

AND HE WILL BE MY SON:
A BIBLICAL PARADIGM FOR THE COVENANT OF WORKS CONCEPTION

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Introduction

T.S. Eliot once expressed a profound irony concerning those things with which we are most familiar. He said, “We shall never cease from exploration.” “And the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.” Perhaps this truth is nowhere more clearly reflected than in the progress of dogmatic development. Though Christ’s church contends “earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints,” she nevertheless strives to “attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God.” Historically, this advancement toward the unity of the faith has been forged in the crucibles of “debate-within-the-camp” and holy, doctrinal warfare against the enemies of Christian truth.

One recent example of “debate-within-the-camp” surrounds the doctrinal conception “variously known as the covenant of nature, the covenant of life, the Edenic covenant, and the covenant of works.”¹ A variety of criticisms, ranging from modest revisions to outright

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¹Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (London: Banner of Truth, 1941), 211 as quoted in: Peter Golding, *Covenant Theology: The Key of Theology in Reformed Thought and Tradition* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2004), 105.

rejections have been offered by friends and foes alike of Reformed theology. Such disagreement among Reformed theologians, in particular, suggests that further work is needed in drafting a more biblical paradigm for viewing and articulating the covenant of works conception.

The authors of this essay agree that further revision is indeed warranted. It is our hope that the paradigm set forth below contributes to this ongoing discussion. But first, in order to provide a helpful context for evaluating this revision, we will briefly identify the key elements of the classical doctrine and survey some of the advancements resulting from the current debate.²

Key Elements

Reformed theologian, Charles Hodge, provides a succinct outline of the key elements that compose the classical covenant of works conception. Hodge writes:

God having created man after his own image in knowledge, righteousness, and holiness, entered into a covenant of life with him, upon the condition of perfect obedience, forbidding him to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil upon the pain of death.

According to this statement, (1.) God entered into a *covenant* with Adam. (2.) The *promise* annexed to that covenant was life. (3.) The *condition* was perfect obedience. (4.) Its *penalty* was death.³

Additionally, the legal, representative headship of Adam for the entirety of the human race constitutes a fifth key element.⁴ Taken together, these five key elements necessarily demand two important conclusions. First, this pre-lapsarian covenantal arrangement was a means to an end.

²For the sake of brevity, the survey sketched in this paper highlights criticisms offered by those who are, or profess to be, within the Reformed tradition. Information regarding critics operating on Barthian or liberal assumptions can be found in: Cornelius P. Venema, “Recent Criticisms of the Covenant of Works in the Westminster Confession of Faith,” *Mid-America Journal of Theology*, 9 no.3 (1993): 168-176 and Golding, *Covenant Theology*, 106-108.

³Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), 117. Emphasis added.

⁴*Ibid.*, 121-122.

Second, the intended goal or end of this covenantal arrangement was a higher state of existence for Adam than that in which he was created.

It must be noted that strong historical consensus surrounds these two important conclusions. Herman Bavinck ably states this consensus. After briefly setting forth some misguided notions of the church fathers regarding the state and activities of man in integrity, Bavinck says:

Still, everyone acknowledges that Adam did not yet possess the highest humanity, a truth implicit in the probationary command, the freedom of choice, the possibility of sin and death. Especially Augustine made a clear distinction between the ability not to sin (*posse non peccare*) and not to die (*posse non mori*), which Adam possessed, and the inability to sin (*non posse peccare*) and the inability to die (*non posse mori*), gifts that were to be bestowed along with the glorification of the first man in case of obedience and now granted to the elect out of grace.⁵

Bavinck also adds that the Reformed tradition, in contra-distinction to Lutheran theology, carries this Augustinian thought forward into its own doctrinal formulations.⁶ Admittedly, a systematic expression of these elements is lacking in the early Reformers.⁷ However, as early as 1615, *The*

⁵Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 566-567.

⁶*Ibid.*, 572-573.

⁷Peter Golding provides a valuable bibliography of articles which take up the question of whether John Calvin held to a covenant of works conception: Golding, *Covenant Theology*, 222 n.36. For a particularly excellent treatment of this question, consult: Peter Allan Lillback, "Ursinus' Development of the Covenant of Creation: A Debt to Melancthon or Calvin?," *Westminster Theological Journal*, Spring (1981): 247-288. While Calvin may not have held the covenant of works doctrine as expressed in later formulations, it is certain that he embraced the possibility of higher existence for Adam. Note his comments on Genesis 2:7: "Paul makes an antithesis between this living soul and the quickening spirit which Christ confers upon the faithful, (1 Cor. xv. 45,) for no other purpose than to teach us that the state of man was not perfected in the person of Adam; but it is a peculiar benefit conferred by Christ, that we may be renewed to a life which is *celestial*, whereas before the fall of Adam, man's life was only *earthly*, seeing it had no firm and settled constancy: John Calvin, *Genesis*, in vol. 1 of *Calvin's Commentaries*, trans. John King (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Company, 2005), 112-113. Again, in his comments on 1 Corinthians 15:45, he says: "In short, Paul's meaning is, that the

Irish Articles of Religion brings us the first abbreviated articulation of the covenant of works doctrine in credal form:

21. Man being at the beginning created according to the image of God (which consisted especially in the wisdom of his mind and the true holiness of his free will), had the covenant of the law ingrafted in his heart, whereby God did promise unto him everlasting life upon condition that he performed entire and perfect obedience unto his Commandments, according to that measure of strength wherewith he was endued in his creation, and threatened death unto him if he did not perform the same.⁸

Thirty two years later, *The Westminster Confession of Faith* significantly expands upon this conception and gives us the covenant of works doctrine as it is known (and debated) today.⁹

Current Debate

Notwithstanding historic espousal of the individual key elements and the explicit delineation of the covenant of works doctrine in some Reformed symbols, criticisms and suggested revisions continue to surface. At times, various key elements undergo intense scrutiny. More frequently, however, the debate centers on terminological issues.¹⁰ Yet, in spite of the broad spectrum these criticisms represent, consensus appears to be developing around several

condition that we obtain through Christ is greatly superior to the lot of the *first man*, because a *living soul* was conferred upon Adam in his own name, and in that of his posterity, but Christ procured for us the Spirit, who is *life*.”: Calvin, *1 Corinthians*, xv. 46, 53.

