

## THE DOCTRINE OF THE *PACTUM SALUTIS* IN THE COVENANT THEOLOGY OF HERMAN WITSIUS<sup>1</sup>

by J. Mark Beach

HERMAN WITSIUS (1636-1708) represents a conciliatory spirit in the history of Dutch Reformed theology, as he sought to bring together the positive strains in both Voetian orthodoxy and Cocceian federalism.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps his chief and best-known work is *De Oeconomia*

---

<sup>1</sup>For a general orientation to covenant theology, see John Murray, "Covenant Theology," *The Encyclopaedia of Christianity*, ed. P. E. Hughes, vol. 3 (Delaware, 1972); reprinted in *Collected Writings of John Murray, vol. 4: Studies in Theology* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1982), 216-240; Geerhardus Vos, *De Verbondsleer in de Gereformeerde Theologie* (Rotterdam: Mazijk's Uitgeversbureau, 1939); later published in English translation as "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., translated by S. Voorwinde and W. Van Gemeren, revised translation by Richard B. Gaffin (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1980), 234-267; W. Adams Brown, "Covenant Theology," *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings, vol. 4 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, repr. 1981): 216-224; and C. P. Wing, "Federal Theology," *Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, ed. John M'Clintock and James Strong, vol. 3 (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1878): 515-520.

<sup>2</sup>The disputes between Voetians and Cocceians, bringing much division and rancor among seventeenth-century Dutch Calvinists, are ably set forth by J. Reitsma, *Geschiedenis van de Hervorming en de Hervormde Kerke der Nederland*, vijfde, herziene druk bezorgd door J. Lindeboom (s-Gravenhage: Martinus Nijhoff, 1949), 324-327, also see the literature cited there, as well as J. Kuiper, *Geschiedenis van het Godsdienstig en Kerkelijk Leven van het Nederlandsche Volk* (Utrecht: A. H. Ten Bokkel Huinink, 1900), 201-208; D. H. Kromminga, *The Christian Reformed Tradition: from the Reformation to the Present* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1943), 50-54; and F. G. M. Broeyer and E. G. E. van der Wall, editors, *Een richtingsstrijd in de Gereformeerde Kerk:*

*foederum Dei cum Hominibus*, first published in 1677 and twice revised during his lifetime—a fourth edition, redacted by Witsius himself prior to his death, appeared in 1712. The work was translated into Dutch and English and has been reprinted many times. In fact, an English translation from the nineteenth century was republished only a decade ago. This perhaps demonstrates that *De Economia* remains a popular work in some pockets of English speaking Reformed and Presbyterian churches. In any case, Witsius's work certainly represents one of the fullest treatments of the doctrine of the covenants by a Dutch Reformed theologian in the seventeenth century. Herein is contained a fully developed doctrine of salvation. In this connection it ought to be noted that the publishers of the English translation of Witsius's *Economy* inappropriately and erroneously subjoined to his title the sub-title "Comprehending A Complete Body of Divinity." His book, we observe, falls well short of that. Nonetheless, Witsius's treatise comprehensively considers the locus called "soteriology."

In formulating his doctrine of the covenant, Witsius, who very much wished to be a biblical theologian, appeals to the work of Reformed predecessors and contemporaries, such as William Ames, F. Gomarus, J. Cloppenburg, G. Voetius, A. Essenius, and John Owen. Thus he was not the "inventor" of the doctrine. He did however seek to formulate his doctrine of the covenants in a way that showed appreciation for Cocceian insights, without actually succumbing to the Cocceian scheme. Indeed, Witsius sought to conciliate and relate his own Voetian background and training, along with his *Nadere Reformatie* inclinations, to that of Cocceius's greater accent upon the history of salvation.<sup>3</sup> Witsius's personal

---

*voetianen en coccejanen (1650-1750)* (Zoetermeer: Uitgeverij Boekencentrum, 1994). On Witsius's conciliatory spirit, see his own remarks from Book I of his *Economy* where he expresses hope that his meager efforts may "serve to lessen the number of disputes, and help to clear up the truth" (I.1.1).

<sup>3</sup>Cf. J. van Genderen, *Herman Witsius: Bijdrage tot de Kennis der Gereformeerde Theologie* ('s-Gravenhage: Guido De Bres, 1953), 1ff. Van Genderen's work remains the standard source on Witsius's life and theology. He also offers a fine synopsis of the older scholarship on Witsius's place and role in Reformed theology, demonstrating that some scholars reckon Witsius as part of the rigid orthodoxy that led to formalism and the ossification of theology, while others portray him, along with the development of Protestant orthodoxy as such, as representative of the flowering of Reformation principles. More specifically, some scholars

motto was: “In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things modesty and charity” (*In necessariis unitas, in non necessariis libertas, in omnibus prudentia et charitas*), which reflects his conciliatory spirit. Thus in his work *On the Economy of the Covenants*, when he has occasion to disagree with Cocceius on a particular matter, Witsius usually refers to him indirectly and respectfully as “a learned author.” We discover who the learned author is when Witsius references his source. Nevertheless, it is apparent that Witsius’s covenantal theology continues in the line of Voetian Reformed theologians who accented the *ordo salutis*, though neither Witsius’s emphasis on the *ordo* nor his doctrine of the *pactum* led him to negate or ignore the texture of redemptive history, even with his accent upon the doctrine of election.

This essay seeks to examine Witsius’s doctrine of the *pactum salutis* within the context of his discussion of the covenants in general. I maintain, in opposition to many twentieth-century critics of the *pactum*, that the doctrine of an eternal pact between the Father and the Son, entailing a doctrine of the covenant of works and the Son offering himself as “Surety” in the work of redemption, does not represent—as alleged—a departure from the rich doctrine of grace as formulated by prior generations of Reformed theologians. I hope to show that many of the canards directed against this doctrine are born of misunderstanding and even caricature.

In the first major section of this essay, I will survey some of the critical literature by twentieth-century theologians and historians on covenant theology as such, as well as some of the criticisms directed against Witsius as a pinnacle seventeenth-century covenant theologian whose theology, it is alleged, radically departs from Calvin’s. The second major portion of this essay is devoted to an exposition and analysis of Witsius’s doctrine of the covenants, with a specific focus on his treatment of the *pactum salutis*. Finally, I will

---

have reckoned Witsius as not only decidedly Cocceian in orientation, but simultaneously responsible for the death of both federal theology and the older Protestant dogmatics in general. See Van Genderen’s discussion, 135-166, 209-229. Also see W. van ’t Spijker, “Enkele aspecten van de theologie van de Nadere Reformatie,” in *Het eigene van de Nederlandse Nadere Reformatie*, edited by O.J. De Jong, W. van’t Spijker, H. Florijn (Houten: Den Hertog B.V., 1992), 73ff.

offer a summary of conclusions to be drawn from this analysis, along with a brief “apology” of sorts why many of the criticisms directed against the notion of an eternal *pactum* are misapprehensions and off-target.

## I. SURVEY OF SCHOLARSHIP CRITICAL OF COVENANT THEOLOGY

The paucity of scholarship dealing with the covenant theology of Herman Witsius is surprising, given, as already noted, the mediating role he played in the seventeenth-century Dutch Reformed theological scene and the influence his thought subsequently had on both Dutch and Scottish Reformed theology.<sup>4</sup> We discover that even in the Dutch language figures like Voetius and Cocceius<sup>5</sup> have received far more attention than Witsius, although recently there have been some general surveys that treat facets of his thought.<sup>6</sup> There has been, however, a growing

---

<sup>4</sup>The influence of Witsius on Scottish Calvinism is particularly evident in the controversies surrounding the Marrow men and their opposition to a growing neonomianism within the Church of Scotland. See J. Van Genderen’s *Herman Witsius*, 236ff.

<sup>5</sup>On Voetius’s theology, see, for example, W. J. van Asselt and E. Dekker, eds., *De scholastieke Voetius. Een luisteroefening aan de hand van Voetius’ Disputationes Selectae* (Zoetermeer, 1995); J. Van Oort, C. Graafland, et al., editors, *De Onbekende Voetius* (Kampen: Uitgeversmaatschappij J.H. Kok, 1989); and for a treatment of J. Cocceius’s federal theology see Willem J. van Asselt, *The Federal Theology of Johannes Cocceius (1603-1669)*, Studies in the History of Christian Thought, ed., Robert J. Bast, translated by Raymond A. Blacketer (Leiden: Brill, 2001), and *Johannes Coccejus: Portret van een zeventiende-eeuws theoloog op oude en nieuwe wegen* (Heerenveen: Uitgeverij J. J. Groen en Zoon, 1997).

<sup>6</sup>For example, Stephen Strehle, *Calvinism, Federalism, and Scholasticism: A Study of the Reformed Doctrine of Covenant*, Basler und Berner Studien zur historischen und systematischen Theologie, eds., A. Schindler, M. A. Schmidt, and L. Vischer (Bern: Peter Lang, 1988): 286-298; J. van Genderen, “Herman Witsius,” *De Nadere Reformatie en het Gereformeerd Piëtisme*, ed. T. Brienen, et al (’s-Gravenhage: Uitgeverij Boekencentrum B.V., 1989); B. Loonstra, *Verkiezing-Verzoening-Verbond: Beschrijving en beoordeling van de leer van het pactum salutis in de gereformeerde theologie* (’s-Gravenhage: Uitgeverij Boekencentrum, 1990): 193-218; 107ff.; 115ff.; 130ff.; 137ff.; K. Exalto, “Herman Witsius,” *Theologische aspecten van de*

scholarship dealing with covenant theology in general, and we note that many twentieth-century Reformed theologians have espoused their own theological formulations in opposition to its specific characteristics. We detect basically three trajectories of assessment: First, for lack of a better term, a “Barthian” trajectory of analysis and criticism, which conceives of this theology as compromising sovereign grace and corrupting Calvin’s theological genius; second, a repristination trajectory of criticism, viewing covenant theology—in line with the Barthian critique—as an aberration of early Reformed theology, wishing to rediscover Calvin’s doctrine but refusing to go in Barth’s direction; and, third, a trajectory of appreciation, wherein certain specifics of covenant theology are disputed and recast to varying degrees, but in general a positive verdict is rendered as to its biblical character and its continuity with earlier Reformed thought.

### A. The Barthian Trajectory

One particular feature of covenant theology that has received a great deal of criticism is the doctrine of the *pactum salutis* (also called the counsel of peace or the covenant of redemption). Karl Barth, for example, dismissed the doctrine as “mythology,” arguing that it wrongly introduces a break between the eternal decree of God as the beginning of all things on the one hand and the intratrinitarian pact on the other. With this scheme, said Barth, the covenant of grace becomes “a secondary and subsequent divine arrangement . . . and not the beginning of all the ways of God.”<sup>7</sup> He asks: “Can we really think of the first and second persons of the triune Godhead as two divine subjects and therefore as two legal subjects who can have dealings and enter into obligations one with another?” Perhaps the question is indicative of Barth’s own modalistic predilections regarding the Trinity. In any case, for Barth, the one God as single subject—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—is the one partner in a covenantal relationship, with man as the other partner. There is no such thing as an “agreement” between the divine Persons of the

---

*Nadere Reformatie*, ed. T. Brienens, et al. (’s-Gravenhage: Uitgeverij Boekencentrum B.V., 1993): 155-158.

<sup>7</sup>Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, translated by G. W. Bromiley, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1936-1969), IV/1, 65, 66. Hereafter cited as *CD*.

