

NOTATIONES

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SOME OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THE *THREE FORMS OF UNITY* AND THE DOCTRINE OF THE COVENANT OF WORKS

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1. Recent Criticisms of the Doctrine of the Covenant of Works

WITHIN THE MORE recent history of Reformed theology some writers have greeted the doctrine of the covenant of works with suspicion, viewing it as something less than fully (or even remotely) biblical.¹ Some view it as theological

¹ Among writers who mostly fall under the Reformed umbrella and dislike and either wish to caution against, revise, or altogether reject the doctrine of the covenant of works, at least according to *their own portrait* of the doctrine, are F. W. Dillistone, *The Structure of the Divine Society* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1951), 131ff.; Nico T. Bakker, *Miskende Gratie—Van Calvijn tot Witsius: Een vergelijkende lezing, balans van 150 jaar gereformeerde orthodoxie* (Kampen: Uitgeversmaatschappij J.H. Kok, 1991), 31-36; James B. Torrance, "Covenant or Contract? A Study of the Theological Background of Worship in Seventeenth-Century Scotland," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 23 (February 1970): 51-76; idem, "Calvin and Puritanism in England and Scotland—Some Basic Concepts in the Development of 'Federal Theology'" in *Calvinus Reformator: His Contribution to Theology, Church and Society* (Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education, 1982), 267; idem, "The Strengths and Weaknesses of the Westminster Theology," in *The Westminster Confession in the Church Today*, ed. Alasdair I. C. Heron (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew, 1982), 48ff.; Holmes Rolston, III, *John Calvin versus the Westminster Confession* (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1972), passim; idem, "Responsible Man in Reformed Theology: Calvin versus the Westminster Confession," *The Scottish Journal of Theology* 23 (1970): 129-156; John Murray, "The Adamic Administration," *Collected Writings of John Murray*, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1976-1982), I: 47-59; Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1966), 214-226; Dennis Lee, "A Brief Study of the Doctrine of the Covenant of Works in the Reformed and Presbyterian Tradition: Pre-Creedal History, Varying Interpretations, and Critique," *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal* 37 (November 2003): 55-81. Here we also mention S. G. De Graaf, "De Genade Gods en de Structuur der Gansche Schepping," *Philosophia Reformata* 1 (1936): 17-29; idem, "Genade en Natuur," in *Christus en de Wereld* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1939), 72-113, especially 87-96; idem, *Het Ware Geloof: Beschouwingen over Zondag 1-22 van de Heidelbergse Catechismus* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1954), 46-51; idem, *Promise and Deliverance*, trans. H. Evan Runner and Elisabeth Wichers Runner, 4 vols. (St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada: Paideia Press, 1977-1981), I: 36-48; G. C. Berkouwer, *Sin, Studies in Dogmatics*, trans. Philip Holtrop (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 206-209; C. Van der Waal, *The Covenantal Gospel* (Neerlandia, Alberta: Inheritance Publications, 1990), 47-56; Clarence Stam, *The Covenant of Love: Exploring Our Relationship with God* (Winnipeg, Manitoba: Premier Publishing, 1999), 47-53; N. Diemer, *Het Scheppingsverbond met Adam: Het Verbond der Werken*

speculation, or more sinisterly, as a misappropriation of the Reformed heritage, such that a species of legalism is introduced into Reformed thought inasmuch as this doctrine places human *works* front and center in the divine-human relationship in Paradise. This is regarded as a fundamental and serious mistake, for humans never earn their way before God, not even before the fall, and to define man's relationship to God in terms of *works* discards from the outset the favorable and beneficent nature of God's relation to his image-bearer. Thus, the critics argue, this doctrine compromises, if it does not entirely give up, the favorable and loving nature of God's relationship to man, which, at root, must be defined as a sort of fatherly kindness, an amicable relationship, and wholly gracious or at least characterized as a disposition of kindness on God's part.

Another suspicion that lurks nearby with respect to the doctrine of the covenant of works is its idea that Adam had not yet achieved his final destiny in Paradise. Since most federal theologians have argued that Adam's place in Paradise was not permanent, inasmuch as it did not characterize man's finished or definitive state, and argue further that Adam, upon faithfully coming through the test of his obedience, would have been ushered into an incorruptible state (like believers in glory), no longer the object of the tempter's deceptions, the suspicion reigns that this doctrine posits the notion that man *merits* his improved condition, that this doctrine conceives of man as *earning* his way before God, so that divine blessings are based on man's works. This notion, the critics assert, is both unscriptural and outrageously harmful. Blessing based upon human achievement runs at cross purposes with the gracious character of God's relationship to man; worse, it sets up a paradigm of a "merit religion" that is unbiblical and pernicious. Moreover, some critics will also say that this doctrine posits the dubious notion of man being tested in Paradise, which is neither necessary nor kindly on God's part, not to mention, such a testing is not taught in the Bible. Besides (and this is considered the nail in the coffin for the doctrine of the covenant of works), it is not a doctrine confessed in the sixteenth-century Reformed confessions, or more specifically the Three Forms of Unity.

This bundle of criticisms, of course, raises a fundamental question: Have the critics actually attacked *the doctrine* of the covenant of works which comes to expression for example in the Westminster Standards or the Formula Consensus Helvetica, or in any number of classic Reformed writers, such as Francis Turretin, A. A. Hodge, Robert L. Dabney, Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, or Louis Berkhof?² In rejecting this doctrine, are they rejecting what

(Kampen: Uitgave van J. H. Kok, 1932), 10-32; and insofar as he agrees with Diemer, Mark W. Karlberg, "Reformed Interpretation of the Mosaic Covenant," *Westminster Theological Journal* 43 (Fall 1980): 1-57; idem, "The Original State of Adam: Tensions within Reformed Theology," *Evangelical Quarterly* 87 (1987): 291-309; idem, "The Mosaic Covenant and the Concept of Works in Reformed Hermeneutics" (Ph.D. diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1980); also see Daniel P. Fuller, *Gospel and Law: Contrast or Continuum: The Hermeneutics of Dispensationalism and Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 18-64; Scott J. Hafemann, *The God of Promise and the Life of Faith: Understanding the Heart of the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001); Norman Shepherd, *The Call of Grace: How the Covenant Illuminates Salvation and Evangelism* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 2000). For a cogent, albeit brief, survey and critique of many of these authors, see Rowland S. Ward, *God and Adam: Reformed Theology and the Creation Covenant* (Wantirna, Australia: New Melbourne Press, 2003), 175-197.

² Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 3 vols., ed. James T. Dennison, Jr., trans. George

the doctrine actually teaches or what actually constitutes the doctrine, or have they attacked and rejected *their own portrait* of the doctrine? Indeed, while admitting that there is not complete uniformity of presentation of this doctrine among Reformed writers, and admitting too that at least some more recent defenders of the doctrine sometimes appear to advocate the idea that man as creature can strictly merit before God the Creator—admitting this aberration—nonetheless, I maintain the critics' sketch of this doctrine proves to be inaccurate, distorted, and in some cases overtly false.

As for the charge that this doctrine is not taught in the Three Forms of Unity, i.e., the Belgic Confession (1561/1618-19), the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), and the Canons of Dort (1618-19), here a distinction is necessary if we are to speak with accuracy and veracity. If it is said that the Three Forms of Unity do not teach this doctrine because the terminology which defines and explicates the mature doctrine is lacking, then, by those standards, it is conceded: the doctrine of the covenant of works is not taught in the Three Forms of Unity. However, if it is said that the substance of the doctrine is presented in the Three Forms of Unity, though some of the specific terminology is not used, then the conclusion must be different: the Three Forms of Unity teach the doctrine of the covenant of works. As Herman Bavinck observes, although the doctrine of the covenant of works is not mentioned in these confessions “in so many words,” it is nonetheless “materially” embodied in them.³ Although the word “covenant” is not to be found in the Three Forms of Unity to describe man's relationship with God before the fall, this does not mean that the content of the doctrine is absent. On the contrary, as Bavinck says, “one

Musgrave Giger (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P&R Publishing, 1992-1996), Topic VIII; A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (1879; reprint, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1972), 309-314; 367-377; idem, “God's Covenants with Man—The Church,” in *Evangelical Theology: Lectures on Doctrine* (1890; reprint, Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth, 1976), 163-183; Robert L. Dabney, *Syllabus and Notes of the Course of Systematic and Polemic Theology*, 2nd ed. (St. Louis: Presbyterian Publishing Company of St. Louis, 1878), 300-305; A. Kuyper, A. *Dictaten Dogmatiek: collegedictaat van een der studenten. Vol. III: Locus de Foedere* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, s.a [1902]): 82-95; idem, *De Leer der Verbonden: Stichtelijke Bijbelstudien* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1909); Herman Bavinck, *gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, 4th ed., 4 vols. (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1928), II, 524-550, in English trans. John Vriend, ed. John Bolt, *Reformed Church*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 563ff.; Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th revised and enlarged edition (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939, 1941), 211-18. We might extend this list: John Dick, Charles Hodge, J. H. Thornwell, Abraham Kuyper, Jr., W. G. T. Shedd, Geerhardus Vos, J. Gresham Machen, A. G. Honig, W. Heyns, Henry Beets, M. J. Bosma, Morton H. Smith, Robert L. Reymond, besides any number of British and Continental theologians from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. See Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics: Set Out and Illustrated from the Sources*, rev. ed., ed. Ernst Bizer, trans. G. T. Thomson (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1950; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978), 281-300. Among those who have the rudiments of this doctrine, see John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 2.i.3-11; and in this connection, see Peter A. Lillback, *The Binding of God: Calvin's Role in the Development of Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 276-304; Wolfgang Musculus, *Loci communes* (Basel, 1560; 1563; 1573); idem, *Common Places of Christian Religion*, trans. John Man (London: Henry Byneman, 1578); Zacharias Ursinus, *The Smaller Catechism and The Larger Catechism* (1562), trans. Lyle D. Bierma, in *An Introduction to the Heidelberg Catechism: Sources, History, and Theology*, Lyle D. Bierma, et al., Texts and Studies in Reformation and Post-Reformation Thought, ed. Richard A. Muller (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005). As for the terminology used to define this doctrine, other terms include: the covenant of faith, the covenant of life, the paradisaical covenant, the Edenic covenant, the covenant of creation, the covenant of nature. Interestingly, in spite of the different terminology, Reformed theologians were in general agreement about the essential features of this covenant, no matter the name assigned to it.

³ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, II: 567.

may doubt the word, provided the matter is safe” (*de vocabulo dubiteur, re salva*)⁴—which is to say, although a theological idea is not fully formulated in confessional documents, that does not mean it is not taught therein implicitly. The Three Forms of Unity, to be sure, do not *explicitly* teach the doctrine of the covenant of works. However, as I will argue below, that doesn’t mean that these confessional documents do not teach the essentials, the main elements, of the doctrine, and so the doctrine is present *implicitly* and *materially* in them. That is, the Three Forms of Unity provide us the materials for and even teach the essential content of the doctrine.

In what follows, I will first offer an exposition of the Three Forms of Unity as this relates to the doctrine of the covenant of works, followed by a summary, which in effect serves as an analysis and defense of Bavinck’s assertion that this doctrine is materially embodied in these documents. After that, and second, in view of certain criticisms that are often directed against this doctrine, I will present some analytical remarks in an effort to clear away some misconceptions and erroneous assumptions which commonly surround this teaching.

2. The Elements of the Covenant of Works in the *Three Forms of Unity*

The principal materials for assessing the teaching of the Three Forms of Unity concerning the doctrine of the covenant of works include: Lord’s Days 3-6 of the Heidelberg Catechism; articles 14 and 15 of the Belgic Confession; and Heads III/IV, articles 1-3 of the Canons of Dort. In what follows, we will use the Heidelberg Catechism as the primary document, referring to the Belgic Confession and the Canons of Dort where appropriate.

