

Federalism and the Westminster Tradition

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Reformed Orthodoxy at the Crossroads

MARK W. KARLBERG

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FEDERALISM AND THE WESTMINSTER TRADITION

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In memory of the faculty
That served at (Old) Westminster
Whose voice is still heard

Soli Deo gloria

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Preface

THE TERM “federalism” is the synonym for Reformed covenant theology, one that highlights the representative principle of headship associated with the First and Second Adams. Biblical history opens with the account of the creation of the world—with particular attention to the origin of humankind, fashioned in the likeness of God. It closes with the arrival of the Eschaton, the eternal kingdom of heaven. Hence, biblical history is eschatological, looking forward to the consummation of God’s purposes in creation and recreation. As the account of God’s relationship with humankind, biblical history is also covenantal. These two features, covenant and eschatology, are of signal importance in the interpretation of God’s revelation.

The unfolding of the history of the world is distinguished by various events—and is, accordingly, subject to several divisions or schematizations. There is “the world that once was” (from creation to the great flood in the days of Noah) and “the world that now is” (from the flood to the close of the age). Never again would God destroy the earth as he did in the days of Noah. Rather, God would preserve the world until the final Day of Judgment. The rainbow is the covenant sign of God’s pledge (in the Covenant of Common Grace). There is also the threefold division between Creation, Fall, and Redemption. The fall of our first parents resulted in the abrogation of the first covenant, the Covenant of Works. God’s gracious provision in the offering up of the Savior of the world as substitute for the sins of humanity required the making of a new covenant, the Covenant of Grace, extending over the entire course of postlapsarian history. Equally important is the division between old and new ages, the latter inaugurated in eschatological glory (though not yet consummate fullness) with the first advent of Jesus Christ. (Hence, the new covenant age is, properly speaking, “semi-eschatological.”) On any of these schematizations, the divine covenants occupy a central role in the unfolding of biblical history, the account of God’s engagement with humanity. The pivotal figure in this history is the incarnate Christ, the Second and Last Adam—the Alpha and Omega.

Preface

More than any other theological tradition, Reformed federalism has recognized the importance of the biblical teaching on the covenants in its system of doctrine. This tradition came to mature confessional status in the writing of the Westminster Confession of Faith (and Catechisms). The place of the Westminster tradition in the stream of Christian history and theology is remarkable indeed. Westminster not only gained recognition as the epitome of Calvinist teaching at the close of the Protestant Reformation (the middle of the seventeenth century), it also earned the reputation for precision and comprehensiveness in doctrinal formulation. It became the measure by which biblical interpreters defended their systems of doctrine—either in agreement or disagreement with the theology of the Westminster divines.

With little exception (the Puritan doctrine of the sabbath being the notable one), the Westminster documents bear testimony to Reformed catholicity. And they continue to speak for historic Reformed orthodoxy (*i.e.*, international Calvinism) down to the present day. This is not to suggest that Westminster Calvinism is not open to revision and correction—in places. And, to be sure, the Westminster theology has found its ardent critics. Today, no where are the Westminster standards faulted more than in the doctrine of the covenants (including the juridical interpretation of justification and the law of God). The chief focus of this collection of essays is the doctrine of the law of God—law as covenant. More specifically, our theological concern is the relationship between the Law and the Gospel. Of equal interest is the subject of the divine institutions of church and state, which introduces us to the important and perennial question concerning the relationship between church and state in the postlapsarian world. (Prior to the Fall, there was only theocracy—God’s immediate rule over his people. The institutions of church and state arise after the Fall.)

While the first chapter lays out the biblical warrant for the Reformed doctrine of the Covenant of Works, the second features the work of the leading modern-day exponents of federalism, Geerhardus Vos and Meredith G. Kline. Division within the Westminster Seminaries over the doctrine of covenant, justification, and election—including its impact upon the Orthodox Presbyterian Church—is the subject of the third and fourth chapters. The closing chapter takes up the subject of the relationship between church and state, pointing out differences in theological viewpoint based upon divergent and conflicting understandings of the doctrine of the covenant. Central to all this discussion is the teaching concerning the spiritual nature of the church as the gathered saints, the covenant people of God called out from the world as the instrument of God’s reconciliation and redemp-

tion. The appendixes contain reviews of books addressing the subject of the theology of the covenants (including justification, predestination, and the sacraments). Here additional light is shed on differences and contradictions in contemporary Reformed formulation. Of crucial importance in these articles and reviews is the teaching of the (New) Westminster School, which presently holds multiple perspectives on basic Reformed doctrine—views reflecting the diverse meandering of (neo-)Calvinism and (neo-)evangelicalism more broadly over the last three decades.