Trinity, with the aim of effecting human salvation.<sup>8</sup> The idea of a divine *pactum* is not, he says, “a Christian thought,” for what all the federal theologians missed is that Christ—the eternal divine Logos in his incarnation—is “the eternal *testamentum*, the eternal *sponsio*, the eternal *pactum*, between God and man.”<sup>9</sup>

Echoing some of Barth’s criticisms, Thomas F. Torrance states that a covenant of redemption coming prior to and lying behind the covenant of grace introduces an inappropriate distinction between God’s acts beyond time and his acts in time.<sup>10</sup> What is more, Torrance strongly objects to what he sees as “the conditionality” that comes to mark the doctrine of salvation. In this doctrine, Torrance asserts, the Son is the Redeemer of the elect *provided* he fulfills certain conditions stipulated by the Father. Thus, only through the fulfillment of a “bargain” can the covenant of free grace be put into effect!<sup>11</sup>

F. W. Dillstone also travels this path of criticism. He observes that “covenant-terminology” was seldom used in the confessional documents of the sixteenth century—this in contrast to the Reformed confessional standards of the seventeenth century. Dillstone detects here a significant change. Now “the Covenant-conception” comes to prominence in Reformed theology. What is more, this covenant-conception is “markedly different from that of the earlier Reformed teaching.” A “new theory” emerges, says Dillstone, first reflected in the Irish Articles of 1615, wherein a double-covenant schema is set forth, namely, the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. Most ominous in this connection, however, is the notion of conditionality: “the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace, each in its way a contract between God and man, each promising man life and salvation upon definite conditions.” This new covenantal scheme means that “God is a God who enters into contract with men, who binds Himself to bestow blessings if only they will fulfil certain conditions.” It also

---

<sup>8</sup>CD, IV/1, 65.

<sup>9</sup>CD, IV/1, 66.

<sup>10</sup>Thomas F. Torrance, *School of Faith: The Catechisms of the Reformed Church* (London: J. Clarke, 1959), lxxxix.

<sup>11</sup>Thomas F. Torrance, *Scottish Theology: From John Knox to John McLeod Campbell* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996), 118.

means that “the dialectic between Law and Gospel which Calvin sought to maintain is broken. . . .”<sup>12</sup>

According to Dillistone, the federal system of theology came to classical expression in the Westminster Standards. He challenges the entire federal schema, arguing that the covenant of works can only function as a “legal confirmation” of what was already known by man as God’s creature, being bound *as creature*, apart from a formalized covenant, to render full and personal obedience to God. The covenant of works is in fact “a fictitious invention which has no Scriptural foundation.”<sup>13</sup> Dillistone further argues that the federal scheme of Westminster, and all like construals of God’s relationship to man, since it conceives of covenant at its root as a matter of strict conditions, cannot avoid compromising the gospel at its root. Indeed, charges Dillistone, with this framework the heart of the gospel has been lost. The essence of the covenant is promise, not condition, which means it is something very different from contract. “To promise oneself without explicit conditions—that is Covenant: to promise a gift upon explicit conditions—that is Contract.”<sup>14</sup> To be sure, when the Westminster Confession discusses the covenant of grace the notion of contract gives way, but so does the proper notion of covenant itself. Instead we are left with a covenant that has become “a *deus ex machina* automatically bringing life and salvation to the elect.”<sup>15</sup>

We also take note of the assessment of Nico T. Bakker, who in his book *Miskende Gratie—Van Calvijn tot Witsius* explicitly critiques the covenant theology of Witsius. Although perhaps not wholly clear from the title of Bakker’s book (*Misperceived Grace*), it soon becomes apparent that Bakker judges later Reformed theologians to have departed from the rich, fully gracious character of Calvin’s theology and to have put in its place a theology that needs serious rectification and correction. Bakker consistently contrasts Calvin’s theology with that of Herman Witsius. According to Bakker, the entire structure of Witsius’s theology is dominated by the doctrine of election, for Witsius conceives of the temporal covenant between

---

<sup>12</sup>F. W. Dillistone, *The Structure of the Divine Society* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1951), 131. See his chapter entitled “Federalism in the Seventeenth Century.”

<sup>13</sup>Dillistone, *The Structure of the Divine Society*, 131-132.

<sup>14</sup>Dillistone, *The Structure of the Divine Society*, 134.

<sup>15</sup>Dillistone, *The Structure of the Divine Society*, 134.

God and the elect as rooted in eternity, specifically, as rooted in the eternal pact of salvation between the Father and the Son.<sup>16</sup> This is set in contrast to Calvin who, though strongly affirming a doctrine of predestination, did not make it proceed from an eternal, unchangeable divine will but from the witness of Christ in history and regeneration by the Holy Spirit, along with justification by faith—that is, from the believer’s experience of God’s mercy. Bakker also maintains that Witsius introduced a complete natural theology and a naturalistic ethic through his notion of “a call of nature,” which is said to further establish the call of the gospel. Thus Witsius distinguishes between a threefold call: a moral or commending call (*aanradende roeping*), an imperatival or commanding call (*gebiedende roeping*), and an effectual call (*krachtadige roeping*). Only the last of these, the effectual call, is supernatural and efficacious, being an inward call of the Spirit, while the commending and imperatival calls are outward only, the former is rooted in nature and the covenant of works, while the latter is expressed by the law and the gospel. Says Bakker, for Witsius, like Thomas Aquinas, grace perfects nature; and with Aquinas, *contra* Calvin, Witsius gives us a sort of natural knowledge of God.<sup>17</sup>

Bakker also considers Witsius’s notion of the covenant of works. What is disagreeable in Witsius’s scheme is his notion of natural law. Whereas Calvin insisted that knowledge of God from nature is no longer possible after the Fall, Witsius goes in a different direction. Given the Fall, Witsius does not say that the covenant of works is abrogated; rather, he asks *whether* and *how far* it is abrogated.<sup>18</sup> More particularly, Witsius argues that the law, the promise, and the curse of the covenant of works are not abrogated; hence, virtually nothing is abrogated. Thus, says Bakker, almost the entire content of the covenant of nature returns in the covenant of grace. In fact, the covenant of nature is essentially identical to the covenant of grace. The only thing that is abrogated is *the law as the condition for receiving eternal life*. But, even then, it is only a matter of the substitution of the Surety—Christ—for the previous covenant

---

<sup>16</sup>Bakker refers to Witsius’s *Economy of the Covenants*, Book II.

<sup>17</sup>Nico T. Bakker, *Miskende Gratie—Van Calvin tot Witsius: Een vergelijkende lezing, balans van 150 jaar gereformeerde orthodoxie* (Kampen: Uitgeversmaatschappij J.H. Kok, 1991), 31-36; Bakker refers to Witsius’s *Economy of the Covenants*, III.5.15.

<sup>18</sup>Bakker cites I.9.1. of Witsius’s *Economy*.

members—ourselves—as the one who fulfills the condition of the covenant. Witsius’s scheme makes the *lex naturalis* virtually, if not wholly, identical to the gospel. The covenant of grace stands completely in the shadow of the covenant of nature, with the latter covenant forming the cornerstone of his theology.<sup>19</sup>

According to Bakker, Witsius’s doctrine of the covenants makes the abrogation of the covenant of works imaginary. The covenant of works, which was established prior the Fall, becomes the model for the covenant of grace after the Fall. Thereupon, so modeled, the covenant of grace is in this way founded in the *pactum salutis* before all time and thereby receives eternal validity. This means that the covenant of nature has likewise not been abrogated in the covenant of grace, but more permanently established.<sup>20</sup> The dialectical interplay between law and gospel which characterized Calvin’s theology is in Witsius’s theology schematized under two covenants. Even worse, the difference between these covenants, practically speaking, vanishes, with the result that in Witsius’s thought we see the complete reversal of Calvin’s theology. Bakker therefore bids us to note well (*nota bene!*) that Witsius’s theology sets the law above the gospel, justice above mercy, and nature above grace.<sup>21</sup>

Bakker also alleges that Witsius conceives of covenant as “contract.” Says Bakker, for Witsius, all covenants take the form of an agreement, a pact, or a contract.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, the law, and likewise the law of nature (*lex naturalis*), continues to play the decisive role in the covenants.<sup>23</sup> Bakker further maintains that Witsius derived his definition of covenant, with the dominating idea of contract and agreement, from the juridical sphere, specifically from Hugo Grotius (1583-1645).<sup>24</sup>

## B. The Repristination Trajectory

Another trajectory of assessment agrees with the “Barthian” criticism that covenant theology represents an aberration from Calvin’s prior formulation. Part of the burden of this line of

---

<sup>19</sup>Bakker, *Miskende Gratie*, 125-130.

<sup>20</sup>Bakker, *Miskende Gratie*, 134.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>Bakker, *Miskende Gratie*, 170.

<sup>23</sup>Bakker, *Miskende Gratie*, 176-177.

<sup>24</sup>Bakker, *Miskende Gratie*, 177.

thinking is to go back to earlier Reformed writers and re-pristiniate the past. N. Diemer, for example, in his book, *Het Scheppingsverbond van Adam*, believes he can discern what he terms “the pure Reformed position” on the covenant as this was given expression in the sixteenth century by a number of Reformed theologians laboring in Switzerland, specifically Zwingli, Bullinger, and Calvin. Each of these Reformers, says Diemer, taught that the state of Adam before the Fall is principally different from the covenant of grace, that both Adam and Christ are covenant heads, and that the covenant of grace begins with Genesis 3:15. An *organic* covenant relation exists between God and man prior the Fall. At this early stage, argues Diemer, Reformed theology had not been infected with the teaching of “humanistic federalists” (*humanistische foederalisten*) or “humanists” (*humanisten*). Diemer also deems Ursinus and Polanus to abide in the pure line. Although Ursinus spoke of a “covenant of nature” and Polanus used the language of “covenant of works,” neither man forsook the idea of the organic nature of the covenant. For Diemer, the organic nature of the covenant means that the covenant relationship is rooted in creation as man is created in the image of God. He sets this in opposition to a mechanistic, humanistic, and formalized idea of the covenant where specific stipulations must be met on condition of obtaining a supernatural life. The *Three Forms of Unity* express the pure teaching on the covenant as well. Meanwhile, Diemer brands Melancthon the villain who introduced “humanistic federalism” (*humanistisch foederalisme*) into Reformed theology in the way of “natural law.” Subsequently, the pure line of thinking about the covenant was weakened and compromised. Other “compromisers” of the correct understanding of the covenant include, among others, J. Cloppenburg (who formalized the definition of covenant), the Westminster Assembly, F. Junius, and virtually all Reformed theologians of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. There are exceptions, though few: F. Gomarus, J. Ussher, the Irish Articles, and W. Ames, and then later on P. van Mastricht, and A. Kuyper.<sup>25</sup>

Diemer also argues that if the correct conception of the covenant was weakened at this stage, further on into the seventeenth century it was altogether perverted. Under a chapter

---

<sup>25</sup>N. Diemer, *Het Scheppingsverbond met Adam: Het Verbond der Werken* (Kampen: Uitgave van J. H. Kok, 1932), 10-32.

entitled “The Reformed Position Forsaken,” Diemer lumps together such individuals as J. Wollebius, M. Martini, and L. Crocius in Germany, and J. Cloppenburg, J. Coccejus, H. Witsius, and J. van den Honert in the Netherlands, as examples of Reformed theologians who completely corrupted the doctrine of the covenant. In particular, Diemer views the notion of a covenant of works as a corruption. He faults the above-mentioned theologians for mechanically linking the fulfillment of the law as the meritorious condition for obtaining eternal life. Obedience to the law, then, is the cause (*oorzaak*) of receiving God’s love and righteousness. Meanwhile, man is not created perfect (*volmaakt*) in his original state, which means that Adam had yet to be ushered into his highest state of blessing and had to earn (*verdienen*) his way to a better situation. *As created*, Adam is no friend or son of God, with the right to the divine inheritance. Rather, Adam is God’s friend only *through the covenant of works*, and his inheritance must be earned. As a consequence of the above errors, these theologians, says Diemer, likewise put the covenant of grace in the wrong place, while the covenant of works continues to function negatively in that new covenant.<sup>26</sup>

The same sad story, as narrated by Diemer, can be told in England as well, where the doctrine of the covenant reached a similar dead-end.<sup>27</sup> The light of recovery may be seen in the Netherlands, however, with *De Walchersche Artikelen* (1693), and in the work of theologians like P. van Mastricht, M. Leydecker, W. à Brakel, J. Marck, A. E. Franken, A. Rotterdam, B. de Moor, and (partially) in A. Comrie.

