

**In Defense of the “Covenant of Works”**  
Dr. Jack Kinneer  
Adj. Professor of New Testament  
Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary

It has become popular in Presbyterian circles to speak derisively of the terminology “covenant of works” as used in the Westminster Standards. As both a professor in a theological seminary, and a member of a candidates and credentials committee of a presbytery, I often hear candidates for ordination express a reservation about the “covenant of works” language. Sometimes, it is couched in the form: “I agree with the concept, but find the language problematic.” Other times, even the notion of a covenant in which life is by works is dismissed as inconsistent with grace. All this wears the garb of piety and wisdom, when in fact it is both irreligious and irrational despite the good intentions of those who express such sentiments.

Those seeking ordination in a number of historic<sup>1</sup> Presbyterian churches are asked to give consent to the system of doctrine taught in Holy Scripture and summarized in the *Westminster Confession and Catechisms*. Presbyterians have always affirmed that their doctrine is both derived from Scripture, and bound together as a system of truth in which each part supports and is supported by the other parts. Yet somehow it is thought that we can call into question one of the fundamental and structural notions of that system without jeopardizing the coherence of the entire system. This is the irrationalism exhibited in this repeated complaint against the “covenant of works” terminology.

But what is even more disturbing is the dressing up of this irrationalism in the garb of piety as if our forefathers greatly distorted and minimized the grace of God by articulating the notion of the covenant of works. Without the covenant of works concept, the work of Christ our mediator logically dissolves into nothing more than pretense. God grants us life on the pretense that Christ’s obedience unto death is the cause of that life, when in fact Christ has not merited or earned life for us. Life was never to be earned. It was only and exclusively a gift by grace. For if Adam could not have earned life by obedience, how is that the Second Adam could earn life for us by his substitutionary obedience and sacrifice?

Our thesis is twofold. First, that under the first covenant which God made with Adam before his fall, life was offered to him upon the condition of his works, namely, his personal, perfect and perpetual obedience. To put it in different terms, judgment was based, not upon grace and faith in a mediator, but upon Adam’s works alone. And second, because the term “covenant of works” accurately describes the essential nature of that covenant, it should be the preferred label. The other terms, the covenant of creation and the covenant of life, are less adequate. The term “covenant of creation” tells us nothing about the nature of the covenant, but only about the time of its inauguration. The term “covenant of life,” while true in that life was offered to Adam, does not adequately distinguish how life was offered to him over against how life that is now offered to us through our mediator, Jesus Christ. In other words, both the terms, “covenant of creation” and “covenant of life” need the addition of “covenant of works” to adequately express the nature

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<sup>1</sup> By “historic” I mean churches that hold to the historic faith of the Presbyterian tradition, as opposed to churches that give lip service to that faith while delighting in every possible deviation from it.

of that first covenant. The first covenant was a covenant of works, not of grace, and it is properly so termed.

The first covenant placed man in a circumstance of testing with a threat hanging over his head. "...but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die."<sup>2</sup> The verbal threat makes the notion of testing inescapable. God put Adam to the test. It was a test that Adam could fail. He could eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And if he did, he would surely die. So then, life was contingent upon perfect obedience. Only one infraction, one little taste of the forbidden fruit, and Adam would die.

It is a matter of secondary importance whether we conceive of the life that would be lost as that life which Adam already possessed, or whether we think it to be a future and more exalted life that was promised by the tree of life. In either case, life was conditioned upon perfect obedience. To say that God gave life to Adam as a gift of grace, but that he had to maintain himself in that life by his perfect obedience, is fuzzy thinking. As soon as God interposed the commandment and made the threat, life was now based upon perfect obedience. Adam could and did lose that life, and so did the whole race through him. After the threat was issued, life was based upon Adam's perfect obedience.

Now this threat of death cannot be separated from the idea of God as judge. God would evaluate the performance of Adam, and impose the penalty for even one sin. When Adam did sin, God confronted him, cursed him, and sent him out of the garden and away from the tree of life. Paul describes Adam's sin and its consequence in judicial language. Paul teaches that "the judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation."<sup>3</sup> And again, "the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men."<sup>4</sup> Who did the judging? Who condemned Adam and all his posterity? It is sad that such an obvious question needs to be asked. But the answer, while obvious, seems to be avoided by some today. God is the judge. He is the one who condemned Adam.

