

**COVENANT THEOLOGY IN *THE WESTMINSTER CONFSSION OF FAITH***

**Kevin C. Carr  
Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary  
CH 859 The Westminster Assembly  
August 31, 2009**

**Class Instructors:  
Dr. Sinclair B. Ferguson  
Dr. David P. Murray**

**In Partial Fulfillment for a Master of Theology Degree  
in Reformation and Post-Reformation Theology  
Dr. Joel R. Beeke, Advisor**

## Introduction

The *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1647) was the outcome of over a century of Protestant reflection on biblical truth. It was one of several documents arising from the Westminster Assembly held in England at the behest Parliament from 1643 through 1652 when it was officially dissolved. In the words of John H. Leith, the *Confession* and its *Catechisms* “bring to a climax in a grand and monumental way one of the very great theological periods in the history of the Christian church.”<sup>1</sup> He continues, “The Westminster Confession was one of the final documents of the great period of theological activity that began on October 31, 1517, with Luther’s ninety-five theses.”<sup>2</sup> Supplanting the Scots Confession of 1560 it expressed the theological convictions of the Reformed and English speaking world, and yet differed in no essential matter from its counterparts in Europe. It has enabled generation after generation of believers to drink from the wells of Scripture with knowledge and understanding. Westminster’s *Confession of Faith* was, in effect, the last great statement of faith in the confessional era.<sup>3</sup>

Although representing the culmination of the family of Reformed creeds, Westminster was the first in one respect. Unlike its confessional predecessors the *Westminster Confession* explicitly set forth the doctrine of the covenant which had

---

<sup>1</sup> John H. Leith, *Assembly at Westminster: Reformed Theology in the Making* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1973), 11.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>3</sup> Other confessional statements that followed were merely slight modifications of Westminster for the sake of addressing special concerns. The independent Divines at Westminster, for instance, desire expression for their Congregational convictions. They modified the *Confession of Faith* with regard primarily to church government and discipline when they produced the *Savoy Declaration* in 1658. Later the Particular Baptists used the *Westminster Confession* as the foundation for their Second London Confession of 1677 and the Philadelphia Confession of 1742. Timothy George says, “The Second London/Philadelphia Confession was, with some significant changes, almost word for word a duplication of the Westminster Confession.” See Timothy George, “Baptists and the Westminster Confession” in *The Westminster Confession into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, edited by Ligon Duncan, vol. 1 (Geanies House, Fearn: Christian Focus Publications, 2003), 150. Later he observes that Baptist modifications to the Westminster Assembly primarily concerned “the sacraments, church polity, and the civil magistracy.” See George, 155.

become the defining feature of Reformed theology.<sup>4</sup> Geerhardus Vos observes that, “The Westminster Confession is the first Reformed confession in which the doctrine of the covenant is not merely brought in from the side, but is placed on the foreground and has been able to interweave with almost every point.”<sup>5</sup> Earlier, Princeton’s redoubtable Benjamin Breckenridge Warfield had insisted that federal theology was the “architectonic principle”<sup>6</sup> underlying the *Confession of Faith*. From the time of Zwingli and Bullinger in Zürich, through Calvin and Beza in Geneva, and Ursinus and Olevianus in Heidelberg, to the Scottish and English contribution, federal or covenant theology<sup>7</sup> had been a dominant point of discussion in the Reformed branch of the Reformation. Early on the first and second generation Reformers in Zürich and Geneva utilized covenant theology to argue for the unity of redemptive history and biblical revelation. It thus became the means to refute Anabaptism and provide the grounds of sacramental theology, especially

---

<sup>4</sup> Comparing the Belgic Confession (1561), the Heidelberg Confession (1563), the Second Helvetic Confession (1566), and the Canons of Dort (1616), only the Canons of Dort makes explicit reference to “a covenant...whether of grace or of works.” See Joel R. Beeke and Sinclair B. Ferguson, editors, *Reformed Confessions Harmonized* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Company, 1999), 52. The *Irish Articles of Religion* (1615) attributed to James Ussher made mention of the pre-fall covenant with Adam in article 21: “Man being at the beginning created according to the image of God...had the covenant of the law ingrafted in his heart: whereby God did promise unto him everlasting life, upon condition that he performed the entire and perfect obedience unto his Commandments, according to that measure of strength wherewith he was endued in his creation, and threatened death unto him if he did not perform the same.”

<sup>5</sup> 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. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980), 239.

<sup>6</sup> Benjamin B. Warfield, *The Westminster Assembly and its Work*, in *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, vol. 6 (1931, repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981), 56.

<sup>7</sup> The terms “covenant” and “federal” can be used synonymously to describe the system of theology. “Federal” stems from the Latin *foedus* which means “covenant”. David Weir distinguishes between these designations insisting that a shift from grace to works occurred in the *Westminster Confession* from the earlier *First Helvetic Confession* (1536). Thus for Weir covenant theology principally expounded grace; federal theology principally expounded duty. See David A. Weir, *The Origins of the Federal Theology in Sixteenth-Century Reformation Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 154. For a critique and review of Weir’s position see, Mark W. Karlberg, *Covenant Theology in Reformed Perspective: Collected Essays and Book Reviews in Historical, Biblical, and Systematic Theology*, (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2000), 111-128.

infant baptism.<sup>8</sup> Later, with the Heidelberg Reformers, the covenant found its way into each major *locus* of doctrine being recognized as the organizing principle of Scripture instead of merely being the basis for Scriptural unity. Bierma summarizes the progress in covenantal understanding:

There were no fundamental differences in the conception of the covenant in the major first-generation (Zwingli) and second-generation (Musculus, Bullinger, Calvin) Reformed theologians who dealt with the doctrine [of the covenant]....The most far-reaching changes in Reformed covenant thought took place in the third-generation theologians, lead by Ursinus [who]...became the first Reformed thinker to free the covenant of grace from the limits of a single locus...and to apply it to a whole range of topics within a unified system of theology.<sup>9</sup>

That the doctrine of the covenant underwent an evolutionary development during the sixteenth and early seventeenth-century is not disputed. That various points of federal theology were, and are, debated and disagreement prevails is not denied. However, the Divines at the Westminster Assembly managed to produce a confession that articulated an amazing consensus that has held its ground despite attempts, past and present, to dislodge it.

The purpose of this essay is fourfold: 1) to survey some of the major contributing influences that gave shape to the *Confession's* covenant theology; 2) to present the *Confession's* covenant theology as its “architectonic principle”; 3) to review and respond to key criticisms of the *Confession's* covenant theology; 4) to conclude with some observations regarding the importance of Westminster’s covenant theology for today.

### **Influences on Westminster’s Covenant Theology**

The Westminster Divines did not articulate the doctrine of the covenant in a vacuum. There had been considerable discussion and progress regarding federal theology

---

<sup>8</sup> Lyle D. Bierma, *German Calvinism in the Confessional Age: The Covenant Theology of Caspar Olevianus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Company, 1996), 31-32, 36-37, 44.

<sup>9</sup> Bierma, *German Calvinism*, 61-62.

from the Reformation's inception. Leith makes an important observation regarding the achievement of the *Westminster Confession*:

The Assembly was the beneficiary of almost 125 years of Protestant theology. It was aware of this heritage. On the one hand, it was determined to avoid innovation in theology. It did not cherish novelty. On the other hand, it was aware of a need for a "further and more perfect reformation than as yet hath been attained." This reformation was a *purification*, not a change of the Reformed faith. The conservation of the theological work of the past century, not originality, was to be the hallmark of the Assembly.<sup>10</sup>

This being the case, it must be admitted that the Assembly produced its statement on covenant out of a milieu of theological thought. What then influenced the thinking of the Westminster Divines and their contemporaries on matters of covenant theology?

### **Continental Influence**

The first influence was the Continental Reformed tradition. The impact of the Zürich Reformers, particularly Heinrich Bullinger (1504-1575), was keenly felt on Westminster through a series of published sermons called *The Decades* which became required reading for clergy preparation in England. Vos observes that the *Decades* is a work "structured entirely by the covenant idea."<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, Zürich had attracted numerous Puritan expatriates under the persecutions of Bloody Queen Mary. Later, the center of gravity for the Reformed Church shifted to Geneva and "Calvin's *Institutes* became the recognized textbooks of theology at Cambridge and Oxford."<sup>12</sup> According to Vos, the theology of Calvin "was built on the basis of the Trinity, and therefore the covenant concept could not arise as a dominant principle." Thus, he says, "The theologians of Zürich...are to be regarded as the forerunners of federal theology in the

---

<sup>10</sup> Leith, 35.

<sup>11</sup> Vos, 236.