Coming more from a theological rather than an historical angle, Klaas Schilder likewise challenges facets of covenant theology and specifically rebuffs, if not the validity of the *pactum salutis*, certainly its value. Schilder argues that the *pactum salutis* is no less but also no more than a manifestation of the trinitarian covenant-life of God. The divine counsel is always a counsel of the three Persons, such that “*actually every decision can be reduced to a pact and represented as convention*”—that is, as an intratrinitarian convention or

---

<sup>26</sup>Diemer, *Het Scheppingsverbond*, 32-54.

<sup>27</sup>Diemer, *Het Scheppingsverbond*, 55-64. Throughout Diemer leans rather heavily upon the work of G. Schrenk, *Gottesreich und Bund in älteren Protestantismus* (Gütersloh, 1923); he also appears to be following a certain trajectory of interpretation of H. Heppe.

agreement. For Schilder, if we are to speak of a *pactum salutis*, then we must also speak of a *pactum damni*; the counsel of peace entails a counsel of condemnation; a *pactum creationis* also involves a *pactum restaurationis*. Indeed, we could go on endlessly in this way. The *pactum* is in fact, says Schilder, nothing other than an intrusion into God's eternal counsel, a case of scholastic "tinkering."<sup>28</sup>

For Schilder, in opposition to the assertions and formulations of seventeenth-century Reformed theologians, the covenant of works is not a distinct or different covenant from the covenant of grace. On the contrary, the covenant of grace is a continuation of the covenant of works.<sup>29</sup> The covenant of grace is only "new" in the sense of being a new phase of the *one* unbroken history of the covenant. God has established a covenant with man, and he has not abrogated this covenant by the Fall. God doesn't allow the statutes or stipulations of the covenant to be abrogated by (or on account of) human sin. For Schilder, this covenantal continuity and singularity means that the gospel is present in paradise. The obligations of the covenant likewise abide from the beginning, along with the blessings and the curses, each set next to the other.<sup>30</sup> Part of what motivates Schilder in this regard is his rejection of every idea of reward (*beloning*) according to merit (*verdienste*). He doesn't want anything to do with the notion of condition (*voorwaarde*) within the covenant scheme unto the obtaining of eternal life. The rule of gratitude, which characterizes the covenant of grace, is the oldest rule, the primordial covenant of gratitude.<sup>31</sup> Therefore Schilder speaks instead of the demand of continual faith, with our continual "Amen" to God's Word. Yet he is also concerned to place strong accent on human responsibility inasmuch as the covenant is not spoken *about* persons but is spoken *to* them as genuine parties of the covenant. Schilder despises any construal of covenant that leads to human passivity and excludes the tension of human responsibility, i.e., the necessary and appropriate response to God in the way of faith and repentance. Thus we do better not to speak of an unconditional promise of salvation to the elect, for in the words of the old baptismal form: the Holy Spirit *will make us living members of*

---

<sup>28</sup>Klaas Schilder, *Heidelbergsche Catechismus*, 4 vols. (Goes: Oosterbaan & Le Cointre, 1947-51), I: 383.

<sup>29</sup>Schilder, *Heidelbergsche Catechismus*, II: 26; I: 319.

<sup>30</sup>Schilder, *Heidelbergsche Catechismus*, I: 4-2-405, 489.

<sup>31</sup>Schilder, *Heidelbergsche Catechismus*, I: 74f.; 76.

*Christ*, that is, in the way of faith and repentance (cf. Canons of Dort, 2, 5). Indeed, if Adam had observed this demand, he would have experienced the most intimate indwelling of God's Spirit in his heart and would have come to a state of *non posse peccare*, not able to sin. This, however, would not have been a matter of merit, for the notion of merit dishonors God.<sup>32</sup>

Schilder also opposes the notion of covenant as a contract between God and man, for again this involves the idea of condition and merit. Covenant doesn't involve either one of these.<sup>33</sup> When one is in a covenant, over against some contractual arrangement, there is no *partial payment to be received or accepted*. A person either abides in the covenant or he falls away—trampling upon and rejecting the covenant.<sup>34</sup> Schilder likewise sets himself against the *pactum* in rejecting the idea of Christ as *constitutio mediatoris* from eternity, lest Christ function not solely as a mediator of redemption as the expression of saving grace but also be conceived as a mediator of creation, with attachments to the dubious doctrine of common grace.<sup>35</sup> Even if Schilder does not overtly plead for a return to Calvin's theology in opposition to later developments, he does view seventeenth-century developments as less than helpful in arriving at a fully scriptural doctrine of the covenant.

Another critic who represents a spirit of repristination is John Murray. Specifically, Murray is critical of using covenant-categories in order to describe the prelapsarian situation in paradise, referring to it as the Adamic administration.<sup>36</sup> Thus Murray regards himself as something of a *revisionist* in relation to the classic scheme of covenant theology. Nonetheless, his correction to the traditional representation is more linguistic than substantial, for his reformulation and what he regards as a realignment with Calvin on

<sup>32</sup>Schilder, *Heidelbergsche Catechismus*, II: 23.

<sup>33</sup>Schilder, *Heidelbergsche Catechismus*, II: 26.

<sup>34</sup>Schilder, *Heidelbergsche Catechismus*, II: 26-27.

<sup>35</sup>Schilder, *Heidelbergsche Catechismus*, II: 195ff.; 201-205. For a further discussion of Schilder's views, see J. van Genderen, *Verbond en Verkiezing*. Kampen: Uitgeversmaatschappij J. H. Kok, 1983: 84-87; and B. Loonstra, *Verkiezing-Verzoening-Verbond: Beschrijving en beoordeling van de leer van het pactum salutis in de gereformeerde theologie* (The Hague: Uitgeverij Boekencentrum, 1990): 162-167.

<sup>36</sup>John Murray, "The Adamic Administration," *Collected Writings of John Murray*, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1976-1982), I: 47-59.

the nature of the arrangement in paradise prior to the Fall actually employs the theological categories and issues set forth within the dual covenant-schema, that is, the *foedus operum* and *foedus gratiae*. Likewise, his rejection of using the terminology of covenant as applied to the intratrinitarian life of God does not entail an absolute rejection of the idea of what is expressed by the language “covenant of redemption.” Given his own definition of what a covenant is, he prefers the designation, “the inter-trinitarian economy of salvation.”<sup>37</sup> For Murray, the concept of covenant belongs exclusively to the sphere of history and to redemption in history. He doesn’t deny however that there is such thing as an “eternal covenant.”<sup>38</sup>

An additional critic of traditional covenant theology, particularly the notion of the *pactum salutis*, is O. Palmer Robertson. He correctly notes that this doctrinal formula never found expression in the classic creeds of the Reformers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, though it has found wide acceptance among Reformed theologians. While Robertson believes that the idea of God eternally decreeing to redeem a people for himself is a biblical teaching, he comes to a different verdict regarding the “covenant of redemption.” The notion of a pre-creation covenant between the Father and Son is an artificial construct. “Scripture simply does not say much on the pre-creation shape of the decrees of God.” Thus, says Robertson, “to speak concretely of an intertrinitarian ‘covenant’ with terms and conditions between Father and Son mutually endorsed before the foundation of the world is to extend the bounds of scriptural evidence beyond propriety.”<sup>39</sup> Robertson also contests the traditional terminology associated with the covenant of *works* and the covenant of *grace*. The “nomenclature”

---

<sup>37</sup>Murray, “The Plan of Salvation,” *Collected Writings of John Murray*, II: 130.

<sup>38</sup>Murray, “Regeneration,” *Collected Writings of John Murray*, II: 167; cf. also, “Faith,” 2: 249ff.; “The Plan of Salvation,” II: 130ff.; “Covenant Theology,” 4: 234ff.; and *The Covenant of Grace: A Biblico-Theological Study* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1988). For a complete analysis and assessment of Murray’s views, see Jeong Koo Jeon, *Covenant Theology: John Murray’s and Meredith G. Kline’s Response to the Historical Development of Federal Theology in Reformed Thought* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, Inc., 1999), 103-190; 279ff.

<sup>39</sup>O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1980), 54.

used here is imprecise and suggests that grace was not operative in the covenant of works. In fact, says Robertson, “the totality of God’s relationship with man is a matter of grace,” for “the creational bond” between God and man is gracious.<sup>40</sup> Thus Robertson wishes to emphasize that grace is prior to law in the creational relationship.

Clearly the whole of man’s circumstance arose out of the graciousness of the Creator-God. Man did not have to look forward to the possibility of a state of blessedness; he began his existence in a condition of blessedness. . . .<sup>41</sup>

Moreover, this terminology suggests that works play no proper role in the covenant of grace. On the contrary, states Robertson, “works play a most essential role in the covenant of grace.” He would have us remember that “while salvation is by faith, judgment is by works.” In addition, Robertson charges that the covenant of “works” terminology places too much focus on but one aspect of the relationship between God and man, namely, the “non-eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” The broader responsibilities that man, as creature, owes God, as Creator, is narrowed to “Adam’s probation-test.”<sup>42</sup>

[I]t seems that the whole law/grace or law/promise scheme . . . is a false one. Law simply cannot be set over against grace or promise. The revelation of God’s law to his people represents a most gracious provision. The law of God itself embodies the grace of God.<sup>43</sup>

### C. The Trajectory of Appreciation

A final trajectory of assessment does not share the harsh criticisms expressed above; rather, it reaches a positive verdict concerning covenant theology, even while, perhaps, recasting certain features of it. Over all, the assessment is one of appreciation. Herman Bavinck is an example of this trajectory of criticism. In his

---

<sup>40</sup>Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*, 55, 56.

<sup>41</sup>O. Palmer Robertson, “Current Reformed Thinking on the Nature of the Divine Covenants,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 40 (1977): 74.

<sup>42</sup>Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*, 56.

<sup>43</sup>Robertson, “Current Reformed Thinking on the Nature of the Divine Covenants,” 74.

judgment, the doctrine of the *pactum salutis* is not free from “scholastic subtlety.” Moreover, he contests the exegetical validity of the doctrine, at least as defended by most theologians of the seventeenth century. Says Bavinck, the *locus classicus* of the *pactum*, Zechariah 6:13, has nothing to do with a covenant relationship between the Father and the Son; instead, it points to the harmonious relation between the kingship and priesthood of the Messiah (these being united in one person) unto the establishment of peace for his people. Bavinck also disputes the juridical distinction between *fidejussio* and *expromissio* as these terms were disputed by seventeenth-century Reformed theologians. Nonetheless, he believes that the doctrine of the *pactum salutis* rests upon a scriptural idea. Indeed, within the divine essence, the covenant has its full reality, and the relationship of the three persons of the Godhead bears the character of a *sunqhhk* in the fullest sense. Yet in defending the doctrine of the *pactum*, Bavinck jettisons talk of conditions, demands, and promises that define the seventeenth-century development of the doctrine.<sup>44</sup>

Abraham Kuyper also believes that we “are fully justified to carry the concept of the *foedus*, the *pactum*, into the intra-divine life.”<sup>45</sup> Although he anticipates concerns of Karl Barth, namely, that the *pactum* might be construed as tritheistic, unlike Barth, Kuyper argues that finally the doctrine does not require an uncertainty and disparity among the divine Persons. Kuyper however was concerned to emphasize that the *pactum* belongs “to the necessary manifestations of God’s essence,” and so he seeks to protect it from all contingency. It is “directly and absolutely based in the essence and the attributes of God.”<sup>46</sup>

G. C. Berkouwer, as the theological heir of Bavinck’s and Kuyper’s work, also takes up the question whether the doctrine of the *pactum salutis* trespasses the boundaries of the biblical message. He is aware that the modern theological consensus is that this doctrine is speculative and scholastic. According to Berkouwer, what is at stake in the *pactum* is the place and function of Christ in

---

<sup>44</sup>Herman Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, 4 vols. (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1928-30), III: §44, section 346.

