

The Theology of the Westminster Standards WCF 7.2 – The Covenant of Works

*“But like Adam they transgressed the covenant;
there they dealt faithlessly with me.” – Hos 6:7*

I. Review: God’s Condescension in Covenant

“The distance between God and the creature is so great, that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God’s part, which he hath been pleased to express by way of covenant.” (WCF 7.1)

“To be a Christian is to live one’s life not merely in obedience to God, nor merely in dependence on God, nor even merely for the sake of God; it is to stand in conscious, reciprocal fellowship with God, to be identified with Him in thought and purpose and work, to receive from Him and give back to Him in the ceaseless interplay of spiritual forces. It is this direct confrontation of the religious mind with God which finds in the covenant-idea its perfect expression. To be in covenant with God—what finer and what more adequate definition of the perfect religious life could be conceived than this?”

– Geerhardus Vos, “Hebrews, the Epistle of the Diatheke,” 186

II. The Covenant of Works

“The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam; and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience.” (WCF 7.2)

Q. What special act of providence did God exercise toward man in the estate wherein he was created? A. When God had created man, he entered into a covenant of life with him, upon condition of perfect obedience; forbidding him to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, upon pain of death. (WSC 12)

A. Key biblical Texts

1. **Gen 2:15–16** – *“And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, ‘You may surely eat of every tree of the garden,¹⁷ but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.’”*
2. **Rom 5:12** – *“Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned ...”*

“Adam’s first sin as act is representatively our sin. It is just as if we had sinned in it. God reckons it so according to His justice, and this verdict of God is called the imputation of Adam’s first sin. Imputation thus means ‘to put something on someone’s account,’ whether it is required of him or is to his benefit.” (Geerhardus Vos, RD, 2:34)

3. **Gen 2:8** – *“The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.”*

B. Objections to “Covenant of Works”

1. “The word ‘covenant’ isn’t found in Genesis 1–3.” Response?
2. “The term ‘covenant of works’ sounds like man could obligate God to bless him. But this is impossible.” Response?
3. “A ‘covenant of works’ sounds legalistic and cold. A gracious God would never condition blessing on the basis of works.” Response?
 - a. **John 17:4–5** – “I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. ⁵ And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.”

“The covenant of grace is nothing other than a covenant of works accomplished in Christ, the fulfillment of which is given to us by grace.” (Geerhardus Vos)

III. Implications

- A. How would you rate the importance of the covenant of works with Adam for Bible history (see Rom 5:19 and 1 Cor 15:21)?
- B. Is it tempting for Christians to think they are under a covenant of works with God today? When can you tell this is happening in your own life?
 1. **Gal 3:10, 13–14** – “For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.’ ... Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us ... so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.”
- C. What are the implications of Adam’s broken Covenant of Works in the world today? For unbelievers? For the church?

“There are many poor souls that think themselves fine reasoners, yet they pretend to say there is no such thing as original sin; they will charge God with injustice in imputing Adam’s sin to us; although we have got the mark of the beast and of the devil upon us, yet they tell us we are not born in sin. Let them look abroad into the world and see the disorders in it, and think, if they can, if this is the paradise in which God did put man. No! Everything in the world is out of order. I have often thought, when I was abroad, that if there were no other argument to prove original sin, the rising of wolves and tigers against man, nay, the barking of a dog against us, is a proof of original sin. Tigers and lions durst not rise against us, if it were not for Adam’s first sin; for when the creatures rise up against us, it is as much as to say, You have sinned against God, and we take up our Master’s quarrel.” (George Whitefield, *The Method of Grace*)