<sup>12</sup> Leith, 39-40.

narrower sense insofar as the covenant for them becomes the dominant idea for the practice of the Christian life.”<sup>13</sup>

In a recent essay, Joel R. Beeke and R. Scott Clark address the prevailing “Calvin against the Calvinist” theory regarding the development of covenantal thought.<sup>14</sup> In doing so they demonstrate, over and against alleged theological rabbit trails and blind alleys of Reformed thinkers after Calvin, a continuous current of covenantal thinking from continental Europe to Westminster, particularly through German theologian Zacharias Ursinus (1534-1583). They insist upon the following points. First, they say, “Ursinus’ Calvinism was a notable part of a stream of continental Reformed theology that flowed into England in the late sixteenth century and nourished young English Calvinists who would later take their places in the Assembly of the Divines.”<sup>15</sup> The medium, accordingly, through which Ursinus’ covenant theology influenced English Calvinism, was Oxford University. Finally, they argue that the federalism of both Ursinus and Westminster was “Protestant, gracious, and Calvinist.”<sup>16</sup> For Beeke and Clark, “Ursinus played a significant role in mediating Calvinism to Oxford” where many of the Westminster Divines received their theological education.<sup>17</sup> Ursinus’ influence came to Oxford via his *Heidelberg Catechism* and his subsequent catechetical lectures published in 1584 as the *Compendium Christinae Doctrinae*. The *Compendium* was produced in English in 1587.<sup>18</sup> Beeke and Clark further insist that, “Through the Catechism and the

---

<sup>13</sup> Vos, 236.

<sup>14</sup> Joel R. Beeke and R. Scott Clark, “Ursinus, Oxford, and the Westminster Divines” in *The Westminster Confession into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, edited by Ligon Duncan, vol. 1 (Geanies House, Fearn: Christian Focus Publications, 2003), 1-32.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 8-9.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-11.

Compendium there is a definite link between Ursinus and Oxford, and through the latter to the Assembly.”<sup>19</sup> They summarized Ursinus’ covenant theology as follows:

Ursinus conceived of sin and redemption in terms of a broken covenant of works and a gracious covenant of redemption. The Sinaitic law is not read back into creation. Rather, the Sinaitic law is a reflection of God’s prelapsarian intention. Thus the law was said to apply in the New Covenant, not however as a condition of righteousness, but as a guide to life for the redeemed. This is standard Protestant teaching.<sup>20</sup>

### **British Influence**

There were, however, significant British influences as well. Alexander F. Mitchell maintains in his work on *The Westminster Assembly* that, with respect to the doctrine of the covenant, “there is nothing taught in the Confession which had not been long before in substance been taught by Rollock and Howie in Scotland, and by Cartwright, Preston, Perkins, Ames and Ball in his two catechisms in England.”<sup>21</sup> Similarly, Warfield affirms these same individuals adding to them the *Sum of Saving Knowledge* (circa. 1650) by David Dickson and James Durham, and Edward Fisher’s *Marrow of Modern Divinity* (1645), both of which he says “were destined to a career of great influence in the Scottish theology.”<sup>22</sup> Likewise, Leith recognizes that, “The role of the covenant in systematic theology was further developed by William Perkins, Sibbes, Preston, and William Ames.” He singles out Robert Rollock as “one of the earliest theologians to develop the covenant theology in Britain” and notes that, “John Ball’s comprehensive statement of Christian theology, under the rubric of the covenant, *The Covenant of Grace*, was published while the Assembly was meeting.”<sup>23</sup> Although it

---

<sup>19</sup> Beeke and Clark, 13.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 19. Beeke and Clark’s position contradicts that of John H. Leith who claims, “The development of covenant theology took place, apparently, in considerable independence on the continent and in Britain.” Cf. Leith, 94.

<sup>21</sup> Cited by Vos, 239.

<sup>22</sup> Warfield, 56-57.

<sup>23</sup> Leith, 94.

would be impossible in this paper to examine the contribution of all these noted individuals, the covenantal views of Robert Rollock and John Ball will be surveyed as illustrative of the theological soil out of which Westminster's *Confession* grew.

### ***Robert Rollock***

It was Rollock (circa. 1555-1599) who brought the term covenant of works into the English confessional language, following no doubt Ursinus' idea of the *foedus naturale*.<sup>24</sup> His lectures from the University of Edinburgh, where he was President from 1583-1599, were published in 1597 as *A Treatise of Our Effectual Calling*. For Rollock the preaching of the gospel was in effect the "promulgation of the covenant of grace."<sup>25</sup> He insists that "all the word of God appertains to some covenant" and that "God speaks nothing to man without the covenant."<sup>26</sup> Defining covenant as "a promise under some one certain condition," he sets forth Scripture's bi-covenantal structure by expounding the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. Each covenant is discussed with regard to its ground, its promise, and its condition.

Rollock regards the covenant of works as functioning both before and after the fall. He sees it as "a legal or natural covenant" in which the law of God "was engraven in man's heart." God would later "repeat that covenant of works" to Israel and inscribe the law on stone saying, "*Do these things, and ye shall live.*" The ground of the covenant of works, he says, is "not Christ, nor the grace of God in Christ, but the nature

---

<sup>24</sup> Lyle Bierma says, "Today it is widely acknowledged that the covenant idea played a significant, even structural, role in Ursinus' theology and that it was he who introduced the term, if not the concept, of a *foedus naturale* ('natural covenant', later known as the covenant of works) into Reformed theology." Lyle D. Bierma, "Law and Grace in Ursinus' Doctrine of the Natural Covenant: A Reappraisal," in *Protestant Scholasticism: Essays in Reassessment*, edited by Carl R. Trueman and R. Scott Clark (Paternoster: Waynesboro, GA, 1999), 96-97. See also Bierma, *German Calvinism*, 58-59.

<sup>25</sup> Robert Rollock, *Select Works of Robert Rollock*, vol 1 (1844-1849, repr., Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2008), 29.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.



of man” as “holy and perfect.”<sup>27</sup> He sees no need of a mediator to make reconciliation because there was no breach between the parties involved. “God made this covenant with man, as one friend doth with another. For in the creation we were God’s friends, and not his enemies.”<sup>28</sup> The promise of the covenant of works is eternal life. Adam’s need was not righteousness because he was already “just and perfect.” Nevertheless, according to Rollock, there is a sense in which Adam was to be “justified by his works.” He says, “After that man had lived godly and justly, according to God’s law...he might be...declared of God to be just by his good works...and so eternal life might be said to be given unto him.”<sup>29</sup> It is these good works that form the condition of the first covenant. Good works as a condition pertain only to the covenant of works prior to the fall, not those born of “grace and regeneration” after the fall. Rollock denies that the works required in the first covenant are meritorious. Rather, he says, “They were due in the creation, as pledges of thankfulness in man to his Creator, for the excellent work of his creation, and to glorify God his Creator.”<sup>30</sup> He furthermore admits that good works are required of those who are in Christ as an outcome, not a condition. He says, “In the gospel, good works are required of them which be in Christ, not such as proceed from their own nature, or such as they can yield of their own strength, but only such as proceed from the grace of regeneration.”<sup>31</sup> He insists that the New Testament never teaches that those in Christ may receive eternal life by good works.

Rollock clearly sees a place for the covenant of works after the fall. He says, “The covenant of works had this use in Adam before his fall, that Adam by it might be

---

<sup>27</sup> Rollock, 34.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 36.

justified and live. After the fall it hath the same use in the unregenerate, elect and reprobate, to wit, to justify and save them, or to condemn them.”<sup>32</sup> However, since the corruption of human nature had rendered justification by the covenant of works out of the question, all it can do is condemn. Thus, for Rollock there are two “ends or uses” for the covenant of works after the fall. First, it is “a preparative to embrace the Covenant of Grace” by leading the elect to “the acknowledgment of sin and condemnation.” Second, it serves to “stir up all believers to march forwards in all faith and godliness.”<sup>33</sup>

The covenant of grace for Rollock is the gospel which was instituted after the breach of the covenant of works. Its ground, which is twofold, concerns Jesus Christ as Mediator: his death and his blood. The former serves “to satisfy the justice and wrath of God for our sins, for the breach of that covenant of works”; the latter “to purchase and merit a new grace and mercy of God for us...whereby we stand reconciled unto God.”<sup>34</sup> Adam’s “original justice” or righteousness was lost in the fall and “injustice” or unrighteousness replaced it. Thus, the justice or righteousness promised in the covenant of grace is not an “inherent righteousness”, but “the righteousness of our Mediator Jesus Christ” granted by “the imputation of God.”<sup>35</sup> The covenant of grace also promises “another kind of inherent justice” which is produced in believers by the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>36</sup> The condition of this covenant is faith alone. Rollock is clear that the “works of regeneration are not contained in the condition of the Covenant of Grace.”<sup>37</sup> Neither is it mere faith as a general virtue that justifies sinners. Rather, he