⁸*The Irish Articles of Religion, 1615*, Article XXI. See: Philip Schaff, ed. *The Creeds of Christendom: With a History and Critical Notes*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Company, 1983), 530.

⁹*The Westminster Confession of Faith, 1647*, Chapter IV:II; Chapter VII; Chapter XIX:I, VI. See: Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom*, 611-612; 616-618; 640-42.

¹⁰For example, contention exists around the terms grace, merit, covenant, works, probation and life (as offered by the tree of life). Among these, the term merit, in particular, has been the source of much heated debate. Though we are not completely satisfied with his conclusion, for an informative historical study of merit terminology, see: Lee Irons, “Redefining Merit: An Examination of Medieval Presuppositions in Covenant Theology,” in *Creator, Redeemer, Consummator: A Festschrift for Meredith G. Kline*, eds. Howard Griffith, John R. Muether (Greenville, SC: Reformed Academic Press, 2000), 253-269.

observations. Though multiple writers could be reviewed with varying degrees of profit, the survey below sketches the affirmations, denials and contributions of three important figures in this current debate and reveals the contours of this developing consensus.

Herman Hoeksema

The first noteworthy criticism comes from the pen of Herman Hoeksema.¹¹ Although Hoeksema affirms aspects of the covenant of works, he presents five objections to the classical doctrine which ultimately lead him to “condemn it as unscriptural.”¹² Yet, ironically, some of Hoeksema’s criticisms actually serve to revise and strengthen the doctrine.

Elements affirmed. Consistent with the covenant of works, Hoeksema affirms the presence of a pre-lapsarian covenant.¹³ He acknowledges the positive law and penalty regarding the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. He likewise upholds the necessity of obedience to avoid the penalty of death and the representative headship of Adam for the human race.

Elements denied. It is Hoeksema’s first and central objection that strikes at the very heart of the covenant of works. He says, “...the theory that Adam had the promise of God that he would inherit eternal life had he obeyed the probationary command does not fit in with the

¹¹Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1966), 214-226.

¹²Ibid., 220.

¹³Ibid., 217; 220-222. Hoeksema sees the covenant, however, as “a relation of living fellowship and friendship” as opposed to an “established agreement between Adam and his Creator, consisting of a condition, a promise, and a penalty...” On the basis of this “relation” view, he sees no room for the Adamic administration as “a means to an end.” Rather, the covenant (understood as relationship) is an end in itself.

rest of Scripture, nor with any possible dogmatic conception.”¹⁴ This primary criticism, however, is patently misguided in that it stems from a non-biblical, dualistic conception of earthly and heavenly existence.¹⁵ Furthermore, it is completely out of line with the doctrinal heritage that Hoeksema otherwise embraces.

Contributions offered. In spite of the erroneous nature of his main objection, Hoeksema nevertheless advances the debate in three ways. First, he rejects the classical idea of the pre-lapsarian covenant as an agreement, compact or contract.¹⁶ This observation represents a much needed corrective to the classical conception, for there is simply no Scriptural evidence of Adam agreeing to enter any kind of contractual arrangement offered by the Almighty. Furthermore, Hoeksema draws attention to some of the problems inherent in utilizing the language of ‘merit’ to characterize Adam’s obedience.¹⁷ Finally, Hoeksema highlights the deficiency of viewing the pre-lapsarian relationship between God and Adam through a “wage

¹⁴Ibid., 219.

¹⁵Ibid., 217-220. Hoeksema reveals this dualism in unambiguous terms: “It is true, of course, that Adam would not have suffered the death penalty if he had obeyed. But this is quite different from saying that he would have attained to glory and immortality.” “...Adam might have lived everlastingly in his earthly state.” “He might have continued to eat from the tree of life and live forever; but everlasting earthly life is not the same as what Scripture means by eternal life” (217). Also, “And the fact is that it was quite impossible for Adam to attain to the heavenly level of immortal life.” “Immortality and heavenly glory are in Christ Jesus alone” (220).

¹⁶Ibid., 217. Though offered with some qualification, this classical view is reflected in works such as: Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger, vol. 1 (Philipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1992), 574.

¹⁷Ibid., 217-218.

earner” paradigm. Consistent with his definition of the covenant, he posits that the relationship of Adam to God is best viewed through the lens of “friend-servant.”¹⁸

John Murray

In his important article, “The Adamic Administration,” John Murray offers an insightful critique which further advances the covenant of works debate.¹⁹ Although some lay charges of denial at his feet,²⁰ Murray stands in agreement with four of the five key elements of the classical doctrine. This essential agreement leads most subscribers and at least one opponent of the covenant of works to place Murray’s revisions squarely within the stream of confessional thought.²¹

¹⁸Ibid., 222-223.

¹⁹John Murray, “The Adamic Administration,” in *Collected Writings of John Murray*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 47-59. Our indebtedness to Murray’s contributions cannot be overstated: e.g., Samuel E. Waldron, *A Modern Exposition of the 1689 Baptist Confession of Faith* (Durham, England: Evangelical Press, 1989), 91-100. The revisions we offer below consciously build upon the foundation of his biblical-theological insights. In addition to our own observations, we seek to explore, synthesize and expand upon a variety of Murray’s theological offerings.

²⁰See Meredith Kline, “Covenant Theology Under Attack,” *New Horizons*, February (1994) and Mark W. Karlberg, “Reformed Interpretation of the Mosaic Covenant,” in *Covenant Theology in Reformed Perspective* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publisher, 2000), 43-46.

