

The COVENANTS

of Works and of Grace



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THE COVENANTS OF WORKS AND OF GRACE

*“And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and
between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head,
and thou shalt bruise his heel.”*

—Genesis 3:15

*“In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground;
for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art,
and unto dust shalt thou return.”*

—Genesis 3:19

Introduction

It is difficult to know who was the first to call the doctrine of the covenants “the marrow of divinity” (or theology), but it is a most appropriate observation. Without bones the human body would be an unshaped glob of flesh. Without theology the ideas of Scripture would lie in an unshaped mass. Marrow is at the center of the bones which shape our body, and marrow gives health to the body. So the doctrine of the covenants is at the core of theology, and the health of any theological system depends on its understanding of this truth. It would be nearly impossible to overstate the central importance of the Biblical teaching on covenants.

In Genesis chapter three, we observe two covenants in action. Two very different covenants are in force at the same time. The Covenant of Works is not introduced for the first time in chapter three. But all of man’s hopes under the Covenant of Works were dashed here. The curse of the Covenant of Works is declared in this place and it begins to fall on Adam, his race, and his world.

The truly amazing thing is that, just as the curse of the Covenant of Works is imposed, a new covenant is published. Promises of the Covenant of Grace are announced (Gen 3:15) even before the curses of the first covenant are applied (3:19). Also astounding is the fact that Adam’s next recorded deed was an act of faith aroused by the Covenant of Grace. “And Adam called his wife’s name Eve; because she would become the mother of all the living” (Gen 3:20). The head of sinners was not despairing over his co-

lossal failure under the Covenant of Works. Nor was he overwhelmed by the dreadful curse of universal death which was announced. Rather he was hopeful. He was filled with optimism upon hearing the glorious and precious Covenant of Grace with its cheerful promises.

The Covenant of Grace arises from the ashes of the Covenant of Works. As man takes his first step into the ruins of the cursed earth, he does so trusting in the Covenant of Grace. These events are interpreters of the rest of the material in the Bible. Genesis begins at the beginning—with the framework for understanding all the Scriptures. If one misunderstands Genesis chapters one to three, he cannot possibly comprehend the remainder of the Bible. Genesis 3 and its two covenants dominate the experience and history of mankind and will continue to do so until this old and worried earth is destroyed.

1. Definitions of Covenant

A. *What Is a Covenant?*

The Almighty, who is infinitely exalted above His creature, man, made man in a state of blessedness (or happiness, or well-being). What this blessedness was is not left to our imaginations but is clearly spelled out in the first three chapters of Genesis.

1) Man had life, both spiritual and physical.

2) Man had knowledge and righteousness, being made in God's image.

3) Man had communion with God, intimate personal fellowship with his Maker. He enjoyed friendship and nearness to the Most High. This is always true happiness for human beings: to live, filled with knowledge and righteousness, in daily companionship with their God.

As man was made, he was mutable or changeable. It was possible for him to lose his blessedness. It became a matter of sad reality that man did in fact lose life (Gen 3:19), righteousness (3:11), and communion with God (3:8). While man was still in a state of blessedness, the Lord set before him a way to continue in and to be confirmed in his blessedness. Herein is the heart of what a covenant is: *a sovereignly given arrangement by which man may be blessed.*

B. *The Covenant of Works*

Man might have had life forevermore. He might have been kept in knowledge and righteousness. He might have been the everlasting companion of the Lord of creation. He might never have known corruption, misery, and the curse. The way for innocent Adam and all his posterity to remain in a state of well-being and to be confirmed in happiness (to eliminate the possibility of losing happiness) was based entirely on what man would do.

“And the LORD God planted a garden eastward in Eden; and there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground made the LORD God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil.”—Genesis 2:8-9

“And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.”—Genesis 2:16-17

Under this covenant, man *must do* what he is commanded in order to continue in a state of blessedness. If innocent man is to remain happy, all hinges on what he *does!* If man fails, then the curse falls. If man succeeds, blessing will be his and will belong to all his offspring. Historically, this divinely-given arrangement by which man may be blessed has been called the *Covenant of Works*. That name was chosen because its focal point was man’s working. Everything depends upon what man does.

Some dispute using the term “Covenant of Works” because the Bible nowhere refers to the arrangement in the Garden of Eden with this phrase. Of course, neither is a host of other theological words found in the Bible. “Trinity,” “Calvinism,” “doctrines of grace,” “limited atonement,” “total depravity,” etc. are never found on the pages of Scripture. What is important is whether the doctrines to which the terms refer are taught in the Word of God. It cannot be denied that the concepts employed under the phrase “Covenant of Works” are found in Scripture. If someone prefers to call it the “Pact of Eden,” it does not matter so long as the content of this “pact” is Biblically defined.