---

<sup>32</sup> Rollock, 47.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 39

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 41.

says, “the faith that shall apprehend Christ” is that through which God offers righteousness and life.<sup>38</sup> Faith is that which “embraces God’s mercy in Christ.”<sup>39</sup> Thus, according to Rollock, “Christ is the ground....Christ is the condition....And the cause also of the performance of the covenant is Jesus Christ already embraced, and applied unto us by faith.”<sup>40</sup> Rollock stresses that the good works incumbent upon those in the covenant of grace are not the same as the condition of the covenant of works. He says:

I confess good works be required of them which be in Christ, and justified by him; but all such works belong to grace and regeneration;—to grace, I say, only;—and they be not the works of free-will nor of nature. Know this then, that to such as be in Christ, the covenant of works to them is abolished, and of none effect so far forth as by it justification and salvation is obtained...[B]ut now it hath another special use; for it serveth for our direction in the works of grace and sanctification.<sup>41</sup>

### ***John Ball***

John Ball (1585-1640) has been regarded as “one of the fathers of Presbyterianism in England.”<sup>42</sup> The work, for which he is best known, *A Treatise of the Covenant of Grace*, was published posthumously in 1645 just three years prior to the *Confession’s* appearance. The *Confession* has numerous parallels to Ball’s covenantal position. Like the *Confession*, Ball recognizes the great distance that separates the Creator and his creatures for “where there is huge and infinite disparity, there can be no assurance of this so great a gift, but the certaine Word of God, and the assured Promise of him who doth never lie, nor change.”<sup>43</sup> A covenant for Ball is, “a free Promise of God,

---

<sup>38</sup> Rollock, 40.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 40-41.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>42</sup> E. F. Kevan, “The Law and the Covenants—A Study in John Ball,” in *Puritan Papers* (1956-1959), edited by J. I. Packer, vol. 1 (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 2000), 45.

<sup>43</sup> John Ball, *A Treatise of the Covenant of Grace: Wherein the Gradual Breakings Out of Gospel Grace from Adam to Christ are Clearly Discovered* (London: Simeon Ash, 1645), 5.

but with stipulations of duty from the reasonable creature.”<sup>44</sup> He further explains that a covenant implies two things: “For a covenant is...the one covenanting, the other restipulating or accepting....First, the giving of some future good. Secondly, the retribution of some performance. The first without the second, is no more than a Promise: the second without the first is no less than a Law....But when two persons upon these two parts concur (sic), it is that we call a Covenant properly.”<sup>45</sup>

Ball is among the cadre of Puritans whose bi-covenantal views influenced the *Confession of Faith*. He recognizes the distinction regarding a covenant as either legal or evangelical, “of works, or of grace.” He continues, “The Covenant of Works, wherein God covenanteth with man to give him eternall life upon condition of perfect obedience in his owne person. The Covenant of Grace, which God maketh with man promising eternal life upon condition of believing.”<sup>46</sup> He says regarding the covenant of works that, “The Covenant which God made with our first parents, is that mutuall contract or agreement, wherein God promised eternall happinesse to man upon condition of intire and perfect obedience to be performed in his owne person.”<sup>47</sup> He further claims that, “The Author of the Covenant is God...for God doth enter in Covenant with man, not as his equal, but as his Sovereign.”<sup>48</sup> Although the condition of the first covenant with Adam was works, it was nevertheless a consequence of God’s “free grace and love.” The parties of this first covenant were God and man. Ball says, “God promiseth unto man upon condition, and man promiseth unto God what he requires.” No Mediator was required in the covenant of works for man enjoyed “friendship with God” and “did beare

---

<sup>44</sup> Ball, 3.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 3-4.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 7.

the image of God” unvarnished.<sup>49</sup> He continues, “This Covenant was a Covenant of friendship not of reconciliation; being once broken it could not be repaired; it promised no mercy or pardon, admitted no repentance, accepted no obedience, but what was perfect and compleat.”<sup>50</sup>

The covenant of grace, according to Ball, was instituted “immediately upon the fall,” and is regarded, not as a covenant of “friendship”, but a “Covenant of Reconciliation.” The author of this second covenant is God “considered as a mercifull and loving Father in Jesus Christ.” As a Creator, God made the first covenant with Adam in his integrity. “As a Savior he looked upon the poore creature plunged into sinne, and misery by reason of sin.”<sup>51</sup> The moving cause of the covenant of grace “was not any worth, dignity or merit in man...[nor] the present misery into which he had cast himselfe....The sole moving cause...was the love, favour and mercy of the Lord.”<sup>52</sup> Futhermore, Ball says, “This Covenant was made in Christ, in and through whom we are reconciled unto God: for since God and man were separated by sinne, no Covenant can passe betwixt them, no reconciliation can be expected, no pardon obtained, but in and through a mediator.”<sup>53</sup>

Ball recognizes that the covenant of grace contains both a promise and a condition or stipulation. God offers pardon and eternal happiness,<sup>54</sup> and promises “to be God and Father by right of redemption, and Christ to be Savior of them that believe.”<sup>55</sup> The stipulation, he says, is “that we take God to be our God, that is, that we repent of our

---

<sup>49</sup> Ball, 9.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 16-17.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 18.

iniquities, believe the promises of mercy and embrace them with the whole heart, and yield love, feare, reverence, worship and obedience unto him” according to his word.<sup>56</sup> Ball regards repentance as a condition of faith, but insists that “faith alone is the cause of Justification and Salvation.”<sup>57</sup> For Ball the covenant of grace “is opposite to the former in kind” and thus he regards it as impossible for a person to be under the covenant of works and the covenant of grace “at one and the same time.”<sup>58</sup> As a sinner a person cannot be justified by obedience, but only through the “free mercy of God in Jesus Christ embraced by faith.”<sup>59</sup> The covenant of grace unfolds throughout the Old Testament through several stages which include Adam, Abraham, Moses, David, and Israel after the Babylonian captivity, eventually finding its fulfillment with the New Covenant in Christ. Ball acknowledges that the terms, *covenant of works* and *covenant of grace*, are not explicitly found in Scripture. However, the ideas are certainly there. He says, “We reade not in Scripture, the Covenant of works, or of grace *totidom syllabis*: the nearest we come to it is Romans 3:27, the Law of works opposed to the Law of faith; which hold out as much as the Covenant of works, and the Covenant of grace.”<sup>60</sup>

### **Westminster’s Doctrine of the Covenant**

As noted above, Warfield regarded covenant or federal theology as the “architectonic principle” or organizing structure underlying the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. This being the case, covenant is like the golden thread which holds the *Confession’s* tapestry together. To trim it or remove it will cause everything to unravel. Although the *Confession* discusses “God’s Covenant with Man” in chapter seven as a

---

<sup>56</sup> Ball, 18.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 9.

separate *locus*, it is nevertheless woven through its entire fabric. John Murray sees Westminster's covenant theology rooted in God's sovereign decree of election.<sup>61</sup> His observation makes a suitable entrance into the *Confession's* teaching on the covenant:

A confessional statement respecting salvation must be oriented to God's sovereign election. This, as we found, the confession does. But the purpose of grace originating in election comes to realization in the history of covenantal administration. Biblical theology demonstrates that redemptive revelation and accomplishment are covenantal....The significance of the perspective provided by this formulation cannot be overestimated; it guards the unity of redemptive history, relates this history to the consummating time and event, the coming of Christ, and accords to soteriology the covenantal structure that is indispensable if it is scripturally conceived.<sup>62</sup>

### **The Covenant in General**

The integration of covenant theology into the *Westminster Confession of the Faith* can be illustrated by expounding a number of points. The *Confession* does not explicitly define a covenant. It does, however, hint at the components of a definition when it 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.<sup>63</sup>

Regarding the covenant in general, three things are noteworthy in this paragraph. First, the necessity of the covenant is grounded in the Creator-creature distinction. Even before the fall a covenant was necessary to assure that Adam would enjoy communion with God as his "blessedness and reward" because the "distance" between them was "so great." After the fall the disruption due to sin made a covenant all the more necessary. Next, obedience to the Creator is required of the creature by virtue of the great disparity between them. As the inferior party, Adam owed God obedience; as the superior party God owed Adam nothing. Adam's obedience is often recognized as a legal debt he owed

---

<sup>61</sup> WCF 3.6, 8.6, 8.8.

<sup>62</sup> John Murray, *Studies in Theology*, vol. 4 in *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1982), 254.