Now we ask, "What sort of judgment was this judgment?" Was it a judgment of grace in which God forgave sin, iniquity and rebellion? Well, of course not. Adam was not justified, but condemned based upon his works. And in him, so were all his posterity descending from him by ordinary generation. Only the Lord Jesus Christ, begotten of the Holy Spirit in the womb of Mary, was not condemned in Adam's first sin. Adam earned or merited death by his disobedience. Paul teaches that "the wages of sin is death."<sup>5</sup> The term used refers to the promised compensation for soldiers who fulfilled their military contract. Adam earned death by his misdeed.

Adam was condemned by God based upon his works. This is obvious. But it should be equally obvious that, if Adam had not sinned in eating the forbidden fruit, he would have been justified by his works. There was no other basis for Adam to be justified that his works of personal, perfect and perpetual obedience for however long the time of probation lasted. Sin and die. Obey

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<sup>2</sup> Genesis 2:17 New International Version.

<sup>3</sup> Romans 5:16 New International Version.

<sup>4</sup> Romans 5:18 New International Version.

<sup>5</sup> Romans 6:23 New International Version.

perfectly and live. The second is the necessary logical implication of the first. There is no neutral ground between sin or obey. It is one or the other. Eat and die. Do not eat and live.

Thus the basis for life was Adam's own obedience. No one was appointed as a mediator to obey for Adam. No provision was made for deliverance from even one act of disobedience. The life offered to Adam in the garden was conditioned only upon his perfect obedience. That is why we rightly call it a covenant of works. As to its essential nature, there was no provision of grace for failure. There was only the threat.

God was not bound to make a covenant with Adam. He was not bound to offer him life based upon perfect obedience. He could do with his creation as he chose. But he chose to make a covenant. That was a condensation. We may even call it grace. But it was not the grace of the New Covenant that is offered to those who deserve to die. But when God made the covenant, he not only bound Adam to the terms of the covenant, God bound himself to the terms of that covenant. The terms of that covenant were not justification by grace through faith for sinners. The terms were life only if Adam never sinned.

In particular, God bound himself to give Adam life as long as Adam obeyed. Once the covenant was made, once God spoke his word to Adam, God was not free to "execute" Adam "if the mood struck him." The threat was necessarily also a promise. "If you obey, you will not die" was the necessary logical implication of "when you eat of it, you will surely die." Life and death are opposites, not two options among many.

So then, God bound himself by his threat to put Adam to death only if Adam disobeyed. By that same word, God bound himself to give Adam life if he obeyed. In terms of the covenant, Adam had a right to life if he obeyed. Now this was not a right inherent in Adam as a creature. It was not a right inherent in the value of Adam's obedience. But it was a right based upon the covenant God freely made with Adam. It was not inherent merit, but contractual merit.

If you mow my yard (7 acres!), I owe you nothing unless I first contracted with you to mow my yard for a specified recompense. But if I did make such a covenant with you, and you mowed my yard, then I would owe you the recompense. That recompense would not be "of grace," but "of your works." And if the form of that contract was "you shall mow my yard and I will pay you ten dollars (I'm cheap!)," then your mowing would earn you the recompense promised.

Paul used just this sort of economic language when he discussed justification by works of law.

What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh?<sup>2</sup> For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God.<sup>3</sup> For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness."<sup>4</sup> Now to the one who **works**, his **wages** are not counted as a gift but **as his due**.<sup>5</sup> And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness,<sup>6</sup> just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works:<sup>7</sup> "Blessed are those

whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered;<sup>8</sup> blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin."<sup>6</sup>

In this passage, Paul uses the language of economic law to describe justification by works. Works bring a wage, not as a gift, but as what is due for the work performed. While the English Standard Version gives a good overall translation of this passage, there are some nuances in the Greek that are not evident in English translation.

A less paraphrased translation would be: "to the one who works, the wage/reward is not reckoned according to grace but according to debt." The term rendered "wage/reward" (μισθός) is used both for a wage earned and for a reward given. The term is used in Genesis 15:1 in reference to Abraham.