<sup>45</sup>Abraham Kuyper, *Dictaten Dogmatiek: collegedictaat van een der studenten. Vol. III: Locus de Foedere* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, s.a [1902]), 90.

<sup>46</sup>A. Kuyper, *De Leer der Verbonden: Stichtelijke Bijbelstudien* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1909), 18, 19.

the divine process of salvation. The *pactum* safeguards against any notion that divine election is decreed apart from Christ or that he is rendered the mere executor of that decree.<sup>47</sup> Berkouwer argues that “a deeply religious motif lies embedded” in the doctrine of the *pactum salutis*. He cites Heinrich Heppe to the effect that what is most at stake in this doctrine is “the concept that the *foedus gratiae* was based on the eternal *sponsio* of the Son.”<sup>48</sup> Berkouwer rejects Barth’s (mis)contrual of the doctrine. Indeed, “the doctrine of the *pactum salutis* points to the eternal and solid foundation of salvation in the trinitarian love of God for man.” The idea “of the *pactum salutis* indicates an analogy which underlies the absolutely harmonious economy of salvation.”<sup>49</sup> At root, the *pactum* enables us to understand the biblical testimony regarding the submissiveness of the Son to the Father, the Servant of the Lord.<sup>50</sup> Berkouwer asserts:

It is beyond doubt that the doctrine of the *pactum salutis* has been meant to indicate the depth- and stability-aspects of salvation in Christ. When we speak of depth-aspect, we mean that eternity does not stand in contrast to what in time becomes historical reality, but rather that the salvation accomplished by Christ’s death of reconciliation cannot be merely historical, but that it has its eternal foundation in the love of God. If we speak of *pactum salutis* to indicate this aspect, we do not thereby attempt to humanize the counsel of God. We wish, on the contrary, to indicate an analogy with what is called a ‘covenant’ or ‘pact’ on earth. Much, then, depends on the *tertium comparationis*, since we do not wish to transpose what cannot be transposed without violating the honor of the triune God.<sup>51</sup>

According to Berkouwer, analogies ultimately fell us in this connection, and dogmatically we must delimit the boundaries of analogy “in order to indicate in the concept of the *pactum salutis* that reality of the work of redemption which has its foundation in the

---

<sup>47</sup>G. C. Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, Studies in Dogmatics, translated by Hugo Bekker (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960), 162.

<sup>48</sup>Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, 164-165.

<sup>49</sup>Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, 166-167.

<sup>50</sup>Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, 167. Cf. Barth, *CD*, IV/1, where he indicates as the actual mystery of reconciliation the obedience in God Himself. Thus, notes Berkouwer, Barth is likewise confronted with all the same sorts of issues and questions that surround the *pactum salutis*.

<sup>51</sup>Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, 167-168.

union of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: the mystery of the Servant of the Lord.”<sup>52</sup>

Finally we mention the American Old Testament scholar, Meredith G. Kline. Kline affirms the covenantal character of Genesis 1-3, as well as the double-covenant schema of *foedus operum* and *foedus gratiae*.<sup>53</sup> He also affirms the idea of the *pactum salutis*, which he prefers to call “the intratrinitarian covenant,” reserving the locution “covenant of redemption” to refer to what is usually called “the covenant of grace.”<sup>54</sup> What is to be noted is that Kline, being fully conversant with modern exegetical scholarship and the findings regarding ancient Near Eastern covenants, offers a contemporary exegetical defense and reformulation of classic covenant theology. This is not to render a verdict, however, whether his views accurately reflect those of Witsius or other prominent seventeenth-century Reformed theologians.<sup>55</sup>

Having set forth the diverse trajectories of criticism directed at covenant theology and the doctrine of the *pactum salutis* in particular, we next turn to a consideration of Herman Witsius’s doctrine of the covenants, focusing particularly and at length on his understanding of the compact between the Father and the Son. We are interested in determining how Witsius’s covenant theology relates to the kinds of criticisms explicated above. Does the portrait fit? Or has Witsius, with other seventeenth-century covenant theologians, been misrepresented or perhaps misunderstood?

## II. WITSIUS’S DOCTRINE OF THE *PACTUM SALUTIS*

---

<sup>52</sup>Berkouwer, *Divine Election*, 170.

<sup>53</sup>Meredith G. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue* (S. Hamilton, Massachusetts: Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, 1989), 67.

<sup>54</sup>Kline, *Kingdom Prologue*, 86; and “The Exaltation of Christ,” *Kerux* 12 (1997): 7.

<sup>55</sup>For a thorough analysis of Kline’s views, see Jeong Koo Jeon, *Covenant Theology: John Murray’s and Meredith G. Kline’s Response to the Historical Development of Federal Theology in Reformed Thought*, 191-278.

A. The Divine Covenants in General<sup>56</sup>

For Witsius, a covenant in its overall signification is expressive of an agreement (*conventio*) between God and man, which in light of the divine promise regarding eternal happiness, including a commination of eternal destruction, brings with it a prescribed condition. If this condition is met, man acquires a right to the promised blessing, if left unfulfilled the penal sanction threatened is imposed.<sup>57</sup> As God's finite creature, this covenant relationship

---

<sup>56</sup>For a general sketch of Witsius's doctrine of the covenants, see J. Van Genderen, *Herman Witsius: Bijdrage tot de Kennis der Gereformeerde Theologie*, 209-214; Stephen Strehle, *Calvinism, Federalism, and Scholasticism: A Study of the Reformed Doctrine of Covenant*, Basler Studien zur historischen und systematischen Theologie, eds., A. Schindler, M. A. Schmidt, and L. Vischer (Bern: Peter Lang, 1988), 286-298; B. Loonstra, *Verkiezing-Verzoening-Verbond: Beschrijving en beoordeling van de leer van het pactum salutis in de gereformeerde theologie* (The Hague, 1990), 107ff; 115ff.; 130ff.; 137ff.; K. Exalto, "Genadeleer en heilweg," T. Brienens, et al., editors, *Theologische aspecten van de Nadere Reformatie* ('s-Gravenhage: Uitgeverij Boekencentrum B.V., 1993), 155-158; also see Richard A. Muller, "The Covenant of Works and the Stability of Divine Law in Seventeenth-Century Reformed Orthodoxy: A Study in the Theology of Herman Witsius and Wilhelmus À Brakel," *Calvin Theological Journal* 29 (April 1994): 75-100. Van Genderen argues that Witsius followed the outline of covenant theology, but refuted the Cocceian conception at cardinal points. He also argues that Witsius was averse to "all scholasticism," and thereby deviated from his tutor Voetius. Thus he was essentially a theologian of synthesis, seeking to bring reconciliation between the followers of Voetius and Cocceius. As for his teaching on the covenant of grace and, in that connection, the covenant of redemption, Witsius placed the accent, says Van Genderen, on the realization of the promise of the covenant in the life of the elect. This accent coincides with Witsius's predilections toward the *Nadere Reformatie*, wherein the "praxis pietatis" is of preeminent importance, see 263ff.

<sup>57</sup>Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man: Comprehending a Complete Body of Divinity*, trans. by William Crookshank, to which is prefixed the Life of the Author, 2 vols. (London: R. Baynes, 1822; reprinted with an essay by J. I. Packer, "Introduction: On Covenant Theology," Escondido, California: The den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1990), I.1.9-10; hereafter cited as *The Economy*; the Latin edition used here is *De Œconomia Foederum Dei cum Hominibus, Libri Quatuor*, editio quarta (Herborna, 1712); hereafter cited as *De Œconomia Foederum*. Citations from

subsists between parties who are “infinitely unequal.” Therefore man’s acceptance of this covenant proposal takes on the nature of an imposition or command, and he can only *sinfully* refuse his Creator’s overtures. Indeed, his very conscience dictates that this covenant is equitable in all its aspects, for man is created with the innate duty to submit to his Creator’s disposition.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, natural law is a product of God’s own nature and expresses the divine goodness itself.<sup>59</sup>

As for the covenant relationship between God and man, this is likewise evidence of God’s own graciousness and goodness, for in view of God’s own self-sufficiency and his sovereign rights over all his creatures *as Creator*, he is not obliged to enter into any special relationship with man.<sup>60</sup> He acts benevolently, displaying his immense goodness, in establishing the covenant of works (*foedus operum*), stipulating its conditions, that is, obedience to his commands, and offering the rewards or blessings prescribed if the condition is fulfilled, on the one hand, and threatening sanctions if the condition goes unmet, on the other.<sup>61</sup>

In Witsius’s covenantal scheme, like many of his Reformed predecessors and contemporaries, he articulated a double-covenant schema between God and man. Thus, upon the breach of the covenant of works, God enacts a new covenantal agreement, namely a covenant of grace (*foedus gratiae*), wherein he delimits the human parties of this covenant to the elect, stipulating faith in the Mediator, even as the promises announced are to be possessed solely in and through the Mediator of this covenant, the Son incarnate.<sup>62</sup> Witsius maintains that the conditions of the covenant of grace are wholly met by Christ as the Mediator, acting as our Surety, so that everything that the elect do in response to covenant obligations in fact has *no conditional force* as such; indeed, the actions of the elect find their authorship neither in human ability nor in human autonomy.<sup>63</sup>

---

the English translation, as with the Latin text, will be according to Witsius’s book, chapter, and section numbers, e.g., I.3.4.

<sup>58</sup>*The Economy*, I.1.13.

<sup>59</sup>*The Economy*, I.3.13-14.

<sup>60</sup>*The Economy*, I.1.14.

<sup>61</sup>*The Economy*, I.4.13.

<sup>62</sup>*The Economy*, II.1.5.

<sup>63</sup>See, for example, *The Economy*, III.1.8-9, 12-13, 18.

With this very preliminary survey and thumbnail sketch of Witsius's discussion of the covenants in general, we arrive at his description and treatment of the *pactum salutis*, which, for him, serves as the foundation of all of God's gracious activity toward us.

## B. The Pactum Salutis

### *Preliminary Definition and Explanation of the Pactum Salutis*

Witsius discusses his doctrine of the *pactum salutis*, calling it the covenant between God the Father and the Son, within the context of his treatment concerning the covenant of grace. He thus distinguishes between that covenant which "intervenes between God the Father and Christ the Mediator" and that "testamentary disposition, by which God bestows by an immutable covenant, eternal salvation and every thing relative thereto, upon the elect."<sup>64</sup> As for their relation, as earlier observed, the latter presupposes the former and is based upon it. According to Witsius, the *pactum* enables us to better understand the nature of the covenant of grace itself. This accounts for his treating the subject at this point, that is, prior to his discussion of the covenant of grace. He thus uses the whole of Book II of his *Economy* to exposit this covenant or compact between the Father and the Son before moving on in Book III to his treatment of the covenant of grace.

