

## 5. SHOULD WE SPEAK OF A COVENANT OF WORKS?

Most Reformed explainers agree that God established the covenant already in paradise, before man's fall into sin. Many of them make a distinction between the covenant before and after the fall, however. Often this is formulated as follows: before the fall, the covenant was a covenant of *works*, but after the fall it became a covenant of *grace*. This implies that before the fall man had to earn something, or at least show himself worthy of obtaining more than he had. But now, after the fall, since he lost the ability to earn anything, man can only live by grace.

Underlying all this is an important question. Has our relationship with God ever been built on human works, achievement, or merit? Did our works in the past and do they in the present in any way determine the relationship itself? Our works – or the lack of them – indeed influence the relationship with God and the way it functions at a given moment, but is it ever based on our works or always solely on his grace towards us?

### **Covenant of works**

The expression covenant of works is not found in Scripture. If the Bible draws any distinction between works and grace, it is that we cannot be saved by our works, the works of the law, but only by faith, through grace. This line of thinking is followed by the apostle Paul over against the Judaizers, for example in Romans 3 and Ephesians 2. It is all a matter of grace, so that no man will boast before the LORD (Rom 3:27; 1 Cor 1:31).

It would appear that the term covenant of works was not used until after the Reformation. Some of the underlying elements (such as the probationary command and the idea of freedom of choice) are mentioned by the early church fathers and the Reformers. Augustine called the relationship which Adam had with God a covenant (*pactum*). Calvin stressed, like Augustine, that salvation is a work of God alone, through grace, and that this was so also under the old covenant:

“...the covenant by which they [the Israelites] were reconciled to the Lord was founded on no merits of their own, but solely on the mercy of God who called them” (*Institutes*, I, 370).

In the time after the Reformation the doctrine concerning the covenant was further developed by men such as Bullinger and Olevianus. The idea of a covenant of works now also made its entry. (L. Berkhof gives a review of this development in his *Systematic Theology*, pp. 211ff.)

Soon the doctrine concerning a covenant of works became entrenched, and denying the existence of such a covenant was at one point even regarded a heresy. The teaching was also formalized in various creeds, for example in the Westminster Standards. The Westminster Confession states first that God’s covenant is “a voluntary condescension on God’s part” (Chapter VII, “Of God’s Covenant With Man”). We can heartily agree with this statement. It goes on to state in Section II of the same Chapter, “The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam, and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience.” And in Section III of Chapter VII we read, “Man by his fall having made himself incapable of life by the way of that covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the Covenant of Grace.”

This idea became popular also in the Reformed Churches in The Netherlands, especially through the work of the well-known theologian and statesman Dr. Abraham Kuyper. At one time practically every Reformed theologian worked with the distinction between a covenant of works and a covenant of grace.

The Westminster Standards cite as proof text for this covenant of works Galatians 3:12: “The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, ‘The man who does these things will live by them’.” The proof text for the covenant of grace is Galatians 3:21, “Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not! For if a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law.” It seems simple: before the fall, man lived by the law; after the fall, he lived by the promise. It is a case of works (first covenant) versus grace (second covenant).

The use of these texts, however, doesn’t prove much. Paul is in this chapter not contrasting the state of man before the fall with his state after the fall, but he is opposing the *Judaist* teaching that salvation is by the works of the law and not solely by faith in Jesus Christ. His statement is that we cannot be saved by the works of the law, but only by grace.

The suggestion that man in paradise by perfect, personal obedience would *merit* eternal life is unsubstantiated and quite problematic. There is no biblical proof for the idea that Adam would have earned eternal life if only he had shown himself to be faithful and obedient. Adam and Eve, as we have seen, were *given* life and abundance by the gracious and kind provisions of God in the covenant that he made with them. They did not have to earn these gifts or attain some higher

degree of perfection. They had to remain obedient, righteous, and holy, as they were created.

Man's fall into sin is not a matter of his failing to do the required works; it is, rather, a matter of rebellion and unfaithfulness, a *breaking of the covenant* which God in his goodness had made with man. The fall is a wilful rejection of God's sovereignty.

### **A time of probation?**

The idea of a covenant of works necessarily requires the notion of a *probationary period*. If a covenant of works existed, then man must be tested to show himself worthy of God's gifts. If he passes the test, he will be approved and granted further blessings, such as perfection and life everlasting; if he fails, he will become corrupt and worthy of eternal damnation.

But why would God seek to test and prove what he has created good? The word that is used for "good" in the original means that something is without flaw, "a perfection which was fully in accordance with the divine will" (Aalders). Everything – also man – turned out exactly according to God's design.

If one wishes to maintain the idea of a covenant of works, one needs to hold to the position that man at creation was imperfect, and had still to earn, attain, and achieve perfection and eternal life. Then Adam at this time was on his own quest for glory, in which he needed to demonstrate his worthiness. But where does the Word of God state such things?