C. The Covenant of Grace

When Adam had sinned as the representative of the human race, and he and all mankind had thus fallen, the Lord revealed His determination to rescue a great multitude from a state of sin and from the curse. Our God was not caught by surprise when Adam rebelled. Even before the world was made, the Almighty had formed His purposes of Grace. From all eternity, the Father and the Son entered into an agreement to recover God’s elect from the consequences of the predestined Fall. For reasons wholly found in the Godhead, the Lord did not wish to abandon all mankind to the curse they justly deserved for disobedience under the Covenant of Works.

Therefore in the Garden of Eden, the second covenant was published. This too was a divinely-appointed, sovereignly-given arrangement by which man could be blessed (or happy). This second covenant, however, was a method whereby man, who had lost life, knowledge, righteousness, and communion with God, might regain these elements of his well-being and be confirmed in them.

The Covenant of Works was not a way of salvation. It was a way for the truly innocent and blessed man to continue in and to be confirmed in his blessedness. Never, ever, did the Lord propose a scheme of works for *sinner*s to be saved. The Covenant of Grace is the only divinely revealed plan by which sinners may be blessed. Genesis 3:15 indicates that all mankind in Adam had become the companion and ally of Satan. Man, woman, and their offspring had become compatriots of the prince of darkness. They were in spirit more like the devil than like their Maker. Thus the Lord declared His plan of Sovereign Grace while addressing the devil:

“And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.”

—Genesis 3:15

Jehovah did not publish a new set of rules for man to carry out if he is to be saved. But the Creator asserted “*I will*” do what is necessary to divide Satan from fallen man. “*I will*” bring man back to My side to fight with Me against the arch-foe. The wicked one devised a plan to use man in attacking the Lord. But *the Lord* will see to it that the Seed of the woman issues the blow of crushing defeat to the devil. “Salvation is of the Lord” (Jon 2:9).

If fallen sinner-man is to be restored to and confirmed in blessedness, his only hope is in what *God* does for him. Man, under the Covenant of Grace, receives the blessing, of life, knowledge, righteousness, and communion with God. But *God* does the work to secure these. From man’s vantage point, all is a free gift. It is all of grace. Thus it has been called the *Covenant of Grace*. Its leading feature is free grace to man from God.

In the entirety of Scripture there are only two divinely instituted arrangements by which man could be blessed: The Covenant of Works for innocent man, the Covenant of Grace for fallen man. Both covenants are referred to in God’s first communication to man after the Fall in Genesis 3.

2. Similarities and Differences in the Two Covenants

A. The Well-Being of Mankind

Both the Covenant of Works and Covenant of Grace look toward the well-being of mankind. Both address the question, “What is the way for man to prosper, to be satisfied, and to experience a happy condition?” And the blessedness to which each covenant points is in many ways identical with that held out by the other. Both point man to life, knowledge, righteousness, and communion with God.

However, in one sense the Covenant of Grace leads to an even higher plane of blessedness than was ever envisioned in the Covenant of Works. For the way of grace is only through union with our precious Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To be the bride of God’s Son is a pinnacle of blessing above that which Adam had in his innocent state. To reign with Christ and share His inheritance is more than restoration to and confirmation in the blessedness Adam experienced before the Fall. In Christ we are raised above the angels in honor and blessedness. Union with Christ suggests higher intimacy and privilege in communion, knowledge, righteousness, and life, than Adam had in his unfallen state.

As described in the Bible, the Covenant of Works breathes a curse. “But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die” (Gen 2:17). This word from God implies blessing upon obedience but expressly states a curse upon disobedience. Such an emphasis upon cursing in the Covenant of Works is important, because under the scheme of works cursing, not blessing, actually came to all mankind. Also, men must be warned that, if they do not flee to Christ for grace, they must receive the curse. “For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse” (Gal 3:10a). Meanwhile, the Covenant of Grace breathes promise:

“...her seed...shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel.”

—Genesis 3:15

The Covenant of Grace has no curse. None who ever really enters the Covenant of Grace can be cursed, for God will do for him all that needs to be done for his blessedness. The Covenant of Grace does not need to curse anyone. All mankind is already cursed under the Covenant of Works. As a matter of fact, “There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus...” (Rom 8:1a).