2.1. Man as Created

In Lord’s Day 3 of the Heidelberg Catechism (Q/As 6-8) the question is asked whether God created man as fallen: “Did God create man so wicked and perverse?” The answer to this question sets forth the original blessedness in which man was created. Instead of being created wicked and perverse, “God created man good, and after His own image; that is, in true righteousness and holiness, that he might rightly know God his Creator, heartily love Him, and live with Him in eternal blessedness to praise and glorify Him.” Similarly, the Belgic Confession teaches that God “made and formed [man] in his image and likeness—good, just, and holy; able by his own will to conform in all things to the will of God” (art. 14); and the Canons of Dort state that “Man was originally created in the image of God and was furnished in his mind with a true and salutary knowledge of his Creator and things spiritual, in his will and heart with righteousness, and in all his emotions with purity; indeed, the whole man was holy” (III/IV, art. 1).

God’s purpose or intention in creating man in his image merits our careful consideration, for the catechism presents a threefold purpose: that man may (1) truly know God; (2) love him with all his heart; and (3) live with him in

⁴ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, II: 569.

eternal happiness, and all this for God's praise and glory. The German original uses a purpose clause: "auss daß" (*so that*)—man is created *so that* he might know God, *so that* he might heartily love him, and *so that* he might live with him in eternal blessedness, to praise and glorify him. The Belgic is explicit in affirming that man, being the divine image-bearer, was created good, just, and holy in order to conform his will to God's will. Man wasn't to live any way he pleased, but he was to will to do God's will. His life was to conform to the divine standard. The Canons explicitly state that man was created with a true and salutary knowledge of God; thus, man was not a blank slate—instead, a knowledge of God was written on his heart. He was knowledgeable of "things spiritual" and righteous in his "will and heart"; and his emotions were "pure." In short, he was "holy." Inasmuch as God created man with the purpose that he truly know him, love him, and live with him in blessedness, the same was his calling or duty; such is the only response that befits what man is as the bearer of the divine image and who God is as his Creator. Anything less than this response to God is rebellion and sin; anything less than responding to God in conformity to and in accord with the purpose of being created after the divine image, is sin and treachery of the highest order.

Thus the Three Forms of Unity are uniform in teaching that man was created holy, righteous, and good, with the aim or purpose to live that way before God.

2.2. Man as Fallen

2.2.1. *First Parents*

It is well known that the first Q/A of the Heidelberg Catechism does not begin with man's creation; thus it does not begin at the beginning. Instead, it begins with the current lived experience of the believer in the rough and tumble of the Christian walk. Therefore it asks the believer, in the trial and struggle of faith, the question, "What is your only comfort in life and in death?" The reply is that believer's comfort is in belonging, in life and death, body and soul, to the faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. But in order to possess that comfort they first need to know, among other things, how great their sin and misery are (Q/A 2). The catechism therefore explores the nature of human fallenness. Why and how are humans fallen? That is, how have humans gotten into the miserable mess of being estranged from God and under his wrath? The catechism explicitly denies that this is from God; instead, man's corrupt nature comes "from the fall and disobedience of our first parents, Adam and Eve, in Paradise, whereby our nature became so corrupt that we all are conceived and born in sin" (Q/A 7). The Belgic makes clear that although God created man in his own image and likeness, that is, "good, righteous, and holy," able by his own will to do all the things in agreement with God's will, man subjected himself willingly to sin and so also to death and the curse when he gave his ear to the words of the devil. Thus he did not value or recognize the honor and excellence in which he was first created. His sin, specifically, involved the violation of the commandment of life. "For the commandment of life, which he had received, he transgressed; and by sin separated himself

from God, who was his true life; having corrupted his whole nature” (art. 14).⁵ Being now subject to both physical and spiritual death, and guilty, as well as wicked, perverse, and corrupt in his whole nature and all these ways, “He lost all his excellent gifts which he had received from God, and retained none of them except for small traces which are enough to make him inexcusable” (art. 14).

2.2.2. *The Positive Law Prohibition*

The Belgic Confession refers to the positive law prohibition that God gave to Adam, the command not to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, as “the commandment of life.” This nomenclature shows that the intention of the paradisaical stipulation functioned as a test of obedience for the attainment of eternal life, i.e., a life no longer fallible, corruptible, and amissible. For the life that Adam possessed in Eden was still amissible. Some critics deny that there is any evidence in Scripture for a promise of a life no longer amissible (i.e., a promise of eternal life) or for a test of man’s obedience. But such denials need not detain us. The dots run in a straight line on this point, for disobedience clearly results in death, curse, and damnation—*eternal* damnation (except God come to the rescue); so the life promised is eternal life. This is why the Belgic Confession calls that prohibition the commandment of life.

2.2.3. *Human Nature Poisoned and Adam’s Progeny under Judgment*

The Heidelberg makes clear that the fall of Adam and Eve poisons our nature. As it goes for them, it goes for us. Their fall brings forth corruption and guilt, which render us all fallen, so that we are born sinners, “conceived and born in sin.” According to God’s arrangement (call it his divine appointment), the failure of Adam and Eve to walk with God in true righteousness and holiness, specifically, their failure to know God truly, to love him with all their heart, and to live with him according to God’s standard of justice, brings the forfeiture for them and for us (for all their posterity) the eternal blessedness of living with God in fellowship and happiness. Consequently, their fall renders us fallen as well, and now we find ourselves infected with original sin, i.e., total depravity. Hence Q/A 8 asks: “But are we so corrupt that we are wholly incapable of doing any good, and inclined to all evil?” The answer: “Yes, indeed; unless we are regenerated by the Spirit of God.”

Not surprisingly the Canons of Dort echo these themes: “However, rebelling against God at the devil’s instigation and by his own free will, [man] deprived himself of these outstanding gifts. Rather, in their place he brought upon himself blindness, terrible darkness, futility, and distortion of judgment in his mind; perversity, defiance, and hardness in his heart and will; and finally impurity in all his emotions” (III/IV, art. 1). “The corruption [issuing from Adam’s fall]

⁵ A more recent translation of the Belgic Confession translates these words as follows: “For he transgressed the commandment of life, which he had received, and by his sin he separated himself from God, who was his true life, having corrupted his entire nature.” Original French text: “*Car il a transgressé le commandement de vie qu’il avait reçu, et s’est retranché de Dieu, qui était sa vraie vie, par son péché, ayant corrompu toute sa nature....*”

spread, by God's just judgment, from Adam to all his descendants—except for Christ—not by way of imitation ... but by way of the propagation of his perverted nature" (III/IV, art. 2). "Therefore, all people are conceived and are born children of wrath, unfit for any saving good, inclined to evil, dead in their sins, and slaves to sin ..." (III/IV, art. 3). The Belgic likewise links Adam's fall with our corruption and curse. "We believe that by the disobedience of Adam original sin has been spread through the whole human race. It is a corruption of all nature—an inherited depravity which even infects small infants in their mother's womb, and the root which produces in man every sort of sin. It is therefore so vile and enormous in God's sight that it is enough to condemn the human race..." (art. 15). Clearly, Adam functions as a public person in Paradise; as it goes for him it goes for his descendants.