<sup>63</sup> WCF 7.1.

to God.<sup>64</sup> Finally, all covenants are essentially gracious in their fundamental character in that they involve a “voluntary condescension” on God’s part. God is always the initiating party. This is true both before and after the fall. This condescension comes in the form of a covenant. The Divines, however, do not use the term “grace” in describing the pre-fall arrangement that Adam enjoyed with God as his Creator. That term is reserved for all covenants after the fall as descriptive of how sinful human beings relate to God as Redeemer. Nevertheless, nineteenth-century Princetonian A. A. Hodge (1823-1886) notes in his commentary on the *Confession*: “The enjoyment of the Creator’s fullness and love by the creature is a matter of sovereign grace, depending alone upon the will of the Creator.”<sup>65</sup>

### **The Covenant of Works**

The *Westminster Confession* decidedly affirms a bi-covenantal<sup>66</sup> structure to Scripture. It recognizes a *first* covenant before the fall and a *second* covenant after the fall. They each represent ways in which people may enjoy union and communion with God. For Hodge, a covenant as understood in the *Confession* is a “conditional promise.”<sup>67</sup> Scottish Theologian Robert Shaw elaborates on this idea:

A covenant is generally defined to be an agreement between two parties, on certain terms. In every covenant there must be two parties, and consequently two parts—a conditional and a promissory; the one to be performed by the one party, and the other to be fulfilled by the other party. If either of the parties be fallible, a penalty is often added; but this is not essential to a covenant.<sup>68</sup>

---

<sup>64</sup> R. Sherman Isbell, “The Origin of the Concept of the Covenant of Works” (ThM thesis, Westminster Theological Seminary, 1976), 5.

<sup>65</sup> A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith* (1869, repr., Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1992), 121.

<sup>66</sup> Tri-covenantalism which posits a third pre-temporal covenant of redemption between the Father and the Son was only making its appearance at the time of the Assembly. Scottish theologian David Dickson’s (1583-1663) *Therapeutica Sacra* (1657) clearly sets forth the tri-covenantal scheme of covenant theology.

<sup>67</sup> Hodge, 121.

<sup>68</sup> Robert Shaw, *The Reformed Faith: An Exposition of the Westminster Confession of Faith* (1845, repr., Geanies House: Christian Focus Publications, 2008), 128.



The first covenant is variously called the covenant of *life*<sup>69</sup> with respect to its promise or the covenant with *Adam*<sup>70</sup> with respect to the federal head. But it is most often termed the covenant of *works* with regard to the condition incumbent upon the receiving party. The covenant of works was originally made with Adam in the Garden of Eden as a special act of providence.<sup>71</sup> This important confessional doctrine concerns several things. As a covenant, it possessed both a condition and a promise. The *Confession* teaches that God promised life to Adam “upon condition of perfect and personal obedience” and threatened death for disobedience.<sup>72</sup> In the so-called “state of innocency” Adam was *capable* of doing what was right and good as well and not.<sup>73</sup> God had “endued him with power and ability to keep” the covenant of works.<sup>74</sup> The prohibition against eating the tree of the knowledge of good and evil gave outward form to the law of God written on Adam’s heart which was the same law later given on Mt. Sinai in the Ten Commandments<sup>75</sup> as God’s moral law and holy character does not change. The promised life would be received after of a period of probation and tested obedience. The “pledge” of this promise was the tree of life.<sup>76</sup> Failure to keep the covenant of works would result in death<sup>77</sup>, or according to Hodge, “exclusion from the communion of God.”<sup>78</sup>

---

<sup>69</sup> *LC* 22.

<sup>70</sup> *LC* 22.

<sup>71</sup> *SC* 12; Cf. *SC* 20.

<sup>72</sup> *WCF* 7.2.

<sup>73</sup> *WCF* 9.2.

<sup>74</sup> *WCF* 19.1.

<sup>75</sup> *WCF* 19.1-2. This notion was particularly advanced by Robert Rollock.

<sup>76</sup> *LC* 20.

<sup>77</sup> *LC* 20.

<sup>78</sup> Hodge, 123.

The *Confession* also affirms that Adam acted in behalf of “his posterity”—that is, “as a public person.”<sup>79</sup> In other words, he acted as the federal head for the entire human race. Accordingly, “life was promised to Adam; and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience.”<sup>80</sup> The *Shorter Catechism* explains that upon Adam’s failure to keep the covenant of works, “all mankind, descending from him by ordinary generation, sinned in him and fell with him, in his first transgression.”<sup>81</sup> Thus such biblical doctrines as sin and the fall are understood covenantally.

The covenant of works receives further elaboration in the *Confession’s* chapter entitled *Of the Law of God*.<sup>82</sup> It must be noted that God had *enabled* Adam to obey him. The covenant of works is said to be a law which God gave to Adam “and endued him with power and ability to keep it.”<sup>83</sup> According to Hodge this “moral law... was revealed in the very constitution of man’s nature; and although it has been greatly obscured by sin, it remains sufficiently clear to render even the heathen without excuse.”<sup>84</sup> Adam, in the so-called “state of innocency, had,” according to the *Confession*, “freedom, and power to will and to do that which was good and well pleasing to God; but yet, mutably, so that he might fall from it.”<sup>85</sup> If Adam had achieved the promised life through obedience, it could not have been considered meritorious on his part since God enabled him to obey in the first place.

---

<sup>79</sup> *LC* 22.

<sup>80</sup> *WCF* 7.2.

<sup>81</sup> *SC* 16.

<sup>82</sup> *WCF* 19.

<sup>83</sup> *WCF* 19.1.

<sup>84</sup> Hodge, 250.

<sup>85</sup> *WCF* 9.2.

## The Covenant of Grace

Adam's failure in the covenant of works rendered him and his posterity incapable of "any spiritual good"<sup>86</sup> thus denying them the ability to attain life under that arrangement. The Divines insisted, "We cannot by our best works merit pardon of sin, or eternal life at the hand of God."<sup>87</sup> If the distance between God and man before the fall was "so great" do to his creatureliness, it is now greater still due to his sinfulness, and thus described as an "infinite distance."<sup>88</sup> Thus, "the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the *covenant of grace*"<sup>89</sup> which, like the first, possessed a promise and a condition. This covenant "offereth" eternal life to sinners through Jesus Christ, "requiring" simply faith in him as a response.<sup>90</sup> The Divines further stressed that the condition of faith is not meritorious in any way as the Lord grants "his Holy Spirit, to make them willing, and able to believe."<sup>91</sup> They referred to it as "the grace of faith, whereby the elect are enabled to believe to the saving of the souls" also calling it a "work of the Spirit of God" wrought by the means of grace.<sup>92</sup> Furthermore, God promises the Holy Spirit to the elect "to make them willing, and able to believe" so that not only the promise, but the condition itself is accomplished in the covenant of grace.<sup>93</sup> The *Larger Catechism* likewise calls this required faith "the condition" and affirms that the Holy Spirit is given to the elect "to work in them that faith, with all other saving graces; and to enable them unto all holy obedience, as the evidence of the truth of their faith and

---

<sup>86</sup> WCF 9.3.

<sup>87</sup> WCF 16.5.

<sup>88</sup> WCF 16.5.

<sup>89</sup> WCF 7.3.

<sup>90</sup> WCF 7.3.

<sup>91</sup> WCF 7.3.

<sup>92</sup> WCF 16.1.

<sup>93</sup> WCF 7.3.

thankfulness to God.”<sup>94</sup> It is to be noted that faith and obedience are distinguished from each other—faith alone being the condition; obedience being the evidence and outcome. The Divines also affirm the close association of the terms “covenant” and “testament” noting that the latter speaks more particularly of the inheritance received by the elect at the death of the Testator Jesus Christ.<sup>95</sup>

The second covenant is called the covenant of grace with regard to the accomplishment of its promises. Although the covenant of works is a gracious covenant in that God takes the initiative with Adam through a “voluntary condescension”, it is not a covenant of grace as its condition is obedience.<sup>96</sup> Under the covenant of grace people are incapable of life through obedience, so the condition is fulfilled in their behalf. The *Confession* states that, “Man, by his fall into a state of sin, hath wholly lost all ability of will to any spiritual good accompanying salvation” and is thus unable “to prepare himself thereunto.”<sup>97</sup> However, upon conversion, God “translates him into a state of grace” and “enables him to will and to do that which is spiritually good” albeit imperfectly.<sup>98</sup> Furthermore, the covenant of grace is made “with Christ as the second Adam” and all the elect united in him.<sup>99</sup> As the first Adam brought death to his posterity, so the second Adam grants everlasting life to his posterity.

The covenant of grace is the over arching idea that is common to all biblical covenants after the fall. Thus the *Confession* affirms the unity of the covenant of grace between the Old and New Testaments. It states, “There are not therefore two covenants

---

<sup>94</sup> *LC* 32.

