

The Covenant of Grace

Central to the Reformed faith is the idea of **Covenant**. Most Christians talk about covenants—indeed it is hard to escape this term as it is so prevalent in Scripture. However, many do not see the covenant as anything more than an agreement between equals. This is a poor explanation of such a rich term.

Covenants in the Bible are either bi-lateral or uni-lateral. That is, they are either made by equals with obligations upon both parties (bi-lateral) (Genesis 14:1-9); or they are imposed by a sovereign upon a vassal in which responsibility may fall to one or both parties (uni-lateral) (Hebrews 6:13). Intrinsic to the concept of covenant is the idea of reward and punishment. The keeping of the covenant will bring reward; the breach, punishment.

These concepts are important to the Reformed faith as we hold that God uses covenants as His *modus operandi*. In other words, God uses covenants as His standard operating procedure. Therefore, to be Reformed is to be, above all else, covenantal.

Two covenants that must be understood are [The Covenant of Works](#) and [The Covenant of Grace](#). There is much confusion concerning these, so we shall try to succinctly outline each.

The [Covenant of Works](#) (a term which must be understood correctly) refers to that covenant which Adam – and his posterity in him – received from God. In this covenant God promised life on the condition of obedience. The test was that Adam should not eat from the tree in the midst of the Garden (Genesis 2:17).

Many react to the term “[Covenant of Works](#)” because they rightly believe that no *sinful* man can merit favour with God or earn salvation. The only problem with this criticism is that the term is viewed from our standpoint and not Adam’s. We are dead in trespass and sin (Ephesians 2:1). Adam was not. We must be reconciled to God. Adam walked in the Garden with God (Genesis 3:18). So, for Adam, the “works” were really nothing more than obedience to God’s command. Remember, Adam was the only man to have had a truly free will. He was able to choose to obey or not. Thus understood, “works” were not about *earning salvation*, but about **being obedient** to the command of God and maintaining a relationship with Him.

This brings us to the “[Covenant of Grace](#).” Logically, the [Covenant of Grace](#) is in many ways the opposite of the [Covenant of Works](#). Adam, until the fall, was spiritually alive and could pursue obedience of his own free will. When Adam chose to disobey God, he and his posterity reaped the covenant curse—death! We became aliens and strangers to God. We were cast from His presence. In fact, our way of return was barred (Genesis 3:24). Our heart of flesh became stone (Ezekiel 11:17-21). We no longer knew God or cared to know Him (Romans 1:21-22).

The Westminster Divines summed it up thus: Man, by his fall, having made himself incapable of life by that covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second, (Gal. 3:21, Rom. 8:3, Rom. 3:20–21, Gen. 3:15, Isa. 42:6) 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, (Mark 16:15–16, John 3:16, Rom. 10:6–9, Gal. 3:11) and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto eternal life His Holy Spirit, to make them willing, and able to believe. (Ezek. 36:26–27, John 6:44–45) (WCF 7:3)

This summary by the Divines points out to us why this second covenant is called “Grace.” We are no longer capable of life in terms of the former covenant as *we are spiritually dead* and under God’s just judgement. Therefore, God, by His grace alone, appointed a redeemer and all the means necessary whereby He would restore His people to Himself.

Salvation in the [Covenant of Works](#) depended upon man. Salvation in the [Covenant of Grace](#) depends entirely upon God. Louis Berkhof, in his Systematic Theology, writes: “This is exactly one of the important

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points in which the former differs from the latter, that it is no more dependent on the uncertain obedience of man, but only on the absolute faithfulness of God. The covenant promises will surely be realised, but — only in the lives of the elect.”

The essence of this **Covenant of Grace** is stated in Q & A 32 of the Westminster Larger Catechism: The grace of God is manifested in the second covenant, in that he freely provideth and offereth to sinners a Mediator, and life and salvation by him; and requiring faith as the condition to interest them in him, promiseth and giveth his Holy Spirit to all his elect, to work in them that faith, with all other saving graces; and to enable them unto all holy obedience, as the evidence of the truth of their faith (James 2:18,22) and thankfulness to God, (2 Cor. 5:14–15) and as the way which he hath appointed them to salvation. (Eph. 2:10)

With these things stated we must now look at the impact of this piece of theology, for it has a significant influence upon what we ought to believe and therefore how we should practice Christianity.

First, we note that Calvinistic soteriology is brought to the fore. We need to be saved because we are incapable of saving ourselves. Unlike Adam, we do not exist in a state of innocence in which we have a free will capable of choosing righteousness. Many today claim that man in his sinful state still has a free will and that he can exercise that will to choose for God. The **Covenant of Grace** would teach us otherwise. If this is not so, then we essentially exist under a synergistic covenant of works—Man contributing to his own salvation through the exercise of his will.

Think this through. Adam’s sin caused a complete rupture in his relationship with God. Adam was cursed, as was the creation he had ruled. He was cast out of God’s presence. More over, a sentry and a flaming sword were placed at the entrance to make sure that he would not return or access the tree of life. In addition to this we have many Scriptures that speak of our spiritual blindness, deadness, hardness etc. Our hearts are described as wicked, stone, and incapable of choosing or following right (Ezekiel 36:26; Romans 3:23; 6:23; Isaiah 53:6; 1 Peter 2:9-10; Colossians 1:13).

Second, we can no longer abide any semblance of Dispensational thought. As is clear from these teachings, God’s **Covenant of Grace** was in operation from the Garden. Therefore, it is error to hold to the belief that the Old Testament is salvation by law and works and that the New Testament proclaims salvation by grace.

Third, we see that the unity of the Scriptures is upheld. There are not multiple means of salvation. There is but one. Salvation has always been by promise (Romans 4:13).

In light of this, how do we understand the related topic of **The New Covenant**? Simply put, the Bible explains it in terms of escalation. We no longer live in shadow and type as those in the Old Testament. Christ, the fullness, is come. The reality has appeared. Therefore, we have a greater obligation to obedience. The **Covenant of Grace** becomes all the more important and all the more necessary (Acts 17:30).

The Westminster Divines have this to say:

Under the gospel, when Christ, the substance, (Col. 2:17) was exhibited, the ordinances in which this covenant is dispensed ... though fewer in number, and administered with more simplicity, and less outward glory, yet, in them, it is held forth **in more fullness**, evidence, and spiritual efficacy, (Heb. 12:22–27, Jer. 31:33–34) to all nations ... and is called the new Testament. (Luke 22:20) There are not therefore two covenants of grace, differing in substance, but one and the same, under various dispensations. (Gal. 3:14,16, Acts 15:11, Rom. 3:21–23,30, Ps. 32:1, Rom. 4:3,6,16–17,23–24, Heb. 13:8) (WCF 7:6)