2.2.4. Divine Justice and the Requirement of God's Law

Lord's Day 4 of the Heidelberg Catechism elaborates on this theme further as it takes up the matter of God's justice in this arrangement, namely, that Adam's and Eve's disobedience has eternally mortal repercussions for their progeny. Is this arrangement (this connection between Adam and Eve and their posterity) fair, especially given that their fall renders us incapable of living with God in obedience, incapable of believing him and loving him? Is it right that the faith and obedience; or rather, the converse, that the faithlessness and disobedience of our first parents determine our spiritual estate from conception and birth, leaving us totally tainted in nature and unable to live holy lives? More specifically, "Does not God, then, wrong man by requiring of him in His law that which he cannot perform?" That is, given our fallenness, given that we are no longer able to do any good and are instead inclined to all evil, how can God continue to require us to obey his law since we can't obey it? The catechism offers a negative reply to this query, for God created us capable of being law-keepers, "God made man capable of performing it," i.e., performing his law.

Here we see that the call to obedience is not something foreign to the paradise situation, for God placed Adam and Eve in Eden with the ability to obey his law and with the intention that they do so. Indeed, in Paradise they were required to obey his law. Consider the alternative: that God does not require them to obey his law or that he does not care whether they perform his will! The alternative is absurd. The call to obedience, which is to love God, which is to believe his Word, which is to submit to him and honor him and render to him all that is due him as God, as Creator, is not contrary to the relationship that man has with God in Eden but is natural and fitting to the relationship between God and his rational, moral creature, especially one made after God's image. It is inconceivable that God would not require that Adam and Eve walk before him in true righteousness and holiness, given that God created them good, after his own image, that is, in true righteousness and holiness, so that they might rightly know, love, and live with their Creator in eternal blessedness (cf. Q/A 6). That this eternal blessing did not come about for them or for their posterity is because "man, through the instigation of the devil, by his own willful disobedience, deprived himself and all his posterity of these gifts" (Q/A 9; cf. Canons, III/IV, art. 1).

That the Heidelberg Catechism in particular presents the essential ingredients of what later was formally developed and called the covenant of works is further confirmed by Q/As 10-11. Question 10 makes clear that man cannot sin against God with impunity. Divine punishment awaits human disobedience. There is an eternal and terrible penalty for the disobedience and apostasy of Adam and Eve in Paradise. Although question 10 is addressed specifically to fallen people, our fall is of one piece with Adam's, and so it explains the penalty for *Adam's disobedience*. Thus, being tempted by the devil, man by his own willful defiance deprived himself and all his posterity of the gifts of eternal life with God; he forfeited for himself and for us true knowledge of God, as well as righteousness, holiness, and love. The consequence for this failure to do what God required of man is clear: God will by no means allow such disobedience and apostasy to go unpunished, not Adam's and not ours. "He is terribly displeased with our original as well as actual sins; and will punish them by a just judgment temporally and eternally, as He has declared, *Cursed is every one who continueth not in all things that are written in the book of the law, to do them*" (Q/A 10). Interestingly, the catechism commandeers Deuteronomy 27:26, the passage quoted in answer 10, to apply both to the situation in Paradise and to the abiding demand that all human beings must live by the righteous standard of God's law, otherwise they come under the law's curse (also see Gal. 3:10; cf. HC, Q/A 62).

2.3. The Gospel—or the Covenant of Grace

In contrast to the situation in Paradise, the Three Forms of Unity provide us, in a preliminary way, the first glimpse of the covenant of grace revealed and established after the fall. For example, the Heidelberg Catechism explains that salvation will not come by setting aside God's standard of righteousness and holiness (Q/As 12, 16); therefore the Mediator that is needed in order to rescue fallen man must be true and righteous man, yet more powerful than all creatures, that is, he must also be true God (see Q/As 15, 17, 36). This is none other than Jesus Christ (Q/A 18).

Moreover, this good message to fallen sinners, i.e., this gospel, is "first revealed in Paradise" in the mother promise of Gen. 3:15 (Q/A 19). As further confirmation of this, the catechism recognizes the parallel that Scripture establishes between Adam and Christ, the second Adam (Q/A 20), in whom all humans may be reckoned—that is, a person is either fallen and guilty in Adam, or a person is by faith engrafted into Christ and reckoned righteous with the righteousness of Christ (cf. Q/As 59, 60). What must not be missed here is that the original, pre-fall relationship between God and man in Paradise does not provide the path for human redemption: there is no promised redemption or redeemer in the pre-fall arrangement between God and man in Paradise. In Paradise before the fall, man's relationship with God was not through faith in the Mediator, through atonement; it was not *by faith alone in the righteous works of Another*.

The same ideas are expressed in the Belgic Confession and the Canons of Dort (see BC, articles 17-18, 20, 25-26; Canons II, articles 1-4, 9; I, art. 2). Satisfaction must be made to God's justice. The standard of righteousness persists; it is not diminished because of sin, nor does the requirement of

human obedience and righteousness suddenly emerge *post-fall*. Upholding the standard of righteousness always defines and conditions man's relationship to God. Thus, the gospel—the rescue of sinners through Jesus Christ—is unto faith and the obedience of the good works, the fulfillment of all righteousness. “God in his boundless mercy has given us a guarantee [*Sponsorem*] his only begotten Son, who was made to be sin and a curse for us, in our place, on the cross, in order that he might give satisfaction for us” (Canons II, art. 2).