B. Man Must Be Righteous If He Is To Be Blessed

Both the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace demand that man be righteous if he is to be blessed. The Lord Himself is the source of all moral integrity. It is impossible for God to sin. He is opposed to all sin. He loathes sin and is angry with the wicked daily (Psa 7:11). He cannot look upon sin without retribution being given. His instinctive response to sin is “Depart from me...” When the Most High made this world, it was *all* very good (Gen 1:31). This meant that all mankind was morally righteous.

Nevertheless, a being devoted to evil was given access to God’s good and beautiful earth. The serpent (Satan) beguiled Eve. He deceived the woman and made her a temptress to Adam. What was expected of Adam and Eve was allegiance and faithfulness to their Maker, but they joined in the rebellion of the wicked one. It was this departure from righteousness that forfeited blessedness for Adam and all his race. Genesis 3:15 indicates that only a return to righteousness would bring back blessing under the Covenant of Grace. Then instead of their being at enmity with God, the Lord would make His elect at enmity with Satan.

The standard of righteousness is identical under both arrangements (of works and of grace). It is nothing less than the moral law stamped upon the hearts of all mankind from creation.

“For not the hearers of the law are just before God, but the doers of the law shall be justified. For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves: Which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another.”—Romans 2:13-15

No one can fully escape an inward awareness of this standard even when he rebels against it. God is unchanging in all His ways. His requirement for man is always an imitation of His own righteousness. God’s expectation of man does not change.

Adam was made upright—with a heart inclined to keep the God-given standard of righteousness. Genesis 2:17 gives the specific command, “But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.” There is much more to this commandment than appears on its surface. A testing period was established during which man must obey to be confirmed in his righteousness. And the focus of attention is upon a tree.

Theologians often refer to this tree as sacramental. It is symbolic of all the obedience which man’s Maker expected of him. It represents all of the righteousness required of

man. Had Adam ceased to acknowledge God as his God, had Adam ceased to keep the Sabbath, had Adam been unfaithful to Eve, had Adam become a liar, had Adam coveted, there would have been a fall even if he had not touched the fruit of the forbidden tree. As a matter of fact, eating the forbidden fruit involved a breaking of all ten commandments in the Decalogue! Many of these are explicitly shown in Genesis 3. Coveting the fruit, desiring to be God, disbelieving God's Word, unfaithfulness of the man to his wife, etc., are all in the text as part of eating from the forbidden tree. The tree was symbolic of the standard of righteousness man must keep.

Scripture is repeatedly insistent on this point: that the Most High expects perfect and perpetual obedience to each and every statute in His moral law. Deuteronomy 27:26 is quoted in Galatians 3:10, "Cursed is every one that continueth not in *all things* which are written in the book of the law to do them." James 2:10 is emphatic, "For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all." Genesis 3:15 shows us that if man is to be blessed under the Covenant of Grace, he must be set at a distance from all sin. Sin and rebellion are defined identically under both arrangements.

There is one great difference between the two covenants: When man was innocent, the way for acquiring righteousness was that man provide necessary righteousness for himself. When man is a guilty and vile sinner, the way proposed for acquiring righteousness is that man trust in a Mediator to provide the necessary righteousness for him.

Genesis 3:15 gives the first gospel announcement of a Mediator who can provide righteousness for the sinner-man. The Seed of the woman will be bruised as a sacrifice to take away the guilt of fallen man. The Seed of the woman will bruise the head of Satan to destroy his power over man in leading him to sin. But throughout, both covenants have an identical definition of the righteousness man must have to be blessed by God. Without holiness no man (under either covenant) will see the Lord (Heb 12:14).

C. Principles of Operation in Man

The Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace have diverse principles of operation in man. The two covenants operate identically *for* man. Both aim at the same blessedness for him. Both propose the same righteousness for him. But the covenants have opposite operations *in* man.

The great principle man was expected to employ under the Covenant of Works was: Man must work to provide his own righteousness. If Adam was to expect to continue in and to be confirmed in the blessedness he had from creation, his only hope was to keep God's commands perfectly, perpetually, and universally. This principle is called, in Romans 3:27, "the law of works."

The great principle man is expected to employ under the Covenant of Grace is completely different. Here man must believe. This is called, "the law of faith" (Rom 3:27). Man must exercise faith in God's sending a Mediator (the Seed of the woman) who will provide man with righteousness which is indispensable in the sight of God. Faith in that Mediator is the only way that fallen, guilty, polluted sinners can have the righteousness which God demands before He will bless man.

The operative principle in the Covenant of Works is “do for ourselves.” The operative principle in the Covenant of Grace is “trust God’s Mediator to do for us.”

