

The Covenant of "Works"

Now that the "covenantal dynamic" approach of Prof. Norman Shepherd (Philadelphia) is under attack, the discussion turns to what is often called the covenant of works. Can his "covenantal dynamic" approach be accepted as a more Scriptural formulation that is at least comparable with the Westminster Standards? Is it in agreement with what these standards teach about the relation between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace? The statement has been made that Prof. Shepherd has significantly reduced the *contrast* between these two covenants.

The Westminster Confession speaks in Chapter 7 of God's covenant with man. Let us read sections two and three.

- II 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.
- III Man, by his fall, having made himself incapable of life by that covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the covenant of grace; wherein He freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ; requiring of them faith in Him, that they may be saved, and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto eternal life His Holy Spirit, to make them willing, and able to believe.

Professor Shepherd's opponents see a sharp contrast between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. The first contained a *works* principle; the second embodies a principle of *grace*. One is reminded of the contrast that the apostle Paul makes between justification by works and justification by faith. When Paul deals with this contrast, he writes in Romans 4: "Now to one who works, his wages are not reckoned as a gift but as his due. And to one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness." Works are set over against trust; due wages or merit are the opposite of free grace. Now the reasoning is: in Paradise Adam could earn eternal life; it was therefore a covenant of works; now after the fall into sin we receive life as a free gift of grace, and believers in Christ, therefore, are the beneficiaries of a covenant or testament of grace. In the covenant of works there was the condition of perfect and personal obedience, but in the covenant of grace — although there is a requirement of faith — there is no condition of obedience any longer. Christ has kept the covenant for us; His active obedience merited eternal life for us, and the covenant of grace is, therefore, unconditional in character.

Those who reason in this manner often relate to the Mosaic covenant to this covenant of "works." The Mosaic

covenant is then the republication of the covenant of law in Paradise. Also the covenant of Horeb had a strongly conditional character. Did the LORD not say to Israel: "You shall therefore keep My statutes and My ordinances, by doing *which a man shall live*"? (Lev. 18:5). He also threatened with the curse of the covenant: "Cursed be he who does not confirm the words of this law by *doing* them" (Deut. 27:26). And again the new covenant of grace is then placed over against this Mosaic covenant of the law. Our readers may have captured the picture of this presentation: the covenant of works is a covenant of the law; it contains the condition of perfect and personal obedience and by fulfilling this condition man could *merit* eternal life.

On the basis of this presentation Prof. Shepherd's conception is attacked. The first accusation is that he reduces the contrast of the Standards first by emphasizing the grace of the covenant of works. He stresses the statement in the Westminster Confession that affirms the "voluntary condescension" on God's part, expressed in His promise of blessedness and reward by way of covenant. Prof. Shepherd also emphasizes that the original relationship of God and Adam was as the love relationship of Father and child. It was a union between God and his people with a command and a promise. It was a communion with mutually binding ties of love and faithfulness. This same covenantal structure embraces all relation between God and man from Genesis to Revelation. Instead of picturing a *contrast* between the covenant of works and the Mosaic covenant, on the one hand, and the new covenant, on the other hand, Prof. Shepherd emphasizes the *identity* of the basic structure. To be sure, if Adam had been obedient he would have been justified on the ground of his own inherent righteousness, while after his fall he could only be justified on the basis of the imputed righteousness of the coming Christ, the last Adam. Yet Adam's own inherent righteousness would not have been meritorious; Adam was a son, not a laborer, the covenant in the garden was not a labor contract. Eternal life could never have been earned. It was a gift of God, and man would obtain it in the way of covenantal obedience.

What shall we say about these things? First of all, there is a difference between the Westminster Standards and the Three Forms of Unity. The Three Forms of Unity — the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort — do not contain a doctrine of the so-called covenant of works. In Lord's Day 3 of the Heidelberg Catechism or in Art. 14 of the Confession of Faith one would look for the word "covenant" in vain, let alone for the expression "covenant of works." This situation makes for a less cramped discussion.

The Rev. C. Vonk, in the first volume of his *De*

Voorzeide Leer I a, wrote a section about the so-called covenant of works. He discusses the elaborate exposition by Herman Witsius in *The Economy of the Covenants between God and man* (I now use the title of the English translation, published in 3 volumes at London, 1763. The original dates from 1686). Witsius was one of the Reformed theologians who read texts like Lev. 18:5 and Deut. 27:6 with a view to the covenant of works. According to Witsius, the law of Moses was, at least in some respect, a repetition of the covenant of law in Paradise. The Rev. C. Vonk rejects this identification forcefully. Witsius falls into the trap of the Jewish adversaries of Paul who removed the Christ from the good Thora of Moses. "Van al wat zweemt naar vereenzelviging der goede Wet van Mozes met een z.g.n. werkverbond, waarin het alles toeging naar de fantaserijke analyse van Witsius, zijn we beslist wars." Rev. C. Vonk does not want to know anything of such identification of the good Law of Moses and the so-called Covenant of Works about which Witsius had given such a broad and speculative analysis. Rev. Vonk grants another the freedom to speak of a covenant between God and Adam, but such private opinion should not be aired as if it were an official confession. According to him, the simple prohibition of Gen. 2:17 is, too small a basis for a complete *covenant*.