It is remarkable how many defenders of a covenant of works and an accompanying probationary period must admit that they do so by speculation, not on the basis of revelation. For example, L. Berkhof states, "[Adam] was temporarily put on probation, in order to determine whether he would willingly subject his will to the will of God," and he sees the evidence for this in the promise of eternal life which is to be fulfilled when the condition of obedience has been met. But he must admit, "...it is perfectly true that Scripture contains no explicit promise of eternal life to Adam" (*Systematic Theology*, p. 216).

H. Bavinck states that the doctrine of the covenant of works "rests on a Biblical foundation and is of exceptional value." He says that those who objected to the notion of a covenant of works were usually opposed to the idea of any covenant (Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, II, 530ff.). This is not so in my case, for I fully hold to the truth that God made a covenant with Adam and his posterity. It is remarkable how Bavinck, while on the one hand wanting to maintain the teaching of a covenant of works, on the other hand freely admits "...[religion] is not a *work* by which we bring advantage or profit to God and have the right to a reward. But it is *grace* to be allowed to serve him...." Can we have it both ways?

In his *Outlines on Genesis*, p. 25, I. de Wolff shows the same ambiguity when he writes that God, in forbidding the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, "tested man, placed him before a free choice so that in the service of his

responsibility man might show his faithfulness in holiness. The other side of the coin was that man through obedience in life would persevere and thus would attain the blessed eternal life, for which the tree of life served as a sacrament. This is not expressly stated, but man who was put to work with his pure and discriminating knowledge was able to *infer* it from the threat of the curse...” (italics added).

It is disconcerting that in these statements so much is taken for granted and that we are even told what Adam was able to “infer” from what God said. Surely we are now dealing with speculations. We also read that these trees served as a kind of sacrament, a sign that in reality functions only for fallen and sinful man, as we confess in Article 33 of the Belgic Confession: “We believe that our gracious God, mindful of our insensitivity and infirmity, has ordained sacraments to seal His promises to us and to be pledges of His good will and grace toward us.”

The idea of testing in the so-called probationary command is problematic for other reasons. What exactly did Adam have to prove? Was the possibility that he could sin and die an indication that he was not yet perfect at this time, as we normally understand perfection? How long would the period of probation last? Would every new generation come to stand before the same test? It is most likely that – if there was a time of probation – only *one* attack would have to be repelled, and Satan would have been always banished from Paradise. But we do not read such assurances in Genesis 2 and 3.

In reality, things are much simpler. Placing Adam in paradise, the LORD did not put him on trial. He made known to Adam the terms and conditions of his covenant, the promise and the obligation, and rightly expected obedience and faithfulness, for he had made man in his image. He pointed to the unmerited blessings of this covenant which Adam was already receiving: abundance and life. He also warned that if the covenant was broken, the blessings were forfeited and death would follow. Indeed, in paradise the basic rule and structure of the covenant was revealed: God’s ongoing blessing upon obedience and God’s certain wrath on disobedience. So it has always been, and so it will always be.

### **A covenant of favour?**

Because of concerns about the doctrine of the covenant of works, certain scholars in the 1930s began to seek a more suitable terminology that would do justice to the Biblical facts. In his lectures on the covenant, K. Schilder notes the following. “Many think that in the covenant of works man earned his own salvation, and that now Christ does this for us. But the contrasting of work and grace has caused much confusion. Ursinus [one of the authors of the Heidelberg Catechism] saw it correctly. Man can never earn anything with God; the law promises salvation under the pact of obedience and the covenant of grace promises salvation under the pact of faith. We cannot speak here of merit. God has freely determined that it would be done in this manner. In freedom he connected merit to works, just as he connected summer to spring” (*Het Verbond*, pp. 13ff.).

What Schilder is saying is that everything depends – before and after the fall – upon God’s (sovereign) grace. He uses two terms, however: *grace and favour*. “There was favour in Paradise; grace in a strict sense after the fall.” The idea is that grace can only be shown when there is sin. He writes, “As God showed his favour in paradise, he gave his grace after the fall.” It is through the use of these two different words (which are quite similar) that Schilder wishes to retain the special emphasis on God’s *grace* after the fall, but also to fix attention on God’s (unmerited) *favour* before the fall. The point is that we can never earn anything with God but are always dependent on his grace or favour.

It was especially S.G. de Graaf who strongly opposed the term covenant of works. He writes, “This covenant [made with Adam before the fall] is commonly called the covenant of works. This gives the impression that Adam had to attain eternal life for himself through his good works. But in Adam’s case we cannot speak of earning: God granted him his full favour, and the only thing that God asked of him was to choose that favour and to show through his obedience that he wanted to remain in that favour” (*Hoofdpijnen in de Dogmatiek*, page 61).

De Graaf expresses himself in the same way in his book on the covenant (*Promise*, I, 37). He writes, “We are accustomed to speaking of this covenant as the covenant of works. However, we should not take this name to mean that man was expected to earn eternal life as a reward for doing good works, as though eternal life was man’s payment for services rendered. Because man owes everything he is and has to God, we may never speak of man earning wages paid out by God. Therefore it might be wiser to speak of the covenant of God’s favour.”

