and we welcome this contribution from his pen in which he responds to contemporary debates over the doctrine of the covenant and places them in their historical setting.

Covenant theology has long been identified as the hallmark of the Reformed tradition. Recently, Jack Rogers remarked: 'One doctrine which may serve to focus on the distinctively Reformed contribution to ecumenical Christianity is *covenant*. The concept of covenant sums up much of what being Reformed is all about.'¹ Over against the Lutheran and Radical reformational movements of the sixteenth century the Reformed tradition developed its theological system and methodology in accordance with the biblical doctrine of the covenant. Throughout the course of history, redemptive and preredemptive, God sovereignly administered his kingdom by means of the covenants. This study of the original state of Adam considers one aspect of the doctrine of creation, namely, God's covenant with Adam, what traditionally became known as the Covenant of Works. Implicit in our treatment of the biblical doctrines of creation and covenant is adherence to the historicity of the events recorded in the first three chapters of Genesis.²

The purpose of this article is to analyse and evaluate Reformed interpretations of Adam's original state in creation in light of the present-day debate within Calvinism. Special attention will be given to the subject of biblical eschatology (in its widest meaning, not just end-time events) in relation to the doctrine of creation. We will argue in favour of the so-called 'organic' conception of covenant, which takes into consideration the eschatological

¹ Jack Rogers, *Presbyterian Creeds: A Guide to the Book of Confessions* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985) 129.

² For a discussion of Adam as a historical person, see J. P. Versteeg, *Is Adam a 'Teaching Model' in the New Testament? An Examination of One of the Central Points in the Views of H. M. Kuitert and Others*, trans. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. (Nutley: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1978).

design of Adam's creation in the image of God. As type of the one to come, Adam would receive the approbation of God upon his successful completion of the probationary test. The ground for covenant blessing was faithful compliance with the legal obligations made known to Adam through natural and supernatural revelation. The reward included confirmation in original righteousness and eventual glorification (upon fulfilment of the historical mandate given to our first parents to propagate the human race and to exercise dominion over all creation).

Background to Reformed Thought

It had become popular among medieval scholastics to distinguish between two stages of creation corresponding to a supposedly twofold state of Adam prior to the Fall. Whether or not one assumed a temporal separation between these two stages or states of creation, what was important in the minds of the scholastics was acknowledgement of Adam's creation in a 'pure' state of nature (*in puris naturalibus*), to which was added the supernatural gift of grace (the *donum superadditum*).³ By means of God's (non-redemptive) grace Adam and all humanity could come to spiritual communion with God as their highest blessedness. The higher enjoyment (*fruitio*) of God constituted the state of grace, in distinction from the state of 'pure' nature. The provision of supernatural grace itself indicated the creature's utter dependence upon God for the full blessing of life and spiritual communion with God. The beatific vision of God, i.e., glorification, could not be attained by natural human strength. Oftentimes, the scholastics spoke of this subsequent state of grace in specific terms of God's covenant or pact with all humanity. The eschatological goal of creation, namely, communion and life with God in consummated glory, was to be attained in the way of covenant promise and reward. Whereas the state of nature was static, the covenant order was established by God as the means of realizing humanity's final state of glorification and beatitude.

The Thomistic dichotomy between nature and grace played a prominent role in the history of dogmatics. According to Aquinas' interpretation of 1 Corinthians 15:46, Adam's original state (termed 'animal life') was one in which the creature did not see God in his essence. Rather, Adam was to be translated into that

³ A good overview to medieval theology is found in Reinhold Seeberg, *Textbook of the History of Doctrines*, trans. Charles E. Hay (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977).

perfect blessedness, whereby he might behold the divine essence. Adam's true happiness would consist in the vision of God in his essential glory, and it was beyond the natural ability of the creature to arrive at that state without the additional aid of supernatural grace. 'Consequently neither man nor any creature can attain final happiness through [his] natural resources.'⁴ Aquinas taught that the individual's own good works, called 'merits', were the ground of the promised blessing. The dualism between nature (*ex puris naturalibus*) and grace (*donum superadditum*), as applied to the creation order, was carried over into the fallen state. The Fall did not rob the creature of all his/her natural ability. The fallen creature was still able to do good works, i.e., perform deeds of merit; but the addition of supernatural grace became all the more necessary after the Fall. The sacraments of the Roman Church were considered to be the channel for supernatural grace.⁵

There were three critically important concepts in late medieval nominalism: the *potentia ordinata* (the ordained power of God), the *foedus* (the covenant), and the Pelagian idea of *facere quod in se est* ('doing one's very best'). In contrast to the *potentia absoluta* (the absolute power of God), by which God could do any and all things freely and without limitation, God chose to bind himself in covenant with humanity, so that by his ordained power he bestowed supernatural grace to those who did their very best. Whereas Robert Holcot was responsible for joining together the idea of the *potentia ordinata* with the doctrine of *facere quod in se est*, the widespread adoption of this teaching was to be attributed largely to two sources—the writings of Gabriel Biel, who ranks among the most important and authoritative scholastics in late medieval nominalism, and the later Christian humanist movement during the early days of the

⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, ed. Thomas Gilby (New York: McGraw-Hill, n.d.) 16.131.