2.4. Summary

Given this short tour through what the Three Forms of Unity put forward concerning man as originally created and the nature of his relationship to God both before and after the fall into sin, we can summarize what these documents teach as it pertains to the question of the covenant of works:

(1) The confessions teach that Adam in some sense functions as a public person, meaning that as it goes for him it goes for his race; for his sin brings repercussions not just to himself but to all his progeny.

(2) The confessions teach that God created man as good, in righteousness and holiness in order to be righteous and holy, to obey God, which is to be a law-keeper, which is to love and conform himself to God's will, with the explicit consequence that failure to do so brings accursedness and punishment.

(3) The confessions presuppose that we know from the account in Genesis how God warned Adam regarding the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and it is this positive prohibition (which the Belgic Confession calls “the commandment of life”), along with the whole of the law written on his heart (after all, that is what it means to be good, created in true righteousness and holiness) which man was *capable of performing*. Therefore, make no mistake, it was also this prohibition (along with the law written on his heart) that he willfully disobeyed through the instigation of the devil, thereby depriving himself and all his posterity of the inborn gifts (cf. Q/A 9; Canons III/IV, art. 1).

(4) The confessions thus teach that Adam and Eve were tested by God in being tempted by the devil, for the fall of man(kind) issues from the disobedience of our first parents in Paradise. They did not do what God called them to do; the work or obedience he required was not performed; and so in violating the specific positive command regarding the tree of knowledge of good and evil, they violated the whole law—including the law to love God with all their heart, with all their soul, with all their mind, and with all their strength; and the law to love their neighbor as themselves (cf. HC, Q/A 4). Were not Adam and Eve to be neighbors to one another in love, protecting one another from violating God's command? But they did not love God or each other according to God's law. They did not believe God's word to them, nor did they do it.

(5) The catechism in particular teaches that the original paradisaical standard of righteousness, which is God's law, continues—meaning, after man's fall, God does not change his standard of righteousness and holiness, for the law

itself is nothing else than God's own righteousness and holiness coming to expression in relation to humans who bear God's image. This is why God does no one an injustice in continuing to insist upon the righteousness of his law to be performed by all persons, even though they are now fallen and totally depraved. (What absurdity to argue that Adam didn't have to keep the law or perform works in accord with righteousness, but that his fallen descendants do!)

(6) The confessions teach that the violation of God's law brings about eternal death and punishment for Adam and his posterity as the just penalty for his (and their) treachery (in him). God's justice requires that sin be punished with the supreme penalty.

(7) The confessions also demonstrate, in contrast to the situation in Paradise, that God provides a new path for fallen man to enjoy fellowship with him, which is the gospel of Jesus Christ. The original arrangement in Paradise before the fall cannot and does not open the path to human redemption. God, however, according to his free mercy and grace, without violating but fulfilling his holiness and righteousness, provides the Mediator in his Son, who as the eternal Son of God became true, righteous man, to rescue sinners. This gospel, "first revealed in Paradise," as the Heidelberg Catechism observes, shows that God must intervene if man, now fallen and under the judgment of death, would find eternal life.

In each of these teachings of the Three Forms of Unity we discover the essential elements of (what will subsequently) be formalized in and labeled the covenant of works or some such nomenclature. Man was always to be a law-keeper; for he was to be the original promise keeper, obeying his Creator's commands, doing his Maker's will, which is the way of true knowledge, righteousness, and holiness and the path along which fellowship with God and the blessing of God abides, even in glory.

3. Analysis and Observations

It has not been our interest in the foregoing to offer a full treatment of the doctrine of the covenant of works. Rather, our focus has been to set forth the teaching of the Three Forms of Unity pertaining to the original relationship man enjoyed with God in Paradise, and the requirements God established in order for that relationship to persist and issue forth into eternal fellowship. With that focus, we have also demonstrated what the Three Forms of Unity teach regarding the consequences of man's fall, and God's first overtures of gracious rescue for fallen sinners. Cumulatively, we discover that these documents affirm in substance the doctrine of the covenant of works. In rejecting the doctrine of the covenant of works, many critics (perhaps unknowingly) seem also to be rejecting the teaching of the Three Forms of Unity on God's relationship to man in Paradise and the way of fellowship with God.

In what follows, I wish to offer a few remarks in an effort to clarify some aspects of the doctrine of the covenant of works which detractors of the doctrine typically distort, misunderstand, or ignore. I will group my comments under two general headings.

3.1. The Meaning of Merit

First, we address the issue of merit. Although many opponents of the doctrine of the covenant of works do not want to relinquish a pre-fall paradisaical covenant as such, they do want to rid this paradisaical covenant of any notion of *merit*. They reject the idea that God blesses man *because of obedience* or that human works *earn rewards* from God.

Inasmuch as the question of human merit emerges as a prominent concern among opponents of the covenant of works, we do well to offer a brief clarification and elaboration on what the covenant of works comes to regarding humans meriting before God.

It must be stated from the outset, and this is chief, although merit- or reward-language is used by many writers who champion the doctrine of the covenant of works, such language does not affirm a strict parity between human works and divine reward. On the contrary, merit is used in the technical sense of *ex pacto* merit, not condign merit or congruent merit.

Ex pacto merit means that the blessing bestowed upon human works is *from the covenant arrangement itself*, that is, it is graciously rewarded. It does not imply that there is any sort of worthiness to human works which in themselves make God man's debtor or that the reward given is earned or achieved. It simply means that the covenant stipulation has been fulfilled and the gracious reward will be bestowed, for God is true to his word and true to himself. He keeps his promises. As William Ames says, "In this covenant the moral deeds of the intelligent creature lead either to happiness as a reward or to unhappiness as a punishment. The latter is deserved, the former not" (*The Marrow of Theology*, I.x.11). Similarly, Robert Rollock, writing his catechism on the covenants, addresses the issue of merit head-on, posing this question: "Is this condition of works one of merit?" The reply: "Not at all. Rather, it is one as of duties which bear witness to [man's] gratitude towards God the creator (Rom. 11:35; Luke 17:10)."⁶ Likewise, the Reformed theologian, Daniel Wyttenbach (1706-79), in his work, *Tentamen Theologiae dogmaticae Methodo scientifica pertractate*, 3 vols. (Frankfort-on-Main, 1747-49; also Bern, 1741-47) II, pp. 568, 569, addresses this issue during the late period of Reformed orthodoxy, writing the following: "By perfect obedience Adam could not have merited anything. God could rightly have demanded such obedience, being the Most High and Absolute Lord, and man owed such obedience, both on account of the divine perfections and for the sake of his own happiness and the tremendous benefits received from God, and so obedience, even the most perfect, would have been sheerly due to Him.... Eternal life was accordingly promised to man and represented *in no sense as a reward*.... Adam could not have asked eternal life of God save *in virtue of the pact*."⁷

⁶ Robert Rollock, *Catechism on God's Covenants*, trans. and intro. Aaron C. Denlinger, in *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 20 (2009): Q & A 12, p. 111.