“For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse: for it is written, Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them. But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God is evident, for, ‘The just shall live by faith.’ And the law is not of faith: but, ‘The man that doeth them shall live in them.’”

—Galatians 3:10-12

In one sense nothing has changed between the two covenants. What is held before man in both covenants is the same blessedness. What is necessary and indispensable to receive this blessedness is identical in the two covenants. The Lord required perfect and universal righteousness in both. The definition of righteousness is unchanged from the Covenant of Works to the Covenant of Grace. But in another sense everything is at opposite poles. In the Covenant of Works man must earn *by his doing*. In the Covenant of Grace man must receive the free gift from a Mediator *by believing*.

3. Implications from the Scriptural Presentation of Covenants

A. Covenant Theology Is at the Heart of Calvinism

Where covenant theology is misunderstood or opposed, usually Calvinism¹ declines very rapidly. The statement that there are only two covenants, one of works for innocent man and one of grace for sinful man, is another way of saying that the Lord Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, and that no man comes to the Father but by Him (Joh 14:6). All believers in the Old Testament, all in the New Testament, and we ourselves can only come to God as sinners in Christ.

There is but one method of grace for sinners. God does not have multiple schemes for blessing sinners. He does not frantically crank out covenants in reaction to human decisions, until one happens to work well because man accepts it. From eternity past there was but one well-conceived way for sinners to be recovered. All covenants since Eden embody this one divine plan of redemption through a divinely appointed Mediator.

Such Covenant Theology is a close cousin of Federal Theology. Federal Theology teaches us that God approaches all members of the human race and dispenses blessings and curses to each under one of two heads. Either what Adam did will determine your destiny, or what Christ did will determine your destiny.

“For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive.”

—1 Corinthians 15:21-22

¹ **Calvinism** – the system of theology formulated during the Reformation, and upheld by the church everywhere until the late 1800s. It teaches that God is sovereign in everything, including man’s salvation in which God justly condemns all men through Adam because of their sin, but elects some to salvation in His mercy and grace. Calvinism also holds the Biblical truth that man is responsible to seek God and call upon Him for salvation.

If you are in Adam, in federal union so that Adam has served as your representative and substitute, then you must die. If you are in Christ, in federal union so that Christ serves as your representative and substitute, you will be made alive! There is no third head, no third arrangement. This is simply another way of saying that there are only two covenants!

It is this truth which must be understood, in order to comprehend the doctrine of Limited Atonement.² When Jesus died He died for His sheep, for a certain number that the Father had given to Him (see John chapters 6, 10, and 17). He was the designated Federal Head or representative of the elect. Our Lord, in His life and on the cross, acted on behalf of a stipulated number of sinners. Therefore all who are in Christ will come to Him and will be saved at the last day (Joh 6:37). All who are outside of Christ (outside of the Covenant of Grace) are hopelessly perishing.

It is possible for individuals to believe in Limited Atonement while they do not understand covenant theology or federal theology. Yet those who do so have a vague and indistinct understanding of this doctrine. They would not be able to explain or defend it to themselves or to others, without recourse to covenant or federal theology. In the history of the church those who hold to some system of truth alien to covenant theology, have tended to cast off the doctrine of Limited Atonement. It follows naturally that other doctrines of grace³ come under attack as well.

There are many who defend Dispensationalism⁴ and deplore Covenant Theology. These Christians have tolerated “four-point-Calvinists,” but they become adamant in opposition to any man who adopts Limited Atonement. Dispensationalists instinctively sense that Limited Atonement involves federal theology or covenant theology. And they are correct. The adoption of Covenant Theology will include rejection of Dispensationalism.

² **Limited Atonement** – the Biblical doctrine that Christ died for His people, who are chosen by God before the creation of the world. The opposing doctrine is universal atonement, where Christ is said to have died for all the sins of all men.

³ **doctrines of grace** – a name given to the system of theology which upholds the historic faith of the Reformation, which emphasizes the glory of God in His sovereign rule over all things, and which includes the doctrines of election and limited atonement. It is often referred to as “Calvinism.”

⁴ **Dispensationalism** – the system of theology which divides time into distinct “covenantal periods,” each of which had a different way in which man should relate to God. One key doctrine in this teaching is that the Old Testament moral law does not apply to the New Testament saint because it was a part of a former dispensation, where Mosaic Covenant law is replaced by New Covenant grace. Another key doctrine is the idea of a one-thousand year millennial reign of Christ upon the earth. Note: a branch of Dispensationalism called “Historic Dispensationalism” holds that the moral law of God continues to apply to believers today as a rule of life and guide to holiness; it is still called dispensational because it retains belief in the thousand year literal reign of Christ.

