

HERMAN WITSIUS AND THE ECONOMY OF THE COVENANT OF WORKS: A SKETCH OF HIS DOCTRINE

by Jeffrey Scott

Introduction

IN 1964, the research of two physicists led them to propose the existence of subatomic particles called quarks, which are smaller constituent parts of another subatomic particle known as a hadron. Hadrons are basic to neutrons, protons, and electrons and there is not an instrument in existence that is capable of empirically verifying the actual existence of these particles, let alone the much smaller quark. Despite the lack of any empirical evidence for the existence of the quark, its assumed existence is basic to all nuclear physics research today. Physicists confidently assert that the quark is a “fundamental” particle of all matter. Despite not being able to observe these particles, physicists maintain their existence because all of their calculations and nuclear observations demand that they exist.¹ In other words, quarks *must* exist in order to explain everything else that physicists observe in the sphere of nuclear physics.

In an analogous way, Reformed theologians have described the prelapsarian relationship that YHWH established with Adam in covenantal language despite the absence of such language in Moses’ historic account. On these grounds, there are many who deny the Scriptural legitimacy of the doctrine of the covenant of works. Or, if they allow the term “covenant” they reject expressing the content of the covenant with the language of “works,” “merit,” or “holiness,” believing that it “introduces works righteousness into the divine/human relationship.”² Instead, the dissenters propose a “covenant of love or a covenant of friendship or a covenant of favor; or they argue for some other administrative arrangement that isn’t a covenant.”³ Some of the disagreement is a matter of semantics. But, if the disagreement over words leads us to a wholesale abandonment of the concept, we must ask the question: what are we giving up?

Wilhelmus ‘a Brakel asserts that a proper understanding of this doctrine is vital, for “whoever errs here or denies the existence of the covenant of works, will not understand the covenant of grace, and will readily err con-

1. Stanford University for the U.S. Department of Energy Office of Science, “Quarks,” SLAC National Accelerator Laboratory, published 06/15/09, accessed on 04/18/11, <http://www2.slac.stanford.edu/vvc/theory/quarks.html>.

2. J. Mark Beach, *Theology & Anthropology* (DS 134): Class Notes (Mid-America Reformed Seminary, Dyer, IN, 2011), 234.

3. *Ibid.* In this quote Dr. Beach is alluding to the criticism of the covenant of works by S.G. De Graaf, Clarence Stam, G.C. Berkouwer, and John Murray.

cerning the mediatorship of the Lord Jesus.”⁴ Dr. Richard Muller, an historian who has examined the much-maligned doctrine, reasons that it functions “as a pattern of interpretation for the obedient life a man before the fall and as an explanation of the problem of the holy law of God as it confronts and condemns man after the Fall.”⁵ For the Reformed, it becomes the backdrop for proper “understanding of sin and of sinful human nature,”⁶ and as such, the covenant of works has “an explanatory role over against the doctrine of salvation, specifically, the doctrine of grace and its Mediator.”⁷ Bavinck highlights the significance of understanding the demand placed on Adam as covenant because it is basic to Paul’s formulation of justification: “As the obedience of the one man, that is, Christ, and the grace granted to humanity in him, brought acquittal, righteousness, and life, so the one transgression and misdeed of the one man is the cause of condemnation, sin, and death for humanity as a whole.”⁸ In other words, the ramifications the doctrine of the covenant of works has for Christology and soteriology is “profound.”⁹

Muller calls the prelapsarian covenant a “doctrinal construct,”¹⁰ admitting that it is not explicitly laid down in Scripture. It is a “secondary or derivative albeit still fundamental category of doctrine”¹¹ developed completely in line with the Westminster Confession’s rule of interpretation which says, “the whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man’s salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or *by good and necessary consequence* may be deduced from Scripture” (1:6, emphasis added). Muller is careful to point out that the “exegetical starting point” for the doctrine is not Genesis 1-3, but rather, “the doctrine was a conclusion drawn from a large complex of texts.”¹² Herman Witsius, the great Dutch Reformed theologian of the seventeenth century whose work on the divine covenants “has reached landmark status,”¹³ quoting Clemens Romanus said, “Let the truth be taken from the scriptures themselves”; by these alone it should stand or fall in religious affairs; by these are all controversies to be settled.”¹⁴ Of course, ultimately, the question is whether or not the Scriptures teach a prelapsarian covenant of works.

It is my contention that we do not need a fresh investigation into this matter so much as we need a reorientation to the past in order to discover what our Reformed fathers actually articulated concerning man’s original relationship with his Creator. In this short essay I take up Herman Witsius’s work concerning the covenant of works to seek to demonstrate that this doc-

4. 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 `A Brakel,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 29 (1994): 75-101, 76.

5. *Ibid.*, 89.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*

8. Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: God and Creation*, vol. 2, gen. ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 565.

9. Muller, “The Covenant of Works and the Stability of Divine Law,” 89.

10. *Ibid.*, 75.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*, 90.

13. J. I. Packer’s, “Introduction: On Covenant Theology,” in *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man: Comprehending a Complete Body of Divinity*, vol. 1 (Escondido, CA: The den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1990), 1.

