

CHAPTER 3

THE COVENANT OF WORKS

Definition of the covenant of works

WCF 7:1-2; WLC 20; WSC 12

[Hodge 2, ch. 6; Murray 2, ch. 5; Clark, *The Atonement*, sect. 10]

Its name

Called covenant of works in WCF 7:2; WLC 30

Called covenant of life in WLC 20; WSC 12

Meaning of covenant

Biblical terms:

Hebrew – ברית *brîṭ*

Greek – διαθήκη *diatheke*

1. Definition

An agreement, administrative arrangement, or law imposed by one party on another, or agreed upon by two parties.

- Between equals

Gen 31:44—Jacob and Laban

- From superior to inferior

Gen 6:18; 9:9ff; 15:18; 17:2ff

Cf. suzerain-vassal treaties

Meredith G. Kline, *Treaty of the Great King* [later ed. with new title, *Structure of Biblical Authority*], *By Oath Consigned*

2. Basic features of covenants

Parties

Conditions

Sanctions:

 Promised rewards

 Threatened punishments

3. God's condescension to enter into covenant with man

WCF 7:1, "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."

4. Covenant signs

Used for confirmation:

Genesis 9:8-13 ⁸ Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him: ⁹ "I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you ¹⁰ and with every living creature that was with you—the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you—every living creature on earth. ¹¹ I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be cut off by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth."

¹² And God said, "This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: ¹³ I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth.

Genesis 15:17-18 ¹⁷ When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. ¹⁸ On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, “To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates—

Cf. Jer 34:18-19—walking between the pieces of the animals to make a covenant

Genesis 17:10-11 ¹⁰ This is my covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. ¹¹ You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you.

Luke 22:20 ²⁰ In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.

Basic features of the covenant of works

Parties: God and Adam (representing mankind)

Conditions: perfect obedience to God’s law

Reward: everlasting life for himself and his seed (after a probationary period)

Punishment: spiritual and physical death for himself and his seed

Scriptural evidence for the covenant of works

Parties

Named in Gen 2: God and Adam (esp. vv. 15-17)

Adam representative of all mankind (more under imputation):

- 1) 1 Cor 15:21-22; Rom 5:12-19
- 2) Results apparent in all the race (death, labor in childbirth, toil)
- 3) Parallel in 1 Corinthians and Romans with Christ’s representing his people

Conditions

Obedience to the whole moral law required by the nature of the law (cf. Jas 2:10, “For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.”)

Adam’s obligations reflect moral law: communion with God, Sabbath, family, labor, etc.

Special law—abstain from the tree of knowledge of good and evil (for type of knowledge indicated, see Murray 2:51-53)

Resist temptation

—God ordains temptation, is not the author or agent of temptation (Jas 1:13-15)

Temporary nature of the probation

Elements of tree of life (Gen 2:9), and of children to be born (Gen 2:22-25; cf. 4:1)

Promise of life

Not explicitly stated, but can be inferred:

- 1) Gen 3:22, eternal life denied because of sin
- 2) Gen 2:17, threat of death for disobedience
- 3) Rom 5:12-19, penalty of death contrasted to life
- 4) Christ’s obedience brings life

Many writers have used Hosea 6:7 as an express statement of the covenant of works: “Like Adam, they have broken the covenant.” (“Adam” can be translated “man,” as in the LXX and KJV, NKJV; but “Adam” is used in most modern translations, e.g., ASV, RSV, NASB, NIV, NRSV, ESV)

Note other verses used by Reformed writers refer to other covenants

WCF proof texts:

Rom 10:5, “The man who does these things will live by them” (quoting Lev 18:5)

Luke 10:25-28, “Do this and you will live” (referring to the two great commandments)

C. Hodge: same texts, also Rom 2:7, “by persistence in doing good”

Note on Rom 2:13-15—can refer to Gentile unbelievers (referring to conscience) or to Gentile believers (referring to new heart)

Dabney, *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, 303-04:

Heb 11:6, rewards seekers

Rom 8:3-4, fault with our sin, not covenant of works

— “The Scriptures expounding the nature of the Covenant of Works, expressly say that life would have been the result of perfect obedience. Let the student consult Lev 18:5; Deut 30:15; Ezek 20:11; Matt 19:17; Rom 2:6-7; 7:10; 10:5; Gal 3:12.”

Cf. criticism of Murray 2:55-56

However, statements referring to the Mosaic covenant do reveal God’s natural and habitual treatment of obedience—rewarding with life. Thus, they can be used for argument by analogy (which Hodge notes).