B. Dispensationalism Bears the Seed of Arminianism⁵

1. The entire idea in Dispensationalism, that God designed many schemes for man's rescue and breathlessly waited to see how man would receive each, is an insult to a sovereign God. Before the world was made, God determined to save His chosen ones by one plan (Eph 1:4-5). The plan was revealed at the Fall in Genesis 3:15—the Covenant of Grace.

2. Dispensationalism flirts with a relative standard of right and wrong, because it envisions a God who sets up and tears down laws and ways to righteousness as almost whims. It is no coincidence that dispensationalists have frequently taught a second work of grace. They conceive of righteousness as a mystical experience after the new birth which is tied to no definite standard. Scripture teaches that there is but one standard of righteousness which emerged from the very character of God: "Be ye holy, as I am holy" (1Pe 1:15). It has been a constant in the two covenants revealed from heaven.

Some have called themselves "Reformed," but they attack what Reformed confessions of faith teach on Covenant Theology. Although they are not consciously Dispensationalists, they revive many arguments of that anti-Calvinistic school of thought. Surely they have not done so intentionally or consciously. Yet what they have taught militates against the doctrines of grace. They would be horrified to realize that it is so. But it is the tendency and the inevitable influence of taking their teachings seriously and working them out to their natural conclusions. It has been an attack upon sovereignty and upon clearly defined righteousness. Covenant Theology is at the heart of Biblical truth. Those who are its enemies may do great damage to the church of Christ.

C. God's Covenants Are Permanent

When God makes a covenant it is here to stay! In Genesis chapter three there are two covenants in force at the same time. Dispensationalists treat God's covenants as almost whimsies of the divine fancy. It is irreverent to suggest that the Almighty is whimsical. He never is. Everything He says and does flows from majestic wisdom. But the impression made under dispensational teaching is that the Lord God had an idea for the human race at Creation. He published that plan to Adam, but man sinned, and the situation on earth became unsavory and confused. So the Lord introduced another idea. This did not improve the created realm, and thus the Lord gave still another plan.

The unspoken suggestion in Dispensationalism is that the Lord is always a step behind man, reacting to His creature's decisions. It further implies that poor God utterly depends upon the initiative of man. If man does not ratify the Lord's ideas with human approval, they come to nothing. Their concept is that there was an age of innocence which ended in disaster. That was followed by an era of Human Government. Since this accomplished little, it was followed by a dispensation of promise, and so on. You are left with the suggestion that the Great Architect in the sky is ripping up one plan after an-

⁵ **Arminianism** – the system of theology which holds that man has within him a spark of good, and that with his own free will he can choose to be saved. In this system, a person's salvation depends upon his "inviting Christ into his life" or some similar "decision" which he must make.

other. He is crumpling up the old designs and beginning on yet another. It is back to the drawing board again and again. The Old Testament is little more than the Architect's work room of crumpled up, rejected plans. The entire area is strewn with failure.

God's covenants are treated with this shredding machine mentality in the writings of some who still wish to be called "Calvinistic" or "Reformed," but who have made vigorous assaults on the doctrine of the covenants. It comes through in their writings and speeches that in their view old covenants are now rescinded. They suggest that the only covenant that has any validation today is the New Covenant introduced by the Lord Jesus. All other covenants have been scrapped, they would say.

We need to take seriously Jesus' words, "Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled" (Mat 5:17-18). The Lord God never swears by an arrangement with man and then cancels the treaty. When God makes a covenant, either every element of it is perfectly satisfied by complete fulfillment, or else that covenant continues to be in force.

The Covenant of Works was not God's first attempt with men. It is an arrangement endorsed by the Almighty. Since He who cannot repent⁶ instituted this covenant, it never can be revoked. Genesis 2 and 3 is not an interesting artifact of ancient history, dug out of the sands of time to bemuse us as we think of a world that once was and is no more.

The Covenant of Works is very much in force today. Genesis 3:16-20 is an explanation of our present modern world.

"Unto the woman he said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee. And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return. And Adam called his wife's name Eve; because she was the mother of all living."

—Genesis 3:16-20

This is a world under the curse of the Covenant of Works. The two most distressing, yet most obvious, facts of our existence are the corruption of human nature and the nearly universal death of all mankind. Even we who trust Jesus Christ taste and see the curse of the Covenant of Works.

Paul preached the Covenant of Works as well as the Covenant of Grace.

"Wherefore, as by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned: (For until the law sin was in the world: but sin is not imputed when there is no law. Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to

⁶ **repent** – to change one's mind (Num 23:19; 1Sa 15:29).