These writings are the climax of three decades of research and study; they appear as the third in the series of collections published by Wipf and Stock, beginning with *Covenant Theology in Reformed Perspective*, followed by *Gospel Grace: The Modern-day Controversy*. The critical teaching in dispute in each of these studies is the classic Protestant antithesis between the Law and the Gospel, what serves as the basis for the Reformed doctrine of the twofold covenants, the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace. Protestant-Reformed Orthodoxy now stands at the crossroads; the plight of Westminster Seminary (East and West) is merely illustrative of the depth and the intensity of the contemporary theological dispute, one impacting the future of Protestant evangelicalism as a whole. The battle is between historic Reformed-Protestantism and modern-day revisionism of a radical sort. The rise of postmodernism (or nonfoundationalism) is indicative of the rapidly changing mood and posture in (“evangelical”) biblical scholarship at the opening of this third millennium of Christian interpretation. Without question, the modern church continues to lose her biblical moorings. Forsaking the basic theological convictions of the Protestant Reformation it has attempted to subject the Word of God to vigorous academic (*i.e.*, “scientific”) investigation (the return of rationalism). In doing so, it has abandoned the Scripture principle, which recognizes the uniquely authoritative and inerrant character of the Word of God. Lost in the shuffle is the uncompromising proclamation of the one, true Gospel—the Gospel of justification by grace through faith alone. Lost also is the doctrine of the perspicuity of Scripture. Nothing less than a new Reformation in our day will halt travel down the road leading to destruction.

[A summary exposition of the issues in dispute can be found in my two-part essay: “Today’s Church: Standing or Falling?” [Part 1] in *The Outlook* 54.4 (April 2004) 5–8; and “Judgment According to Works: The Crux of Today’s Dispute” [Part 2] in *The Outlook* 54.5 (May 2004) 6–8.]

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Review of Michael Horton, *God of Promise: Introducing Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (forthcoming).

Review of Russell D. Moore, *The Kingdom of Christ: The New Evangelical Perspective* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004), in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48 (2005) 410–15.

Review of *The Pattern of Sound Doctrine: Systematic Theology at the Westminster Seminaries*, ed. David VanDrunen (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2004), in *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* (forthcoming).

Review of Keith A. Mathison, *Given for You: Reclaiming Calvin's Doctrine of the Lord's Supper* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2002), in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48 (2005) 174–78.

Review of David J. Engelsma, *The Covenant of God and the Children of Believers: Sovereign Grace in the Covenant* (Grandville, Mich.: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2005), in *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* (forthcoming).

ONE

The Significance and Basis of the Covenant of Works

Exegetical and Theological Factors

THE REFORMED doctrine of the Covenant of Works was introduced in the late sixteenth century, with intimations of a pre-Fall covenant appearing in earlier writers, notably, in Augustine, Heinrich Bullinger, and John Calvin. Study of the history of biblical interpretation from the time of the Reformation onwards shows that the doctrine of the Covenant of Works developed in close conjunction with exposition of the old, Mosaic economy of redemption. In their controversy with the Anabaptists, who held a low view of the Old Testament (partly reminiscent of the teaching of Marcion, an expositor from the early period of church history), Reformed theologians vigorously challenged their erroneous reading of the Bible and championed a positive assessment of the Old Testament, companion to the New. Despite obvious differences between the old and new covenants—chiefly, the legal cast of the former—there stands the underlying unity between the two Testaments, summed up in the theological terminology of the Covenant of Grace.

Once it surfaced, the doctrine of the Covenant of Works—the covenant of law established with Adam at creation and (partially) reinstituted with Israel under Moses—very quickly became a theological commonplace in international Calvinism, a vital and essential element in the system of biblical teaching. Debates did arise how best to formulate the old, Mosaic covenant as part on the single, ongoing revelation of the Covenant of Grace, while retaining within its administration a legal (or works) principle, antithetical to the principle of grace (“grace” = saving faith in Christ as Redeemer and Reconciler).¹

The Significance of the Doctrine of the Covenant of Works

Precursor to this distinctively Reformed teaching was the Protestant understanding of the foundational doctrine of justification by faith alone (*sola fide*), what is called the material principle of the Reformation. The doctrine of the Covenant of Works within Reformed theology, in other words, was the inevitable systematico-theological outworking of the Protestant law/gospel contrast, which theological contrast was critical to all debates with Rome and other detractors regarding the nature and content of the Gospel of sovereign grace. And so it remains down to modern times. Evangelical Protestants maintain with one, unified voice the position affirming that the grounds of the sinner's justification before our holy and righteous God is supplied by another Person, namely, Jesus Christ. Salvation rests on an alien righteousness imputed to all who are identified (through spiritual union) with the sacrificial, substitutionary Lamb of God. Good works, though necessary in the life of the believer, are not the grounds of life and salvation, but are evidential of true, justifying faith. (Under the first covenant, the Covenant of Works, Adam as federal head of the entire human race would have earned or merited eternal life, the reward of successful probation in the Garden of Eden. More on this below.)