²¹For a subscriber’s vindication, note the words of Venema: “What you find in Murray’s treatment of the WCF’s doctrine of the covenant of works, then, is not so much a repudiation of any of its essential teaching as a refinement of some aspects of the WCF’s formulation that he finds objectionable or misleading,” Venema, “Recent Criticisms of the Covenant of Works,” 185. For an opponent’s support, note the words of Ralph A. Smith: “Murray’s supposition fits perfectly with the notion of a covenant of works, which, as this quotation shows, he denies only in language and not in substance.” Similarly, “Murray’s view is consistent with the traditional covenant of works idea, even though he refused the term...” Ralph A. Smith, *Eternal Covenant: How the Trinity Reshapes Covenant Theology* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003), 67; 76.

Elements affirmed. The sectional headings of “The Adamic Administration” reveal Murray’s overt majority-alignment with the traditional doctrine. Murray gives considerable treatment to the key elements of condition, promise, and threatening (penalty). Additionally, he conveys the parallels between the representative headships of Adam and Christ with enough clarity and passion to move a reader from theological reflection to doxological joy.

Elements denied. One significant departure Murray makes from the classic formulation is his denial of the existence of a pre-lapsarian covenant.²² He prefers to reserve the term ‘covenant’ for the redemptive era and consequently views the pre-lapsarian arrangement as simply “a special act of providence.”²³ Moreover, Murray contends that the term ‘works’ is not an appropriate denominator for the Edenic arrangement, for it obscures “the elements of [condescending] grace entering into the administration.”²⁴ As a corollary to this, Murray insists that “we must dissociate all notions of meritorious reward,” on the basis of simple justice, from the promise of life in the administration.²⁵ For Murray, the principle of simple justice could not

²²Murray, “The Adamic Administration,” 49-50.

²³Ibid., 49.

²⁴Ibid., 49.

²⁵Ibid., 56. On this point Meredith Kline asserts that Murray opened the door for the introduction of Norman Shepherd’s erroneous views: Kline, “Covenant Theology Under Attack.” Kline contends that Adam was, indeed, able to meritoriously attain eternal life on the basis of simple justice. For Kline, *any* use of the term ‘grace’ or denial of meritorious obedience in the pre-fall arrangement is an attack upon the gospel itself. While Kline writes as a friend of the Reformation and champion of the classical doctrine of justification *sola fide*, his no-grace/all-merit view of the covenant of works represents a deviation from both the spirit of Reformed symbols and significant contributors within the Reformed tradition: see A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1991), 310; R. L. Dabney, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1996), 300-301; Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, ed. Bolt, Trans. Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 570. Of course, these Reformed theologians carefully distinguished the pre-fall ‘grace’ of God from the saving grace

have issued a reward of confirmation in righteousness and life. Rather, such a blessed hope could only come on the basis of God’s faithfulness to His own promise.

Contributions offered. Murray makes at least four contributions which refine the quality and accuracy of the covenant of works conception. First, like Hoeksema, Murray draws attention to the error of viewing the Adamic administration as a contract or compact.²⁶ Next, due to his denial of a pre-lapsarian covenant, Murray helpfully maintains that the administration’s “uniqueness and singularity must be recognized.”²⁷ This means that along with the classical doctrine, Murray acknowledges that Christ indeed “fulfilled the obedience in which Adam failed.”²⁸ Yet, he observes that “[I]t would not be correct to say, however, that Christ’s obedience was the same in content or demand.”²⁹ The foundational parallel between Adam and Christ is that both were under law with diverse requirements of obedience, rather than under a singular and uniform arrangement styled as the covenant of works. A third observation consists, again with Hoeksema, in Murray’s highlighting the deficiencies of merit terminology.

of God. Nevertheless, they had no qualms with employing the term ‘grace’ to describe the condescension of God in offering man the possibility of attaining the reward of life. After all, the Scriptures themselves employ the term ‘grace’ without reference to human demerit in the case of the God-man, Jesus Christ (John 1:14). Similarly, these and other equally noteworthy men have rejected or heavily qualified the usage of the term ‘merit’ with regard to the pre-fall state: see John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. McNeill, trans. Battles (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), III.XV.2, 789; Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 1, ed. Bolt, trans. Vriend (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), 652, sec.3; R. L. Dabney, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1996), 300-301; Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 570. Kline’s contentions, therefore, must be viewed at best as unhelpfully restrictive.

²⁶Ibid., 50.

²⁷Ibid., 50.

²⁸Ibid., 58.

²⁹Ibid., 58.

The final refinement concerns Murray's expositions of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the tree of life. Herein lays a significant advance in handling the pertinent biblical data. With masterful insight, Murray concludes that the knowledge of good and evil "describes the issue of either alternative of the probation."³⁰ This underscores the reality of remaining growth or maturation for Adam in his state of integrity. There was knowledge yet to be attained.

Similarly, Murray asserts that the tree of life, though not forbidden, was nevertheless "by the arrangements of providence or of revelation ... recognized as reserved for the issue of probationary obedience."³¹ With this observation, Murray both sustains and buttresses the classical end of the covenant of works. He sustains the classical end by holding to the possibility of a higher existence for Adam. He buttresses the doctrine by attesting that Adam had not yet partaken of the tree of life – a position which is ambiguous or denied among some Reformed theologians on the basis of an inference that Adam was permitted to eat of the tree of life (more on this below).

James B. Jordan

The final important figure of our survey is James B. Jordan. In a collection of essays entitled *The Federal Vision*, Jordan offers a criticism of the covenant of works conception that is

³⁰Ibid., 52. It must be remembered that the knowledge of good and evil is both a communicable attribute of God (Gen 3:22) and a sign of maturity (Heb 5:14). It is reasonable, therefore, to conclude that a successful probation for Adam would have issued in permission to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in order to acquire its attribute (more below).