⁵ This covenantal-sacramental aspect of ecclesiology is not peculiar to Thomas. Martin Greschat traces it back to earlier medieval Roman Catholicism, particularly with the rise of the *Genossenschaften* or *Bünde* during the eleventh and twelfth centuries ('Der Bundesgedanke in der Theologie des späten Mittelalters', *ZKG* 81 [1970] 44–63).

Reformation.⁶ Reflecting earlier Thomistic teaching Biel conceived of the 'pure' state of nature as free of the infusion of grace—prior to Adam's reception of the *donum superadditum*.

Johannes Staupitz, who had greatly influenced the young Luther, was trained in the theology of Biel. The basic structure of the covenant in Staupitz' understanding was the same as that found in nominalism generally. David Steinmetz has observed: 'Adam had as a hope or promise the gift of glory (what Staupitz following Thomas Aquinas sometimes refers to as the *visio dei* and sometimes calls *fruitio*, the unhindered enjoyment and love of God as the *Summum Bonum*)'.⁷ However, the content of the relationship between the Creator and the creature differed significantly from earlier formulations. The new element introduced by Staupitz was the role given to Christ in the pre-Fall situation. Adam's creation in the image of God involved conformity to Jesus Christ, the source of election. Before the Fall Adam could achieve his true potential as made in God's image through the cooperative efforts of his natural powers and the grace of Christ. Likewise, after the Fall good works (nature) retained its function in conjunction with the benefits of Christ's death (grace) in the process of salvation. Staupitz failed to reach a consistent Augustinian position on the sinner's inability to do what was good in the sight of God. He still left room for human cooperation with God in salvation. On the one hand, Staupitz taught, election was not based upon any foreseen merits in the individual, and good works themselves were viewed as fruits of election. The first grace of justification (called the *gratia gratum faciens*) could not be obtained by human merit. What was necessary was a proper moral disposition for its reception. This grace was freely bestowed upon those who truly desired it (combining doctrines of the *potentia ordinata* and *facere quod in se est*). However, in Staupitz' view, this grace was owed to the elect on grounds of God's covenant obligation made in Christ (*ex debito gratia*). On

⁶ See the following studies by H. A. Oberman: 'Facientibus Quod in se est Deus non Denegat Gratiam: Robert Holcot O. P. and the Beginnings of Luther's Theology', in *The Reformation in Medieval Perspective*, ed. Steven E. Ozment (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1971) 119–141; 'The Shape of Late Medieval Thought: The Birthpangs of the Modern Era', in *The Pursuit of Holiness in Late Medieval and Renaissance Religion*, ed. C. Trinkaus and H. A. Oberman (Leiden: Brill, 1974) 3–25; and *The Harvest of Medieval Theology: Gabriel Biel and Late Medieval Nominalism* (Revised edition; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967).

⁷ David C. Steinmetz, *Misericordia Dei: The Theology of Johannes von Staupitz in its Late Medieval Setting* (Leiden: Brill, 1968) 62.

the other hand, the increase of grace in the elect was a matter of the merit of one's good works.

Early Reformed Theology

The rise and development of covenant theology in the age of the Reformation (up to 1648) can be fully understood only against the background of medieval scholasticism as we have outlined it above. Out of this theological context John Calvin and the Protestant reformers set about to reform Church dogma according to the teaching of Scripture. Calvin acknowledges the eschatological design of God's purposes in creation. Based on the apostle Paul's statements concerning creation in 1 Corinthians 15, Calvin distinguishes between the earthly life of the First Adam and the heavenly life of the Second. Through Christ's redemptive work fallen humanity is renewed according to the pattern of Christ's heavenly image: 'it is a peculiar benefit conferred by Christ, that we may be renewed to a life which is *celestial*, whereas before the fall of Adam, man's life was only earthly, seeing it had no firm and settled constancy'.⁸ The tree of life in the garden symbolized Adam's dependence upon the goodness and beneficence of his Creator.⁹ Although Calvin does not develop his thoughts beyond this, his avoidance of the scholastic dichotomy between two states of creation clearly sets his view apart from previous teaching.

Among prominent federalists of the sixteenth century who expressed views similar to Calvin were Zachary Ursinus, Casper

⁸ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), *sub.* Genesis 2:7.

⁹ '[God] gave the tree of life its name, not because it could confer on man that life with which he had been previously endued, but in order that it might be a symbol and memorial of the life which he received from God . . . He intended, therefore, that man, as often as he tasted the fruit of that tree, should remember whence he received his life, in order that he might acknowledge that he lives not by his own power, but by the kindness of God alone, and that life is not (as they commonly speak) an intrinsic good, but proceeds from God' (*sub.* Genesis 2:9).