Witsius relates his understanding of the "compact" (*pactum*) that exists between the Father and the Son in this way:

[Concerning this compact] . . . I thereby understand the will (*voluntatem*) of the Father, giving the Son to be the Head and Redeemer of the elect; and the will (*voluntatem*) of the Son, presenting himself as a Sponsor or Surety (*Sponsorem*) for them; in all which the nature of a compact (*pacti*) and agreement (*conventionis*) consists.<sup>65</sup>

---

<sup>64</sup>*The Economy*, II.2.1; *De Oeconomia Foederum*: "1. Pactum quod inter Deum Patrem et Mediatorem Christum intercedit. 2. Testamentaria illa dispositio, qua Deus electis salutem aeternam, et omnia eo pertinentia, immutabili foedere addit."

<sup>65</sup>*The Economy*, II.2.2; *De Oeconomia Foederum*: "eo nomine intelligo, voluntatem Patris Filium dantis ut Captu et Redemptorem electorum, et voluntatem Filii se ut Sponsorem pro iis sistens, in quibus ratio pacti et conventionis est."

According to Witsius, Scripture depicts the Father as requiring the Son's obedience, even unto death, with that obedience being the condition upon which in turn he promises (*repromisitentem*) to the Son that he shall be the head of the elect in glory, even as he shall possess the highest name in heaven.<sup>66</sup> Meanwhile, the Son presents himself to do the Father's will, "acquiescing in that promise" (*acquiescentem isti promissioni*), and so acquiring the kingdom and glory promised to him according to the stipulations of that compact. Witsius insists that this compact between the Father and the Son constitutes the very "foundation of our salvation" (*salutis nostrae fundamentum*).<sup>67</sup>

This bold claim necessitates a scriptural and theological defense. Consequently, Witsius advances his account in a threefold way: first, by presenting various exegetical arguments in support of his formulation; second, by offering a fuller account of the particulars that comprise the *pactum*; and last, by "invincibly proving" the validity of this covenant from the nature of the sacraments. We briefly examine each of these.

### *Exegetical Defense of the Pactum Salutis*

Witsius maintains that the compact that exists between the Father and the Son is taught by Christ himself in Luke 22:29: "and I engage by covenant unto you a kingdom, as my Father hath engaged by covenant unto me."<sup>68</sup> The key term in this locution is the Greek word *diati,qemai*, which Witsius renders as *testamentaria dispositione addico* and *dispositione testamentaria addixit*. Just as the elect obtain the kingdom by virtue of some covenantal or testamentary arrangement, likewise Christ.<sup>69</sup>

---

<sup>66</sup>*The Economy*, II.2.2.

<sup>67</sup>*The Economy*, II.2.2.

<sup>68</sup>Witsius's citation here is in Greek, followed by a Latin translation (it ought to be observed that most all of his direct biblical citations are from the original languages): "kavgw. diati,qemai u`mi/n, kaqw.j die,qeto, moi o` path,r mou basilei,an." "Et ego testamentaria dispositione addico vobis Regnum, sicut dispositione testamentaria addixit mihi illud Pater." Thus Witsius's Latin could be translated as: "And by a testamentary arrangement I confer unto you a kingdom, as by a testamentary arrangement my Father has conferred unto me."

<sup>69</sup>*The Economy*, II.2.3.

Next Witsius turns to Hebrews 7:22, where Christ is spoken of as “a surety of a better covenant or testament” (*krei,ttonoj diaqh,khj e;gguoj*).<sup>70</sup> Witsius elaborates on the nature of Christ’s “suretiship” (*Sponsio*), for it consists in this:

that [Christ] *himself undertook to perform that condition* [*praestare conditionem illam*], without which, consistently with the justice of God, the grace and promises of God could not reach unto us; but being once performed, they were infallibly to come to the children of the covenant: unless then we would make void the suretiship of Christ, and gratify the Socinians, the very worst perverters of scripture, it is necessary, we conceive of some covenant [*Foedus*], the conditions of which Christ took upon himself; and that, having performed them, he might engage to us for the Father, that we should certainly have grace and glory bestowed upon us.<sup>71</sup>

After this explanation Witsius appeals to Galatians 3:17, where the apostle makes mention of a certain “covenant” or “testament” (*diaqh,khn*) “that was confirmed before of God in Christ.” The “contracting parties” (*personae contrahentes*) of this covenant are God and Christ, with the “agreement” (*conventio*) between them being “ratified.”<sup>72</sup> What is not to be missed in this verse, says Witsius, is that the promises spoken of in this connection “were made to Christ himself” (cf. v. 16). Thus, although it is true that Christ is the executor of the testament and is himself bequeathed to us by God, and although salvation is a divine gift, here the apostle makes clear that Christ is “the seed” unto whom the divine promise is made, namely, the inheritance of the world and the glorious kingdom. Therefore “it is evident . . . that the word *diaqh,kh* does here denote some covenant or testament, by which something is promised by

---

<sup>70</sup>Witsius’s Latin rendering is “*melioris Foederis, vel Testamenti Sponsor.*”

<sup>71</sup>*The Economy*, II.2.4; *De Œconomia Foederum*: “quod in sese receperit praestare conditionem illam, citra quam salva justitia Dei, gratia Dei et promissiones ipsius ad nos non poterant pervenire: et qua praestita omnia illae ad filios foederis perventurae erant. Nisi erga sponsonem Christi evacuare, et Socinianis, pessimis Scripturae perversoribus, gratificari velimus, necesse est Foedus aliquod concipiamus, cujus conditionis Christus in se receperit, spondendo apud Patrem se eas pro nobis praestitutum; et quibus praestitis spondere nobis pro Patre possit, de gratia et gloria infallibiliter nobis donanda.”

<sup>72</sup>*The Economy*, II.2.5.

God to Christ.”<sup>73</sup> Even if the promises apply to Christ’s mystical body—his people—it does not follow that they do not apply to Christ who is the head.<sup>74</sup>

In defense of the *pactum* Witsius also turns to a number of Old Testament passages, which in his estimate explicitly mention “the suretiship of Christ.” For example, Psalm 119:122: “be surety for thy servant for good” (bAjl. ^D>b.[; bro[]) receives this explanation by Witsius: As Surety, Christ is to receive divine protection in order that it may go well for him. Similarly, Witsius cites Isaiah 38:14: “I am oppressed, undertake for me”—that is, “be to me a surety and patron.”<sup>75</sup> Christ alone is the one who so “undertakes,” for God says, in the words of Jeremiah 30:12 “who is this, that engaged his heart[?]” This question directs us to Christ as Surety, for by his suretyship Christ “pledged his very heart” for our sakes. In other words, he gives his soul as both the matter and price of suretyship (*sponsio sive fidejussio*), and so as Sponsor or Surety he approaches God “in order to procure the expiation for sins.”<sup>76</sup>

Witsius next considers Zechariah 6:13: “the counsel of peace shall be between them both” (*consilium pacis est inter utrumque*). Being a messianic prophecy, Witsius points out that the parties referred to in this text are “the Branch” on the one hand and “the LORD” on the other. This branch (or Messiah), as one who comes from God (Isa. 4:2; Zech. 1:12), performs his duties and offices according to the counsel that exists between him and the Father, with the aim of bringing us *peace*. He is the new root of a new offspring, whose office is to build the temple of the Lord, that is, “the church of the elect,” the house of God (1 Tim. 3:15). Christ, then, lays the foundation of this house by his cross, and he cements it with his blood. With his resurrection, he has ascended to glory and performs his kingly and priestly duties from there. Consequently, “He now does what his session gives him a right to do, he makes intercession for his people” (Rom. 8:34). But in this connection Witsius raises what he regards as the key question: What is the origin of all this? Why do things unfold in this way? The answer to such questions brings us back to Zechariah 6 and “the counsel of peace” (*consilium pacis*)—that is, the pact that exists between the one who is called the

---

<sup>73</sup>*The Economy*, II.2.5.

<sup>74</sup>*The Economy*, II.2.5.

<sup>75</sup>*The Economy*, II.2.6.

<sup>76</sup>*The Economy*, II.2.6.

Branch and Jehovah, whose temple Christ builds and on whose throne he now sits (Rev. 3:21).<sup>77</sup> Thus Witsius arrives at an exegetical conclusion, with a theological formulation:

... what else can this counsel be, but the mutual will of the Father and the Son, which we said is the nature of the covenant? It is called a counsel, both on account of the free and liberal good pleasure of both, and of the display of the greatest wisdom manifested therein. And a counsel of peace, not between God and Christ, between whom there never was any enmity; but of peace to be procured to sinful man with God, and to sinners with themselves.<sup>78</sup>

Witsius is not unaware that his appeal to this text in support of the idea of the *pactum salutis* is contested, but he finds the proposed alternative understanding of this text unpersuasive and therefore unacceptable.<sup>79</sup> In fact, he argues that his exegesis is supported by Jerome.

#### *Particulars of the Pactum Salutis*

Having set forth his basic exegetical argument in favor of the *pactum salutis*, Witsius turns to elaborate upon “all the parts” of this covenant. He is concerned, as it were, to address “the nature” of this covenant and to answer the query, What is it? He begins by defining the “contracting parties” (*partes contrahentes*) of this covenant, namely, the Father on the one hand and the Son on the other. Appealing to Christ’s subordination to the Father in his earthly ministry and to a variety of messianic and servant Psalms, along with a number of prophetic materials, Witsius argues that there is a clear arrangement wherein the Father proposes the law of the covenant (John 10:18; 12:49), to which a promise is adjoined, that is, the blessing of seed (Isa. 53:10-12; 49:6-8). “On performing

---

<sup>77</sup>*The Economy*, II.2.7.

<sup>78</sup>*The Economy*, II.2.7; *De Economia Foederum*: “Quidnam porro hoc consilium est, nisi mutua voluntas Patris et Filii, quam conventionis rationem obtainere diximus? Quae consilium vocatur, tum ob liberam et liberalem utriusque eudokian, tum ob maximam, quae in eo elucet, sapientiam. Et consilium Pacis, non Deum inter et Christum, inter quos nulla fuit inimicitia; sed pacis, procurandae homini peccatori cum Deo, et peccatoribus secum.”

<sup>79</sup>See *The Economy*, II.2.8-9.

that law, the Son acquires a right to ask the reward” (cf. Psalm 2:8).<sup>80</sup>

For his part, the Son accepts the Father’s covenant proposal, which consists of his willing submission of himself to the law of the covenant (Psalm 40:7-9). The words “mine ears hast thou (bored) open” means that the Father has engaged the Son as a willing servant to himself, for they are in mutual agreement about the reward. The Son therefore willingly, and with delight, does the Father’s will (Psalm 40:8-9; John 14:31). Indeed, the Son actually submits himself to the law, all the way to death (cf. Gal. 4:4; John 15:10; 8:29; 19:30). He did so, however, with the consolation that the Father shall, upon his perfect obedience, grant the promised reward (Isa. 49:4; John 17:4, 5).<sup>81</sup>

### *Confirmation of the Pactum Salutis from the Sacraments*

Witsius sees an additional confirmation of the *pactum salutis* in that Christ made use of the sacraments—the signs and seals of the covenant. Since the sacraments seal what is depicted and promised by them, namely, the federal promise concerning justification from sins, Christ’s use of the sacraments demonstrates that he voluntarily engages himself as Surety, taking our sins upon himself, according to the penalty that is their due and depicted in the sacraments themselves. Thus, God the Son, in the use of the sacraments, “acknowledged himself a debtor to fulfil all righteousness. . . .”<sup>82</sup>

In this connection, Witsius rejects Cocceius’s appeal to Psalm 16:4 as adequately clear to express the inter-trinitarian arrangement expressed by the *pactum*.<sup>83</sup> He also contests the notion that *the covenant between the Father and the Son (pacto Patris et Filii)* is “a late invention.” While it is true that few ancient writers had a firm grasp of this doctrine, nonetheless, says Witsius, some of the most renowned and able theologians of more recent memory expressly teach the *pactum salutis*.<sup>84</sup>

---

<sup>80</sup>*The Economy*, II.2.10; *De Economia Foederum*: “Lege illa praestita jus Filio addicitur petendi mercedem.”