14. *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man: Comprehending a Complete Body of Divinity*, vol. 1 (Escondido, CA: The den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1990), 23.

trine, while thoroughly charged with divine law, is not at all an endorsement of works righteousness, but is rather, as the Westminster Confession avers, an act of “voluntary condescension on God’s part” (7:1), thus indicating that “divine grace also undergirds the divine/human relationship in all of its dispensations- pre-fall and post-fall.”¹⁵

I will track Witsius’s development of this doctrine through his definition and distinction of biblical covenants, noting how he defines the contracting parties and condition of the covenant of works. Following Witsius’s logically progressive articulation of the doctrine, I will then observe how he treats the promises, penal sanctions, and sacramental signs of the covenant. My analysis will conclude with a look at Witsius’s view of divine concurrence in Adam’s disobedience, the subsequent imputation of original sin to Adam’s posterity, and consider to what degree the covenant of works is abrogated.

1. The Definition, Parties, and Conditions of the Covenant of Works

Witsius’s first concern is to establish the biblical usage of the Hebrew word for covenant in its various uses. He needs to establish a definition of the term before he can apply it to the prelapsarian relationship between YHWH and Adam. He notes first that the Hebrew, *berith*, is used “sometimes *improperly*, and sometimes *properly*.”¹⁶ When he says “improperly” he refers to *berith*’s immutable use as a testament, or “irrevocable will” (Num. 18:9); promissory use (Exod. 34:10); and precept, such as the laws of release (Jer. 34:13-14). The proper use of the term *berith* “signifies a mutual agreement between parties, with respect to something,”¹⁷ such as the pacts made between Abraham and his confederates (Gen. 24:28, 29). Witsius says that he has the latter use of *berith* in mind with respect the covenant of works.

Insofar as God covenants with man, Witsius defines it as “an agreement between God and man, about the way of obtaining consummate happiness; including a commination [threatening] of eternal destruction, with which the contemner [despiser] of the happiness, offered in that way, is to be punished.”¹⁸ In other words, a covenant is a relationship between God and man in which God intends to bless man with happiness, yet threatens him with eternal punishment, in the event he seeks happiness in a way not in keeping with the covenant promises.

After having offered his definition of the covenant, it appears Witsius answers an objection to the propriety of God establishing a relationship of this sort with a creature, as if a thing “unbecoming of God.”¹⁹ Witsius answers this objection saying that “God cannot but bind man to love, worship, and seek him, as the chief good.”²⁰ And with great rhetorical force he poses the question, “Who can conceive it to be worthy of God, that he should thus say to man, I am willing that thou seekest me only; but on the condition of never

15. J. Mark Beach, *Christ and the Covenant: Francis Turretin’s Federal Theology as a Defense of the Doctrine of Grace*, Reformed Historical Theology, vol. 1, ed. Herman J. Selderhuis (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 66.

16. Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants*, 42. I.i.3.

17. *Ibid.*, 43. I.i.3.

18. *Ibid.*, 45. I.i.9.

19. *Ibid.*, 46. I.i.11.

20. *Ibid.*

finding me”²¹ For that is the entire purpose of the covenant, that God would be found to be the only source of blessedness and reward of the creature (WCF 7.1). The covenant demands are first and foremost demands for the creature’s happiness.

It is here at the very beginning of Witsius’s treatise on the covenant that he deals the deadliest blow to the argument that a covenant of works introduces a works righteousness whereby the creature strictly merits for himself the reward of eternal life, which God is then obligated to extend to him. Witsius does say that the difference between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace is that in the covenant of works “man is considered as working, and the reward to be given as of debt.”²² However, it is a merit of grace. Those who cry “works!” need to listen to the careful way Witsius articulates the nature of this merit:

Only God, in this covenant, shews what right he has over man. But man, upon his accepting the covenant, and performing the condition, does acquire some right to demand of God the promise; for God has, by his promises, made himself a debtor to man. Or, to speak in a manner more becoming God, he was pleased to make his performing his promises, a debt due to himself, to his goodness, justice, and veracity.²³

Witsius does see an element of merit in this relationship, but it is merit solely based on God’s condescending goodness and grace. Bavinck is less subtle in expressing the nature of merit in the covenant of works when he says,

There is no such thing as merit in the existence of a creature before God” because “human beings were creatures, without entitlements, without rights, without merit. When we have done everything we have been instructed to do, we are still unworthy servants (*duoloi archreioi*, Luke 17.10).... The religion of Holy Scripture is such that in it human beings can nevertheless, as it were, assert certain rights before God... All this is possible solely because God in his condescending goodness give rights to his creature. Every creaturely right is a given benefit, a gift of grace, undeserved and nonobligatory. All reward from the side of God originates in grace; no merit, either of condignity or of congruity, is possible. True religion, accordingly, cannot be anything other than a covenant: it has its origin in the condescending goodness and grace of God.²⁴

So, when opponents of the covenant of works bemoan the merit-religion they hear being taught in it, they are listening to only half of the story and misconstruing it at that. As Witsius and the Reformed tradition have maintained, the covenant of works is God giving to man “full liberty to glory in God, as his God, and to expect from him, that he will become to man, in covenant with him, what he is to himself, even a fountain of consummate happiness.”²⁵ From the very beginning it is a covenant of gracious merit. When

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid., 49. I.i.15.