Olevianus, and Robert Rollock.¹⁰ By the closing decades of the sixteenth century the creation order was expounded in explicitly covenantal terms. Although Calvin himself did not view the preremptive period in terms of the covenant idea, the federalist doctrine of the Covenant of Works (or as it was sometimes called, the Covenant of Nature) was consistent with Calvin's thought. On the basis of intensive study of the Scriptures these early Reformed theologians were led to abandon the scholastic doctrine of nature and grace, and the corresponding distinction between intrinsic merit (*ex condigno*) and undeserved merit (*ex congruo*). The former meritorious works were performed out of one's own natural strength, whereas the latter were possible through God's granting of prevenient grace. According to the early Calvinists, Adam, as son of God, was created to enjoy life and communion with God, and he continued to live by God's sustaining love and justice. The reward of greater blessing (eternal life) for the covenant obedience of God's image-bearer would have been a matter of divine justice, even though human righteousness was not an autonomous possession or attainment. This was the Reformed 'organic' conception of covenant. It stood over against scholastic notions of inherent human virtue, to which God was made a debtor on grounds of 'strict justice'. (Such a view made justice a standard independent of God.)

Through long years of controversy and debate Protestant dogmaticians made increasingly heavy use of scholastic distinctions and terminology. To preserve the graciousness of the first

¹⁰ Paul Helm, 'Calvin and the Covenant: Unity and Continuity', *EQ* 55 (1983) 65-81. With reference to this article Roger Nicole comments: '[Helm] marshalls evidence to show that certain well-formulated covenant structures can be found in Augustine, that all essential features of covenant theology, notably the covenant of redemption between the Father and the Son and the covenant of works between God and Adam, as well as the covenant of grace between God and the redeemed, have unmistakable roots in Calvin's theology. The later emphases, he avers, were stimulated by the need to respond to the onset of Arminianism, but the fundamental principles were in place in Calvin and a number of others well before the beginning of the seventeenth century' ('John Calvin's View of the Extent of the Atonement', *WTJ* 47 [1985] 209; see esp. 208-210).

See also Peter A. Lillback, 'Ursinus' Development of the Covenant of Creation: A Debt to Melancthon or Calvin?' *WTJ* 43 (1981) 247-288; Lyle D. Bierma, 'The Covenant Theology of Casper Olevian' (Ph.D. dissertation, Duke University, 1980). Bierma takes exception to John Murray's reading of Olevianus. However, Murray is correct in stating that Olevianus taught that in the covenant of works eternal life was granted to Adam on the grounds of obedience to the law of God (merit). See Bierma's discussion on pages 176ff.

covenant with Adam most Reformed federalists employed the speculative and dualistic distinction between nature and grace. As a result, the covenant order was set over against the natural order of creation. This new development, or rather revision to an order view, appeared in the writings of Francis Junius, a highly respected Dutch scholar and professor. The covenant, according to Junius, was established with our first parents by God the Father in the love of his Son. It held out the promise of supernatural life for obedience and the curse of death and separation from God for disobedience. As a supralapsarian Junius emphasized the sovereign, electing purpose of God in creation. Although Adam was obliged to render complete and perfect obedience to the law of God by virtue of his debt as a creature (*ex puris naturalibus*), the covenantal reward of life eternal was strictly one of grace and mercy (*ex pacto*). Prior to the Fall, argued Junius, Adam's blessedness was communicated by the three persons of the trinity, particularly by the Son, the fountain of election. The cause of life was God's sovereign grace and election. The sacrament of the tree of life symbolized supernatural life through Christ, the originator of life. Although Junius upheld the essential distinction between this original, covenantal grace of Christ and soteric grace after the Fall, his speculative view of covenant nevertheless obscured the fundamental antithesis between the order of creation (law) and the order of redemption (grace).¹¹

For the first time in the history of covenant theology there appeared a significant revision of Calvinistic doctrine regarding creation and God's covenant with Adam. No longer was the covenant concept organically related to the order of creation. The result was a logical, if not temporal, abstraction of a natural order from a supernatural, covenantal order in creation. On this interpretation the covenantal order was perceived to be superimposed upon the natural. Junius' view of supernatural grace offered in the way of covenant was virtually equivalent to the

¹¹ Francisci Junius, *Opuscula Theologica Selecta*, ed. Abraham Kuyper (Amstelodami: F. Muller and J. H. Krupt, 1882), Locus 25, theses 1–5. Peter Y. Dejong remarks: "The most conspicuous element is the way in which [Junius] made the transition from the Covenant of Works to the Covenant of Grace depend on the already established decrees of predestination. There can be very little doubt that the Supralapsarianism of Junius prevented him from developing the reason why the Covenant of Works was necessary, when the salvation of the elect was already rendered certain by the decree of God from eternity" (*The Covenant Idea in New England Theology: 1620–1847* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1945, 27).

scholastic notion of the *donum superadditum*. A second and more serious result of this theological deviation within Reformed thought was federalism's obscuration of the eschatological design of creation.¹² (As we will argue below the return to the biblical theme of eschatology among Reformed systematians at the turn of the twentieth century brought about the eventual reclamation of the organic conception of the covenant of creation.)