⁷ Quoted from Heppel, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 296. "Adamus perfecta obedientia mereri nil potuisset; etenim Deus iure talem obedientiam potuit postulare ut supremus et absolutus Dominus homoque illam obedientiam debebat tum ob perfectiones divinas tum ob propriam felicitatem ac beneficia a Deo accepta maxima, adeoque obedientia vel perfectissima opus fuisset pure debitum. — Vita aeterna proinde homini promissa ac repraesentata fuit *neutiquam ut merces*. — (569): Adamus vitam aeternam a Deo petere potuisset non nisi *vi pacti*." See the discussion of this issue in J. Mark Beach, *Christ and the Covenants: Francis Turretin's Federal Theology as a Defense of the Doctrine of Grace*, Historical Reformed Theology, eds. Herman J. Selderhuis, et al. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 113-119; 199-202.

In the larger historical context of Christian theology, the Reformed were confronted with the medieval doctrine that distinguished between condign and congruous merit. The merit of congruity refers to a work that is morally good and done from free will *without* the aid of divine grace; as such the “good works” performed belong to the unregenerate person prior to the reception of grace. However, in doing what they can, being morally inclined to God’s law, it is fitting and congruous for God, according to his goodness, to “infuse the grace of justification” into those so disposed. Thus it is congruous for God to give man a reward appropriate to his power of acting. The merit of condignity on the other hand has to do with persons who have thus become the recipients of divine grace; the “good works” they do are done from free will *with* the aid of divine grace. As such their works have an intrinsic value and are “altogether worthy” of reward, not only because they agree or congrue with God’s nature, but because their value requires an “equality between the work and the reward.” These works are condign because the merit and the reward are proportional to one another.⁸ Richard Muller explains that the distinction has to do with the merit of the individual’s own effort versus that of the Holy Spirit’s operation. In the former case, “the act is only a ... half-merit, inasmuch as no human act can justly deserve the reward of salvation.” In the latter case, however, “the act could be viewed as ... a full merit, inasmuch as the work of the Spirit is absolutely good and is the ground of a truly and justly deserved salvation.” In short, this distinction enabled “late medieval scholastics to argue that a minimal act might be performed and, because of it, first grace conferred.”⁹

The Reformed, for their part, rejected these notions of merit. Francis Turretin, for example, like Calvin, allows the use of the term when carefully defined. He speaks, then, of merit as “consecution,” that is, one thing is consecutive of or follows from another according to God’s arrangement. By contrast, Turretin observes that *true* or *strict merit* demands that five conditions be met:

(1) that the “work be undue”—for no one merits by paying what he owes (Lk. 17:10), he only satisfies; (2) that it be ours—for no one can be said to merit from another; (3) that it be absolutely perfect and free from all taint—for where sin is, there merit cannot be; (4) that it be equal and proportioned to the reward and pay; otherwise it would be a gift, not merit ...; (5) that the reward be due to such a work from justice—whence an “undue work” is commonly defined to be one that “makes a reward due in the order of justice.”¹⁰

In light of these stipulations, Turretin’s verdict is that humans cannot perform any work whatsoever that would mount up to having merited anything before God, either of congruity or condignity.

(1) They are not undue, but due; for whatever we are and can do, all this we owe to God, whose debtors we are on this account called (Lk. 17:10; Rom. 8:12).

⁸ Turretin, *Institutio theologiae elencticae*, XVII.v.3; also cf. Wollebius, *Compendium theologiae christianae*, Bk. II.i.11.

⁹ Richard Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985).

¹⁰ Turretin, *Institutio theologiae elencticae*, XVII.v.6.

(2) Not one is ours, but all are gifts of grace and fruits of the Spirit (Jam. 1:17; Phil. 2:13; 2 Cor. 3:5). (3) They are not perfect, but alloyed as yet by various impurities (Rom. 7:18; Gal. 5:17, 18; Is. 64:6). (4) They are not equal to future glory because there is no proportion between the finite and temporary and the infinite and eternal (Rom. 8:18; 2 Cor. 4:17). (5) The reward promised to them is purely gratuitous and undue and so to be expected not from the internal merit of the work and its intrinsic worth, but only from the most free estimation of it by the one who crowns it (Rom. 6:23; 4:4; 11:6).¹¹

That is, humans can only enjoy an *ex pacto* sort of merit before God, and this means human righteousness and blessing is from God's free goodness and benevolence. God the Creator is not indebted to the creature.

Long before many recent critics voiced their objections to the doctrine of the covenant of works, A. B. Van Zandt offered these clarifying comments:

If the covenant with Adam was an act of mere arbitrary power, without any grace or goodness in it, it would be difficult to bring it into harmony with other Scriptures under any method. But as it was, itself, an act of grace, placing man in new relations to law, and with possibilities of benefit, vastly superior to any otherwise attainable, and within the reach of his free moral agency, we think it may easily be brought under the provisions of the one "Everlasting Covenant."¹²

Similarly, W. G. T. Shedd, in advocating the terminology of "the covenant of works," carefully defines what is loaded into terms like "merit" and "reward." He explains, "The merit to be acquired under the covenant of works was pactional." In the event that Adam stood the test of obedience with integrity and faithfulness, he "could claim the reward ... only by virtue of the promise of God, not by virtue of the original relation of a creature to the Creator." For as a creature standing before his Creator he owed complete and perfect obedience to him *without reward*; *no merit* existed or could exist in that relationship. In doing all that was required of him, he would have only rendered to God what was his due and therefore he remains an unprofitable servant (cf. Luke 17:10).¹³

Therefore, as it pertains to humans meriting before God, let it be clearly stated that the Reformed objection to this concept is not the term itself (which Reformed writers, including various Reformed Confessions, readily use in order to describe the work of salvation on our behalf) but the idea that man, strictly speaking, can put God in his debt. The latter notion is invalid; neither man as God's unfallen creature nor man as sinner can place God in his debt. There can be no objection, however, in affirming that believers are rescued from God's wrath through the merits of Christ imputed to us. Calvin uses this sort of language, as does the Belgic Confession—to mention only two examples (see, for example, Belgic Confession, Article 20-23; also Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Days 2-7, 16.40, 23-24).