23. Ibid., 48. I.1.xiv. This formulation is known as “ex pacto” merit, i.e., merit that is awarded to human obedience from the covenant promise of God; hence the reward is not owed apart from God condescending to establish a covenant with his human creature.

24. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: God and Creation*, 570.

25. Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants*, 48. I.i.14.

God could have demanded full obedience of man with only the threat of eternal punishment hanging over his head, God obliged himself to man promising to give him an eternal reward for the obedience that he naturally owed to his Creator, and that without reward.

Witsius's next burden in this treatise is to explain how the contracting parties involved in the covenant of works, God and man, have come to this mutual agreement. He explains that there were two ways in which Adam is bound in relation to this covenant. First, as a man, Adam was "a rational creature, under the law of God, innocent, created after the divine image and endued with sufficient powers to fulfill all righteousness."²⁶ Reasoning backwards from Paul's descriptions of the image of God (Col. 3:10; Eph. 4:24), Witsius, like the Westminster Confession 4:2, describes Adam as originally possessing knowledge, righteousness, and true holiness. "For as God cannot but be wise and holy, and as such, be a pattern to the rational creature, it follows, that a creature wise and holy, is, as such, the expression or resemblance of God."²⁷ Witsius appears to be combating the Socinian claim that man was to possess righteousness as "a privilege peculiar to the covenant of grace, which we obtain in Christ, and which Adam was without."²⁸ Witsius is careful to deconstruct this false notion of the image of God because it wrongly suggests that Adam's will was something entirely separate from and in no way influenced by the moral integrity of his person. Instead of being righteous, supposedly, Adam was neutral with respect to the law of God, being neither induced by an innate quality or by anything outside of himself. Witsius, however, sufficiently demonstrates that "*true holiness* [which he equates with righteousness] denotes such a desire of pleasing God, as is agreeable to the truth known of, and in him, and love for him."²⁹ In other words, holiness and righteousness is the quality of a soul desiring, in love, all that is agreeable to God. But, the Socinians, hoping to protect libertarian free-will, falsely posit neutrality towards God and his commands as a more worthy status of a creature created in the image of God.

So far from this, Witsius demands that we understand the image of God in Adam "as the most excellent deposit from heaven" in which God, "by a continual influx of his providence, should preserve those powers, and excite them to all and each of their acts."³⁰ He is saying that, in order to understand the quality of Adam as a contracting party to the covenant, we must also take account of the fact that "no state can be conceived, in which the creature can act independently of the Creator."³¹ Adam, as a party to this eternally binding covenant, was at no disadvantage.

Not only was Adam, as a man, party to the covenant, but Adam was also the "head and representative of mankind, both *federal* and *natural*."³² As proof, Witsius cites Romans 5:12 noting that "the penalty threatened by God upon Adam's sinning, *thou shalt surely die*," did not affect him alone, "but *death passed upon all men*."³³ As the second proof of Adam's federal head-

26. *Ibid.*, 51. I.ii.3.

27. *Ibid.*, 54. I.ii.9.

28. *Ibid.*, 55. I.ii.10.

29. *Ibid.*, 54. I.ii.9.

30. *Ibid.*, 57. I.ii.13.

31. *Ibid.*

32. *Ibid.*, 58, italics original. I.ii.14.

33. *Ibid.*, italics original.

ship over the whole of humanity, Witsius points to the “beautiful opposition of the first and second Adam,”³⁴ which Paul pursues in Romans 5:15ff. The covenantal nature of the relationship between Adam and YHWH, at first, follows from Paul’s logic there as it parallels the covenant of grace wherein Christ “represents all the elect, in such a manner that they are accounted to have done and suffered themselves, what he did and suffered, in their name and stead.”³⁵

Having considered the contracting parties of the covenant, Witsius unfolds the law or conditions of the covenant. In his discussion he argues for a twofold sense of the law in the covenant; “*the law of nature*, implanted in Adam at his creation,” and “*the symbolical law*, concerning the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.”³⁶ The law of nature the Apostle Paul spoke of as “the work of the law written on their hearts, their conscience bearing witness” (cf. Rom. 2:14, 15). Witsius says that the law was planted in the heart of Adam “appears from the reliques, which, like the ruins of some noble building, are still extant in every man.”³⁷

This law of nature, as Witsius describes it, is not opposed to or incompatible with love. Apparently, Witsius turns his sights on an unnamed author who suggested that “prior to the fall there was properly no law; for then the love of God prevailed, which requires no law.”³⁸ Witsius replies to this assertion. He begins by arguing that law is not the same thing as enforcement but rather the “obligatory virtue” that is “founded on the holiness of the divine nature, so far as imitable by man.”³⁹ Law isn’t a sheriff guaranteeing the observance of ordinances. It is the holiness of God which his image bearers are capable of keeping, and therefore obligated to imitate. Not only this, but everywhere in Scripture love is equated with the law; and sin is the breaching of law.