The fullest exposition of the Reformed scholastic doctrine of covenant appeared in the work of Johannes Cloppenburg. Cloppenburg had undoubtedly a significant, though indirect, influence upon the framing of the theology of the covenant in the Westminster Standards. He distinguished between subjective and objective sides of Adam's creation in the image of God. The objective side involved the covenant between God and Adam; the subjective side had regard to various characteristics of the human constitution. Whereas God's revelation to Adam was both natural and supernatural, Adam's ability to know God and to trust him required the supernatural communication of grace. The covenantal relationship—*personal* communion and fellowship with God—was not natural to Adam's original state in creation, but rather rested upon a special act of condescension on God's part. Although the covenantal reward of eternal life was contingent upon Adam's compliance with the law of God, the actual granting of eternal life was itself purely a matter of God's grace. Cloppenburg made use of the distinction between reward based on 'strict justice' (intrinsic merit) and reward granted in the way of the covenant. As image-bearer of God, Adam was a servant of the Creator; his elevation from the status of servanthood to sonship was contingent upon God's covenantal love and condescension.¹³

¹² Contrast the contention of DeJong: 'Although from the very beginning the Reformed theologians made constant and consistent use of the covenant idea, they were not altogether clear on two specific points. In the first place, such leaders as Bullinger and Olevianus did not clearly formulate the representative idea. Original guilt was considered transmitted to all men purely because of the natural relationship in which Adam stood to the race, thus, in much the same manner as original pollution. It was not until some time later that the idea of his legal and representative relationship to the race was stressed as distinct from the physical. In the second place, these men were not always clear in distinguishing the covenant relationship in which Adam stood to God from his relation as creature' (Ibid., 27).

¹³ Johannes T. Cloppenburg, *Exercitationes super locos communes theologicos* (Franeker, 1653), *Loci de Statu Hominis Ante Lapsum*, I, theses 1-2; *Syntagma selectarum exercitationum theologicarum* (Franeker, 1645), Disputation I, thesis 40.

With similar precision David Dickson conceived of the covenant arrangement as an addition to the constitutive state of nature with its distinctive governing principle, the so-called law of nature (*lex naturae*). The covenantal order entered alongside, but did not supplant, natural law. The law of nature required of the creature full and perfect obedience. Prior to life in covenant with God, Adam was but an unprofitable servant of the Creator. The obedience he rendered to God was merely his due as a servant-creature. By way of the covenant Adam was to be made a 'confederate friend of God'. The requirements laid down in connection with the probationary test, observed Dickson, were meager in comparison with the reward of eternal life; the reward far outweighed what Adam dutifully owed his creator.¹⁴ In the words of one of his contemporaries, Anthony Burgess, who chaired the first committee of the Westminster Assembly: 'Yet, though it were a Covenant of works, it cannot be said to be of merit. Adam, though in innocency, could not merit that happiness which God would bestow upon him.'¹⁵

From our brief survey of representative works in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century covenant theology it is not at all surprising that the scholastic conception of covenant found its way into the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms. The Confession states:

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 (VII. 1).

The natural relationship between God and the creature, we are told, is one of law: 'reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto Him as their Creator'. But the highest enjoyment of God—'fruition' is the scholastic term denoting the beatific vision of God (glorification)—depends upon the covenant established 'by some voluntary condescension on God's part'. The Shorter Catechism describes the covenant as a 'special act of providence', suggestive of the view that posits a distinction between the natural order and the covenant order. On the one hand, the covenant with Adam is defined as a covenant of works.¹⁶ On the other hand, the nature/

¹⁴ David Dickson, *Therapeutica Sacra* (Second edition: Edinburgh, 1697) 105ff.

¹⁵ Anthony Burgess, *Vindiciae Legis, Or, A Vindication of the Morall Law and the Covenants* (London, 1646) 125–126.

¹⁶ See my 'Reformed Interpretation of the Mosaic Covenant', *WTJ* 43 (1980) 38ff.

grace dichotomy as employed by the Westminster divines in their doctrine of the covenant introduces a speculative element within the confessional formulation.

We cannot by our best works merit pardon of sin, or *eternal life* at the hand of God, by reason of the great disproportion that is between them and the glory to come; and the infinite distance that is between us and God, whom, by them, we can neither profit, nor satisfy for the debt of our former sins, but when we have done all we can, we have done but our duty, and are unprofitable servants; and because, as they are good, they proceed from His Spirit; and as they are wrought by us, they are defiled, and mixed with so much weakness and imperfection, that they cannot endure the severity of God's judgment (XVI. 5, *italics mine*).

With respect to the sinner and justification before God, the Confession is accurate in its statements. And this, to be sure, is the main emphasis in this chapter of the Confession. However, at the same time, the Westminster divines reiterate here a point made earlier in chapter seven cited above. Because of the 'great disproportion' between the Creator and the creature, the creature cannot merit eternal life on the ground of good works. In the state of nature Adam could find favour in God's sight and enjoy temporal life as long as he remained faithful and obedient. That is to say, natural life was contingent upon good works (merit); eternal life was non-meritorious. Yet the Westminster divines identify the covenant with Adam as a covenant of works. The 'covenant of grace' terminology is an exclusively redemptive-historical category, distinguishing those divine-human covenants subsequent to the Fall. In accord with the traditional Protestant law/gospel contrast the Westminster Standards preserve the distinction between two antithetical principles of inheritance, works and faith. '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' (VII. 2). To be sure, competing elements within the confessional formulations introduce a measure of ambiguity and confusion within Reformed theology.¹⁷

¹⁷ The basic structure of the Westminster Standards rests upon the proper two-covenant conception (the covenant of works and the covenant of grace), rather than upon the speculative nature/grace dichotomy. Eliminating the nature/grace dualism from the confessional formulation does not jeopardize the theological system contained in the Standards. However, rejection of the two-covenant schematization results in a radical revision of Reformed theology.