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward (LXX: μισθός) shall be very great."<sup>7</sup>

The promise to Abraham necessarily raises the question as to the basis for this "reward." And so Paul distinguishes between a μισθός (wage, reward) that is according to grace and a μισθός that is according to debt. The phrase "according to grace" includes the commonly used Greek term (χάρις) that is rendered into English as "grace." The opposite term is the word for debt (ὀφείλημα). The same term in the plural is used in the Lord's Prayer in the petition "forgive us our debts (ὀφειλήματα) as we forgive our debtors (ὀφειλέταις)."

In the thought of Paul, justification by works is according to debt. Justification by faith is according to grace. Which of these two categories describes the covenant with Adam at creation? Adam, were he to be justified (judged by God to be righteous), would have been justified by his works. God would have been indebted, so to speak, by virtue of his covenant, to pay Adam the wage he earned by his works.

This was not the case with Abraham, but then Paul places Abraham in the category of the ungodly (vs. 5). Abraham was a sinner and his justification was by grace and through faith. But Adam in the Garden was not a sinner. And no promise of justification by grace was offered to him if he should sin. The only word to him was "for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." The categories of justification by faith according to grace versus justification by works according to debt are not inventions of the twisted minds of medieval scholastic theologians, but the inspired ideas of the Apostle.

Now let us suppose that Adam had not sinned. Had he done all that God required, his performance would have been "an act of righteousness." The Greek term for such righteous performance is δικαίωμα (righteous action). Now if one does δικαίωμα, the resulting judgment is δικαίωσις (justification). Had Adam not sinned, he would have done δικαίωμα (righteous action), the God's judgment would have been δικαίωσις (justification), and Adam would have lived.

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<sup>6</sup> Romans 4:1-8 English Standard Version.

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 15:6 English Standard Version with parenthetical note by the author.

But Adam did not do δικαίωμα (righteous action). Instead he transgressed the commandment (παραπτώμα) and the result was death. But Paul teaches us that Christ came to undo what Adam did. How did he accomplish this?

Therefore, as one trespass (παραπτώμα) led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness (δικαίωμα) leads to justification (δικαίωσις) and life for all men.<sup>8</sup>

Jesus performed the righteous act for us, and we are justified on that basis and receive eternal life. We are justified by grace through faith, but Jesus performed perfect righteousness. He never sinned. And he offered himself to pay for our sins. Paul uses the intensified form of the word for redemption (ἀπολυτρόσις) to describe this payment.

And are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus...<sup>9</sup>

But Paul also attributes our justification to Jesus' one act of righteousness as we saw in Romans 5:18. And the same result is attributed to Jesus' obedience in 5:19.

For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.<sup>10</sup>

Jesus performed the one act of righteousness. Jesus obeyed. The result is that we are justified and receive life. We are not justified by our works, but we are justified by his work. We are not justified by our righteous acts but we are justified by his righteous act. We are not justified by our obedience but we are justified by his obedience. Life is the result of perfect obedience and perfect righteousness. That was the basis for life for Adam in the covenant of works. It is the basis for life for us in the covenant of grace. Grace is not a lessening of the demand but the provision of a substitute who obeyed perfectly, that is who performed a perfect righteous action for the entirety of his earthly life culminating in his sacrificial death.

If life for Adam in the first covenant was by grace and not works, why did Jesus need to work, to obey and to do righteousness perfectly? But God offered life to Adam and his posterity based upon sinless obedience, and God restored life to sinners by the sinless obedience of his incarnate Son, the second Adam. Deny the "works" nature of the first covenant, and you destroy the basis of the covenant of grace which is the perfect work, obedience and righteous act of Jesus our Savior.

Let us continue to affirm that the first covenant was indeed a covenant of works in which life was to be earned by obedience, less we destroy the covenant of grace in which life was earned for us by the perfect obedience of Jesus, and given to us as a gift of grace.

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<sup>8</sup> Romans 5:18 English Standard Version with parenthetical notes by the author.

<sup>9</sup> Romans 3:24 English Standard Version.

<sup>10</sup> Romans 5:19 English Standard Version.