Further, the Apostle Paul states that “God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh could not do” (Rom. 8:3). This line of reasoning, Witsius notes, is evidence that there was a time when the law was not “weakened by the flesh,” which only could have been before Adam fell. Not only that, but in the new creation, God “inscribes the same law on the heart, which in the first creation he had engraven on the soul.”⁴⁰

We need to pay close attention to Witsius’s response to the assertion of a lawless love, for today there are some who think that they exalt God by maintaining it. By separating love from law they make love arbitrary and subjective. Witsius argues against this line of thinking, because it ultimately grounds love somewhere outside of God. The first table of the law, Witsius says, is summed up by Christ in the saying “you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (Mark 12:30). This command is not founded on “the arbitrary good pleasure of the divine will,” but rather in the “very nature of God.”⁴¹ To say otherwise is to suppose that God could tell his creatures “I am really the chief good, but my

34. Ibid. I.ii.15.

35. Ibid.

36. Ibid., 60. I.iii.1.

37. Ibid. I.iii.2.

38. Ibid., 61. I.iii.5.

39. Ibid. I.iii.6.

40. Ibid., 63. I.iii.7.

41. Ibid., 65. I.iii.12.

will is, not to be esteemed a good in any respect; I, indeed, am worthy of the highest love, but it is my will, that you deem me worthy of your hatred."⁴² This contradiction is not allowed. We must conclude, as Witsius does, that love for God is interpreted for us in the law of nature and the postlapsarian Decalogue, which are one and the same.

The law or conditions of the covenant of works also take shape in the symbolic law represented in the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Witsius observes that the tree was intended by God to test the obedience and love of man toward God as well as to instruct him (1) that "it is unlawful for man, even to desire an apple," but by God's command, (2) "that man's true happiness is placed in God alone ... so that it is HE alone, on whose account all other things appear good and desirable," (3) that Adam might know "much more good in obedience to the divine precept, than in the enjoyment of the most delightful thing in the world," and (4) that Adam had not arrived at the highest happiness, "but to expect a still greater good."⁴³

The perfect keeping of the law was to be an accomplishment of the whole man, both body and soul, for only when the inward man conforms to the outward man can he be complete or perfect. The keeping of the law was also to be done with "all the heart, with all the soul, with all the mind" (Matt. 22:37), and "with all our might" (Deut. 6:5).⁴⁴ And, finally, the keeping of the law was to be done "without interruption or period."⁴⁵ Only when the conditions of the covenant were kept throughout "the period which God had fixed for probation" could man possess the right of reward.⁴⁶

2. The Promises and Penal Sanctions of the Covenant of Works

The promise of reward attached to the covenant commands was that Adam would obtain eternal life, "that is, the most perfect fruition of [God] himself, and that for ever."⁴⁷ While the account in Genesis does not expressly state the promise of reward Witsius bases his assertion, first, on the statement in Romans 8:3, that "God, by sending his son in the flesh, did what the law could not do, 'in that it was weak through the flesh.'"⁴⁸ It is clearly stated in the Scriptures that Christ won for his people the right to eternal life. Witsius infers, therefore, that "had it not therefore been for sin, the law had brought men to the eternal life, which Christ promises to and freely bestows on his own people."⁴⁹

Witsius then argues that Adam was to be rewarded with eternal life, upon obedience to the covenant, from Paul's statement that "the law promised life" (Rom. 7:10). Witsius asks, "But when? In innocence before it was made weak by the flesh."⁵⁰ How could the law have ever promised life if it was not given, or apprehended, by man prior to the fall? Witsius rightly concludes from Paul's statement that there was a time when the law did promise life, and that time was during Adam's probation.

42. *Ibid.*, 66. I.iii.14.

43. *Ibid.*, 68, 69. I.iii.21.

44. *Ibid.*, 70. I.iii.24.

45. *Ibid.* I.iii.24.

46. *Ibid.* I.iii.25.

47. *Ibid.*, 73. I.iv.4.

48. *Ibid.* I.iv.5.

49. *Ibid.*

50. *Ibid.*, 74. I.iv.6.

Lastly, Witsius reasons that eternal life must have been the reward promised Adam because it is logical “that God should promise Adam, by covenant, something greater and better” than he already possessed in his first estate.⁵¹ It would not have been a reward for Adam merely to remain as he already was. Surprisingly, Witsius does not offer any thoughts here about Adam’s status as *posse peccare*. It seems appropriate to broach the subject while discussing the reward for obedience. Surely we want to talk about eternal life as a higher degree of happiness in God, but what about Adam’s ability to sin? Perhaps Witsius is alluding to Adam possessing a state of *non posse peccare* when he says that Adam will have “a more spiritual state”⁵² in eternity. But this language is ambiguous and not particularly helpful.

Having considered the promises of the covenant, it is fitting that Witsius provides analysis of the penal sanctions attached to the covenant in his next major section. In Genesis 2:17, God tells Adam that in the day he eats of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil he “shall surely die.” The controversy surrounding this seemingly plain sanction lies in what is meant by “death.” Witsius makes some introductory observations in this connection, noting first of all that death, being a consequence of sin, was not natural as the Socinians were known to have argued. The penal sanction of death, being attached to the transgression of the symbolic law rather than natural law, formed part of the trial of man’s most perfect obedience to God. The penalty as such must match the crime, so to speak—and the crime of Adam’s disobedience was against “the most holy nature of God.” Moreover, the term “death” here applies to “whatever the scripture any where signifies by that name,” since the death that unfolds in the history of humanity is merely the blossoming of the seed of death sown by Adam. Thus it follows that if all die after Adam sinned, then Adam was acting not only for himself but for all “his posterity.”⁵³