<sup>81</sup>*The Economy*, II.2.10.

<sup>82</sup>*The Economy*, II.2.11.

<sup>83</sup>*The Economy*, II.2.12-15.

<sup>84</sup>*The Economy*, II.2.16.

### C. The Nature of the Pact between the Father and the Son More Fully Explained

Since the *pactum salutis* “is the foundation of the whole of our salvation,” Witsius seeks to offer a fuller exposition of what he has first sketched in broad outline. Specifically he wishes to answer more fully four questions: (1) What constitutes the beginning of this covenant, and in what periods of time was it completed? (2) What is contained in the law of the covenant, particularly, how far and to what does it bind the Son? (3) Was the Son obliged or free to enter into this covenant? And (4) what was the nature and degree of the reward promised to the Son in virtue of his obedience to this covenant?

#### *The Commencement and Periods of the Pactum Salutis*

Witsius conceives of this covenant having three periods: (1) its commencement in the eternal counsel of the holy Trinity, wherein the Son “was constituted by the Father, with the approbation of the Holy Spirit, the Saviour of mankind; on this condition; that in the fulness of time he should be made of a woman, and made under the law; which the Son undertook to perform”; (2) its constitution in Christ’s intercession, by which immediately after the fall of man the Son offered himself to God for the actual performance of those things which he had promised from eternity; and (3) its execution in Christ’s incarnation and mediatorial work, suffering “his ears to be bored” (Psalm 40:7; Heb. 10:5), meaning he *voluntarily* engaged himself to be God’s servant.<sup>85</sup> The Son acted in love for the Father and the church, his spouse and spiritual children, “for the ears of such voluntary servants were bored” (Exod. 21:5, 6).<sup>86</sup> “Thus Christ was actually constituted Mediator (*Mediator constitutus*), and revealed as such immediately after the Fall; and having undertaken the suretiship (*et vadimonio obito multa coepit agere*), he began to act many things belonging to the offices of a Mediator.”<sup>87</sup>

#### *The Proposed Law to the Mediator*

---

<sup>85</sup>*The Economy*, II.3.2-4; *De Œconomia Foederum*: “talibus enim voluntariis servis aures perforabantur.”

<sup>86</sup>*The Economy*, II.3.4.

<sup>87</sup>*The Economy*, II.3.2-3.

The law proposed to the Son as Mediator, says Witsius, may be understood from two angles: (1) as the directory of his nature and office; and (2) as the condition of the covenant. Similarly, the Mediator himself may be viewed from three perspectives: *as God, as man*, and *as the Mediator God-man*.<sup>88</sup> As God he is not subject to any law.<sup>89</sup> As man he was obviously subject to the moral law.<sup>90</sup> As the incarnate Christ he was, in addition, subject to the ceremonial and civil laws.<sup>91</sup> He is also, as Mediator, under the law in two respects: (1) as enjoining the condition of perfect obedience, upon which he and his own were to partake of happiness; and (2) as binding to the penalty, due to the sins of the elect, which he has taken upon himself.<sup>92</sup> If the Son had not appeared as Mediator, he would have been a holy man and nothing more. But, in fact, he did more than this, for he fulfilled the law and merited happiness (Heb. 5:7). Obviously, as Son, he was the heir of all things! “But it was owing to his voluntary covenant-engagement (*voluntariae confederationis*), *that though he was rich* and might have acted as equal to God from the very beginning of his incarnation, *yet for our sakes he became poor* (2 Cor. 8:9).” Moreover, Christ’s subjection to the law, as “enjoining the condition of happiness” (*imperante conditionem beatitudinis*) must be distinguished from his subjection to it in another respect, and that absolutely, as “the rule of holiness” (*norma Sanctitatis*). This distinction appears in that “Christ has laid aside the first, while this last continues, and will continue, to eternity.”<sup>93</sup>

According to Witsius, this distinction is highly useful, for it solves the problem how the active obedience of Christ (so-called, but not properly so), may be imputed to us, seeing that as a man the Mediator owed it for himself.<sup>94</sup> “But his subjecting himself to the law, as prescribing the condition of happiness, is wholly from his voluntary covenant-engagement (*hoc totum ex voluntaria confederatione est*) which he entered into on our account, which by every right or just title, may, and ought to be imputed to us.”<sup>95</sup> Christ thus entered

---

<sup>88</sup>*The Economy*, II.3.5.

<sup>89</sup>*The Economy*, II.3.6.

<sup>90</sup>*The Economy*, II.3.9.

<sup>91</sup>*The Economy*, II.3.10.

<sup>92</sup>*The Economy*, II.3.12.

<sup>93</sup>*The Economy*, II.3.13.

<sup>94</sup>*The Economy*, II.3.14.

<sup>95</sup>*The Economy*, II.3.14.

into the covenant and bound himself, in this way, to fulfill the whole law. Considered as a righteous man merely, he may have been exempted from the miseries of our sins and even from death, “but having once, by *a voluntary engagement*, submitted himself to the law for us, he became bound to satisfy also this sanction of the law, which threatened death to sinners; for all these things arise from the mediatorial *covenant*, and belong to Christ as *Mediator*.”<sup>96</sup>

### *The Freedom of the Son to Enter into the Pactum Salutis*

Witsius next takes up the question whether the Son could refuse to undertake or withdraw himself from the *pactum salutis*? Setting himself against the Remonstrants, Witsius answers this question by first making a distinction. *As God*, the whole of this covenant was of the Son’s own most free will and good pleasure. “Here is nothing but *good pleasure, philanthropy unmerited*, and altogether liberal, pure, and unmixed grace.”<sup>97</sup> Indeed, it is *by grace* that the Son humbles himself to undertake obedience, having assumed human nature.<sup>98</sup> *As man*, the Son could not, without sinning, withdraw from this sponsorship (*sponsio*),<sup>99</sup> for if the human nature, being united to him, could have withdrawn itself from and renounced the covenant, then the Son of God might have violated his own covenant engagements, in which case he would not be true and faithful God.<sup>100</sup> Moreover, the divine decree would then be subject to negation, which is contrary to its inviolable nature.<sup>101</sup>

### *The Reward Promised the Son in Virtue of the Pactum*

Witsius briefly addresses himself to the question regarding the reward promised to the Son in virtue of this covenant (*pactum*), considering in that connection the relation that obtains between his obedience and this reward. According to Witsius, “The reward promised to the Son, is *the highest degree of glory* (John 17:1).” This glory may be distinguished according to Christ’s humanity, his deity,

<sup>96</sup>*The Economy*, II.3.15.

<sup>97</sup>*The Economy*, II.3.21; *De Oeconomia Foederum*: “Mera hic evudoki,a, indebita ac liberalis plane yilanqrwpi,a, pura puta gratia est.”

<sup>98</sup>*The Economy*, II.3.27.

<sup>99</sup>*The Economy*, II.3.21.

<sup>100</sup>*The Economy*, II.3.23.

<sup>101</sup>*The Economy*, II.3.24.

and his whole person as Mediator.<sup>102</sup> Thus, in his whole person as the incarnate Mediator, Christ is highly exalted and bears the name that is above every name (Phil. 2:2), even as he possesses all dominion over every principality and power (Eph. 1:21). The whole church is likewise his possession (Psalm 2:8; Isa. 53:10); and he is the head of all things for the church (Eph. 1:22), for all power and authority belong to him (Matt. 28:18). Moreover, all the gifts and blessings he has merited are bestowed upon his elect, according to the mystical union that exists between Christ and his church (1 Cor. 12:12; Psalm 68:18). He gives to his members that which he received from the Father (Acts 2:33).<sup>103</sup>

“*The obedience of Christ*,” says Witsius, “bears to these *blessings*, not only the relation of *antecedent* to *consequent*, but of *merit* to *reward*: so that his obedience is *the cause*, and *the condition* now fulfilled, by virtue of which he has *a right* to the reward. . . .”<sup>104</sup> Witsius appeals to Psalm 45:7: “Thou lovest righteousness and hatest wickedness [depicting Christ’s obedience], therefore (!Ke-I;) God, thy God, hath anointed thee with the oil of gladness above thy fellows” (depicting the reward of Christ entering his glorious kingdom). Witsius also notes Isa. 53:12: “Therefore (!kel’) will I divide him a portion with the great” and “he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because (rv,a] tx;T;) he hath poured out his soul unto death.” In both of these instances, observes Witsius, “the relative particles, rva txt and !kl expressly indicate that commutative justice, whereby the reward due, bears a reciprocal relation to the obedience performed.” Likewise, Phil 2:8, 9: “He became obedient unto death, wherefore (*dio.*) God also hath highly exalted him.” Also, Heb. 12:2: “who, for (*avnti*) the joy that was set before him, endured the cross.” Again, here an express commutation (or interchange) of obedience and reward is indicated.<sup>105</sup>

#### D. The Suretyship and Satisfaction of Christ

<sup>102</sup>*The Economy*, II.3.28-29.

<sup>103</sup>*The Economy*, II.3.31.

<sup>104</sup>*The Economy*, II.3.32; *De Œconomia Foederum*: “Obedientia Christi ad haec praemia non habet solummodo relationem *antecedentis* ad *consequens*, sed *meriti* ad *mercedem*: adeo ut obedientia Christi *caussa* sit, et *conditio* jam impleta, cujus *vi jus* habeat ad haec praemia.”

<sup>105</sup>*The Economy*, II.3.32; *De Œconomia Foederum*: “Ubi diserta commutatio obedientiae et mercedis est.”

In speaking of Christ as Surety, Witsius naturally appeals to Hebrews 7:22, for there Christ is called “Surety” (*Sponsor*) of the covenant or testament. He is the guarantee of our salvation, since “he engaged to God for us, to perform all those conditions in our stead; upon which we were to receive the testamentary inheritance.”<sup>106</sup> Witsius also appeals to Isaiah 38:14, where we find Hezekiah pleading for God to undertake on his behalf, and to Jeremiah 30:21, which in its fulfillment depicts Christ receiving all the glory of his suretyship: “for who is this that engaged his heart to approach unto me? saith the Lord.” Concerning this text, Witsius offers an explanation: “That is, what mortal, nay, what creature dares engage (*spondere ausit*) to perform all those things which are incumbent on the priest, who shall have a right to approach to me for himself and his people[?]” There is only one who can do this—the one who is our Sponsor. “Our surety, therefore, thus engaged to God for us.”<sup>107</sup>

Witsius argues that Christ is called our Surety because he was appointed by God and according to his own volition undertook the task of making satisfaction for us. Christ’s satisfaction consists of his acting in our stead and in taking our place. In both his actions and passion, he perfectly satisfies God’s justice—including his legislative, retributive, and vindictive justice—and thereby fulfills the righteousness of the law comprehensively, the righteousness that was otherwise required of us if we are to have a right to eternal life without impunity.<sup>108</sup> In other words, Christ makes satisfaction for sinners in the fullest sense of the word. Witsius offers an exegesis of Psalm 40:6-8 in this connection. What is crucial to see, according to Witsius, is that Christ fulfills all righteousness prescribed by the divine law, both in his obedience and sacrifice:

. . . that law requires, not only perfect righteousness, in order to obtain a right to eternal life, but also deserved punishment to be inflicted on the sinner. For all this was signified by the sacrifices, gifts, burnt-offerings, and sin-offerings, of the law. For when the sinner offered to God beasts or corn, which were given to himself for food, and was careful to have them consumed by fire, as it were

---

<sup>106</sup>*The Economy*, II.5.1.