I do not agree with Rev. Vonk as far as the use of the word "covenant" is concerned. The relationship between God and Adam may very well be indicated by this expression. The covenantal name LORD is found in Genesis 2 and 3, all elements of a covenant relationship are present (e.g. two parties and two parts), and on the basis of the Hebrew text I prefer to read in Hosea 6:7: "But like Adam they transgressed the covenant . . ."

Nevertheless, the Rev. Vonk is right in rejecting the idea that a covenant of works or covenant of law had been reestablished at Sinai. This concept of republication of the "law of nature" in the Mosaic law is confusing and does no justice to the covenant of Horeb as a dispensation within the covenant of grace in Jesus Christ. The abuse of the law of Moses by Pharisees and Judaizers should not be taken as the normal use of the good teaching of Moses. "If you believe Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote of me," the Lord Jesus said, John 5:46.

But one should also not bring a Pharisaic or Judaist work-principle into the good covenant of Paradise. The term "covenant of works," used in the Westminster Standards in distinction from the expression "covenant of grace," must lead to misunderstanding. The misunderstanding of Prof. Shepherd's opponents is that the works in Paradise would have been meritorious. Adam would have *earned* eternal life. But the question must arise: Can man ever earn anything in relation to God? The Belgic Confession states in Article 24, speaking about man's sanctification and good works: Therefore we do good works, but not to merit by them (for what can we merit?); nay, we are indebted to God for the good works we do, and not He to us, since it is He who *worketh in us both to will and to work, for His good pleasure*. Would this confession be valid only for the life in the covenant of God's grace and not also for the covenant in the Paradise situation? The question "For what can we merit?" is a strong and striking rhetorical statement concerning the basic structure of the relation between God and man, Creator and creature. Each and every breath was a gift of God of life, and the creation of man as the image of God was fruit of God's favour.

To be sure, also in the Dutch tradition there have been theologians who constructed a contrast between the covenant of *works* and the covenant of *grace*. No less than Dr. Abraham Kuyper and his follower Dr. V. Hepp wrote in this vein, but especially in this twentieth century there have been several theologians in The Netherlands who have rejected the construction that is now defended by Prof. Shepherd's opponents. I mention S.G. de Graaf, K. Schilder, J.G. Woelderink, and G.C. Berkouwer.

Especially the Rev. S.G. de Graaf has been outspoken in this issue. English readers may consult the summary of the debate between de Graaf and Hepp in Berkouwer's study in dogmatics, entitled *Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971, pp. 206-210). Or they may listen to de Graaf himself in the first volume of *Promise and Deliverance* (St. Catharines: Paideia Press, 1977). There we find a whole chapter on Genesis 2 under the title The Covenant of God's Favor and we read on p. 37:

We are accustomed to speaking of this covenant as the covenant of works. However, we should not take this name to mean that man was expected to earn eternal life as a reward for doing good works, as though eternal life was man's payment for services rendered. Because man owes everything he is and has to God, we may never speak of man earning wages paid out by God. Therefore it might be wiser to speak of the covenant of God's favor. *Grace* in general means favor, but in the Scriptures *grace* always has the special meaning of favor that forgives guilt.

It could hardly be expressed more clearly and succinctly than Rev. S.G. de Graaf does in this quotation. Prof. Shepherd is in good company when he denies the meritorious character of Adam's obedience. The only demand made of Adam was that he choose consciously for the favour given him by God if he and his posterity were to abide forever in that favour. If one would speak of a contrast between the covenant in Paradise and the covenant of grace it is this: that the last Adam as our Mediator had to continue to choose for God's favour even when that favour had completely forsaken Him.

G.C. Berkouwer resolutely took the side of de Graaf over against the criticism of Hepp. Man's original life under God's rule cannot be regarded, for even a moment, apart from God's love and communion.

Because of that fact we can never construe an antithesis between the covenants of 'work' and 'grace.' We err if we interpret this distinction as though God's original covenant had to do with *our* work or *our* achievement or *our* fulfillment of his law, while the later covenant of grace has reference to the pure gift of his *mercy* apart from all *our* works. If we assume this we are compelled to say that God's original relation to man was strictly 'legal,' or that the structure of that relation was determined by man's merit. In that case, we lose sight of the fact that man's obedience to God's command can never be different from a thankful response to God's own fellowship.

Therefore Berkouwer sees good reason to ask if the terminological distinction of a "covenant of works" and a "covenant of grace" is really so very happy. We should avoid the antithesis of merit and grace when seen as two possible "phases" in this one relation of God and man. "Even the obedience which men originally owed to God could only be regarded as the product of God's own love and graciousness and could only root in God's own fellow-

ship. If we drive a wedge between these concepts of *works* and *grace* we interpose the notion of an impersonal legalism within the original relation of God and man" (*Sin*, p. 208).