¹¹ Turretin, *Institutio theologiae elencticae*, XVII.v.7. A similar discussion is found in Johannes Wollebius, *Compendium theologiae christianae* (Oxford, 1657), Bk. II.i.15; in *Reformed Dogmatics.*, trans. and ed. John W. Beardslee, III (Oxford University Press, 1965), 193-194.

¹² A. B. Van Zandt, "The Doctrine of the Covenants Considered as the Central Principle of Theology," *The Presbyterian Review* 3 [1882]: 37.

¹³ William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 3 vols. (1888-1894); repr., third edition in one vol., Alan W. Gomes, ed. (Phillipsburg, New Jersey, 2003), 538. Also see Dabney, *SPT*, 300-305.

Many opponents of the doctrine of the covenant of works have fallen afoul on this fundamental issue. Particularly at this point their arrows of criticisms have totally missed the proverbial target.

3.2. Love and Law

Second, many opponents of the doctrine of the covenant of works seem unwittingly to place God's love and God's law in opposition to one another. As noted earlier, some detractors dislike the doctrine of the covenant of works since it allegedly creates a legal relationship between God and man over against a relationship of love and friendship. This notion, the critics argue, brings a foreign and unwelcome development within the history of Reformed theology, for God never relates to his image-bearers in a *quid pro quo* arrangement. Grace or favor or divine friendship and love must have priority over law and duty and reward for obedience.

In addressing this concern it is important to note that errors come in many forms, and one form of error is to set up a false dichotomy, to establish an either/or choice between things that are not as such opposites. The doctrine of the covenant of works does not commit this error, for the doctrine, positively stated, asserts that love and fellowship with God is the real and proper relationship that exists between God and his image-bearer in Paradise before the fall, *and* that being made in the divine image, Adam is to walk before God uprightly, as in righteousness, in thought, word, and deed in order to abide in communion with God. Adam cannot be blessed by living in disobedience to God. Disobedience is sin; and sin brings enmity and death. Adam must trust God, believe God, be faithful to God, and obey God.

No doubt, many critics of the doctrine of the covenant of works would agree with this portrait so long as it is clearly stipulated that in doing these things Adam is not earning from God any blessing or meriting any privilege or securing, by his works, any future for himself or his posterity. Well, certainly that concern is apt if *merit* in the strict sense is meant. As already observed above, however, merit in the strict sense is excluded.

Yet there is another matter that needs clarification at this point. It is important to remember that Adam's (man's) condition in Paradise was amissible—i.e., precisely as God's image-bearer he was the object of the tempter's deceits. The biblical portrait of Adam's state in Paradise shows us that he was subject to temptation and fall, that his nature could be corrupted, and the life he enjoyed in communion with God could be lost—worse, should he disobey God, he was subject to eternal death and damnation as specified in the commandment of life (BC, art. 14). This commandment, the commandment pertaining to the tree of knowledge of good and evil, shows that Adam needed to be warned about his amissible condition: both of *death* should he disobey God and of *life* should he obey his Creator. The death threatened brings an eternal penalty; likewise, the life promised was *eternal life*, for Adam (man), being mutable and fallible, had not yet reached a state of *non posse peccare* (not able to sin). Clearly Adam's test of obedience regarding the commandment of life was, in the way of obedience, *unto life indefectible and eternal*, for himself and his posterity. The Heidelberg Catechism reminds us that God created

Adam (man) so that he might live with him in eternal happiness, and all this for God's praise and glory (HC, Q/A 6). This was a state Adam (man) had not yet attained.¹⁴

The commandment of life, then, demonstrates that God is prepared to usher Adam (man) from a state of mutability and fallibility—*posse peccare* (able to sin)—to a state indefectible, *non posse peccare* (not able to sin) so that he would no longer be subject to the tempter's deceits or stratagems, and so that he might live with God in eternal happiness. This, after all, is why it is termed a commandment of *life*—in obeying it death is excluded. If this were not the case, then Adam (man), mutable and fallible, would be eternally subject to the testing of the serpent and the perpetual possibility of falling into eternal ruin and death. That arrangement certainly does not describe Adam's life in Paradise as *most blessed* and *eternal*, for that arrangement, if it were true, means that God's commandment of life, if obeyed, does not actually issue forth unto *eternal* life with God and death still threatens.

It is important to see that God gives Adam (man) the commandment of life in order that he might bless his image-bearer in the way of his obedience—an obedience already owed to God, an obedience, that in being owed to God, cannot place God in man's debt when performed. Only by way of this stipulated arrangement (or covenant relationship) does God place himself under obligation to man, and that freely and graciously, so that human obedience may issue forth, according to divine promise, in the inheritance of a blessing strictly unearned but nonetheless graciously rewarded, namely eternal and felicitous life with God.¹⁵ This point is so fundamental for a proper understanding of the Reformed doctrine of the covenant of works that unless it is rightly discerned and embraced (and unfortunately it is often not discerned), it becomes impossible to understand the doctrine in its key tenets.

In this connection we also note that it is a mistake to deny that Adam (man) was tested in Paradise by means of the commandment of life. The sacramental nature of the trees in the garden, the peculiar character of that commandment (forbidding the eating of fruit otherwise fitting to consume), and the presence of the serpent in God's good creation make little sense if human probation is disallowed. Besides, the commandment of life, if obeyed, provided the avenue by which Adam (man) could enjoy the gifts of indefectible holiness and happiness (eternal life)—eternal according to God's loving stipulations.