³¹Ibid., 48.

at once as disconcerting as it is insightful.³² Jordan himself concedes that “[I]n this essay there has been much that is “new” and doubtless controversial.”³³

Elements affirmed. Jordan maintains the presence of a pre-lapsarian covenant. Like Hoeksema, his definition of covenant negates the compact notion and instead views the Adamic covenant as an “in-created” reality. Jordan also affirms the condition of obedience and penalty of death related to the forbidden tree. Additionally, he agrees that the Adamic covenant entails promise of a higher state of existence. Finally, Jordan allows for the representative headship of Adam, yet with qualifications that obscure his degree of alignment with the Reformed confessional heritage.³⁴

Elements denied. While Jordan affirms the promise of a higher state of existence, he proposes that the forbidden tree, rather than the tree of life, affords this possibility. For Jordan, progression from childhood to maturation is the central focus and eschatological goal of the Adamic covenant. Consistent with this maturation view, he disallows any consideration of meritorious works in the administration. Unfortunately, as a result of these denials, the classical triad of righteousness – justification – life is opaque at best in Jordan’s materials.

³²James B. Jordan, “Merit Versus Maturity: What Did Jesus Do for Us?,” in *The Federal Vision*, eds. Steve Wilkins, Duane Garner (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2004), 151-200.

³³Ibid., 195. Among Jordan’s controversial assertions is his belief that had Adam obeyed God in the face of temptation he would have been permitted to eat of the forbidden tree, died a “good death” and then been resurrected by God to “a more glorious existence” (175).

³⁴Ibid., 194-195. For example, Jordan espouses a view of double imputation. However, his idea of double imputation involves the imputation of “our sins to Jesus and His *glory* to us...” [emphasis added]. He rejects the notion that Jesus’ earthly works are given to us, citing the apparent meaninglessness of His miracles in an imputation schema. Yet, Jordan does not disclose his view of the real issue at stake – whether the *righteousness* (not the works) of Christ is imputed to His people.

Contributions offered. As with Murray, Jordan’s concern for thorough exegesis of the Genesis data is laudable. Specifically, Jordan’s emphasis on the maturation implied by the tree of the knowledge of good and evil sheds fresh light on the pre-lapsarian context. Furthermore, his viewing of the administration through a Father-son paradigm brings the narrative of the Genesis text into the forefront.

Summary

This brief survey provides us with the contours of a more biblical approach and articulation of the covenant of works conception. The current debate is trending toward consensus around several needed clarifications. First, if a pre-lapsarian covenant exists, it is certainly of Sovereign imposition and must not be viewed as a compact or contract. However, it must be admitted that there is no explicit record of an oath-sworn promise in the pertinent Genesis materials. For this reason, we agree with Murray that the term ‘covenant’ should be reserved for redemptive history.³⁵ Another positive advance involves the superiority of the Father-son paradigm for viewing the pre-lapsarian state in that it best expresses the biblical-theological narrative³⁶ running throughout Scripture (more below). Obedience in this context

³⁵We wish to acknowledge that many commentators and theologians view Hosea 6:7 as supplying explicit proof for a pre-lapsarian covenant — “But like Adam they have transgressed the covenant.” However, the phrase “like Adam” is also capable of being translated “like men.” Herein lays the controversy. Robert Reymond views the translation “like men” as introducing “an inanity into the text”: Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1998), 430. Calvin, however, disagrees. He deems the translation “like Adam” to be “frigid and diluted” and refuses to “stop to refute this comment; for we see that it is in itself vapid”: Calvin, *Hosea*, 235. Such diversity of perspectives among godly men should dissuade any dogmatic use of this verse as a proof text for a pre-lapsarian covenant. Furthermore, the existence of such a covenant is not crucial for the thesis offered in this essay.

³⁶Geerhardus Vos comments: “In the long run that system will hold the field which can be proven to have grown organically from the main stem of revelation, and to be interwoven

helpfully shifts away from the medieval baggage attending merit terminology.³⁷ Finally, the additional exegetical attention given to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the tree of life paves the way for a more comprehensive view of the Edenic arrangement.

Consistent with these clarifications, we propose that the biblical doctrine of “sonship,” rightly understood, provides a helpful paradigm for maintaining the soteriological/eschatological concerns of the covenant of works conception. More specifically, we believe that maturation from immature to mature son, along with the acquisition of the power and inheritance belonging to such maturity, reflects an accurate exposition of the particulars of Genesis chapters 1-3. In the post-lapsarian era of redemption, it is precisely the sonship paradigm that illustrates Yahweh’s relationships with Israel, Christ, and the New Covenant church. So, before applying our suggested revision to the Genesis materials, we will briefly review these three illustrations.

Paradigm Illustrated

Throughout the course of redemptive history, the sonship paradigm consistently illustrates Yahweh’s relationship with His people. Additionally, this sonship always entails an order of growth and progression from childhood or immaturity to maturity. Furthermore, it is always (and only) the faithful, mature son that possesses power and the Father’s inheritance. As we will see, it is not without significance that the three major foci of the redemptive era are illustrative of this paradigm: Israel as son, Christ as son, and the New Covenant church as son.

with the very fibre of Biblical religion.” Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2000), 18.

³⁷Though Kline/Irons recognize the problems attending merit terminology and attempt to redefine the term, they nevertheless argue tenaciously for the abiding importance of espousing the idea of reward for *meritorious* obedience on the principle of simple justice. Smith, however, insightfully states, “if merit simply means “covenant faithfulness,” why not dispense with the extra term?” Smith, *Eternal Covenant*, 64.

Israel as Son

The nation of Israel provides the first illustration of the sonship paradigm. While Yahweh employs a variety of metaphors to describe His relationship with Israel, ‘sonship’ holds a prominent place (Exod 4:22-23; Hos 11:1; Rom 9:4). This sonship, however, is not static. It involves a maturation process from immaturity to maturity.