Recent Calvinistic Formulation

Not until the latter part of the nineteenth century and on into the twentieth century was progress made in clarifying the biblical doctrine of covenant. For the most part, however, the scholastic distinction between nature and grace occupied a fixed place in Reformed thinking. According to Robert Dabney, Adam was obligated to love and obey God by virtue of creation *in puris naturalibus*. The concept of merit was applicable in describing this natural relationship between Creator and creature, a relationship defined by strict justice. It was reasonable, argued Dabney, that God honour human obedience with the reward 'of that natural well-being appropriate to the creature's capacities'.¹⁸ He stated more fully:

God's act in entering into a covenant with Adam, if it be substantiated, will be found to be one of pure grace and condescension. he might justly have held him always under his natural relationship; and Adam's obedience, however long continued, would not have brought God into his debt for the future. Thus, his holiness being mutable, his blessedness would always have hung in suspense. God, therefore, moved by pure grace, condescended to establish a covenant with His holy creature, in virtue of which a temporary obedience might be graciously accepted as a ground for God's communicating Himself to him, and assuring him ever after of holiness, happiness and communion with God. Here then is the point of osculation between the covenant of works, and the covenant of grace, the law and the Gospel. Both offer a plan of free justification, by which a righteousness should be accepted, in covenant, to acquire for the creature more than he could strictly claim of God; and thus gain him everlasting life. In the covenant of grace, all is 'ordained in the hand of a mediator', because man's sin had else excluded him from access to God's holiness. In the covenant of works, no mediator was required, because man was innocent, and God's purity did not forbid him to condescend to him. But in both, there was free grace; in both a justification unto life; in both, a gracious bestowal of more than man had earned.¹⁹

Espousing an essentially identical point of view, James Henley Thornwell speaks of the 'radical notion of justice' (i.e., strict justice) as that pertains to the natural order of things, what he calls 'moral government' in distinction from covenantal administration. '[Adam] can never under mere moral government be

¹⁸ Robert L. Dabney, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972) 300.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 302.

exempt from the possibility of falling. He can never be rendered absolutely and immutably safe.²⁰ The difference between life in the natural order and life in the covenant order is the difference between a servant and a son. 'Now, in the case of the son, the ground of his expectation from God is not his own merit, but the measureless fullness of the Divine benevolence. God deals with him not upon the principle of simple justice, but according to the riches of the glory of His grace.'²¹

Renewed interest in biblical eschatology led Reformed dogmatists to reassess earlier scholastic conceptions of the original state of creation. A. A. Hodge defined the natural bond between God and Adam in terms of the covenant bond. The concept of merit pertained to the legal aspect of the covenant wherein Adam's blessing of communion and fellowship with God was contingent upon 'perfect conformity to the law of absolute moral perfection'.

It was also essentially a gracious covenant, because although every creature is, as such, bound to serve the Creator to the full extent of his powers, the Creator cannot be bound as a mere matter of justice to grant the creature fellowship with himself, or to raise him to an infallible standard of moral power, or to crown him with eternal and inalienable felicity.²²

For Hodge the covenant of creation was both legal and gracious. Elsewhere he spoke of the 'gracious covenant of works', echoing

²⁰ James Henley Thornwell, *Collected Writings* (Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974) 1.258. For a discussion of the natural law idea in Calvinistic jurisprudence, see my 'Reformation Politics: The Relevance of Old Testament Ethics in Calvinist Political Theory', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 29 (1986) 179-192.

²¹ Thornwell, *ibid.* Regarding the natural state and the subsequent Adamic administration, John Murray remarks that the latter order or administration entails certain features lacking in the previous order of nature: 'there are data which cannot be construed in terms simply of creation in the divine image and the demands of awards belonging to that relationship' *Collected Writings* (Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1977) 2.48). According to the principle of strict justice (natural law), 'Righteousness, justification, life is an invariable combination in the government and judgement of God. There would be a relation that we may call perfect legal reciprocity. As this would be the minimum, so it would be the maximum in terms of the relation constituted by creation in the image of God' (*Ibid.*). See further my 'Reformed Interpretation of the Mosaic Covenant' (48-53) for a critique of the views of Murray on covenant.