<sup>95</sup> *WCF* 7.4.

<sup>96</sup> See Hodge, 122. “This covenant was also in its essence a covenant of grace, in that it graciously promised life in the society of God as the freely-granted reward of an obedience already unconditionally due. Nevertheless it was a covenant of works and of law with respect to its demands and conditions.”

<sup>97</sup> *WCF* 9.3.

<sup>98</sup> *WCF* 9.4.

<sup>99</sup> *LC* 31.

of grace, differing in substance, but one and the same, under various dispensations.”<sup>100</sup> To be sure the Divines recognized that there *are* differences and development in the covenant of grace before and after Christ. But they are essentially the same covenant. In the time of the law, or the old dispensation, the covenant of grace was administered with various promises, ceremonies, “types and ordinances...all foreshadowing Christ to come.”<sup>101</sup> In the time of the gospel, or the new dispensation, it was administered in Word and sacrament “with more simplicity, and less outward glory”<sup>102</sup> in keeping with Christ’s coming. The *Confession* affirms that under the latter dispensation the gospel “is held forth in more fullness, evidence and spiritual efficacy, to all nations.”<sup>103</sup> Nevertheless the gospel is essentially the same in both periods. The *Confession* is clear: “The justification of believers under the old testament was, in all these respects, one and the same with the justification of believers under the new testament.”<sup>104</sup>

### **The Mediator of the Covenant of Grace**

The promise of the covenant of grace concerns the person and work of Jesus Christ, or as the Confessions says, the Lord “offers unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ.”<sup>105</sup> He is the “Mediator” of the covenant of grace<sup>106</sup> under which all of his offices are subsumed.<sup>107</sup> Murray insists, “No chapter in the Confession contains as much pertinent to what is central in Christian confession as does Chapter VIII.”<sup>108</sup> The Mediatorial work of Christ is seen in large part as his fulfilling the terms of the law in

---

<sup>100</sup> *WCF* 7.6.

<sup>101</sup> *WCF* 7.5.

<sup>102</sup> *WCF* 7.6.

<sup>103</sup> *WCF* 7.6.

<sup>104</sup> *WCF* 9.6.

<sup>105</sup> *WCF* 7.3.

<sup>106</sup> *LC* 36.

<sup>107</sup> *WCF* 8.1.

<sup>108</sup> Murray, *Studies in Theology*, 254.

behalf of the elect.<sup>109</sup> The condition is simply “faith in him.”<sup>110</sup> In his office as Mediator, Christ accomplished two things with regard to the covenant of works. First, being made under the law as the covenant of works, he “did perfectly fulfil it” in behalf of the elect.<sup>111</sup> Christ accomplished what Adam did not, and those after him could not. Second, “by his perfect obedience, and sacrifice of himself” he offered himself to God and “satisfied the justice of his Father” thus purchasing “an everlasting inheritance” for the elect.<sup>112</sup> In other words, Christ fulfilled the condition of the covenant of works, vicariously bore the penalty of the covenant of works, and gained the promise of the covenant of works for the elect.

### **The Doctrine of Justification**

This bi-covenantal framework of the *Confession of Faith* finds its fullness in the Doctrine of Justification in which the “obedience and satisfaction of Christ” in fulfillment of the covenant of works is imputed to those who rest “on him and his righteousness, by faith, which faith they have not of themselves, it is the gift of God.”<sup>113</sup> The Divines insist that Christ’s “obedience and death, did fully discharge the debt” of the justified as his “obedience and satisfaction [was] accepted in their stead.”<sup>114</sup> Thus the merits of Christ gained nothing for himself, but everything for the elect. It is the “merit of his obedience and sacrifice...applied to believers” that purchases life for sinners. The Divines refer to this as simply “trusting in his merits.”<sup>115</sup> In sin, human beings possess

---

<sup>109</sup> WCF 8.4-5; Isbell, 5.

<sup>110</sup> WCF 7.3.

<sup>111</sup> WCF 8.4.

<sup>112</sup> WCF 8.5.

<sup>113</sup> WCF 11.1.

<sup>114</sup> WCF 11.3.

<sup>115</sup> LC 174, 193.

only “demerit.”<sup>116</sup> Hymnist Norman J. Clayton agrees with the *Confession* when he writes, “No merit of my own his anger to suppress, my only hope is found in Jesus’ righteousness.”<sup>117</sup> It is the “efficacy of the merit and intercession of Christ...and the nature of the covenant of grace” through which eternal life is gained and assurance and perseverance is enjoyed.<sup>118</sup>

### **The Covenant of Works after the Fall**

The validity of the covenant of works after the fall continues, but only as “a perfect rule of righteousness” expressing duty to God and duty to man.<sup>119</sup> Yet the covenant of works can never be a valid ground for justification because all human works “are defiled, and mixed with so much weakness and imperfection” and are incapable enduring “the severity of God’s judgment.”<sup>120</sup> For believers in particular, who are not under the covenant of works “to be thereby justified, or condemned” nevertheless find it “of great use to them, as well as others...as a rule of life, informing them of the will of God.”<sup>121</sup> The covenant of works is that same *moral law* “delivered by God upon Mount Sinai, in the ten commandments.”<sup>122</sup> Sherman Isbell observes in his Master’s Thesis at Westminster Seminary that it “is the authority of God as Creator which forever binds all men indiscriminately to the obedience of this law.”<sup>123</sup> Although this republication of the covenant of works at Mt. Sinai “doth forever bind all”,<sup>124</sup> it can never be the source of life since sin has render all people incapable of that “personal, entire, exact, and perpetual

---

<sup>116</sup> *WCF* 30.4.

<sup>117</sup> Norman J. Clayton, “My Hope Is in the Lord,” in *Trinity Hymnal* (Philadelphia: Great Commission Publications, 1990), #523.

<sup>118</sup> *WCF* 17.2.

<sup>119</sup> *WCF* 19.2.

<sup>120</sup> *WCF* 16.5.

<sup>121</sup> *WCF* 19.6.

<sup>122</sup> *WCF* 19.2.

<sup>123</sup> Isbell, 3.

<sup>124</sup> *WCF* 19.5.

obedience” which is required. It is valuable to people “as a rule of life” revealing “the will of God”, bringing conviction of sin, or showing God’s good pleasure in obedience.<sup>125</sup> However it can never be the ground of justification. Isbell continues, “The Confession uses the words ‘covenant of works’ to designate an hypothetical method of the justification by the law. The law is of use to believers as a rule of life, but they are not under the law as a covenant of works as by it to be justified or condemned.”<sup>126</sup> Hodge clarifies the respective roles of the Mediator and the Spirit with regard to the covenant of works: “While Christ fulfilled the law *for* us, the Holy Spirit fulfils the law *in* us, by sanctifying us into complete conformity to it. And in obedience to this law the believer brings forth those good works which are the fruits though not the ground of our salvation.”<sup>127</sup> Shaw summarizes the use of the law as a covenant of works:

It may be remarked, that the law of the ten commandments was promulgated to Israel from Sinai in the form of a covenant of works. Not that it was the design of God to renew a covenant of works with Israel, or to put them upon seeking life by their own obedience to the law; but the law was published to them as a covenant of works, to show them that without a perfect righteousness, answering to all the demands of the law, they could not be justified before God; and that, finding themselves wholly destitute of that righteousness, they might be excited to take hold of the covenant of grace, in which a perfect righteousness for their justification is graciously provided.<sup>128</sup>

### **The Administration of the Covenant of Grace**

The administration of the covenant of grace is through the ministry of the Word and sacraments.<sup>129</sup> As noted above, Rollock regarded the preaching of the gospel as the “promulgation of the covenant of grace.”<sup>130</sup> Furthermore, such sacraments as baptism and the Lord’s Supper are defined covenantally as “holy signs and seals of the covenant

---

<sup>125</sup> WCF 19.6.

<sup>126</sup> Isbell, 3.

<sup>127</sup> Hodge, 251.

<sup>128</sup> Shaw, 256.

<sup>129</sup> LC 35.