According to the Apostle Paul, childish Israel lives under tutelage until the appointed time set by the Father:

Now I say, as long as the heir is a child, he does not differ at all from a slave although he is owner of everything, but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by the father. So also we, while we were children, were held in bondage under the elemental things of the world (Gal 4:1-3).

Yahweh utilizes elemental principles – “Do not handle, do not taste, do not touch!” as pedagogical instructors. One goal of this instruction is to produce the full maturation of Israel for the purpose of receiving the inheritance. While waiting until the date set by the Father, Israel’s faithfulness to the Law serves as the condition or stipulation for full and permanent possession of the inheritance: i.e., the Promised Land, dominion over the Gentiles, and Yahweh Himself.

Similarly, what is true of the nation corporately is embodied in Israel’s king. The king, as an Israelite, is already a son of God. However, in the case of Solomon, Yahweh promises to be a Father to him and that “he will be a son to Me” *upon his enthronement* (2 Sam 7:12-14). In a unique sense, the king is a son of God. Wicked kings aside, this sonship is unique as it is a typological expression of mature sonship. As king, Solomon asks for “an understanding heart to judge Thy people to *discern between good and evil*” – the consummate sign of maturity in Scripture (1 Kgs 3:9; cf. Heb 5:14, more below). In other words, mature sonship, power/rule and inheritance are inseparably related in the Old Testament economy. In fact, the very words of

Psalm 2, as they apply typically to David, describe the king's enthronement in power and the attending entitlement to the inheritance as being *begotten* by Yahweh:

But as for Me, I have installed My King upon Zion, My holy mountain. I will surely tell of the decree of the Lord: He said to Me, Thou art My Son, today I have begotten Thee. Ask of Me, and I will surely give the nations as Thine inheritance, and the very ends of the earth as Thy possession (Ps 2:6-8).

Enthroned kingship, then, with its exercise of dominion, power of judicial pronouncement and entitlement to inheritance is the quintessential expression of mature sonship.

Christ as Son

Following this, the humanity and Messianic role of Jesus of Nazareth takes on added dimensions. As to His deity, Jesus is certainly the only begotten Son of God (John 1:14-18; 3:16). What is often missed is that the language of 'son' is also descriptive of His identity as the Son of David (Matt 1:1). As the Son of God in this Davidic sense, Jesus underwent (albeit without sin) progression and maturation. This progressive maturation has direct bearing upon and correlation with His obedience to the Father's will. Murray writes:

It is in this respect that much of orthodox thinking has failed, and that for the reason that the implications of our Lord's human identity have been often overlooked, and in some instances even resisted, lest, as is erroneously thought, prejudice would thereby be offered to his deity. Our Lord was truly human. The moment we think of human nature we must posit growth, development, progression. And so of Jesus we read that 'he increased in wisdom and stature and in favour with God and man' (Luke 2:52). If he increased in wisdom he must have increased in knowledge, and this increase in knowledge must have applied pre-eminently to his understanding of the Father's will and the purpose for which he came into the world. But parallel to this there was increase in wisdom and therefore in the proper application of knowledge to the diverse situations as they emerged. This implies increase in obedience as the demands devolving upon him became more and more exacting, until they reached their climax in the death upon the accursed tree.³⁸

³⁸John Murray, "The Obedience of Christ," in *Collected Writings of John Murray*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 153.

When Luke records the genealogy of Jesus, he applies this developing maturation of Christ in an even more enlightening way. After noting the Father's approval of the Son at His baptism (Luke 3:22), Luke immediately traces the genealogy of Christ not only to David, but all the way back to Adam, the son of God (Luke 3:23-38). He then moves directly into the account of the desert temptation (Luke 4:1-13). Vos rightly concludes that Luke employs this approach in order to paint the desert temptation as a recapitulation of the original Edenic temptation.³⁹ Luke demonstrates that the New Adam, who is the Father's beloved Son, progressively and ultimately renders the perfect obedience the old Adam failed to offer.

Another perspective equally applies to the obedience of Christ. The sonship and obedience of Jesus is also representative of both Israel (Matt 2:15) and Israel's king (Matt 2:2). Parallel to the enthronement 'sonship' of Israel's king, Jesus "was *declared* the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead" (Rom 1:4). In other words, as a result of His perfect maturation and obedience to the Father's will, Jesus attained the authority, power and inheritance belonging to a mature son (Ps 2:7-8, cf. Acts 13:33; Matt 28:18-20; Phil 2:8-11; 1 Tim 6:15-16; Heb 1:5, 5:8-10).

New Covenant Church as Son

Finally, the New Covenant church provides a third illustration of the sonship paradigm. Here a careful distinction must be made. In terms of covenantal and economic sonship, the true church is the mature son, in Christ, who already irrevocably possesses the down payment of the inheritance (Eph 1:14). The New Covenant church is the true Israel of God, who enjoys liberty

³⁹Vos, *Biblical Theology*, 333.

in the Spirit of the Lord (2 Cor 3:17) and is no longer under elemental principles (Gal 4:7; Col 2:20-22).

Yet, in terms of experience and practice, the New Covenant church, too, must grow into a mature man (Eph 4:13), partake of solid food which is for the mature (Heb 5:14), and in the age to come will *become* the sons of God when enthroned (Rev 21:7): inheriting the earth, dominion, immortality and the abiding presence of Yahweh Himself. The already/not yet eschatological dynamic, operating during the overlapping of the ages, accounts for the apparent delay in the full possession of power and inheritance otherwise belonging to such mature sons.