Witsius goes on to explain the various meanings of death spoken of in Scripture. Death, he says, first of all, is the inevitable separation of body and soul. The body which was formed of the dust of the ground is to return to the dust (Gen. 3:19), which means that it is “now unfit for the soul’s constant residence.”⁵⁴ Secondly, Scripture speaks of death as the toil and hardships communicated by God in the formal covenant curses of Gen. 3:16-19. Witsius vividly describes this state of death as the “lasting and hard labour, that great sorrow, all the tedious miseries of this life, by which life ceases to be life, and which are the sad harbingers of certain death.”⁵⁵ Thirdly, Witsius notes how the Scriptures teach that death is the “separation of the soul from God,” which is spiritual death, and which he describes as the “departure of the holy Spirit from it,” referring to Paul’s statement in Ephesians 4:18: “being alienated from the life of God.”⁵⁶ Lastly, Witsius explores the Scriptural teaching about death as *eternal* death, which includes God’s abandonment of the soul, so that it is left without “divine consolation.” The soul finds itself in the miserable state of torment, where God’s face is hidden. This eternal death

51. *Ibid.*, 75. I.iv.8.

52. *Ibid.*, 80. I.iv.20.

53. *Ibid.*, 83. I.v.2.

54. *Ibid.* I.v.3.

55. *Ibid.*, 86. I.v.6.

56. *Ibid.*, 86, 87. I.v.7-8.

involves “a most intense feeling of the wrath of God, for ever and ever, together with horrible despair.”⁵⁷

Concluding his exposition of the scriptural meaning of death, Witsius provides a gloriously cogent explanation of why the soul of man could not be anything other than miserable and vainly longing in its appetites once it is separated from communion with God. He says:

The soul of man was formed for the contemplation of God, as the supreme truth, truth itself, and to seek after him, with all the affection of soul as the supreme good, goodness itself; and it may be said truly to live, when it delights in the contemplation of that truth, and in fruition of that goodness.⁵⁸

What could be the effects on the mind and soul of man once he is, by God’s just penalty, deprived of the estate for which he was created? Witsius says that “it must necessarily perceive itself miserable, by being deprived of the chief good; and being conscious of its misery, most bitterly lament the want of that good, which it was formed to seek after.”⁵⁹ Therefore, man, shut up from the immediate perception of his Creator as his highest blessedness, seeks by sight what he may now only have by faith.

The necessity of the penalty of death, in all of its forms, is rooted in the majesty and holiness of God. Witsius says it is “impossible that God should not love in the tenderest manner, both himself, his majesty, and his glory.”⁶⁰ But when man slights the infinite majesty of God, a majesty to which he is subject by nature, he commits high treason against God and is justly bound over to death. “For *the sinner, as much as in him lies, destroys God and his attributes*, slighting the majesty of God to which it is necessary that all things be subject, from the consideration of both of God and the creatures.”⁶¹ And in this God cannot deny himself (2 Tim. 2:13), and he would do as much if he concealed his majesty or allowed man to slight it.⁶²

Witsius grounds the necessity of the penal sanctions not only on the majesty of God but on his holiness. His holiness is such that “he cannot admit a sinner to union and communion with himself.”⁶³ Not even in the covenant of grace is it possible that God should commune with sinners as such. Witsius offers a much needed correction at this point. It seems that there were some in Witsius’s day, who, like many in our own, mistakenly assert that God favors “the sinner with a communion of friendship, while he [the sinner] continues as such.” But, Witsius is quick to argue that this is a malformed view of grace, for “it is not suitable to the holiness of God to cultivate friendship with the sinner, so long as he continues such.” It is an error to conceive of the covenant of grace as the admission of bare sinners into fellowship with God. Rather, in the covenant of grace, “the satisfaction of Christ was previously requisite to the sinner’s being blessed...” Given that, it is quite mistaken to assert that it becomes God’s holiness to bless sinners and accept them without Christ’s righteousness reckoned to them.⁶⁴

57. *Ibid.*, 88. I.v.11.

58. *Ibid.*, 89. I.v.14.

59. *Ibid.* I.v.14.

60. *Ibid.*, 93. I.v.23.

61. *Ibid.*, italics original. Witsius attributes this quote to Thomas Aquinas. I.v.23.

62. *Ibid.*, 94. I.v.24.

63. *Ibid.*, 95. I.v.26.

64. *Ibid.*, 96. I.v.26.

Answering another common objection that eternal punishment is not justly equivalent to each sin, Witsius argues that sin's punishment ought necessarily to be eternal, according to God's natural right,⁶⁵ as God justice demands it (cf. Rom. 8:4; 1:32; 2:2; 3:25, 26).⁶⁶ The punishment of eternal death is not arbitrarily sanctioned, for in sin committed "against the infinite majesty of God, a malignity *in its measure infinite*, and therefore a demerit of punishment *in its measure infinite* also."⁶⁷ But, while the act itself is not infinite, "the malignity of sin is *in its measure infinite*" due to the fact that it is "committed against an infinite good" and that its stain of sin "endures for ever, unless purged away by the blood of Christ."⁶⁸

Interestingly, while Witsius argues for the justice of eternal punishment, he leaves the door open to that possibility that God might, in the end, release the damned soul from the state of existence. He maintains his ignorance and refuses ultimately to pass judgment on the topic.⁶⁹