Moses, even over them that had not sinned after the similitude of Adam's transgression, who is the figure of him that was to come. But not as the offence, so also is the free gift. For if through the offence of one many be dead, much more the grace of God, and the gift by grace, which is by one man, Jesus Christ, hath abounded unto many. And not as it was by one that sinned, so is the gift: for the judgment was by one to condemnation, but the free gift is of many offences unto justification. For if by one man's offence death reigned by one; much more they which receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness shall reign in life by one, Jesus Christ.) Therefore as by the 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. Moreover the law entered, that the offence might abound. But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound: That as sin hath reigned unto death, even so might grace reign through righteousness unto eternal life by Jesus Christ our Lord."

—Romans 5:12-21

"For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive."

—1 Corinthians 15:21-22.

You live under either the Covenant of Works or the Covenant of Grace. There are none other but these two.

If you have not trusted Christ (God's Mediator for sinners), you are at this moment under the Covenant of Works. All of us were born in Adam, that is, under the divine arrangement made with the entire human race. At the judgment seat God will demand that the terms of this covenant be fulfilled. Multitudes are now living under the Covenant of Works. Only those who have entered the Covenant of Grace have escaped the hopelessness of still being in Adam, born guilty, born under a curse.

Even the availability of the Covenant of Grace must not be misunderstood. When the Lord spoke Genesis 3:15, it was not because He saw with surprise and frustration that the earth was perverted in sin. God did not decide to give men a second chance with some wholly different alternate plan for blessing. Once the Lord had instituted the first covenant, its terms must be forever honored. Thus the first covenant becomes woven into the second.

Under the first covenant, man must have perfect, perpetual and universal righteousness if he is to be blessed. Under the Covenant of Grace, the identical demand must be met. No lesser obedience will be accepted. Under the Covenant of Works the curse pronounced for sin is death. Man sinned and death must be the result. Under the Covenant of Grace a Mediator must fulfill perfect righteousness for men who cannot provide it of themselves. The Mediator will also die under the curse of the Covenant of Works in the place of sinners. The heel of the Seed of the woman is bruised, "Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us..." (Gal 3:13). He did this not by abolishing law or by invalidating the Covenant of Works, but by "being made a curse for us." He met all the demands of the Covenant of Works. He fulfilled all its terms.

As far as we are concerned, we no longer seek blessings by our own performance of the law. We are blessed only by faith in the work of the Mediator. However, the work of the Mediator has direct reference to the Covenant of Works and endorses its right to rule the affairs of men.

When the Covenant of Works was broken, God did not rip it up and say, “Well, let’s begin anew.” Nor did He do so with covenants given to Noah, Abraham, Moses, or David. A covenant must remain in force until all its terms are met and fulfilled. Therefore, every covenant must bend to and comply with all covenants which have gone before.

D. We Must Speak of Both Covenants

When we preach the Gospel Biblically we must speak of both Covenants. What the Savior did to rescue His people can only be explained in terms of the Covenant of Works. The emergency from which He rescued His own was that the curse of the Covenant of Works had fallen upon them. The Covenant of Grace is not a wholly other, arbitrary concept from the drawing board of an indecisive God. It has intimate links with and similarities to the Covenant of Works. It is only because of this entwining of the two covenants that we have anything to say to sinners as we preach grace to Christians!

When we preach to those under the Covenant of Grace—what blessedness is theirs through the work of their Mediator—we have a vital application for the ungodly. They are still in Adam, not in Christ. The blessedness we hold before men in the Covenant of Grace is the very blessedness sinners have lost and forfeited all rights to in Adam.

When by the Gospel we tell of the curse from which we were delivered in Christ our Mediator, we have a crucial lesson for all not under the Covenant of Grace. This is the very curse which hangs over their heads in the Covenant of Works. We must tell them that if God spared not His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all under the curse of the Covenant of Works (Rom 8:32), they cannot escape the curse unless they flee to the Seed of the woman and secure Him as their Mediator.

E. Both Agree in Their Definition of Righteousness

The Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace agree in their definition of righteousness. The New Covenant speaks of ethics with great emphasis. There are lengthy New Testament passages devoted to moral instruction. There are even long chapters of “do’s and don’ts.” This is not because by doing the works of the law (any law, given by Moses or Christ) we can earn blessedness. We lost all hope of success through working when we fell in Adam. Nevertheless, Christ died to make us zealous of good works (Ti 2:14). That is just another way of saying that God put enmity between us and the serpent (Gen 3:15). He planted in our souls a love of righteousness and a hatred of sin. This made us enemies of the devil. The only way to oppose the devil and to please God is to walk in righteousness.