²² A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972) 310-311.

the ambiguity of the Westminster Standards.²³ Regarding justification by faith, Hodge commented: "Merit" is that which deserves on the ground of covenant promise a reward. The merit of reward is imputed to us from Christ, the merit of praise-worthiness remains his forever.²⁴

Abraham Kuyper, Sr., defines Adam's creation in the image of God explicitly in terms of the covenant order established by God in creation. He suggests that the essence of the covenant relationship reflects the nature and image of the triune God. The idea of Adam being made in the image of God is to be understood covenantally. According to Romans 5, observes Kuyper, Adam was in a covenant relationship with God. This covenant arrangement indicated the eschatological goal of creation. As image of God Adam was to move from the condition of *posse non peccare et mori* (the possibility not to sin and die) to the condition of *non posse peccare et mori* (not possible to sin and die); there was to be movement from glory to higher glory. The reward of eternal life was neither *ex congruo* nor *ex condigno*, but rather *ex pacto*. Kuyper identifies his view of covenant as the 'organic' conception, as opposed to the 'mechanical' viewpoint. His son, Abraham Kuyper, Jr., adds that covenant life issues from the triune God and originates in the eternal counsels of the Godhead. Although affirming the gracious character of the covenant with Adam, he emphasizes the inseparability between the natural bond and the covenant bond. 'Adam is called as a confederate in life and created in covenant. The covenant is given with creation, which is evident with Adam's creation in the image of God.'²⁵

In light of the familiar passages in 1 Corinthians 15 and Romans 5 Herman Bavinck expounds the eschatological purposes of God in creation at some length. In the beginning Adam's life was 'earthly'; his hope had been set upon the attainment of 'heavenly' life upon successful completion of God's will for his creation. In contrast to Junius' supralapsarianism, Bavinck interprets these Pauline passages along infralapsarian lines. The eschatological nature of God's six-day work of creation, furthermore, suggests that Adam stood not at the end, but at the beginning of the way. Covenantal blessing for obedience would first bring confirmation in righteousness, and then glorification.

²³ A. A. Hodge, *Evangelical Theology* (Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1976) 163-183.

²⁴ Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, 501.

²⁵ Abraham Kuyper, Jr., *De Vastigheid des Verbond* (Amsterdam: W. Kirchener, 1908) 38-39.

The reward of eternal life, both in the covenant of works (creation) and the covenant of grace (redemption), stands as 'the highest ideal before man'.²⁶

The covenant of works and the covenant of grace do not differ in the final goal, but only in the way which leads to that final goal. In both there is a mediator, formerly of union, now of reconciliation; in both there is a trust, formerly in God, now in God through Christ; in both there is a hope, a love, and so forth. The religion is always essentially the same; it differs only in form.²⁷

The essence of the covenant is union and communion with God. The form of the covenant refers to the way or principle of inheritance, whether it be by works or by faith.

Louis Berkhof, a leading American exponent of the Dutch Reformed orthodox tradition, formulated his view of the original state of humanity in terms of the *status integritatis* (the state of integrity). Despite his use of the nature/grace dichotomy, Berkhof stressed the importance of the covenant idea in conjunction with the biblical teaching on Adam's creation in the image of God. Adam was created for 'a life of communion' with God. The covenant relationship itself was related to the inter-trinitarian covenant, the so-called covenant of Redemption between the Father and the Son in eternity. 'In fact, it is exactly in the trinitarian life that we find the archetype of the historical covenants, a covenant in the proper and fullest sense of the word, the parties meeting on a footing of equality, a true *suntheke*.'²⁸ According to Berkhof, the covenant relationship as a personal bond of union and communion between God and the creature finds its supreme example in the Godhead, the very source of life and blessing.

No one has made a more lasting contribution for the Reformed understanding of eschatology than Geerhardus Vos. 'Few developments in biblical studies over the past century are of such far-reaching importance as an increasing recognition of the New Testament writers' broadened understanding of eschatology . . . Vos was a pioneer in calling attention to this fundamental datum of New Testament teaching—what can be termed its eschatological, redemptive-historical orientation.'²⁹ Although Vos does

²⁶ Herman Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1928), Vol. II, 526.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 532. See also Herman Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, trans. Henry Zylstra (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1956) 271f.

²⁸ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941) 266.

²⁹ Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., 'Foreword' to Geerhardus Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979).

not free himself entirely from the speculative nature/grace dichotomy, he perceives the strength of Reformed theology to lay in its doctrine of the covenant. In his sketch of the history of the covenant formulation he notes that several Lutheran dogmatists towards the end of the seventeenth century had taken up the idea of covenant. But, remarks Vos, 'this is strange since there is no place for it in the consistent Lutheran system.'³⁰ The reason for this, posits Vos, is that Lutheran theology has no place for eschatology in its doctrine of creation, and consequently, it does not provide a viable theological system to accommodate the covenant idea. 'Because Reformed theology took hold of the Scriptures in their deepest root idea, it was in a position to work through them more fully from this central point and to let each part of their content come to its own'.³¹ According to Vos' assessment, it is specifically the Reformed understanding of eschatology and the divine covenants in Scripture that sets Reformed theology apart from Lutheran dogmatics. As evidence of their decidedly theocentric orientation Reformed theologians were not content to leave the covenant idea in the realm of history without tracing it back into the eternal counsels of God. Vos writes:

it is apparent that the dogma of the covenant of redemption is something other than a reworking of the doctrine of election. It owes its existence not to a tendency to draw the covenant back to and take it up in the decree, but to concentrate it in the Mediator and to demonstrate the unity between the accomplishment and application of salvation in Him, on the one side, and the various stages of covenant, on the other.³²

The inter-trinitarian Covenant of Redemption reveals how the

³⁰ Geerhardus Vos, 'The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology', in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980) 241.