3. The Covenant of Works: Sacraments

In his discussion of the sacraments of the covenant of works, Witsius argues that the God provided four sacraments in this covenant so as to confirm "by some sacred symbols, the certainty of his promises."⁷⁰ The sacraments of Paradise, the tree of life, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and the Sabbath function as "visible proclamations of the covenant"⁷¹ that provide a more sure foundation to man's faith, as well as "continually reminding him of his duty."⁷²

In Witsius's estimation, Paradise itself was a sacrament insofar as it was a visible signification of the future reward that awaited Adam in heaven. "The pleasantness of this place, which at every moment set before man the most profuse bounty of the Deity, exhibiting the same to the enjoyment of the senses, assured him [that] ... another residence far more noble and grand"⁷³ awaited him if he maintained his obligations in the covenant during the time of his probation.

Witsius's claim that there are four sacraments is a bit unusual for the tradition.⁷⁴ The problem that I see developing with his view of Paradise as sacrament is that it lends itself to a platonic-like notion that creation is merely a symbol of a higher heavenly ideal. And, if Paradise is truly a sacrament in the covenant of works, what is to say that creation, which is still "before our eyes as a most elegant book (Belgic Confession, Art. 2), doesn't carry over sacramental properties after the fall even though it also groans under the curse of sin? No doubt there are many who are inclined to think that

65. *Ibid.*, 98-99. I.v.31-32.

66. *Ibid.*, 99. I.v.33.

67. *Ibid.*, 103. I.v.40.

68. *Ibid.*

69. *Ibid.*, 104. I.v.41-42

70. *Ibid.*, 104. I.vi.1.

71. D. Patrick Ramsey and Joel R. Beeke, *An Analysis of Herman Witsius's The Economy of the Covenants* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2002), 8.

72. Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants*, 105. I.vi.1.

73. *Ibid.*, 107. I.vi.5.

74. See fn 120 in Beach, *Christ and the Covenant*, 119, 120. Here, Beach provides a rather extensive list of Reformed theologians and their respective positions regarding sacraments in the covenant of works.

praying under a tree or on a mountaintop is more spiritual than praying in other places. Nearly everything in creation could take on sacramental qualities if it somehow provided the individual with an experience that pointed them toward the yet future fulfillment of full communion and dwelling with God.

Next, Witsius describes the sacramental role of the tree of life in the covenant of works. He simply asserts that the tree of life was symbolic of the Son of God, “not indeed as Christ the Mediator, but in as much as he is the life of man in every condition, and the fountain of all happiness.”⁷⁵ Witsius’s does not express a sacramental understanding of the tree of life in terms as clear as, say, Turretin does. Witsius focuses almost exclusively on the signification of Christ in the tree of life. Turretin, however, expands on the sacramental quality of the tree saying, “the life which this tree signified and sealed was not properly the longevity or the immortality of the body alone; rather it was the eternal happiness to be obtained at length in heaven.”⁷⁶

The third sacrament of the covenant of works was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Witsius acknowledges that whether or not this tree is a symbol of the covenant is disputed.⁷⁷ However, the sacramental nature of the tree is verified in that it was “an external and visible sign instituted by God; we have the thing signified, together with a beautiful analogy; we have, in fine, a memorial of man’s duty; all which fully constitute the nature of a sacred symbol or sacrament.”⁷⁸ The tree clearly had a religious function in that the demand not to eat of it ordered an obedience by which Adam could “acknowledge God’s absolute dominion over him.”⁷⁹

What the tree signified however was twofold. First of all, insofar as the tree was called *good* it communicated to Adam that, if he obeyed out of love during the time of his probation, he would “come to the knowledge, sense, and fruition of that good which is truly and excellently so.”⁸⁰ Secondly, the tree signified the curse of disobedience which would come through the experiential knowledge of evil, concerning which Adam was originally ignorant.⁸¹

The tree of knowledge of good and evil, beyond its sacramental signification, served to teach Adam that his happiness “was not to be placed in things pleasing to the sense of the body. Also the tree taught Adam that God’s will was to be the “supreme rule and directory of all the appetites of the soul,” and all of this leading to the conclusion that “there is no attaining to a life of happiness, but by perfect obedience.”⁸²

The last covenantal sacrament that Witsius observes is the first Sabbath. Witsius approaches his treatment of the Sabbath as sacrament first by describing its nature and then by showing in what respects it was a sacrament. When Moses records that on the seventh day God rested, Witsius says that “it was not as if he was fatigued, but as rejoicing in his works so happily completed, and in which he beheld what was worthy of his labour.”⁸³ Thus

75. *Ibid.*, 112.

76. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, vol. 1, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1992), 581.

77. Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants*, 113. I.vi.16.

78. *Ibid.*

79. *Ibid.* I.vi.17.

80. *Ibid.* I.vi.18.

81. *Ibid.*, 114. I.vi.18.

82. *Ibid.* I.vi.19.

