

Federal Vision — The Covenant of Works

Wilhelmus a Brakel “Acquaintance with this covenant is of the greatest importance, for whoever errs here or denies the existence of the covenant of works, will not understand the covenant of grace, and will readily err concerning the mediatorship of the Lord Jesus. Such a person will very readily deny that Christ by His active obedience has merited a right to eternal life for the elect. This is to be observed with several parties who, because they err concerning the covenant of grace, also deny the covenant of works. Conversely, whoever denies the covenant of works must rightly be suspected to be in error concerning the covenant of grace as well.” (TCRS, 1:355)

FV Joint Statement “We affirm that Adam was in a covenant of life with the triune God in the Garden of Eden, in which arrangement Adam was required to obey God completely from the heart. We hold further that all such obedience, had it occurred, would have been rendered from a heart of faith alone, in a spirit of loving trust. Adam was created to progress from immature glory to mature glory, but that glorification too would have been a gift of grace, received by faith alone. We deny that continuance in this covenant in the Garden was in any way a payment for work rendered. Adam could forfeit or demerit the gift of glorification by disobedience, but the gift or continued possession of that gift was not offered by God to Adam conditioned upon Adam’s moral exertions or achievements. In line with this, we affirm that until the expulsion from the Garden, Adam was free to eat from the tree of life. We deny that Adam had to earn or merit righteousness, life, glorification, or anything else.”

Rich Lusk “But was this prelapsarian covenant with Adam a covenant of grace or merit? Was it conditioned on faith or obedience? Was it abrogated with Adam’s sin or perpetuated in a new form?” (AAT, 121).

Rich Lusk “If evidence for the graciousness of the original Adamic administration is found in moving back of creation to the Trinitarian covenant, further evidence is found by analogy with later covenants in Scripture. Every subsequent covenant head — Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and so on — is presented as a New Adam. But if Adam serves as the paradigm for these later covenant heads, and Adam was in a covenant of works, then these later men must have been as well. Of course, that is utter non-sense... But the Noahic covenant was clearly a covenant of grace, based on sacrifice. If Noah is a New Adam — which is obviously the case — the original Adamic covenant likely had an element of grace as well... the basic configuration of the covenant (understood as a bond of love, communion, and friendship, with both privileges and obligations) was already in place. Each covenant renewal maintains this fundamental structure.” (AAT, 123)

Rich Lusk “Israel, like Adam receives life from God and then is commanded to obey on the basis of this grace (Ex. 20).” (AAT, 127)

End Result: Both the covenant of works and the covenant of grace confer eternal life upon all who — by God’s grace and flowing from a heart of loving trust — persevere in performing the required obedience.

Scriptural Evidence for the Covenant of Works

1. Scripture repeatedly references a divine promise of eternal life to mankind upon the condition of perfect obedience to God’s law (Mt. 19:16f; Lk. 10:26f; Rm. 2:13; 7:10; 10:5-6; Gal. 3:11f; Lev. 18:5).
2. God established this promise with mankind either *before* the Fall or *afterward*.
 - A. God did **not** establish this promise *after* the Fall, since mankind was already guilty in Adam and thereby disqualified from offering perfect obedience to His commandments (Rm. 3:20; 8:3; Gal. 3:10).
 - B. Therefore, God **must** have established this promise *before* the Fall.
3. There is evidence of this promise of eternal life in God’s providential dealings with Adam before the Fall.
 - A. God placed Adam in “paradise”, which Scripture identifies as a type of heaven (Lk. 23:43; 2 Cor. 12:3-4; Rev. 2:7).
 - B. God instituted the weekly Sabbath, which Scripture identifies as a type of everlasting heavenly rest (Gen. 2:1-3; Heb. 4:9-11; Rev. 14:13).
 - C. God planted the tree of life, which Scripture identifies as a symbol of the everlasting, unloseable, heavenly life secured for believers by Christ (Gen. 2:9; 3:17, 22, 24; Rev. 22:2, 14).
 - D. God instituted marriage, joining Adam to his wife as “one flesh”, thereby signifying eternal, heavenly communion between God and man, as ultimately to be enjoyed by “Christ and the church” (Eph. 5:30-32).
 - E. Adam is called “the son of God” (Lk. 3:38), indicating that humanity’s chief end was **not** to be suspended indefinitely upon its own obedience, but to “abide in the house forever” since “a son abides forever” (Jn 8:35).
4. There is confirmation of this teaching in other parts of Scripture.
 - A. Hosea 6:4-7 compares Ephraim’s short-lived faithfulness to God’s covenant with Adam’s rapid departure from God in treacherously breaking God’s “covenant” in Eden.
 - B. Romans 5:12-21 identifies Adam as “a type of Him who was to come” (i.e. Christ) and explains how Christ has succeeded where Adam had failed by perfectly obeying God’s law as a covenant head or representative.
 - C. First Corinthians 15:21-22, 45–49 calls Christ the “last Adam”, showing (a) that whereas Adam brought death, Christ has brought life, and (b) the vast superiority of eternal life to anything enjoyed in Eden before the Fall.

Confessional Position: WSC 15; WLC 20, 22, 26, 30-32, 36, 92.