<sup>130</sup> Rollock, 29.



of grace.”<sup>131</sup> Elsewhere, the Divine’s use the terms “visible” and “invisible” church<sup>132</sup> as guardians against the ever present propensity toward over-objectifying sacramental efficacy—i.e. the belief in baptismal regeneration. Although the Reformed routinely speak of all who profess faith in Christ along their children as members of the visible church and thus the covenant community, only the elect are truly in the covenant of grace is a saving way. Thus the sacraments can never be regarded as the cause or ground of regenerative or justifying grace. A believer’s perseverance is assured by the merits of Christ and the very “nature of the covenant of grace” as the promise of God.<sup>133</sup> Hodge summarizes the *Confession’s* affirmations regarding the covenant of grace:

Christ at once purchases salvation for us, and applies salvation to us; commands us to do, and works in us to obey; offers us grace and eternal life on conditions, and gives us the conditions and the grace and the eternal life. What he gives us he expects us to exercise. What he demands of us he at once gives us. Viewed on God’s side, faith and repentance are the gifts of the Son. Viewed on our side, they are duties and gracious experiences, the first symptoms of salvation begun—instruments wherewith further grace may be attained. Viewed in connection with the covenant of grace, they are elements of the promise of the Father to the Son, conditioned upon his mediatorial work. Viewed in relation to salvation, they are indices of its commencement and conditions *sine qua non* of its completion.<sup>134</sup>

### **Critique of Westminster’s Covenant Theology**

Although the confessional standards of the Westminster Assembly have nurtured the faith and life of numerous ecclesiastical bodies—both officially and unofficially—for nearly four centuries, they have not been without criticism.<sup>135</sup> The recent critical literature, and its consequent response, calling into question Westminster’s covenant

---

<sup>131</sup> *WCF* 27.1.

<sup>132</sup> *WCF* 25.1-2.

<sup>133</sup> *WCF* 17.2.

<sup>134</sup> Hodge, 128.

<sup>135</sup> See survey of H. Rolston and J. B. Torrance’s existential (Neo-orthodox) critique of confessional theology, as well as, the Reformed revaluations of Robert Letham, John Murray, and G. C. Berkouwer in, David B. McWilliams, “The Covenant Theology of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and Recent Criticism,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 53, no. 1 (Spring 1991), 109-124.

theology is immense<sup>136</sup> and cannot be addressed in any detail here. Only the essence of an on-going modern dispute can be considered. According to Ligon Duncan, professor of theology at Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, Mississippi, modern discussions on Westminster's covenant theology began with the Puritan studies of Perry Millar and the criticisms Karl Barth.<sup>137</sup> Previous to them Reformed theology of the seventeenth-century was largely ignored. Duncan claims that Barth "was particularly displeased with the concept of the pre-fall covenant of works." What he regarded as "later developments" in covenant theology, "were given confessional status for the first time in the Westminster Confession."<sup>138</sup>

The critical debate concerns the assertion that Reformed theologians after Calvin departed from his grace orientation in favor of a legal orientation. Bierma observes that, "The dominant view in recent scholarship" concerns an alleged "shift of emphasis from grace to law in early Reformed orthodoxy."<sup>139</sup> The *Westminster Confession of Faith* is regarded as the final codification of this anti-Calvinistic stance. The covenant of works

---

<sup>136</sup> See for example, R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Oxford, 1979); Holmes Rolston III, *John Calvin Verses the Westminster Confession* (Richmond: John Knox, 1972); D. Weir, *The Origins of Federal Theology in Sixteenth-Century Reformation Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990); J. B. Torrance, "Covenant or Contract? A Study of the Theological Background of Worship in Seventeenth Century Scotland," *SJT* 23 (1970): 51-76; for criticism of this approach see, M. W. Karlberg, *Covenant Theology in Reformed Perspective: Collected Essays and Book Reviews in Historical, Biblical, and Systematic Theology* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2000); Peter A. Lillback, *The Binding of God: Calvin's Role in the Development of Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001); and Richard A. Muller, "The Covenant of Works and the Stability of Divine Law in Seventeenth-Century Reformed Orthodoxy," *CTJ* 29 (1994): 75-101.

<sup>137</sup> Ligon Duncan, "Recent Objections to Covenant Theology: A Description, Evaluation and Response," in *The Westminster Confession into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, edited by Ligon Duncan, vol. 3 (Geanies House, Fearn: Christian Focus Publications, 2009), 468-469. Millar changed the course of Puritan studies in a more positive direction with the publication of such works *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (1939).

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 469.

<sup>139</sup> Lyle D. Bierma, "Ursinus' Doctrine of the Natural Covenant," in *Protestant Scholasticism: Essays in Reassessment*, edited by Carl R. Trueman and R. Scott Clark (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 1999), 97.

in particular is singled out as allegedly producing “an oppressive legalism.”<sup>140</sup> Andrew McGowen, principle of Highland Theological College in Scotland, describes the so-called “Calvin against Calvinism” school of criticism which claims:

Calvin himself was entirely misunderstood (or deliberately misrepresented) by Beza, his closest friend and colleague, such that what has come to be known as Calvinism is entirely at odds with what Calvin himself believed. The argument usually ends with the affirmation that Karl Barth has gloriously recovered what was lost and is therefore the true standard bearer of Calvinistic orthodoxy.<sup>141</sup>

More recently Zacharias Ursinus has been accused as being among the culprits behind this legal trajectory.<sup>142</sup> Ursinus is singled out in particular because of his introduction of the *foedus naturale* or *foedus operum*, which is regarded as the precursor of the covenant of works.<sup>143</sup>

A variation of the above critique posits a dual tradition emerging from the sixteenth-century Reformation in Switzerland. Bierma summarizes saying, “The Genevan view stressed the role of God’s grace in the covenant; the Zurich view emphasized the human responsibility of obedience.”<sup>144</sup> Leonard J. Trinterud, author of the two tradition theory, claims that the minority view of Geneva and Calvin was overruled by the majority view of Zürich and adopted by the English Puritans, and thus the *Westminster Confession*.<sup>145</sup> Trinterud treats the “federal scheme” of the Westminster documents as “over and against that of Calvin.”<sup>146</sup> For Bierma, however, the wedge driven between Geneva and Zürich is overplayed. He points out that “the mainstream of

---

<sup>140</sup> Donald MacLeod, “Federal Theology—An Oppressive Legalism?” *The Banner of Truth* 125 (March 9, 1974), 21.

<sup>141</sup> Andrew McGowen, “Edinburgh to Westminster” in *The Westminster Confession of Faith into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, edited by Ligon Duncan, vol. 1 (Geanies House, Fearn: Christian Focus Publications, 2003), 187.

<sup>142</sup> Beeke and Clark, “Ursinus, Oxford, and the Westminster Divines,” 2.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>144</sup> Lyle Bierma, “Federal Theology in the Sixteenth Century: Two Traditions?” *Westminster Theological Journal* 45 (Fall 1983), 306.

<sup>145</sup> Leonard J. Trinterud, “The Origins of Puritanism,” *Church History* 20 (1951), 37-38.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

Reformed theology in the sixteenth century—including both the Zurich and Genevan covenant traditions—flowed into the seventeenth century well between these two poles.”<sup>147</sup>

Holmes Ralston III of Colorado State University took the battle to the threshold of the Westminster Assembly in a 1972 work, the title of which betrays its thesis, *John Calvin Versus the Westminster Confession*. Bierma summarizes his argument:

Like many giants of the faith before him, Calvin had broken free of a legalistic religious tradition when he rediscovered the primacy of the grace of God. The very legalism from which Calvin had escaped, however, reemerged in the ‘Reformed orthodoxy’ of his disciples and was give full confessional status in the Westminster Confession of 1647. Nowhere could this be more clearly seen than in the double covenant idea (covenant of works, covenant of grace), which was ‘totally absent from Calvin’ but arose within the next two generations among such relatively obscure theologians as Zacharias Ursinus.<sup>148</sup>

This more general argument is even applied to the supposed conflict between the *Scots Confession* (1560) and *Westminster*. McGowen explains:

There is a prevailing mythology abroad in Scotland, fostered for two generations by a number of neo-orthodox theologians and historians, to the effect that the pure pristine Calvinism of the *Scots Confession* was polluted and destroyed by the evil virus of federal theology resulting in a perverted and scholastic theology which ultimately found expression in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*.<sup>149</sup>

If this disparity indeed exists, one would wonder why the Church of Scotland so readily and eagerly embraced the Westminster standards as its own.<sup>150</sup>

In response to this negative view of the *Confession’s* covenant theology in general, and its covenant of works in particular, several observations must be made.

First, covenant theology represents a development rather than a deviation from the

---

<sup>147</sup> Bierma, “Two Traditions?” 321.

<sup>148</sup> Bierma, “Ursinus’ Doctrine of the Natural Covenant,” 98.

<sup>149</sup> Andrew McGowen, “Edinburgh to Westminster” in *The Westminster Confession of Faith into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, edited by Ligon Duncan, vol. 1 (Geanies House, Fearn: Christian Focus Publications, 2003), 187.