³¹ *Ibid.* 'According to the Lutherans man had already reached his destination in that God had placed him in a state of uprightness. Eternal life was already in his possession . . . Precisely because mankind's destination had already been reached before the fall in Adam, Christ can do nothing but restore what was lost in Adam. And since the destination already realized was fully compatible with mutability and the possibility of falling, the sinner who has been brought back to his destination by Christ must necessarily have to remain at this level. Lutheran theology is, therefore, wholly consistent when it teaches an apostasy of the saints. It does not at all object to uniting the state of justification and sonship with the possibility of such an apostasy' (242).

³² *Ibid.*, 251.

economic relations between the three persons in redemption is thoroughly covenantal. 'In predestination the divine persons act communally, where economically it is attributed to the Father. In the covenant of redemption they are related to one another judicially.'³³

Current Debate in Covenant Theology

Among recent detractors of traditional Reformed teaching on the covenant of works two proposals have appeared: (1). That we abandon altogether the federalist system of interpretation; or (2). That we undertake a thorough-going revision of the doctrine. Common to all these critics is denial of the validity of the covenant of works idea. They claim that the idea of merit does not find support in Scripture. In our view, however, it is a matter of justice for God to grant eternal life to his obedient image-bearers. Failure to recognize this element of the system of truth contained in the Scriptures leads to a defective understanding of the atonement, specifically the necessity of Christ's atoning death as means of satisfying divine justice.³⁴

N. Diemer objects to the traditional doctrine of the covenant of works because in his opinion the concept of works or merit is speculative. In his analysis of the history and theology of the covenant Diemer locates the true Reformed understanding of covenant in its emphasis upon the sovereignty of God against all

³³ *Ibid.*, 246. Vos distinguishes between predestination (the decree or purpose of God to elect some to salvation) and the Covenant of Redemption. 'In predestination there is the one, undivided, divine will. In the counsel of peace this will appears as having its own mode of existence in each person. One cannot object to this on the basis of the unity of God's being. To push unity so strongly that the persons can no longer be related to one another judicially would lead to Sabellianism and would undermine the reality of the entire economy of redemption with its person to person relationships.'

³⁴ Consult A. A. Hodge, *The Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974) and Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956) for classic treatments of the Reformed position. Contrast Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: (An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Atonement)*, trans. A. G. Hebert (New York: Macmillan, 1969). Colin E. Gunton remarks: 'The dominance of Western discussion of atonement by notions of legal satisfaction has been gravely distorting. But the fundamental assertion that human ill is radical, and yet is revealed and healed by God in Christ, is not endangered by the correction of the place where stress is laid in the doctrine of the atonement (see, in particular, Aulén and Whale)' (*Yesterday and Today: A Study of Continuities in Christology* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983] 182).

claims to inherent human worth deserving of reward. The creature can never place demands upon God. Life with God, accordingly, is a gift of pure grace; eternal life is nonmeritorious. But rather than distinguishing between speculative and biblical notions of meritorious reward, Diemer instead minimizes the Reformed consensus reflected in the adoption of the 'covenant of works' terminology for the original arrangement between God and Adam. Diemer superficially treats this element of Reformed thought as a theological anomaly. One cannot, however, jettison the doctrine of the covenant of works and still espouse a truly Reformed and biblical theology.³⁵

In the wake of mounting opposition to historic Reformed Christianity in modern theology Cornelius Van Til writes in defense of orthodoxy:

Covenant theology sprang up naturally as the most consistent expression of Calvinism, in which the idea of the self-sufficient, ontological Trinity is the final reference point in all predication. It is this idea that lies at the centre of covenant theology. The three persons of the Trinity have exhaustively personal relationship with one

³⁵ N. Diemer, *Het Scheppings Verbond Met Adam (Het Verbond der Werken)*, (Kampen: J. H. Kok, n.d.). W. Wilson Benton, Jr., employs unduly pejorative language in his descriptions of federal theology in 'Federal Theology: Review for Revision', in *Through Christ's Word: A Festschrift for Ad. Philip E. Hughes*, ed. W. Robert Godfrey and Jesse L. Boyd, III (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1985) 180–204. Bentons fails to convey an accurate and balanced account of federalist teaching as it developed out of earlier Reformed thought. Instead, his analysis portrays a caricature of Reformed orthodoxy, typical of many recent studies in historical theology. Regrettably, the author evidences no openness to other readings of the federalist literature. More importantly, in calling for a decisive revision of such Reformed doctrines as double predestination, assurance of salvation, and the justice of God, the author ends up substituting one dogmatic 'principle' for another. Benton repudiates the 'system' of doctrine espoused by the Reformed federalists, and in the course of argumentation indicates his sympathy for a neo-orthodox reformulation of the fundamental concept of covenant. According to Benton, the chief culprit in the rise of federalism is Ramism. For a similar argument and biased reading of the history of covenant theology, see Robert Letham, 'The *Foedus Operum*: Some Factors Accounting for its Development', *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 14 (1983) 457–467.