Righteousness described under the Covenant of Grace is precisely the same code of conduct prescribed under the Covenant of Works. If that were not so, the New Testament would have no message for sinners. God’s Spirit begins to work grace in the heart by convincing men of sin. Objectively, the Spirit makes use of the law, the moral law, in

this work of conviction. We do not preach to sinners some new law of Christ. They are not in Christ. They are not under the New Covenant. They have no obligation to obey the terms of a covenant that does not apply to them. Nor are they guilty for disobeying laws that were never theirs to obey.

But the moral law taught by Christ happens to be one and the same as the law in the garden given to Adam and to his posterity. We preach the moral law to Christians, but not because it is a vehicle of their salvation. Salvation is a free gift through faith in Jesus Christ our Lord (Eph 2:8, 9). In gratitude for the free gift already received, the Christian must seek to live in righteousness all his days. It is an act of thanksgiving. But the same law is still the high standard which all unbelievers are expected to keep in order to earn blessing in Adam. The more a sinner sees of the code, the less hope he has of his ever keeping it. He must find a Mediator to provide active righteousness for him. He must find a Mediator to bear the curse for him. He must find a Mediator who can crush the head of the serpent and empower him to become holy.

It is possible to slip into moral law with the glasses of the Covenant of Works. It is possible to read New Testament ethical passages in this frame of mind. When the “law of works” and not the “law of faith” is in one’s heart, all obedience is legal and not evangelical. For this reason we must understand fully the natures of the two covenants. Merely barring Old Testament passages will not eliminate the spirit of the Covenant of Works from men’s hearts.

4. A Corrective to Perverted Views of Scripture

At this very point of moral law, a blunder of tragic proportions has been made frequently. It was made by C. I. Scofield and his dispensational followers. Down to this very day others have begun on the same path.

As people read through the Old Testament, they come upon the Covenant of Moses, the great covenant given at Mount Sinai. Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy are packed full of laws and commandments. When dispensationalists read Moses, they say, “This is the Covenant of Works.” The identical claim has been made repeatedly by others outside the dispensational camp.

There can be no question that the Hebrews were expected to perform many “good works.” But then so are the Christians, as evidenced by long New Testament ethical passages. If that were all that was meant by the term “Covenant of Works,” we could agree that both Moses and Christ issued covenants of works.

But there is a contrast between the Pentateuch and the New Testament. In Moses there is a much larger proportion of and predominance of laws and ordinances. The Old Testament laws are more restrictive and “oppressive.” The New Testament has much more of grace and promise. Again, if that were all that was intended by calling Moses’ covenant a covenant of works, we could agree. In Moses there is higher visibility of law and more rigidity than in the New Testament.

But both the old and the new dispensationalists have something else in mind. They really believe that Moses was propounding a way of salvation by works! They think that Moses was really teaching a “Covenant of Works” as that term has always been used by theologians. They tell us that Moses’ teaching was, “The way to heaven is by keeping the Ten Commandments.” There are some very serious problems with this interpretation of Moses!

First, Moses was only a mediator. God revealed the Sinai system from heaven! It is one thing for the Almighty to tell innocent Adam to continue in and confirm himself in blessedness by means of his own works. But it would be monstrous and nearly blasphemous to suggest that the Lord came to fallen, corrupt, and helpless sinner-man and seriously proposed that he seek restoration to life, knowledge, righteousness, and communion with God by means of his own human works. Such a course would be mocking man by demanding of him what is not possible. Furthermore, it would be contrary to all that God had revealed to Adam (Gen 3:15), Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. To them the Lord had decreed that sinners be saved by grace through faith in a coming Mediator. To suggest through Moses a return to a covenant of works for sinners would be a new thing indeed and a complete reversal of Himself.

Classic Scofield dispensationalists, recognizing the above problems, have taught that God wasn’t really serious when he spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai. All that the Lord said was really “tongue in cheek.” Dispensationalists teach that through Moses, God urged the Jews to do what they should have known they must never do! Jehovah had given a covenant of promise to Abraham. It was a system of grace for sinners. At Sinai, the Lord wanted to see if the Jews really valued this system of grace. But they failed the test. Their mistake was to believe a “tongue in cheek” God. They agreed to obey the voice of God and this landed them back under a system of works.