<sup>150</sup> G. D. Henderson says, “The Scots Confession remained the official doctrinal statement of the Church of Scotland until superseded (though not abrogate) by the adoption of the Westminster Confession in 1647....All ministers signed this Confession.” G. D. Henderson, *Scots Confession, 1560* (Edinburgh: Church of Scotland Committee on Publications, 1937), 19-20.

thought of Calvin and others. John Leith, familiar as he is with the modern criticism, nevertheless sees the work at Westminster as a culmination rather than a divergence from the Reformation. His observation is noteworthy:

The theological achievement of the Reformers during the first half of the sixteenth century is sometimes contrasted with the theological work among Protestants after Calvin's death in 1564. There is no question that the first period is characterized by renewal, by the expectancy and even ecstasy of new insight and discovery, and that the second period is characterized by careful definition and precision, by conservation rather than innovation. Yet the theologians of the Second Reformation, as Alexander Mitchell, the great historian of the Westminster Assembly, calls it, believed that they were carrying on to completion the work that had been begun by Zwingli, Calvin, and Bullinger. In a very real sense the Westminster Confession was the product of one hundred and twenty-five years of theological work.<sup>151</sup>

It is true that Calvin does not mention the covenant of works in his writings.<sup>152</sup> He does however maintain the law-grace distinction by which the insertion of the covenant works idea into Reformed thought sought to maintain. Ernest F. Kevan admits that Puritan theology was more than "a re-issue of continental thought." He nevertheless insists that "the Puritans freely and constantly acknowledged their indebtedness to Luther and Calvin."<sup>153</sup> Peter Lillback in his doctoral dissertation argues that Calvin sees Adam "in a probationary period that will lead to a final state of perfection provided he obeys the law God has given him." He continues, "Calvin's doctrine of the sacraments necessitates the existence of a pre-fall covenant, since sacrament and covenant are simultaneous in his

---

<sup>151</sup> Leith, 12.

<sup>152</sup> Calvin stresses both the unity of the covenant of grace as well as the distinction between law and grace. He says, "The covenant made with all the patriarchs is so much like ours in substance and reality that the two are actually one and the same. Yet they differ in the mode of dispensation" (*Institutes* II.x.2). This is no different from *WCF* VII.5-6. Furthermore Calvin says, "We refute those who always erroneously compare the law with the gospel by contrasting the merit of works with the free imputation of righteousness...The gospel did not so supplant the entire law as to bring forward a different way of salvation. Rather, it confirmed and satisfied whatever the law had promised, and gave substance to the shadows" (*Institutes* II.ix.4). See also Peter Lillback's discussion of the covenant of works in Calvin in his Ph. D. dissertation published in, Peter A. Lillback, *The Binding of God: Calvin's Role in the Development of Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 276-291.

<sup>153</sup> Ernest F. Kevan, *The Grace of Law: A Study in Puritan Theology* (1976, repr., Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1993), 36.

view”, even calling the tree of life “the sacrament of the ‘covenant’ that God has with Adam.” Lillback insists:

Calvin possessed the essential elements needed for Ursinus’ development of the covenant of creation. Subsequently this was fashioned by the Federal theologians into the covenant of works....Thus the basic foundation for the existence of a covenant of works in Reformed theology was established by the great Genevan Reformer.<sup>154</sup>

McGowen’s comment regarding the *Scots Confession* can be applied more broadly to the Reformation as a whole. He says: “...the theology of the Westminster Confession of Faith is a *natural development (emphasis mine)* from the theology of the Scots Confession and that *any apparent changes are simply making explicit what is implicit (emphasis mine)*.”<sup>155</sup>

Second, that the Westminster Divines preserved an oppressive legalism born of a trajectory departing from Geneva or a tradition competing with Geneva is hard to imagine. The Divines went to great lengths to assure the gracious character of its covenant theology. Regarding the covenant of works A. A. Hodge writes:

This covenant was also in its essence a covenant of grace, in that it graciously promised life in the society of God as the freely-granted reward of obedience already unconditionally due. Nevertheless it was a covenant of works and of law with respect to its demands and conditions.<sup>156</sup>

David B. McWilliams agrees with Hodge when he says, “The confession clearly represents the prelapsarian covenant as gracious. Anytime God condescends to fellowship with man, whether considered upright or fallen, it is an act of sheer, unadulterated, sovereign, free grace!” Yet he admits that “grace after the fall must be defined in radically different terms than grace prior to the fall.”<sup>157</sup>

---

<sup>154</sup> Peter A. Lillback, *The Binding of God: Calvin’s Role in the Development of Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Co., 2001), 304.

<sup>155</sup> McGowen, 211-212.

<sup>156</sup> Hodge, 122.

<sup>157</sup> McWilliams, 114.

The *Confession* views a covenant as a “voluntary condescension”<sup>158</sup> on God’s part, apart from which pre-fall Adam would have had no hope of “any fruition of him” as his “blessedness and reward.”<sup>159</sup> The Divines are careful to avoid the language of merit in any strict sense with regard to Adam’s obedience in the covenant of works, applying that term only to the work of Christ in fulfilling the terms of the covenant of works after fall in the covenant of grace.<sup>160</sup> The *Confession* further teaches that even Adam’s obedience in the covenant of works would have been regarded as a gracious gift since God who “gave to Adam a law, as a covenant of works” also “endued him with power and ability to keep it.” In the covenant of grace the condition is faith, the outcome of which is obedience. Yet, even *that* obedience is rooted in the grace of God as the “fruits and evidences of a true and lively faith.”<sup>161</sup> The *Confession* says regarding the obedience of believers, “Their ability to do good works is not at all of themselves, but wholly from the Spirit of Christ.”<sup>162</sup> All of this regards the gracious “voluntary condescension” on God’s part.

It should also be mentioned that not all defenders of Westminster’s covenant theology would be happy with Hodge’s qualified characterization of the covenant of works as a gracious covenant. Ligon Duncan points out that “grace, in its fullest sense, does not and cannot exist before the fall, because sin did not exist in humanity before the fall, and grace, in its fullest sense, entails the overcoming of sin or demerit.” He continues:

---

<sup>158</sup> *WCF* 7.1.

<sup>159</sup> *WCF* 7.1.

<sup>160</sup> *LC* 55, 174, 193.

<sup>161</sup> *WCF* 16.2.

<sup>162</sup> *WCF* 16.3.

In refraining from speaking of God's relation to Adam prior to the fall as 'gracious' we do not intend to diminish in any way the extravagant love and goodness of God in creating and entering into relationship with Adam. We are not saying that Adam in any way deserved the relationship that he possessed with God, but we are saying that his continuation in that state of blessing was based upon his obedience to God's stipulations....So in the absence of sin, and in the absence of demerit, there cannot be sin-overcoming and demerit-overcoming favor—grace.

Thus, the assumption that Adam's relationship to God is one of grace prior to the fall fails to do justice to the meaning of grace, in its fullest redemptive sense.<sup>163</sup>

Given the most recent debates in modern Reformed circles, this advice is perhaps well taken.<sup>164</sup>

Third, Westminster's bi-covenantalism, so roundly criticized, does stand on solid biblical footing. In fact, Duncan flatly denies the criticism claiming, "Federal theology has more solid, explicit, exegetical footing than any of its rivals, and its central themes have been shown to be correct in broad, modern scholarly research." He refers to two things in particular: 1) the Adam-Christ parallels of the New Testament; and, 2) "the distinction drawn from the radical implications of the fall for man's relationship to God."<sup>165</sup> As previously noted, the terms, covenant of works and covenant of grace, are not explicitly found in Scripture. However, like the term *Trinity* the ideas are. John Ball observes, "We read not in Scripture, the Covenant of works, or of grace *totidom syllabis*: the nearest we come to it is Romans 3:27, the Law of works opposed to the Law of faith; which hold out as much as the Covenant of works, and the Covenant of grace."<sup>166</sup> For Ball, Paul's use of the terms "the law of works" and the "law of faith" is none other than the distinction between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace in other language. For federal theology Romans 5:12-21 is paradigmatic: "As by the

---

<sup>163</sup> Duncan, 487.

<sup>164</sup> We refer here to the covenantal issues concerned with the views of Norman Shepherd, the Federal Vision, and the New Perspectives on Paul.

<sup>165</sup> Duncan, 485.