Threat of death

Emphatic form, Gen 2:17, “dying you shall die” = “you shall surely die” (מִוֶּתֶם מוֹת *mût tāmût*)

Note Eve’s vs. Satan’s quotation of this threat, Gen 3:3-4:

3:3 (Eve quoting God), “lest you shall die” (פֶּן־תָּמוּתוּן *pen t^emutûn*)

3:4 (Satan’s response), “you shall not surely die” (לֹא־מוֹתֶם *lô mût t^emutûn*)

(for discussion of Heb. construction, see Gesenius, para. 113v, p. 344; also Keil and Delitzsch on Gen 3:4)

Spiritual death:

Alienation of Adam and Eve from God and each other

Asserted in 1 Cor 15; Rom 5

Physical death: Gen 3:19; 5:5 (and rest of chapter!)

Adam's place in the covenant of works

Representative head of the human race (also called "federal head")

(See above)

WLC 22, "The covenant being made with Adam, as a public person, not for himself only, but for his posterity, . . ."

Covenant made before creation of Eve (Gen 2:17, 22)

Adam's situation

Cf. WLC 20 for the following points:

What was the providence of God toward man in the estate in which he was created?

A. The providence of God toward man in the estate in which he was created, was the placing him in paradise, appointing him to dress it, giving him liberty to eat of the fruit of the earth; putting the creatures under his dominion, and ordaining marriage for his help; affording him communion with himself; instituting the Sabbath; entering into a covenant of life with him, upon condition of personal, perfect, and perpetual obedience, of which the tree of life was a pledge; and forbidding to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, upon the pain of death.

1. "Placing him in paradise"

Garden

Location (names of four rivers, 2:10-14); fits with Middle East or northeast Africa; modern scholars suggest perhaps under the present Persian Gulf

2. “Appointing him to dress it”

Labor involved: “work it,” “take care of it,” Gen 2:15

Work suitable for sinless and glorified creatures

3. “Giving him liberty to eat of the fruit of the earth”

Gen 1:29; 2:8-9, 16 (Ps 104:14-15; but cf. vv. 21, 27))

Meat specified later, after the fall (Gen 9:3; cf. the lamb and Abel)

It’s possible humans were permitted to eat meat before Noah, just not specified;
cf. killing animals for Adam and Eve’s covering, and Abel raising sheep

It’s possible that the animals were peaceful in the garden, but wild outside the
garden, needing to be subdued by man

4. “Putting the creatures under his dominion”

Gen 1:28; 2:19-20 (Ps 8)

5. “Ordaining marriage for his help”

Gen 2:18, 20, “a suitable helper”

Gen 2:22-25, a chaste marriage

Heb 13:4, marriage good and holy

Purposes of marriage:

Before the fall

1) Mutual help, Gen 2:18, 20

2) Produce children in the family, Gen 1:28; 2:24

After the fall

3) Produce godly offspring (in the sinful world), Mal 2:15

4) Avoid fornication, 1 Cor 7:2

Cf. WCF 24:2, “Marriage was ordained for the mutual help of husband and wife; for the increase of mankind with a legitimate issue, and of the Church with an holy seed; and for preventing of uncleanness.”

6. “Affording him communion with himself”

Examples in Gen 1-2—1:28-30; 2:16-17, 22

Personal presence and conversation, Gen 3:8-19

After the fall, but apparently same as before the fall; cf. v. 8

7. “And instituting the Sabbath”

שַׁבָּת *sabbāt*, related to verb שָׁבַט *sābat*—cease, desist, rest (not to similar sounding word שֶׁבַע *šeba‘*—seven)

Rest is proper for God, and for sinless man, Gen 2:2-3; Exod 20:11

Note Sabbath’s relation to resisting temptation in life

8. Giving Adam the “pledge” of the tree of life

Gen 2:9; 3:22, 24

Nature of the tree: sacramental, life-giving (v. 22)

Cf. phrase “lest he take and eat”; could refer to continuous action

The tree of life reappears in the kingdom age (Ezek 47:12; Rev 22:2)

Continuing validity of the covenant of works

[cf. Murray 2:57-59]

Probationary period is ended

We do not lose original righteousness; we never had it.

Many Scriptures pointing to the law for salvation refer to the faith demanded in the Mosaic law, not the the perfect obedience required of Adam.

Adam's sin already is imputed to us.

Relevance continues

Our sin and death are due to Adam's sin under the covenant of works.

Christ's obedience fulfilled the perfect obedience required by the covenant of works—plus much more! (Murray 2:58).

Christ's atonement included the sin of Adam under the covenant of works.