It is not just a matter of semantics. De Graaf admits that “grace, in general, also means favour, but in the Scriptures grace always has the special meaning of favour that forgives guilt.” Therefore, according to De Graaf, it is best summed up in this way: the covenant of favour was made with Adam, and the covenant of grace (by which sin is forgiven) is made with Christ. The bottom line is that God alone receives all the glory for what man receives and does. These scholars were motivated by the *soli Deo gloria* of the Reformation: life is a living out of God’s grace.

## **God’s declaration of love**

What we noted previously serves to underscore some important points in connection with our relationship with God. The LORD God made a covenant with mankind already in paradise, before the fall. This covenant was a sovereign and free initiative of God in which he set his own terms and conditions. In his goodness, he gave in this covenant rich blessings to man. It was clear that man, who was fully dependent upon the LORD God, could trust fully in his covenant promises. God would never forsake his children but would always keep his word to them.

So the LORD entered into a personal and close relationship with mankind, a relationship based on God’s favour and goodness. Man deserved or merited nothing, but was given everything, even a position of honour and glory in creation.

This covenant, then, is God's declaration of love to his children, who were made in his image. The LORD asked only one thing in return: that he be recognized and embraced as the sovereign LORD and King of all.

As we noted earlier, God gave great abundance and asked total obedience. What he asks in his covenant is the response of voluntary and perfect *love*. This love is not something by which Adam would have earned any additional benefits. He could not climb to greater heights than those on which he was already placed (Ps 8). Only by loving God would Adam's life be preserved, continued, and blessed.

## **The covenant of love**

Therefore we are wise not to speak of a covenant of works. At the same time, the expression covenant of favour is also problematic, because favour is so hard to distinguish from grace.

We can best characterize the covenant made with mankind in paradise, and maintained throughout time, as *the covenant of love*. At the heart of every healthy relationship lies love. God lovingly fashioned us after his own image and himself breathed life into us. Love and life go together. God's love is the basis of our life and the strength of the covenant.

We find the expression "covenant of love" twice in the book of Nehemiah. We read in Nehemiah 1:5: "O LORD, God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and obey his commands..." In Nehemiah 9:32, again in prayer, it says: "Now therefore, O our God, the great, mighty and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love, do not let all this hardship seem trifling in your eyes..." In both instances the Hebrew uses the word *chesed*, indicating, as we saw earlier, God's kindness, mercy, and love.

There is a number of passages where love (*chesed*) is closely linked to the covenant. These are Deuteronomy 7:9, 12; 1 Kings 8:23; 2 Chronicles 6:14; and Daniel 9:4. Literally it says in these passages "your covenant and your love," but the NIV invariably translates "your covenant of love," a translation that is quite acceptable. These passages demonstrate clearly that the covenant of God is characterized by his love (*chesed*).

The LORD often assures us of this love. Deuteronomy 4:37 speaks of God's motive for leading his people out of Egypt as follows: "Because he loved your forefathers and chose their descendants after them, he brought you out of Egypt by his Presence and his great strength...." In Deuteronomy 23:5 we read that the reason God would not allow Balaam to curse Israel was: "because the LORD your God loves you." King Hiram of Tyre admitted to Solomon, "Because the LORD loves his people, he has made you their king" (2 Chron 2:11). The Psalms speak of God's love for Israel, for Judah, for Zion.

In Jeremiah 31, the chapter in which the establishing of a new covenant is proclaimed, the LORD assures his people: "I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness" (verse 3). There are many other

passages which could be quoted, but let me end with Malachi 1:2, where at the closing of the Old Testament the LORD assures his people one more time, “I have loved you, says the LORD.”

This love of God must be reciprocated by his people. Therefore the first and greatest commandment, as has been asserted from the beginning and made very clear by our Lord Jesus Christ, is that we love the LORD our God with all our heart, soul, and mind. The God of love demands love for himself first, but also for our neighbour. God gives it himself, and goes the full distance required by love. The strength and glory of the covenant becomes manifest in Jesus Christ. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

Already in paradise this love stood central, and it continues to stand central in the history of this world when the New Jerusalem descends, when we may live in its glow forever.

Our discussion of the question whether we should speak of a covenant of works was not an entering into an academic controversy of little relevance. Our purpose was to learn about the essence and the character of the covenant which God has made with us. We want to know him who has blessed us richly from the foundation of the world, who indeed “in love...predestined us to be adopted as his sons...” (Eph 1:4, 5). Love has motivated God, and it must also motivate us in his service.

We want to know how this God of love was with his children from the beginning of time, and we are deeply amazed to find at every turn his deep love, which prompted him to give his only-begotten Son as the Saviour of the world. It is a love that gives all and therefore demands all. So we see that the covenant is a total *commitment of love*, from God to man and from man to God. It is all this, or it is nothing.