<sup>166</sup> Ball, 9.



offence of one *judgment came* upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one *the free gift came* upon all men unto justification of life. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous" (Rom. 5:18-19; Cf. 1 Cor. 15:22). Here Adam and Christ are both viewed as federal heads of their respective posterities: Adam for the human race; Christ for the elect. In both cases the outcome of their actions were imputed to their respective posterities. Christ, as federal head, is explicitly regarded as the one with whom the new covenant is made (Heb. 9:15, 9:24). Adam, as federal head, is implicitly regarded as the one with whom the first covenant is made (Gen. 2:17; Hos. 6:7). The point at issue is not whether the *term* covenant is used in Genesis 2,<sup>167</sup> but whether the arrangement described is indeed a covenant. If the fundamental components of a covenant are present, then a covenant is present. So argues Louis Berkhof when he observes the presence of parties, promises, conditions, and sanctions in the pre-fall arrangement between God and Adam.<sup>168</sup> And those components indicate a pre-fall covenant, the condition of which warrants a distinction from the covenant that follows after the fall. McWilliams points out that the problems Neo-orthodoxy has with covenant theology stem from its insistence that the story of Adam was myth or saga, not history. He insists,

A rejection of the historicity of Adam must inevitably result in the rejection of federalism...Existentialist theologians homogenize the pre-fall and post-fall situations, collapsing them into a sort of *Ever Present*. The 'before' and 'after' of the creation and fall are transmuted into a timeless "above" and "below" of the creation and the fall.<sup>169</sup>

---

<sup>167</sup> In 2 Samuel 7 God clearly establishes his covenant with David even though the term covenant is not used in that context. Yet, in Psalm 89:3 what took place in 2 Samuel 7 is specifically called a covenant. See Duncan, 489.

<sup>168</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1939), 213.

<sup>169</sup> McWilliams, 113.

## Conclusion

This paper has been a survey of the covenant theology of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*. The origins of its distinctive bi-covenantalism have been sought out among the Continental and British Reformers. Particular attention has been paid to the influence of Robert Rollock and John Ball. The *Confession's* covenant theology has been set forth as its “architectonic principle.” Finally, over and against the modern criticism, the *Confession's* bi-covenantalism has been shown to be historically faithful, theologically gracious, and biblically sound. John Leith offers some telling insight pertaining to the *Confession's* placement in the historical continuum and consequently the esteem with which it should continue to be held:

The place of the Confession in the history of Christian doctrine is such that a grasp of its significance is crucial for an understanding of the contemporary theological situation. The Confession was not only the conclusion of one hundred and twenty-five years of Protestant theology; it was also in a real sense, along with other seventeenth-century statements of faith, the conclusion of sixteen centuries of theological work. The radical break in man's intellectual history occurred with the Enlightenment and the intellectual and social developments of the nineteenth century....The writers of the Confession had far more in common with the men of the New Testament age than contemporary men have with the writers of the Confession. The Confession is, therefore, the last statement of faith before the shattering intellectual and social experience of modern man.<sup>170</sup>

The importance of Westminster's bi-covenantal theology for today can be summarized in the following three points: 1) Westminster's covenant theology helps the church *understand* the gospel better because Adam's first sin, the consequent fall, and the imputation of his guilt to all humanity is seen in terms of the violation of the covenant of works. The depths of sin and the heights grace of God (Rom. 5:20) are seen in their stark contrast;<sup>171</sup> 2) Westminster's covenant theology helps the church *preach* the gospel better because it recognizes that the law as a covenant of works cannot be the ground of

---

<sup>170</sup> Leith, 12-13.

<sup>171</sup> McWilliams, 123; He says, “The covenantal perspective highlights the pre-/post-lapsarian distinction and so highlights the sinfulness of sin and the amazing character of God's free grace.”

justification. The law can now only reveal the tragedy of human sin and point sinners to their need of a Redeemer. The Lord Jesus is set forth as Mediator of the covenant of grace, the benefits of which are received only by faith alone. The covenant works-covenant of grace distinction protects gospel preaching from collapsing works and grace into an homogenized obedient faith or faithfulness as the ground of justification. The preaching of the covenant of grace—that is, the gospel—is clear and crisp in presenting Christ alone, by grace alone, through faith alone; 3) Westminster’s covenant theology helps the church *live* the gospel better because it preserves the church from the very legalism of which it is often accused. It recognizes that good works can never be the ground for either justification or sanctification. Believers are not saved by grace then kept by works. Legalism in sanctification is just as erroneous as legalism in justification. The covenant grace not only provides the gift of faith for sinners in their justification, but it also provides Holy Spirit’s enabling power to persevere to the end in their sanctification. Sadly, the church in nearly all of its quarters has demurred on these very points today.

## Bibliography

- Ball, John. *A Treatise of the Covenant of Grace: Wherein the Gradual Breakings Out of Gospel Grace from Adam to Christ are Clearly Discovered*. London: Simeon Ash, 1645.
- Beeke, Joel R. and R. Scott Clark. "Ursinus, Oxford, and the Westminster Divines." In *The Westminster Confession into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Vol. 2. Edited by Ligon Duncan, 1-32. 2004. Reprint, Geanies House: Christian Focus Publications, 2005.
- Beeke, Joel R. and Sinclair B. Ferguson, eds. *Reformed Confessions Harmonized*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Company, 1999.
- Bierma, Lyle D. "Federal Theology in the Sixteenth Century: Two Traditions?" *Westminster Theological Journal* 45. Fall 1983: 304-321.
- Bierma, Lyle D. *German Calvinism in the Confessional Age: The Covenant Theology of Caspar Olevianus*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Company, 1996.
- Bierma, Lyle, D. "Law and Gospel in Ursinus' Doctrine of the Natural Covenant: A Reappraisal." In *Protestant Scholasticism: Essays in Reassessment*. Edited by Carl R. Truemen and R. Scott Clark, 95-110. Paternoster: Waynesboro, GA: 1999.
- Duncan, Ligon. "Recent Objections to Covenant Theology: A Description, Evaluation and Response." In *The Westminster Confession into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Vol. 3. Edited by Ligon Duncan, 467-500. Geanies House, Fearn: Christian Focus Publications, 2009.
- George, Timothy. "Baptists and the Westminster Confession." In *The Westminster Confession into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Vol. 1. Edited by Ligon Duncan, 145-159. Geanies House: Christian Focus Publications, 2003.
- Hodge, A. A. *The Confession of Faith*. 1869. Reprint, Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1992.
- Isbell, R. Sherman. "The Origin of the Concept of the Covenant of Works." ThM thesis, Westminster Theological Seminary, 1976.
- Karlberg, Mark W. "Covenant Theology and the Westminster Tradition (A Review Article)." In *Covenant Theology in Reformed Perspective*, 111-128. Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2000.

- Kevan, E. F. "The Law and the Covenants—A Study in John Ball." In *Puritan Papers* (1956-1959). Vol. 1. Edited by J. I. Packer, 45-57. Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 2000.
- Leith, John H. *Assembly at Westminster: Reformed Theology in the Making*. Richmond: John Knox Press, 1973.
- Lillback, Peter A. *The Binding of God: Calvin's Role in the Development of Covenant Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Company, 2001.
- MacLeod, Donald. "Federal Theology—An Oppressive Legalism?" *The Banner of Truth* 125 (March 9, 1974): 21-28.
- McGowan, Andrew. "Edinburgh to Westminster." In *The Westminster Confession into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Vol. 1. Edited by Ligon Duncan, 187-212. Geanies House: Christian Focus Publications, 2003.
- McWilliams, David B. "The Covenant Theology of the Westminster Confession of Faith and Recent Criticism." *Westminster Theological Journal* 53, no. 1 (Spring 1991): 109-124.
- Murray, John. "A Notable Tercentenary." In *The Claims of Truth*. Vol. 1 of *The Collected Writings of John Murray*, 312-315. Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1976.
- Murray, John. "Covenant Theology." In *Studies in Theology*. Vol. 4 of *The Collected Writings of John Murray*, 216-240. Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1982.
- Murray, John. "The Importance and Relevance of the Westminster Confession." In *The Claims of Truth*. Vol. 1 in *The Collected Writings of John Murray*, 316-322. Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1976.
- Murray, John. "The Theology of the Westminster Confession of Faith." In *Studies in Theology*. Vol. 4 of *The Collected Writings of John Murray*, 241-263. Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1982.
- Rollock, Robert. *Select Works of Robert Rollock*. 1844-1849. Reprint. Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2008.
- Sanderson, John W. *Viewing the Covenant in Covenant Theology*. Unpublished MSS, 1980.
- Shaw, Robert. *The Reformed Faith: An Exposition of the Westminster Confession of Faith*. 1845. Reprint, Geanies House: Christian Focus Publications, 2008.

Smith, Morton H. "Federal Theology and the Westminster Standards." In *The Covenant: God's Voluntary Condescension*. Edited by Joseph A. Pipa, Jr. and C. N. Willborn, 15-46. Taylors, S.C.: Presbyterian Press, 2005.

Trinterud, Leonard J. "The Origins of Puritanism." *Church History* 20 (1951):37-57.

Vos, Geerhardus, "The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology." In *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*. Edited by Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., 234-267. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980.

Warfield, Benjamin B. *The Westminster Assembly and its Work*. Vol. 6 of *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, 3-72. 1931. Reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Company, 1981.

Weir, David. A. *The Origins of the Federal Theology in Sixteenth-Century Reformation Thought*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.