<sup>107</sup>*The Economy*, II.5.1; *De Oeconomia Foederum*: “Ita ergo sponsor noster Deo spondit pro nobis.”

<sup>108</sup>*The Economy*, II.5.2.

in his own room, he thereby confessed that, on account of his sin, he deserved the most dreadful destruction, and even the eternal flames of hell.<sup>109</sup>

These external ceremonies and sacrifices, however, proved in themselves impotent to render what they signified, even as they were powerless to purge the conscience of dead works. “[T]herefore, Christ offered himself, in order to accomplish that will of God, by which we are sanctified (Heb. 10:10), both by fulfilling all the righteousness prescribed by the law, and by undergoing the guilt of our sins, that he might atone for them as an expiatory sacrifice.”<sup>110</sup> Says Witsius, Christ’s suretyship, as depicted here in Psalm 40, consists of these very things.<sup>111</sup>

The Father worthily procures and accepts the suretyship of the Son, and in this way a number of God’s attributes are clearly manifest. *His truth* is manifest in that he fulfills everything he had promised in his law, in keeping with his justice, and so he reconciles sinful and wretched humans to himself through the Mediator he provides. *His justice* is manifest in that human guilt is not removed except by a sufficient sacrifice. Indeed, Christ provides a more excellent sacrifice than humans are able to offer on their own behalf due to his more excellent obedience and meritorious suffering (Rom. 3:25). *God’s holiness* is manifest in that he refuses to admit anyone into his fellowship unless justified by Christ’s blood and sanctified by Christ’s Spirit. Finally, *God’s all-sufficiency* is manifest in that the Lord—it is almost incredible, says Witsius—does not set aside or dilute any of his perfections while he becomes by this means the God and Savior of sinners. In fact, in the execution of his suretyship, Christ demonstrates this very thing, manifesting the name—that is, God’s perfections (John 17:6; Psalm 60:10).<sup>112</sup>

Witsius is careful to point out that Christ’s suretyship neither abrogates nor derogates God’s law; rather, it puts a favorable construction on it, for Christ fully satisfied all of the law’s demands and lived out its implications (Rom. 8:4). The law, inasmuch as it

---

<sup>109</sup>*The Economy*, II.5.3.

<sup>110</sup>*The Economy*, II.5.3; *De Economia Foederum*: “idcirco Christum se obtulisse, ut preficeret voluntatem illam Dei, per quam sanctificamur. *Heb. 10:10*. tam implendo omnem justitiam lege praescriptam, quam subeundo reatum peccatorum nostrorum, ut pro iis quasi victima piacularis lueret.”

<sup>111</sup>*The Economy*, II.5.3.

<sup>112</sup>*The Economy*, II.5.5.

requires perfect and complete righteousness, brings all sinners under its eternal penalty and dominion of death.<sup>113</sup> That Christ bears this penalty and comes under this dominion on behalf of sinners is not an injustice, for God, according to his own sovereign dominion, could rightly lay the torments due sinners upon Christ, especially with “the effectual consent” (*valido consensu*) of Christ himself.”<sup>114</sup> Indeed, Christ “most willingly took upon himself our transgressions, and the trespasses we had committed against the divine majesty, and offered himself as a surety for them; God, as the supreme governor could justly exact punishment of Christ in our room, and actually did so.”<sup>115</sup>

In this connection, Witsius argues that Christ not only bore our sins as one who was fully righteous in himself, but more, he did this as one who was fully righteous and altogether obedient “*in our room*”—and so, in this way, securing for us the right to eternal life. “The law, which God will have secured inviolable, admits none to glory, but on condition of perfect obedience, which none was ever possessed of but Christ, who bestows it freely on his own people.”<sup>116</sup> Here Witsius cites Romans 5:16—“but the free gift of Jesus Christ is of many offences unto justification”—and argues that though we lack obedience and actually deserve eternal curse, there is nonetheless one who is “sufficient, not only for abolishing many offences, but likewise to be the meritorious cause of righteousness; namely, the obedience of [Christ]; and it becomes ours by gratuitous gift.”<sup>117</sup> Even clearer, says Witsius, is Romans 5:19—“for as by one man’s disobedience many were made [constituted] sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made [constituted] righteous.”

---

<sup>113</sup>*The Economy*, II.5.6.

<sup>114</sup>*The Economy*, II.5.7.

<sup>115</sup>*The Economy*, II.5.7; *De Economia Foederum*: “. . . delicta nostra, et injurias a nobis Divinae Majestati illatas in se liberrimo voluntatis suae arbitrio suscepit, proque iis se vadem obtulerit, Deus ut supremus Rector juste poenas a Christo nostri loco exigere potuit, et reipsa exegit.” Witsius appeals to Isa. 53:5.

<sup>116</sup>*The Economy*, II.5.11.

<sup>117</sup>*The Economy*, II.5.11; *De Economia Foederum*: “. . . quod non modo abolendis multis lapsibus sufficiat, sed quod praeterea meritum et causa justitiae sit: nempe obedientia unius hominis, idque sit nostrum gratuito dono.”

The *former one man* was *Adam*, the root and federal head of mankind. By his disobedience, all mankind, as belonging to him, were involved in the guilt of the curse: and as he sustained the person of all, what he did amiss, is accounted as done by all. *The other is the one man Christ*, who neither sinned in, and with Adam, nor had the dominion of sin and death passed upon him, and who is worthy to be both lord and head, a second Adam, and the origin and source of the inheritance to be devolved on his brethren. He is possessed of an *obedience*, even to the whole law of God, which enjoined him to have a perfect love for the glory of his Father, and for the salvation of his brethren. By that obedience the collective body of those who belong to him *are constituted righteous*; that is, are judged to have a right to eternal life, no less than if every one had performed that obedience in his own person.<sup>118</sup>

Does this mean, then, that all those who are in Christ no longer find themselves under the necessity of obeying God's commands inasmuch as Christ, as the Surety of sinners, has fully obeyed and fulfilled the law in their stead? Witsius replies to the question—which is really more of a jibe against the covenant scheme—by making a distinction on the one hand between the obedience we owe to God as the duty (*officium*) of rational creatures and on the other the obedience conceived as a condition (*conditio*) of acquiring a right to eternal life. The former remains an obligation for us, the latter has been wholly fulfilled by Christ and “neither is, nor can be required of us.” As those rescued in Christ, in whom eternal life is merited for us, we have an even greater obligation of gratitude to God, for we are God's adopted sons and daughters and we

---

<sup>118</sup>*The Economy*, II.5.11; *De Oeconomia Foederum*: “Prior ille unus homo Adamus est: stirps et caput Foederale totius generis humani. Illius inobedientia tota multitudo hominum ad ipsum pertinentium reatui maledictionis involuta est: quumque sustineret personam omnium, id quod ipse male fecit omnes male fecisse censentur. Alter ille unus homo Christus est, qui neque peccavit in et cum Adamo, neque in quem regnum peccati et mortis transiit, quique dignus est, ut si Dominus et caput et novus Adamus, origo et fons haereditatis derivandae in fratres. Is habet obedientiam, nempe universae legis Dei, praecipientis ipsi perfectam charitatem erga gloriam Patris sui, et erga salutem fratrum suorum. Per illam obedientiam tota multitudo illorum, qui ad ipsum pertinent, *justi constituuntur*, id est censentur jus habere ad vitam aeternam, non minus quam si quilibet eorum in propria persona illam obedientiam praestitisset.”

acknowledge him as our heavenly Father to whom all obedience ought never to be declined.<sup>119</sup>

#### E. The *Effectus* of Christ's Satisfaction

Witsius next treats the efficacy or "effect" (*effectus*) of Christ's work of satisfaction.

The *effectus* of Christ's satisfaction is twofold. First, by his satisfaction Christ as Mediator obtained for himself "a right to all the elect: which the Father willingly and deservedly bestows upon him" (cf. Psalm 2:8; Isa. 49:4, 6; 53:10; Eph. 1:11; Titus 2:14; 1 Pet. 2:9).<sup>120</sup> Having purchased the elect, Christ, according to the time of God's gracious visitation, "actually delivers them, as his property, by an outstretched arm." Such is his right, and it cannot be made "ineffectual."<sup>121</sup>

The second *effectus* of Christ's satisfaction pertains to the elect. "The Lord Jesus obtained for *the elect*, by his satisfaction, *an immunity from all misery, and a right to eternal life*, sanctification, conservation, and glorification. . . ." <sup>122</sup> Scripture teaches that Christ's work of satisfaction did not merely make possible for sinners the remission of sins and reconciliation with God; rather, it actually secured remission and reconciliation. Christ's atoning work abolishes the dominion of sin and effects salvation itself. Thus it is impossible that the elect should not participate in this salvation, "unless Christ should be deemed to have satisfied for them to no purpose."<sup>123</sup> Moreover, the idea of redemption (*avpolu.trwsij*), made by payment of a ransom (*lu,tron* or *avnti,lutron*) confirms this further. For redemption sets the captive free. "A true redeemer procures the restitution of liberty to the miserable captive, wherever good faith and an agreement are of force." Thus scripture declares that the proximate effect of redemption is that sins are actually remitted and liberty is restored (Rom. 3:24; Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:14; Heb. 9:12).<sup>124</sup> Liberty means that we have become the possession of Christ, even

<sup>119</sup>*The Economy*, II.5.13.

<sup>120</sup>*The Economy*, II.7.1.

<sup>121</sup>*The Economy*, II.7.2.

<sup>122</sup>*The Economy*, II.7.3. Witsius refers to Matt. 26:28; Gal. 1:4; Titus 2:14; Eph. 5:25-27; and 1 Tim. 1:15.

<sup>123</sup>*The Economy*, II.7.3.

<sup>124</sup>*The Economy*, II.7.4. Witsius further cites 1 Cor. 6:20; Acts 20:28; and Gal. 4:4, 5.

as salvation means that we are his property. Thus “the effect of Christ’s satisfaction is not a bare possibility of our salvation, but salvation itself.”<sup>125</sup>

Witsius then directly links the compact between the Father and the Son and Christ’s work of redemption.

A right to all the benefits of the covenant of grace is purchased at once to all the elect by the death of Christ, so far as, that consistently with the truth and justice of God, and with the covenant he entered into with his Son, he cannot condemn any of the elect, or exclude them from partaking in his salvation; nay, on the contrary, he has declared, that satisfaction being now made by his Son, and accepted by himself, there is nothing for the elect either to suffer to do, in order to acquire either impunity, or a right to life; but only, that each of them, in their appointed order and time, enjoy the right purchased for them by Christ, and the inheritance arising from it.<sup>126</sup>

That the actual participation in Christ’s saving benefits comes to the elect only upon a living faith in the way of effectual calling and actual union with God through faith, does not negate the fact that these very benefits themselves (and the right the elect have to those benefits) are due wholly to Christ’s gracious and effectual work of satisfaction.<sup>127</sup>

After rebutting Arminius’s denial of the efficacy of Christ’s atoning work,<sup>128</sup> and addressing himself to the questions regarding the necessity of Christ’s work of satisfaction and its definite character—that is, *the persons for whom* Christ acted as Surety and

---

<sup>125</sup>*The Economy*, II.7.5.