Theological summary

The Reformed system of doctrine teaches these essential points: The Mosaic covenant is *in some sense* a covenant of works, even though it is part of the unfolding Covenant of Grace in the history of redemption. The consistent portrayal in Old and New Testaments of the old covenant is as a legal arrangement, antithetical to the new covenant administration of life and blessing (the old is a ministration of death and condemnation). The legal requirement associated with the old economy of redemption, specifically, regulation of *temporal life* in the land of Canaan *on grounds of Israel's compliance with the law of Moses*,² is wholly abrogated with the inauguration of the new covenant in Christ's blood. The law came through Moses, grace and truth through Jesus Christ. The principle of works-inheritance, antithetical to faith-inheritance, is expressive of the law of nature, man's duty to render full, perfect obedience to his Creator. This requirement is contained in the moral law of God. Protestant theology distinguishes three kinds of law: the moral, the civil, and the ceremonial. And alongside this threefold classification of the law of God is its *threefold usage*—the civil, the pedagogical, and the normative.³

The inability of sinners, individually and corporately as the people of God, to satisfy the divine demand for righteousness—such righteousness being the grounds of meritorious reward proffered in the covenant—points to the need for Another to perform the work that Adam, and later corporate Israel, was unable to fulfill as God's image-bearer. What the law could not do for sinners, Christ has done, once-for-all. God's covenant made with the two Adams (in the Covenant of Creation and in the Covenant of Redemption) entails the federal or representative principle, the one acting on behalf of the many. Under the former economy of redemption Moses as mediator of the old covenant did not act as federal head on behalf of the Israelite nation, although on certain occasions in Israelite history the obedience of Moses, as well as that of others (including corporate Israel), were pointers to the future, messianic work of Christ.⁴ In each instance the representative obedience typified the obedience of the (coming) "Servant of the Lord." (Typology is an integral element in Reformed covenant theology.) The purpose of the Sinaitic covenant was to frustrate Israel in seeking righteousness on grounds of works-obedience. As her history proved, Israel was unable to secure the temporal blessing of God on this legal basis. Babylonian exile dramatized the futility of works-righteousness as the way to secure blessing from God. (Here it must be stressed that the Sinaitic law never stipulated works-obedience as the grounds of *eternal* blessing, only as the grounds of *temporal* blessing in the land of Canaan—and this for purely pedagogical purposes.)

The latter prophets were the agents of God's covenant lawsuit against disobedient, wayward Israel. Calling the Israelites to repentance and covenant-faithfulness, the prophets were not heeded, their message ignored. Even the messenger of God's final ultimatum with Israel, John the Baptist, was rejected.⁵ What the old covenant could not achieve on Israel's behalf was realized through the work of the great Prophet and High Priest, Jesus Christ—by the establishment of the new and better covenant. The sacrificial system of the levitical institution pointed to the final sacrifice for sin, the Lamb of God. Christ's work of atonement involves the vicarious satisfaction of the penal and legal obligations of the covenant first broken by Adam in the Garden. (That primal history was played out again in the theocratic life of Israel in the typological Garden of God, Canaan, the land flowing with milk and honey.⁶ This earthly Garden typified the eternal dwelling of God with his people in the new heavens and new earth which is to come. The typological picture in the Bible is rich, diverse and complex.)

Christ in his life and death fulfilled the requirements of God's law on behalf of the elect, and them alone. Salvation is *actualized*; it is

accomplished. All this to say, the work of Christ on the cross did not make salvation possible (dependent upon those who might respond on their own volition favorably to the free offer of the Gospel), but certain for the elect. The Holy Spirit—the Spirit of Christ—applies the benefits of the crucified, risen Lord to all those chosen in him. If God were to save a fallen people, it was necessary that he satisfy divine justice, paying the penalty for sin and removing the guilt of transgression. This is the meaning of the Reformed doctrine of the *consequent, absolute necessity of the atonement*. The divine purpose and good pleasure of God was “contracted” in the plan of redemption, the so-called Counsel of Peace or Covenant of Redemption established in eternity between the Father and the Son—in the Spirit. The plan of God entails a threefold imputation: (1) the imputation of Adam’s sin to all humanity; (2) the imputation of the sins of the elect to the Second Adam when he made satisfaction for the sins of the world on Golgatha’s hill; and (3) the imputation of the meritorious obedience of Christ to the elect, his obedience being the exclusive grounds of life and salvation. The obedience of the messianic Son of God includes both his life of active obedience (keeping of the law) and passive obedience (suffering and satisfaction for sin).

The justification of sinners is by faith alone. Faith is the sole instrument of soteric justification; the (scholastic) term “instrument” identifies the precise manner in which sinners receive the righteousness of Christ as a free gift of grace. Salvation is by grace through faith alone. Good works, though not instrumental in the justification of sinners, are evidential of true, saving faith. They are necessary. The justification of the godly is realized in time, as the outworking of God’s eternal purpose. From this vantage point, the proper purpose of redemptive covenant is election. In terms of the institution and administration of covenant in the history of salvation, however, *redemptive covenant is broader than election*.

Baptism as the sign and seal of the Covenant of Grace identifies and secures, according to its *proper purpose*, the salvation of those chosen in Christ (in the mystery of God’s electing purpose). Hence, not all recipients of the baptismal ordinance receive the saving benefits of Christ’s atonement. Baptism, like circumcision previously, enunciates the dual sanctions of the covenant, blessing for obedience and curse of disobedience. In all cases Christian baptism is the sacrament of initiation into the covenant family of God, the church visible. It does not guarantee salvation for all who receive the sign.⁷ The fruits of justification (and regeneration which precedes justification) are manifested in converted lives—lives evidencing true repentance, faith and obedience. Here we must distinguish properly