Paradigm Applied

These three illustrations bring us to consider the Genesis materials. The question that begs answering is, “Does the sonship paradigm, which is so central to the era of redemption, have any roots or basis in the pre-lapsarian state?” The answer is a resounding, yes! The components of sonship, maturation and inheritance are all present in the Edenic scene. Consequently, the sonship paradigm represents the most natural exposition of the pertinent materials and serves as the origin of the narrative thread running throughout the rest of Scripture.⁴⁰

Adam as Son

A careful exposition of Genesis 1-3 reveals the essential description of Adam’s ontological and ethical relationship to God. In short, Adam is originally created as a son of God. Support for this claim is garnered from the intimate connection between image-bearing and

⁴⁰Additionally, in our opinion, the sonship paradigm alleviates the need for dogmatism concerning the existence or non-existence of a pre-lapsarian covenant.

sonship (Gen 1:26-27; cf. Gen 5:1-3). Furthermore, this fact is also borne out by the explicit statement of Luke 3:38.⁴¹ As a result, whatever occurs in the relationship between Adam and God, before the fall, occurs within a filial context. Yahweh deals with Adam as a Father to a son.

This is not to deny, however, the creaturehood or servanthood of Adam emphasized in credal formulations. Functionally speaking, Adam is indeed a servant of the Lord. Both Adam and Eve are to exercise dominion over the creation as vice-regents of Yahweh. However, the sonship of Adam is more fundamental than his servanthood.⁴² Several considerations demonstrate this fact. After the fall, all of humanity remains the image of God (Gen 5:1-3; 9:6; 1 Cor 11:7; Jas 3:9). Similarly, dominion is shared by all mankind (Gen 9:2). Yet, sonship, in the sense of heir apparent, belongs exclusively to those who are the objects of God's redemptive actions and purposes.⁴³

Still, no antithesis exists between sonship and servanthood. In fact, the minor or immature son "does not differ at all from a slave although he is owner (lord) of everything (Gal 4:1). The immature son, like the slave, is under house rules. The Master of the house requires obedience from both. However, at the end of the day, a faithful slave remains only a servant (Heb 3:5-6). It is the faithful son who inherits the Father's possessions."⁴⁴

⁴¹Luke 3:38 does not explicitly contain the Greek term for son. This term, however, is found in Luke 3:23 and rightly supplied throughout the genealogy.

⁴²While Kline gives credence to the sonship of Adam, he nevertheless grants primacy to his vassal-kingship. In so doing, Kline creates the framework for his insistence upon meritorious obedience and reward on the basis of simple justice: Meredith G. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview* (Overland Park, KS: Two Age Press, 2000), 42.

⁴³Only a residual usage of 'sonship' language remains for fallen man in the qualified sense of being the created offspring/image of God (Acts 17:28-29).

⁴⁴Note, however, the Scriptures do assert that a *shameful* son will be supplanted by a wise servant with regard to the inheritance (Proverbs 17:2). This fact points to a possible

Maturation

This sonship of Adam, though blessed and innocent is nevertheless in a stage of immaturity. At first glance, this may seem a startling assertion considering the “very good” pronouncement of Elohim upon His creation (Gen 1:31). Yet, two central observations demonstrate the accuracy of this claim. Those two observations surround the peccability of Adam’s ethical disposition and the data concerning the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

First, the peccability of Adam’s ethical disposition implicitly suggests a stage of immature sonship. Though Adam is created upright (Eccl 7:29), he is yet able to sin against his Father. Until the temptation occurs, the son remains untested and unproven with regard to his faithfulness and allegiance to the Father’s will. Disobedience and unfaithfulness are potential realities. Such peccability is certainly not a reflection of His Father’s nature (Jas 1:13, 17). Therefore, the son invariably has some growing up to do in order to be a full and express image of His Father. He must remain steadfast in obedience, even in the face of temptation, until such maturation reaches its zenith in an irreversibly righteous character.

Second, the data concerning the tree of the knowledge of good and evil explicitly reveals the immaturity of Adam. To begin with, the very existence of the tree itself indicates that

solution to the controversy surrounding ‘merit.’ The Scriptures never describe sons as earning the inheritance from their fathers via obedience as in an employee/employer relationship. In fact, even the minor son, by mere virtue of his birth, is already in principle the “owner of everything” (Gal 4:1). Yet, the Bible does speak of ‘worthy’ sons and ‘shameful’ sons. A son cannot earn an inheritance by obedience, as a laborer would earn his wages (cf. Luke 15:29, 31). However, a son’s submissive obedience in his father’s house demonstrates his worthiness of the family name and consequently the right to share in the inheritance. In contrast, a shameful son who fails to live up to the family name (i.e., fails to rightly ‘image’ his father) will forfeit his share in the family holdings. This principle may shed intriguing light upon the situation in the pre-fall state. Before Adam acted in rebellion, he was an ‘unashamed’ (cf. Gen 2:25) son and was entitled, by virtue of being the created son of God, to the future inheritance. He could not earn or ‘merit’ the inheritance by moral performance – *in principle, it was already his!* Yet, in his rebellion, Adam acted shamefully and was cut off from the tree of life.

Adam and Eve were not created with wisdom or maturity. Otherwise, the existence of this tree would be meaningless. Additionally, the holy nature of the tree itself suggests that its peculiar attribute (the knowledge of good and evil) is not inherently possessed by Adam. The physical location of this tree, in the midst or middle of the garden (Gen 2:9; 3:3), sets it apart from all other trees of the garden — thereby suggesting its holiness. The command not to partake of its fruit (Gen 2:17; 3:3, 11, 17) likewise separates it from all other trees of the garden, confirming the notion of its holiness and that Adam lacked the knowledge of good and evil. Furthermore, the attribute that the tree affords points to the immaturity of Adam. The knowledge of good and evil is synonymous with wisdom and maturity in Scripture (Gen 3:6; Heb 5:14). This knowledge is an attribute of the Father, God (Gen 3:22), the desired possession of the son/king (1 Kgs 3:9) and possibly an attribute of angels (2 Sam 14:17, 20) who likewise possess authority and are called “sons of God” (Job 38:7). However, children do not possess such knowledge (Deut 1:39; Isa 7:15) and the very old have lost it (2 Sam 19:35). Adam and Eve clearly do not possess this attribute before eating from the forbidden tree (Gen 3:6, 22). Consequently, Adam’s sonship must be a sinless but child-like sonship, lacking in wisdom and therefore in maturity. Yet, due to the nature of the tree’s attribute and the analogy of Scripture, Murray and Jordan are correct in asserting that Adam would have eventually been permitted to eat of the forbidden tree to attain mature sonship.⁴⁵