83. *Ibid.*, 119. I.vii.7.

for God to bless and sanctify the Sabbath was first of all to declare it set apart for worship and for the joyful observance of God's glory through his works. It was fitting then that as God "rejoices in his works" (Ps. 104:13), that he should require that Adam should religiously imitate God's act of delighting in his own glory.⁸⁴

Witsius views the Sabbath as a sacrament in that God's rest signifies an even greater and more complete rest from his creative labors that he will glory in after he has dissolved this world with fire "to raise a new heaven and a new earth."⁸⁵ The second way in which the first Sabbath was a sacramental sign was that it signified that there lies ahead for Adam, after his probation, a fuller and more complete rest from his labors, just as we anticipate today under the covenant of grace (Heb. 4:10).⁸⁶

4. The Violation and Abrogation of the Covenant of Works

Despite the promise of eternal life, the threat of eternal death, and the four sacramental signs available to aid Adam, he still violated the covenant of works. Witsius analyzes the unfolding of Adam's violation by first observing how Satan succeeded tempting him. Witsius notes how the Scripture teaches Satan transforms himself into "an angel of light" (2 Cor. 11:14). He presented himself to Eve "as if he had been an extraordinary teacher of some important truth, not yet fully understood," and stirred up doubts in the words of God, "which are the destruction of faith."⁸⁷ After provoking doubt in the words of God with respect to the prohibition, Satan calls into question the penalty for disobedience. Witsius can't help but take a polemical shot at the Roman Catholic doctrine of sin at this point. He suggests that this is when Satan first "instilled that heresy into the unwary woman, the first heard of in the world, that there is a sin which does not deserve death, or, which is the same thing as a venial sin."⁸⁸

Witsius demonstrates how Satan held out to them greater promises of obtaining greater knowledge ("your eyes shall be opened") and position ("you will be like gods"), and this in disobedience to the word of God. Witsius notes how most commentators read Genesis 3:5 ("For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good from evil") as Satan blatantly charging God "with open malignity and envy, as if he forbade this tree, lest he should be obliged to admit man into a partnership in his glory."⁸⁹ Witsius believed that such an open blasphemy would have been repugnant to Adam. More convincingly, Witsius proposes that when Satan promised Adam and Eve that their eyes will be opened and they will become like God, they found it enticing precisely because it was consistent with what had been promised to them if they obeyed the stipulations of the covenant.⁹⁰ For doesn't the Apostle John promise us that through Christ's obedience the covenant children "will be like God" (1 John 3:2)?⁹¹

84. *Ibid.*, 120. I.vii.9.

85. *Ibid.*, 123. I.vii.14.

86. *Ibid.*

87. *Ibid.*, 137. I.viii.5.

88. *Ibid.*, 138. I.viii.6.

89. *Ibid.*, 139. I.viii.8.

90. *Ibid.*

91. *Ibid.*, 138. I.viii.7.

Therefore, the treachery of Satan's temptation was not that he promised them something better than God had pledged, but that he promised them a "probationless" entrance into God's very promises by eating the tree rather than abstaining from it. This may have been the very first get-rich-quick scheme!

Witsius's second observation regarding Adam's violation of the covenant of works was intended to address the Socinians (the proto-open theists?) who taught that God did not foreknow the free-will choice of Adam in his disobedience. Over against this, Witsius asserts, with the Apostle Peter, that "Christ was foreordained before the foundation of the world," and that as the Lamb whose blood was to be shed, 1 Pet. 1:19, 20.⁹² Witsius continues, "if foreknown, it was also predetermined."⁹³ This shows that God foreknew Adam's fall according to the exercise of Adam's free will. This also shows that God's foreknowledge includes the infallibility of the event. All the Reformed orthodox maintain this, knowing that it "is evident from the nature of God and the creature; as he cannot ineffectually influence his creatures to act, so they cannot but act, when under his influence."⁹⁴ We know that man does not have being from himself and is always and ever dependent in all of his activities on the will of God as the prior agent. So, Witsius rightly says that glory ought to be rendered to God when his creatures do well because they have done it in him. However, if God should withhold his good moral influence, man has liberty to sin freely (and that according to the infallible decree of God) in such a way that man is neither forced to sin, nor is God the author of sin.⁹⁵

The only item left to be treated by Witsius in his discussion of Adam's violation of the covenant of works is the way in which Adam functioned in the covenant for his posterity. Witsius's explains this relationship by turning to the Apostle Paul's argument in Romans 5:12. It was through an actual sin, the covenant disobedience of Adam, that "all" are said to have sinned, even though "all" have "no actual, proper, and personal sin."⁹⁶ Witsius infers from this that Adam's sin must have been imputed to his progeny if they are to be condemned as guilty for a sin that was not literally their own. He reasons backwards from the covenant of grace, wherein Christ acts as the federal head of the elect, to understand the original nature of the relationship that Adam had with all who are "in him."⁹⁷ After presenting the various interpretations of Paul's argument in Romans, Witsius resoundingly affirms Adam's federal headship so that, like Christ's righteousness, "Adam's sin is ... imputed to all."⁹⁸

The final matter Witsius deals with in his treatise on the doctrine of the covenant of works is the abrogation of the covenant of works on the part of God. Preliminary to the discussion, Witsius is careful to maintain first of all that it is an "immutable and eternal truth" that all are obliged to "perfect performance of duty ... in whatever state soever they are."⁹⁹ It follows then that

92. *Ibid.*, 140. I.viii.10.

93. *Ibid.*, 141. I.viii.11.

94. *Ibid.* I.viii.13.

95. *Ibid.*, 146. I.viii.27-28.

96. *Ibid.*, 147. I.viii.31.