What a horrible representation of God and of the Old Testament! If this interpretation were taken seriously, the whole system of Sinai likens God to a cat playing with a mouse before the inevitable destruction falls. If the dispensationalists were right, then no one under the Mosaic system, not Moses, David, Isaiah, or any other Jew would be saved; for both they and God would have put them under a covenant of works. “Clearly no man is justified before God by the law...” (Gal 3:11). And they would all have been under the law, not grace. Such a view of the Old Testament is ghastly, and is impossible to defend. Even dispensationalists somehow ignore their own theories and find a way to get the Old Testament Jews out from under the very Covenant of Works that both they and God swore they would abide by at Sinai.

When the Lord came down to Sinai, He spoke audibly with all the people before He delivered the extensive covenant through the mediator, Moses. His very first words were, “I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage” (Exo 20:2). The commandments only then were given. It is plain from the beginning that the Hebrews were not called upon to keep the law in order to gain God’s favor. He had already redeemed them (nationally, at the Exodus). His heart was already with them. They were to keep the commandments in gratitude for what the Lord

had already done for them. In addition, the extensive ceremonies of Moses all point to a coming Mediator. This is obviously a Covenant of Grace, not a Covenant of Works!

Every Biblical covenant after the Fall is revealed by God as a form of the Covenant of Grace. Not one since Eden has been a Covenant of Works. Never, ever did the Lord give a covenant of works to sinners as a way to blessing! None of the Biblical covenants since Eden operates on the “law of works” (Rom 3:27). All have as their mainspring the “law of faith.”

Of course it is possible for any person to read the moral law in the Old Testament or in the New and to live by the principle of works, not the principle of faith. Some did this in Moses’ day. The Pharisees did it in Jesus’ and Paul’s day. It is done in our own day. But the Lord and the Scripture nowhere require this of sinners, nor do they suggest that blessing will follow for any sinner who lives by the principle of works. He is bound to fail.

It is because all Biblical covenants since the Fall are united in their major feature of grace and major requirement of the principle of faith in man that our confession⁷ speaks as it does. All Biblical covenants (with Adam after the Fall, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, Christ) are but varying administrations of the Covenant of Grace. They all embody the same fundamental principles as to the way of salvation for sinners—through trust in the Seed of the woman.

The various administrations of the Covenant of Grace do differ in many ways. They are diverse in the measure of the Holy Spirit given, diverse in the way grace is expressed in worship, diverse in the way righteousness is enforced in the civil arena, diverse in the visible organization to which they are tied, and diverse in the express details worked out under the moral law. Still, in essence they are the same. They all require of man the “law of faith.” They all describe the same standard: righteousness. They all declare the same Mediator who saves. They all lead to the same blessedness for man. They all express the same great purposes of grace.



“And he [Abraham] believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness.”

—Genesis 15:6

⁷ **our confession** – the *London Baptist Confession of 1689*, which is almost identical to the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647) except in the matters of baptism and church government. Both confessions uphold the sovereignty of God in salvation and the responsibility of man to seek Him. The London Confession has been used by Baptist churches around the world for more than 300 years. (Copies are available from Chapel Library.)

“For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith. For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness; Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them.”—Romans 1:16-

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“For if Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof to glory; but not before God. For what saith the scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness.”—Romans 4:2-3

“Now the just shall live by faith: but if any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him.”—Hebrews 10:38

“Furthermore then we beseech you, brethren, and exhort you by the Lord Jesus, that as ye have received of us how ye ought to walk and to please God, so ye would abound more and more. For ye know what commandments we gave you by the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication... For God hath not called us unto uncleanness, but unto holiness.”—1 Thessalonians

4:1-7

“Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified... Even as Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness. Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham. And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed. So then they which be of faith are blessed with faithful Abraham. For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse: for it is written, Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them. But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, it is evident: for, The just shall live by faith. And the law is not of faith: but, The man that doeth them shall live in them. Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree: That the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ; that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. Brethren, I speak after the manner of men; Though it be but a man’s covenant, yet if it be confirmed, no man disannulleth, or addeth thereto. Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ. And this I say, that the covenant, that was confirmed before of God in Christ, the law, which was four hundred and thirty years after,

cannot disannul, that it should make the promise of none effect. For if the inheritance be of the law, it is no more of promise: but God gave it to Abraham by promise. Wherefore then serveth the law? It was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the promise was made; and it was ordained by angels in the hand of a mediator. Now a mediator is not a mediator of one, but God is one. Is the law then against the promises of God? God forbid: for if there had been a law given which could have given life, verily righteousness should have been by the law. But the scripture hath concluded all under sin, that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe. But before faith came, we were kept under the law, shut up unto the faith which should afterwards be revealed. Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith... There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.”—Galatians 2:16-3:29