⁴⁵Although Daniel Fuller acknowledges the full meaning of the forbidden tree’s attribute, he surprisingly denies that such wisdom and maturation is intended for Adam or even for regenerate humanity: Daniel P. Fuller, *The Unity of the Bible: Unfolding God’s Plan for Humanity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 182-184. It should also be noted that Jordan’s assertion that Adam would die a “good death” upon the permitted eating of the fruit is an unnecessary and erroneous conclusion: Jordan, *Merit Versus Maturity*, 175. The only thing that makes the fruit deadly is the command of God. Like the dietary laws concerning unclean animals, God can lift the ban at whatsoever time he chooses and thereby remove the penalty of death for partaking of it (Acts 10:9-16).

Inheritance

Acknowledging that maturation/wisdom is an intended goal for Adam is not to designate it as the inheritance. The Genesis account highlights yet another tree – namely, the tree of life. According to the covenant of works doctrine, the attribute and blessing of this tree is set forth as the inheritance or reward for obedience to the Father’s will.⁴⁶

Herein lays a source of much controversy among critics and adherents of the covenant of works doctrine. Essentially, the controversy can be reduced to two arguments. The first argument concerns the nature of the life attending the tree of life. The second argument concerns whether Adam was already partaking of the fruit of this tree before the fall.

When determining the nature of the life attending this tree, a few observations from the Genesis materials must be kept in view. First of all, Adam is created as a “living being” (Gen 2:7). There is nothing about Adam that is dying since death is the penalty for disobeying the command of God (Gen 2:17). However, if this creation level of life is all that is intended for Adam, then the existence of the tree of life (like the tree of the knowledge of good and evil) would be superfluous. To have any meaning at all, the nature of the tree of life must entail something not yet in Adam’s possession. Similarly, the tree of life cannot be construed as providing routine life sustenance for Adam in his sinless condition. Every plant and tree of the garden is given as food (Gen 1:29; 2:16; 3:2) for providing whatever maintenance of the body is necessary in the pre-lapsarian state. Additionally, Genesis 3:22 reveals that partaking of this tree would make Adam “live *forever*.” The very wording of the text suggests that this attribute is

⁴⁶Concerning wisdom and immortality, both are assuredly found in Christ. However, of these two blessings, “life” rather than wisdom is consistently set forth in Scripture as the reward or inheritance (Prov 10:16; 11:19; 12:28).

irreversible.⁴⁷ Yahweh is greatly concerned to prevent Adam from attaining this attribute in his fallen condition (Gen 3:22-24). Finally, in the book of Revelation, the tree of life is clearly associated with the irreversible, eternal state (Rev 2:7; 22:2, 14). The nature of the life attending the tree of life, therefore, is best described as immortal life – not subject to change or reversal under any conditions (cf. 1 Cor 15:42-46).

In light of this irreversible nature, the second argument of controversy becomes largely settled. Simply put, if Adam possessed the attribute of irreversible life via partaking of the tree of life before the fall he could not possibly suffer the penalty of death attached to the forbidden tree. To state the obvious, irreversible life is irreversible. However, such deduction is not the only evidence available to show that Adam had not yet partaken of the tree of life.

Arguably, careful scrutiny of various exegetical data in Genesis 2-3 leads to a solid refutation of this notion.

To begin with, the tree of life, like the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, is found in the midst (Gen 2:9) or middle (Gen 3:3) of the garden. While no prohibition forbids or penalizes partaking of its fruit, it nevertheless is set apart from common usage by virtue of its physical location. It, too, is a holy tree. Furthermore, there is simply no revelation saying that Adam partook of the tree of life. Such a claim is not only pure speculation, but also contradicts the clear statement of Genesis 3:22. Genesis 3:22 reckons the possible partaking of the tree of life by Adam as a new activity, never before performed. Commentator Victor Hamilton says:

⁴⁷This fact is confirmed by examining the Scriptural usage of the phrase “live forever” (literally, live unto the ages). It is used of believers in John 6:51, 58. It is used of God in Revelation 4:9, 10; 10:6; 15:7. And especially noteworthy, it is used of the resurrected, glorified Christ, who is “the living One” who “was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades” (Rev 1:18). In every case, it is clear that the attribute or condition is irreversible.

Taken by itself the wording of v.22 could suggest that man has not yet eaten of the tree of life. How else is one to explain the use of also (Heb. *gam*) in the verse? And where *gam* was used earlier in the narrative (3:6), it implied new and additional activity – “she gave also to him.”⁴⁸

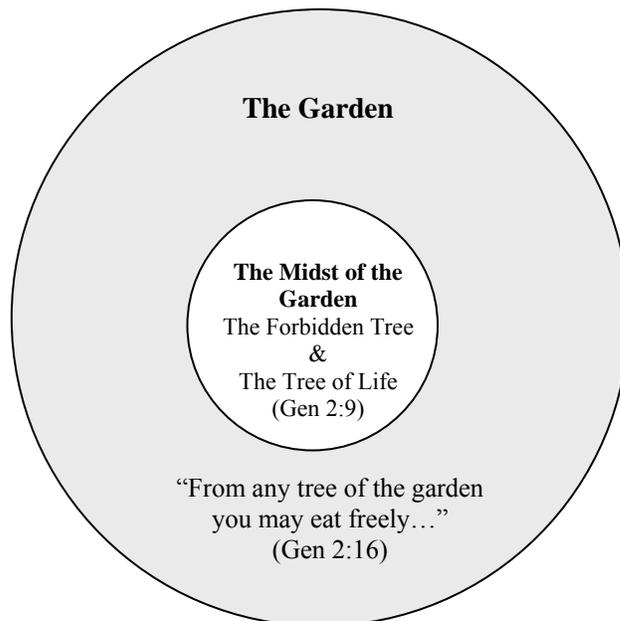
A single partaking of the forbidden fruit acquires the knowledge of good and evil (Gen 3:11, 22) and incurs God’s penalty. It stands to reason, on the basis of its irreversible nature and close connection with the forbidden tree,⁴⁹ that the tree of life would likewise require only a single partaking of its fruit to obtain immortal life.