97. *Ibid.*

98. *Ibid.*, 150. I.viii.34.

99. *Ibid.*, 151. I.ix.2.

the promise of eternal life can be obtained in no other way than by complete obedience to the law of God, and no act of obedience will escape the judgment of God. However, Witsius says: “these maxims do not exclude a surety, who may come under engagements in man’s stead, to undergo the penalty, and perform the condition.”¹⁰⁰ So, while Witsius is not yet ready to formally broach the topic of the covenant of grace, he has already begun to lay the foundation for a proper understanding of Christ’s federal acts of active and passive obedience.

Despite the haranguing of Arminius, who believed that sin broke the covenant thus freeing man of the obligation to obey, Witsius soundly contends that the “obligation to obey is founded principally upon God and not a covenant.”¹⁰¹ With impermeable logic, Witsius argues that if sin breaks the bonds of obligation between a creature and his Creator, then “the first of all deceivers spoke truth, that man, by eating the forbidden fruit, would become as God.”¹⁰² Thus, the law and the penal sanctions due to the breaking of the law are not abrogated despite the fact that man has become incapable of keeping it.

This truth, that the law and penal sanctions are not abrogated by sin or the subsequent covenant of grace, is made manifest in the life and work of Jesus Christ. Witsius asserts: “the covenant of grace is not the abolition, but the confirmation of the covenant of works, in so far as the Mediator has fulfilled all the conditions of the covenant, so that all believers may be justified, according to the covenant of works, to which satisfaction was made by the Mediator.”¹⁰³ As the sinner is in Christ, he has satisfied the covenant of works and, by the virtue of his justification, the law becomes “the law of the spirit of life, testifying that satisfaction was made. All the change is in the state of the man, none in the law of the covenant, according to which man, in whatever state he is, is judged.”¹⁰⁴ So, we see that the covenant of works has been abrogated on the part of God only in the sense that “man can no longer obtain eternal life by the keeping of the law.”¹⁰⁵

Conclusion

My stated intention in sketching out Herman Witsius’s exposition of the covenant of works was to answer some of the criticisms leveled at this important doctrine. Most commonly, the doctrine of the covenant of works is denied on the ground that it is more a speculative theological construction than a doctrine of Scripture. In Witsius’s work, there is not even a suggestion that this doctrine is anything other than one soundly established in the Scriptures. In fact, the first words of his treatise argue that

Whoever attempts to discourse on the subject and design of the Divine Covenants, by which eternal salvation is adjudged to man, on certain conditions

100. *Ibid.*, 151.

101. Ramsey and Beeke, *An Analysis*, 10.

102. Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants*, 155. I.ix.11.

103. *Ibid.*, 160. I.ix.23.

104. *Ibid.*, 161. I.ix.23.

105. Ramsey and Beeke, *An Analysis*, 10.

equally worthy of God and the rational creature, ought, above all things, to have a sacred and inviolable regard to the heavenly oracles.¹⁰⁶

Clearly, Witsius believed, and proved, that the covenant of works is a scriptural doctrine, albeit, one that “was not derived from a bare analysis of the early chapters of Genesis. Rather, it was a doctrine derived from a matrix of theological themes and scriptural teachings.”¹⁰⁷

I believe that it has also been demonstrated in my analysis of Witsius that the covenant of works remains unstained from the charge of teaching a doctrine of works righteousness. Witsius clearly demolishes such an argument by showing that it is the duty of every creature to live in perfect obedience to his Creator, without the promise of reward. So, when the doctrine articulates a relationship wherein God condescends to relate to man in the way of a covenant, whereby he promises to reward human obedience—an obedience already owed to him—and so obligating himself to bless man for the obedience rendered, this demonstrates that the pre-fall covenant was first of all a relationship of divine beneficence, goodness, and grace.

The last charge against the covenant of works that I had endeavored to examine in reviewing Witsius’s work is the claim that the doctrine wrongly injects “law” into a relationship of “love.” Witsius magnificently proves that it is a fundamental error to pit law and love against each other. For in Scripture love for God and neighbor are said to be the summary of the divine law. In other words, if we want to prove what love is, we look to the law to define it for us. Also, it would be contrary to the doctrine of the simplicity of God to propose that God’s goodness is proportionately greater than his righteousness, as if God were more portions love than portions just. God is not divisible into parts, so his righteousness and goodness must be maintained at the same time.

Witsius’s treatise on the covenants, particularly the covenant of works, needs to be introduced to modern evangelicalism and reintroduced to the Reformed churches. If we want to maintain the centrality of divine grace in the gospel, we cannot afford to be ignorant of what Christ actually accomplished for sinners in fulfilling all righteousness. And we will forever be ignorant of what Christ accomplished for us if we do not understand this:

[T]he same law [the law of the covenant of works] which was to man in innocence a commandment to life, and is to man in sin, the law of sin, giving him up to the dominion and guilt of sin, becomes again in the Redeemer the law of the spirit of life, testifying that satisfaction was made to it by the Redeemer, and bestowing on man, who by faith is become one with the Redeemer, all the fruits of righteousness for justification, sanctification, and glorification.¹⁰⁸

106. Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants*, 41. I.i.1.

107. Beach, *Christ and the Covenant*, 140.

108. Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants*, 160-61. I.ix.23.