<sup>126</sup>*The Economy*, II.7.6; *De Oeconomia Foederum*: “Jus ad omnia gratiosi Testamenti bona cunctis simul electis morte Christi partum est, eatenus ut salva veritate et justitia sua, salvo foedere, quod cum Filio pepigit, non possit Deus quemquam electorum mancipare condemnationi, aut excludere communione salutis; imo ex adverso declaraverit, praestita jam a Filio, et acceptata a sese satisfactione, nihil electis aut patiendum aut faciendum restare, quo sibi immunitatem a poena aut jus ad vitam acquirant; sed id unicum superesse, ut, suo singuli ordine ac tempore, parto sibi per Christum jure, et possessione ex jure gaudeant.” In support of this, Witsius appeals to 2 Cor. 5:19; and the idea of Christ as the stone of salvation, see Zech. 3:9; Dan. 2:34; Psa. 118:22; 1 Cor. 3:11.

<sup>127</sup>*The Economy*, II.7.8.

<sup>128</sup>See *The Economy*, II.7, sections 9-16.

made satisfaction on their behalf<sup>129</sup>—Witsius concludes his treatment of the *pactum salutis* (and thus Book II of *De Œconomia Foederum*) with a discussion on the way in which Christ made use of the sacraments as a confirmation of the covenant (*pactum*) between himself and the Father. Here we simply note that, for Witsius, the external symbols or sacraments as they are normative under different dispensations of grace function in a double capacity in that they confirm and seal both the covenant between the Father and the Son and the covenant of grace with believers or the elect.<sup>130</sup>

### III. CONCLUSIONS

In view of the prominent place Reformed theologians of the seventeenth century assigned to the *pactum salutis*—it being integral to the system of covenant theology itself and foundational to the scheme of salvation—it is not surprising that the doctrine has drawn the acute and critical attention of contemporary theologians and historians. Indeed, many contemporary theologians dislike the notion of an intratrinitarian pact, viewing it as simultaneously speculative, unscriptural, and contrary to the spirit and insights of earlier generations of Reformed theology, Calvin’s theology in particular. In short, the *pactum* is viewed with suspicion, being of later Reformed pedigree.

However, in light of our exposition of Witsius’s doctrine of the *pactum salutis* outlined above, it is difficult to see how the numerous criticisms aimed against covenant theology in general, and the covenant of redemption in particular, may be fairly maintained. In fact, it appears that the doctrine of the *pactum* is misconceived and even caricatured by modern scholarship. The Barthian trajectory of criticism, for example—represented by Barth himself, along with Torrance, Dillistone, and Bakker—alleges that covenant theology forfeits the doctrine of grace as hammered out by the Reformers and cannot sustain a wholesome dialectic between law and gospel. By introducing the notion of conditionality into the relationship between God and man, covenant theology introduced a theology of works that altogether displaces a theology of grace. This conditionality, then, betrays the gospel at its root, with the result that now God is able to rescue lost sinners only by way of a bargain

---

<sup>129</sup>See *The Economy*, II.8. and II.9. respectively.

<sup>130</sup>*The Economy*, II.10.1.

with the Son. The essence of the covenant as a divine promise has been jettisoned. What is more, the notion of a divine *pactum* between the Persons of the triune God is both an unchristian idea and brings a rupture within the divine decree, with the consequence that the covenant of grace takes on secondary importance.

Although Barth calls the doctrine of the *pactum salutis* mythology, in view of Witsius's own treatment of the doctrine, it appears that the charge of mythology better applies to this trajectory of criticism. We have discovered that, for Witsius, who is representative of numerous seventeenth-century Reformed theologians, the *pactum* actually secures the doctrine of grace rather than compromising it. Indeed, the intratrinitarian *pactum* serves as proof that the gracious work of salvation finds its origin not only in the divine will or decree but in God himself, being entirely his initiative, so that the execution of salvation is performed along the path of covenant from start to finish. In Witsius's presentation of the compact between the Father and the Son, the Son is displayed as a freely acting person who voluntarily offers himself as our Surety. Thus, as our Mediator, Christ is both the object of predestination, the One in whom a person is elect, and the divine Person who acts voluntarily not only to obey the Father's will in his capacity as Mediator, but who voluntarily and freely presents himself to be that Mediator. Redemption as conceived and articulated by Witsius is wholly a divine work, the gracious character of which cannot be more powerfully enunciated than by demonstrating its origin and emergence from the very nature of God. Indeed, the *pactum* makes the altogether crucial and fundamental point that salvation is rooted in God's being as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Salvation history is grounded in God's free grace.<sup>131</sup>

We see, then, that the *pactum salutis* is not a reworking of the doctrine of election or a reformulation of the divine decree—it certainly brings no rupture within the divine decree; rather, it gives the divine decree content as it concentrates the work of salvation in God's gracious initiative and focuses that initiative on Christ

---

<sup>131</sup>Contra Schilder's misrepresentation of the *pactum* and contra Barth's notion that the *pactum* makes the covenant of grace of secondary importance. The opposite is the case; it makes the covenant of grace possible and undergirds its historical significance.

himself, who is our Sponsor and Surety (or Guarantee).<sup>132</sup> Moreover, as Geerhardus Vos notes, the covenant of redemption demonstrates “the unity between the accomplishment and application of salvation in [Christ], on the one side, and the various stages of the covenant, on the other.”<sup>133</sup>

As for the so-called “conditionality” and “bargain-character” of covenant theology, here too there is a misrepresentation as to what conditionality means and implies. Since the idea of condition is sharply challenged by the repristination trajectory of criticism as well, we take a moment to rehearse briefly the specific concerns expressed. In the spirit of the Barthian trajectory of criticism, this line of scholarship—Diemer, Schilder, Murray (in certain respects), and Robertson—argue that the covenant of works, at least in its seventeenth-century expression, is a dubious and even harmful development within Reformed theology. For in this way the covenant relation between God and man has become formalized and mechanized (to use Diemer’s words). The covenant of works erects stipulations and conditions in the divine/human relationship and so God’s fellowship with man is defined accordingly. This means that blessing is conditioned on merit—that is, the fulfillment of law becomes the meritorious condition for obtaining eternal life. Thus, obedience is the cause of receiving God’s love and goodness. Adam as God’s image bearer must earn his way to a better situation, for he does not enjoy friendship or the status of sonship with God as God’s creature; rather, this privileged status must be earned. Covenant theology therefore gives us a scheme in which reward is according to merit and the covenant itself is turned into a contract. In fact, the entire law/grace or law/promise schema of covenant theology is false. For works function in the covenant of grace and grace undergirds the totality of God’s relation with man even before the Fall.

Given Witsius’s exposition of the *pactum salutis*, particularly his concern to define the meaning of Christ’s suretyship and work of satisfaction, it is difficult to take any of these criticisms seriously, for the idea of conditionality and the doctrine of merit as portrayed here by the critics is completely foreign to Witsius’s doctrine. Perhaps part of the misunderstanding is rooted in a failure to

---

<sup>132</sup>*Contra* Barth, Robertson, et al.

<sup>133</sup>Vos, “The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology,” in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*, 251.

appreciate the fact that for seventeenth-century covenant theologians, Witsius being a case in point, the doctrine of the covenant of works is itself expressive of God's goodness or grace.<sup>134</sup> The fact that God establishes the conditions by which human creatures may interact with him, that is, may serve him and love him, is born of divine condescension and, as Witsius expresses it, God's "immense goodness." God, according to his kindness and mercy, shows the way for fellowship with himself and the way to eternal glory. However, there is a deeper-rooted concern regarding this covenant. Diemer and others seem to suppose that Adam *as created* was automatically in a covenant relationship with God and automatically enjoyed a privileged status of sonship and blessedness as God's image bearer *apart from any divine prescriptions*. There is nothing to be earned or merited, no conditions to be fulfilled. This, however, is a strange construct given the divine command in paradise, which forbids Adam the privilege of eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 2:17). Witsius demonstrates that man is subject to God as a creature. Even as divine image bearers, in a state of sinlessness, humans do not have rights before God unless God himself grants such to them. The covenant of works, then, expresses God's goodness in giving humans privileges that do not belong to them *as created*. Indeed, as Witsius points out, this position of privilege comes to man as a demand inasmuch as he cannot refuse to enter into this covenant arrangement without sinning. The establishment of the arrangement itself is wholly at God's initiative, unconditional, unmerited, gracious, for man's good—even his eternal blessedness—and entirely unilateral or monopleuric. That God has "formalized" his relationship to humans and prescribed "a code of conduct" is entirely his prerogative. Of course, as created—and being God's image bearer—Adam owed God all that is due him, unless one wishes to insist that this "natural relationship" had nothing positive about it. However, following Witsius's project, what the covenant of works demonstrates is that God treats man "better" than that. As creature, man is placed in a relationship with God that aims at a more positive and higher and, finally, more blessed purpose. For as God's

---

<sup>134</sup>See Muller's discussion in his, "The Covenant of Works and the Stability of Divine Law in Seventeenth-Century Reformed Orthodoxy: A Study in the Theology of Herman Witsius and Wilhelmus À Brakel," *Calvin Theological Journal* 29 (April 1994): 75-100.

creature, man is subject to God. If God had not been pleased to “reward” the keeping of his covenant-stipulations with eternal life, then man as *image bearer* and *creature* would have continued in a state of *posse peccare* until, almost as an inevitability, he perish eternally for failure to give the Creator all that is his due. Although the covenant of works indeed stipulates conditions in order to earn the promised blessing, it does not stipulate conditions in order to earn divine favor, for the establishment of the covenantal arrangement “with conditions” bespeaks divine favor itself—that is, the conditions are themselves the blessings of divine favor inasmuch as they prescribe the way along which man can know and enjoy God forever. Again, this is, for Witsius, according to God’s immense goodness.

Given the Fall, however, humans are now unable to work in a way pleasing to God except the original stipulations and prescriptions find fulfillment, and that on their behalf. The obtaining of eternal life has always, even pre-fall, required God’s kindly and gracious initiative; and so in light of human failure and inability to honor God as God and to fellowship with him on his terms, the obtaining of peace and eternal fellowship with God now rests in God alone. Redemption is his work, wherein he, through Christ as Surety, meets all conditions, earns all merits, and ushers his own into the glory wholly undeserved. Whatever “conditions” apply—even “merits” earned—is not a matter of man making his way to God; rather, it is a matter of God establishing the perimeters of man’s relationship with himself and fulfilling all that is required by those perimeters. Thus, as Witsius sets this forth, God sticks to his own covenantal word and purpose for man, and, amazingly, provides the way of “keeping his covenant” and bringing his own to glory without forfeiting his original promise; instead, he altogether fulfills it. Indeed, there is no gift that has not been earned or merited by Christ. But precisely in this way, there is no condition or merit for humans to fulfill at their own initiative or according to their own ability. It is all of grace.

We discover, then, that the criticisms of modern scholarship are neither well founded nor well conceived. Scholarship critical of covenant theology has, for the most part, not accurately traced out the doctrine of grace that is its hallmark. Witsius’s doctrine of the *pactum salutis* merely serves as a case in point. Law and gospel are not inappropriately juxtaposed to one another; rather, what is set in opposition to one another is every *human effort* to obtained salvation versus *Christ as Surety*, who is given to God’s people according the

Father's gracious provision. Neither is covenant a contract *as such*, wherein God and man each do their share—as if parity functions in their respective roles. Quite the opposite is the true picture. Divine goodness and mercy aren't earned, and human obedience does not merit God's love and blessing. Rather, God's love and blessing undergird his entire relationship with his people, grounded in the eternal *pactum*, and from his provision—entirely of grace—they are brought into the blessings of sonship and eternal friendship with God. This is only to say, that the covenant theology of the seventeenth century, Witsius serving as an illustrious example, is a theology that accents divine grace fully as much as the first codification of Reformed theology in the sixteenth century.