Berkouwer states that the Scriptures do not know of any such antithesis in the covenants of works and grace. The apostle Paul uses the terms *works* and *grace* and there is a chasm between work and grace in the text of Romans 4 that we quoted in the beginning of this editorial. But Paul's terms do not point to alternative paths which were

once laid out by *God*. The way of works is condemned by God because it is not the way of God. Should we then in a speculative vision see this by-God-forbidden way laid out by Himself in Paradise? Berkouwer rightly asks: How can this infusion of *merit* leave room for a genuine criticism of Rome concerning their good works?

The idea of meritoriousness of human works should be cut off, right in the beginning when we speak of God's good covenant of Paradise, the covenant of His favour.

J. FABER

BATH — BEKAH — KAB — DARIC — EPHAH — FIRKIN — HIN — KOR — LETEK — LOG — MANEH — MINA — OMER — SEAH

or: Please give us a translation!(2)

What Time Is It?

After having discussed some "minor" problems for the average Bible reader, we now come to some more serious defects of what is called an "English Bible" but which, in fact, contains many non-English words and expressions.

The "worst" part will be when we touch upon the wide use of strange terms for weights and measures. Let's start with the easier part: "What time is it?"

On purpose we leave out the difficulty that the celebrated "average" reader of the Bible has with the Jewish calendar. Apart from the names of the months which are given to us in their *Hebrew* form, there is the problem that our "first month" is not the same as their beginning of the year. Leaving this out of our (limited) discussion of the matter does not exclude that we press for a translation also of this part of the Word of God, so that not only our children and "outsiders," but also we ourselves understand what we read, what the Bible means with "the first month," and so on.

Thus we talk now about the strange fact that most translators have failed to translate "the time of the day." It is as simple as that. They have failed to do that. Our suggestion to do it has, in the course of years, met with consternation: How did we dare to suggest something different from "a literal translation"! Never!

You know what we are talking about. John is known for having had a good memory as to the time of the day something happened. The first disciples went with Jesus to His home; "it was about the tenth hour," 1:39. Jesus sat down at the well near

Samaria; he was tired; "it was about the sixth hour," 4:6. The son of the official at Capernaum was healed by our Lord from a distance: "at the seventh hour the fever left him," 4:52.

I wonder how many of the readers know right away what time is indicated in these examples. The New English Bible tells us. 10th hour is 4 P.M.; 6th hour is noon or midday; 7th hour is 1 P.M. As simple as that, if only you know that for the Jews the day started at 6 A.M. Thus, when Peter on Pentecost Day rejected the suggestion of some that the apostles were drunk, his answer was, according to RSV and many others, "How can you say that? It is only the third hour of the day"; that is 9 in the morning. Anyone ever drunk at that time? But why not say so then in a "translation." 3rd, 6th, 7th, 9th, 10th hour is *not* a "translation"!

The best-known example is that parable in Matt. 20:1-16. The "householder" started early in the morning to hire labourers. First, what is that, "a householder," KJV, RSV? Better words are: landowner (both NEB and NIV), employer, farmer, estate manager, etc. But apart from that, he goes to the market place at (according to our RSV and others) the 3rd, 6th, 9th, 11th hour Again, that is not translating into English! One needs an interpreter, and . . . how often does one need him, because we forget so easily. Oh yes! we all know what "the eleventh hour" is; we sometimes use that expression. But you are wrong if you think that you know what "eleventh hour" means in the Bible! You mean, shortly before midnight. The Bible means 5 P.M.

Enough about that, except the remark that this parable speaks about a

"denarius." Anyone know how much that is? Take your pick. "a penny," KJV; "a dollar," Goodspeed; "the usual day's wage," NEB; "a silver coin a day," Phillips. This, then, brings us to the most complicated business of *Weights and Measures*.

Once we started our search, we became intrigued and can offer a complete list of Hebrew (and some Greek) terms in our English Bible, the places where you find them, and the way they are translated. Take a deep breath and come along (N.B.: we give only one reference for each).

Bath, Isa. 5:10. Guesses: 9 gallon, 6, even 2, NEB.

Bekah, Ex. 38:26. "half a shekel," ¼ ounce, 50¢, *Living Bible*.

Cab or Kab, II Kings 6:25. Some: 2 quarts, but even NEB has: cab, without any explanatory footnote. We already here mention and honour the NIV for giving those footnotes, but we wonder why not put the translation in the text itself?

Cubit, not too strange to our ears; suggested: 18 inches, Gen. 6:16, etc.

Daric, I Chron. 29:7, suggested: same as a shekel; in gold \$5, in silver 64¢.

Day's Journey, Num. 11:31, Luke 2:44: as far as one (child, woman, strong fellow) can walk in one day. Guesses range from 3½ to 20 miles.

Interruption: what a "mess" we may find ourselves in now that we are *Going Metric !!!* Now all translations, helps, etc., that I used for this article, become obsolete!

Denarius, Matt. 20:2; found only in New Testament. Conclusion: a Roman coin. Above we already