¹⁴ The commandment of life, which some Reformed theologians call "the probationary statute," certainly had a unique function, for in being a positive command it provided "a better test of implicit faith and obedience than a moral statute" could do. It "required obedience for no reason but the sovereign will of God." However, and this is a point not to be missed, the violation of this positive command was also a violation of the moral law, for its violation reveals "contempt of authority, disbelief of God and belief of Satan, discontent with the existing state, impatient curiosity to know, pride and ambition" (Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 538). The probationary command, then, tested Adam in his implicit obedience to God.

¹⁵ Robert L. Dabney explains what would characterize man's relationship with God if the covenant in Paradise was not established. "He [God] might justly have held him [Adam] always under the natural relationship; and Adam's obedience, however long continued, would not have brought God into his debt for the future. Thus, his holiness being mutable, his blessedness would always have hung in suspense. God, therefore, moved by pure grace, condescended to establish a covenant with His holy creature, in virtue of which a temporary obedience might be *graciously* accepted as a ground for God's communicating Himself to him, and assuring him ever after of holiness, happiness, and communion with God" (*SPT*, 302; *italics* added).

According to his love God issues the commandment of life, for love and law are not incongruent with one another. On the contrary, in love God calls us to walk in righteousness before him, since righteousness is always the road along which we enjoy communion with God and a blessed future with him. We may even say that righteousness is the *sine qua non* of an abiding relationship of love, blessing, and friendship with God. Adam's fall into sin proves this. Christ's works of redemption likewise prove this, for his redemptive work issues forth, according to its definitive outcome and effect, in the complete justification and sanctification of his people. Believers are reckoned righteous in him through his righteousness and they become righteous through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.

By way of contrast, when Adam ceased to be righteous, all was forfeited. When Adam did not keep God's Word to him, when he did not do what he was called, equipped, and qualified to do, he yielded Paradise and fellowship with God, both for himself and for all his descendants. He deprived himself and his descendants of eternal life and brought forth eternal death. As the Heidelberg Catechism teaches, God's purpose or intention in creating man in his image was *so that* ("auss daß") he might know God, *so that* he might heartily love him, and *so that* he might live with him in eternal blessedness, to praise and glorify him. There were works to be performed by God's image-bearer, which Adam, unto human ruination, he did not perform, and that is why the Heidelberg Catechism quotes Deut. 27:26, for any violation of God's law (and remember that the law is simply an expression of God's holy and righteous nature) is a violation of God! Cursed be anyone who violates God and his law; an eternal curse be upon those who do not continue to do everything written in the book of the law. That includes the written down moral code and the divine law written on our hearts (see Canons of Dort, III/IV, art. 1; Belgic Confession, art. 114; HC, Q/A 11; also see Rom. 1).

God may certainly establish a relationship with man in Paradise that is both a relationship of love and friendship and a legal relationship that stipulates obedience—which is what he did. For God loves and befriends his image-bearers *and* calls them to obedience. That God stipulates obedience, a life of submission to his will, to his Word, does not mean that God lacks love or does not exercise friendship toward Adam, just as he does not lack love for or fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ, the second Adam, when he calls him to fulfill all righteousness. Similarly, when Jesus teaches us that if we love him, we will keep his commandments (John 14:15, 23-24), thereby calling us to obedience, that does not mean he ceases to love and favor us. Stated in other words, God's relationship with man in Eden was indeed a relationship of love and friendship, but that doesn't mean Adam could live in fellowship with God and enjoy blessings if he walked in way of falsehood and unrighteousness, if he didn't love God or believe his Word, if he disobeyed and did not do what he was required to do, i.e., if he failed to perform the works of the law written on his own heart and heed the positive law given to him regarding the tree of knowledge of good and evil.

Again, love and law are not opposites. Just as faith and works are not opposites *as such*, for true faith issues forth in godly works. The contrast between faith and works is a result of man's fall, so that now, because we are

fallen and our works are corrupted and unfit for any saving good, *our works* must be displaced by a faith in *Christ's works* for us. The contrast between faith and works in God's work to rescue sinners is due to the fall, for faith and works, grounded in God's kindly condescension to bless his image-bearers eternally, were united with one another in the context of Paradise before man had fallen into sin. In believing God's Word to him, Adam was to do the good works required of him.

Thus, we see that if Adam had loved God more than himself, if he had trusted God's Word instead of listening to Satan's lies, if he had performed the will of God, he would have been delivered from the tempter once and for all, and his posterity with him. But in fact Adam did not perform the will of God; instead he sinned against the will of God. He failed at the legal requirements of his relationship with God and therefore surrendered his friendship with God.

Both Scripture and the confessions teach that in his law God rightly requires man to perform its stipulations; and God will not suffer such disobedience to his law, such apostasy, to go unpunished, not in Paradise and not now. Thus he imparts the penalty both now and in eternity, for God's "justice demands that sin, committed against his most supreme majesty, be punished with the supreme penalty—eternal punishment of body and soul" (HC, Q/A 11). Adam could not sin against God with impunity, no matter how much love and favor characterized his relationship with God in Eden.

The Three Forms of Unity teach that man communes with God in the way of trusting obedience and righteousness: believing and obeying God, willing as God wills, loving him with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength.

4. Conclusion

From the considerations and analysis presented, we share Herman Bavinck's sentiment that "the doctrine of the covenant of works is based on Scripture and is eminently valuable."¹⁶ As for the critics of this doctrine who dispute the idea that God's law and human obedience to it qualified and conditioned man's relationship to God in Paradise before the fall, they are faced with the dilemma of explaining how man falls from God's favor if human works do not condition that relationship. They must face, too, why, after the fall into sin, divine law and righteous obedience to it, are necessary for redemption. They also find themselves at odds with the teachings of the Three Forms of Unity on these and related matters, which set forth a rudimentary doctrine of the covenant of works. Again, as Bavinck noted, "one may doubt the word, provided the matter is safe" (*de vocabulo dubiteur, re salva*)¹⁷—which is to say, although a theological idea is not fully formulated in confessional documents, that does not mean it is not taught therein implicitly and materially.

¹⁶ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, II: 568.

¹⁷ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, II: 569.