One significant objection, however, rises against this conclusion. Both critics and adherents of the covenant of works doctrine often view the tree of life as included within the permissible category of “any tree of the garden” (Gen 2:16). “Any tree of the garden” is proclaimed as free for the taking. God only bans the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Subsequently, they conclude that Adam did indeed partake (perhaps repeatedly) of the tree of life.

Again, the text provides an answer to this objection. The discussion above concerning the location of the holy trees has already touched on the answer. In brief, the two-fold construction of the garden related by the narrator (Gen 2:9), accentuated by God (Gen 2:16-17) and reiterated by Eve (Gen 3:2-3) precludes this objection. The garden is structured in a two-fold manner – the garden and the midst or middle of the garden. Two concentric circles will readily demonstrate this distinction (Figure 1).

⁴⁸Victor P. Hamilton, *New International Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), 209.

⁴⁹The close connection between wisdom (the attribute of the forbidden tree) and the tree of life is explicitly emphasized in the words of Solomon (Prov 3:13-18).

Figure 1

As this diagram clearly shows, permission to eat from “any tree of the garden” has exclusive reference to the outer circle.⁵⁰ In other words, permission to eat freely from “any tree of the garden” says nothing concerning either of the two holy trees in the midst of the garden.

With reference to the two holy trees, Yahweh explicitly forbids partaking of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. As for the tree of life, Murray is correct in stating that it remains “reserved for the issue of probationary obedience.”⁵¹ To borrow the language of Paul, this tree of inheritance, though not forbidden, remains untouched “until the date set by the father” (Gal 4:2). Only through proven faithfulness will Adam be justified, irreversibly

⁵⁰This understanding applies whether “midst” (Heb. *tawek*) is understood as “among” or as the literal middle of the garden. In either case, the two holy trees are distinguished from “any tree of the garden.” This distinction between the garden and the midst of the garden is further supported and illustrated by both the tabernacle and the temple. Although the entire tabernacle/temple was holy, there yet remained a distinction between the holy place and the holy of holies.

⁵¹Murray, “The Adamic Administration,” 48.

confirmed in righteousness and eat from the tree of life. Only then will he become a mature son of God – the full and express image of his Father.

Conclusion

The importance of this debate cannot be overstated. It is no mere academic exercise. The soteriological and eschatological concerns of the covenant of works conception are biblical and therefore vital to Christianity. The classical triad of righteousness – justification – life, in connection with Adamic representation, touches the very heart of the gospel. Although the forgiveness of sins is certainly good news, the representative work of Christ is not limited exclusively to His propitiatory sacrifice. In other words, the work of Christ and the gospel message itself is not wholly negative.

Positively speaking, Christ is also the antitype of Adam, the son of God (Rom 5:14). He is the second and last Adam – the Faithful Son, whose perfect maturation in righteousness, by obedience to the Father’s will, ultimately attained the inheritance of immortality that the first Adam failed to attain. This, too, is good news! By grace through faith, all who rest upon the completed work of the Faithful Son are given “the right to become children of God” (John 1:12). They are justified and become fellow heirs with the Son (Rom 8:17, 32) as a direct result of his *one* act of righteousness (Rom 5:18).

The sonship paradigm, as set forth in this paper, in no way contradicts the Reformed understanding of the dichotomy between law and gospel. God the Father required personal, entire, exact and perpetual obedience from his son, Adam. The familial context and display of God’s condescending grace in offering the inheritance of immortal life to Adam in no way lessened the demands of his law: “...through *one* transgression there resulted condemnation to all men” (Rom 5:18a). After the fall, no one in Adam can approach God or attain eternal life on

the basis of personal, entire, exact and perpetual obedience. Furthermore, in Christ, no man need approach God with such obedience -- Christ has already fulfilled the requirement for his people! Those who utilize a sonship paradigm to undermine the Reformed doctrines of justification *sola fide* and double imputation must be exposed as departing not only from the historic stream of confessional thought, but most importantly from the Word of God itself.⁵² Similarly, to obscure or negate the inheritance of immortal, glorified physical life is to open the door wide for the destructive introduction of non-biblical dualism.⁵³ All such dualism is detrimental to gospel of Jesus Christ.

Yet, with these sobering caveats in mind, we must remember that the only “infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself.”⁵⁴ Whenever doctrinal expressions can be more clearly articulated in accordance with the whole scope and narrative flow of Scripture, narrow adherence to non-biblical terminology and constructions is at best unnecessary, if not actually unhelpful. It is our sincere hope that the revision offered above will contribute to the overall articulation and defense of the covenant of works conception while couching its concerns within a more biblical paradigm.

⁵²For a historical analysis of the doctrinal positions of Daniel Fuller and Norman Shepherd, see Waldron’s Ph.D. dissertation: Samuel E. Waldron, *Faith, Obedience, and Justification: Current Evangelical Departures from Sola Fide* (Palmdale, CA: Reformed Baptist Academic Press, 2006).

⁵³For example, all variations of hyper-preterism of necessity must deny the inheritance of immortal, glorified physical life as offered in the covenant of works conception.

⁵⁴Waldron, *A Modern Exposition*, 27.

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