Denial of the Reformed doctrine of the covenant of works leads inevitably to radical reinterpretations of other doctrinal matters such as justification by faith (apart from works of the law), the typological significance of Israel's tenure in the land of Canaan, election, and perseverance of the saints. Notable examples of this growing trend in Reformed theology are the schools of thought associated with the works of T. F. Torrance and G. C. Berkouwer.

another. And the idea of exhaustive personal relationship is the idea of the covenant.³⁶

And 'since the internal relationship of the triune God is covenantal, God's relation to mankind is also covenantal.'³⁷ The original state of Adam, contends Van Til, was covenantal; and the covenant itself was conditional.³⁸ Building on the tradition of Vos and Van Til, Meredith G. Kline adopts a covenantal formulation of Adam's creation in the image of God in his treatise on the creative and recreative work of the Spirit. 'Image of God and son of God', observes Kline, 'are twin concepts.'³⁹

Man as created was already crowned with glory and honour, for made in the likeness of the enthroned Glory, a little lower than the angels of the divine council, man was invested with official authority to exercise dominion as priest-king in God's earthly courts. Yet, the glory of man's royal functioning would be progressive as he increasingly fulfilled his historical task of subduing the earth, his ultimate attainment of functional glory awaiting the eschatological glorification of his whole nature after the image of the radiant Glory-Spirit. Ethical glory also belonged to man as created and in this respect man would have gone from glory to glory had he not sinned, moving on from a state of simple righteousness to one of confirmed righteousness.⁴⁰

The biblical concepts of image, glory, and sonship are covenantal and eschatological. Regarding the eschatological design of creation, Kline comments:

It is by tracing the unfolding eschatology of Scripture that we can most deftly unravel the strands of Old Testament religion and

³⁶ Cornelius Van Til, 'Covenant Theology', in *The New Schaff-Herzog Twentieth Century Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, ed. Lefferts A. Loetscher (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1955), 1.306.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Cornelius Van Til, 'Nature and Scripture', in *The Infallible Word: A Symposium*, ed. N. B. Stonehouse and Paul Woolley (Third revised edition; Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1946) 267-268. Van Til presents a stimulating critique of the covenant doctrine in modern theology in his *The New Hermeneutic* (Nutley: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974) 109-161.

Donald MacLeod defends the idea of 'merit' in his 'Federal Theology: An Oppressive Legalism?' *The Banner of Truth*, 125 (Feb. 1974) 21-28.

³⁹ Meredith G. Kline, *Images of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980) 23.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 31. Likewise, the creation-sabbath motif in Scripture points to the covenantal process of work and consummation rest (110-115). See also Meredith G. Kline, 'The Covenant of the Seventieth Week', in *The Law and the Prophets: Old Testament Studies Prepared in Honor of Oswald Thompson Allis*, ed. John H. Skilton (Nutley: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974) 452-469.

discover what is essential and distinctive in it. For eschatology antedates redemption. The pattern for eschatology goes back to creation. Since the creature must pattern his way after his Creator's, and since the Creator rested only after he had worked, it was a covenant of works which was proffered to Adam as the means by which to arrive at the consummation. In the sense that it was the door to the consummation, this original Covenant of Creation was eschatological.⁴¹

It is not merely the *concept* of covenant that distinguishes Reformed theology from other theological traditions, but the *content* of the doctrine. Whereas the covenant idea was commonplace in late medieval nominalism, it was the task of the Reformed theologians to invest the covenant concept with scriptural meaning. And the greatest single impetus for this was the discovery of the biblical teaching on justification by faith. The Reformed tradition distinguished itself by developing a comprehensive, biblical-theological method as means of expounding the system of doctrine contained in the Scriptures. In a word, this method was covenantal. The rise of federalism, often associated with scholastic orthodoxy, was for the most part true to the earliest expressions of Reformed thought. Though use of the scholastic and speculative dichotomy between nature and grace meant a temporary setback for Reformed theology, concern for biblical eschatology in conjunction with the Reformed exposition of the covenants of God in pre-redemptive and redemptive history led eventually to the recovery of the 'organic' conception of covenant. Claimants to covenant theology of a biblical and non-speculative variety are divided between two schools of interpretation, that of historic Reformed orthodoxy (Vox, Van Til, and Kline) and neo-orthodoxy (Torrance and Berkouwer).⁴² It remains for evangelicals to weigh the issues in light of the teachings of Scripture and arrive at an informed consensus within 'ecumenical [orthodox] Christianity'.

⁴¹ Meredith G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 154–155; see also, Meredith G. Kline, 'Of Works and Grace', *Presbyterian* 9 (1983) 85–92.

⁴² Cf., for example, Thomas F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983); G. C. Berkouwer, *Faith and Justification* (trans. Lewis B. Smedes. *Studies in Dogmatics*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954), and, in the same series, *Divine Election* (trans. Hugo Bekker. 1960).