



Reformed Covenant Theology

A SYSTEMATIC INTRODUCTION

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I

Meeting God in the Covenants

The friendship of the Lord is for those who fear him,
and he makes known to them his covenant.

—*Psalm 25:14*

Covenant theology, quite simply, concerns our relationship with God, making it about our understanding of ultimate matters. Among the creatures who inhabit the physical realm, we humans alone have walked with the Lord, had opportunity to pray to him, and enjoy his intimate fellowship, prompting us to marvel with David, as he wrote in Psalm 8:3–4, “What is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?” All the more, Psalm 25:14 teaches us how those who fear the Lord and have his friendship know what it means to be *in covenant* with him. We are the creatures made for communion with God, and covenants are the way that God facilitates that communion with us.

God is then the foremost end of all our hopes and needs. For this reason, theology’s supreme investigation is the doctrine of God’s triune life, in some ways taking preeminence even over the doctrine of salvation.¹ Although this book is not about theology proper, it fits within the scope of theology’s

1. John Webster, “*Rector et Iudex Super Genera Doctrinarum?* The Place of the Doctrine of Justification” in *GWM1*, 159–61; John Webster, “‘It Was the Will of the Lord to Bruise Him’: Soteriology and the Doctrine of God,” in *GWM1*, 143–57.

highest endeavor—contemplation of God—by explaining God’s works that provide the place where we encounter him in his love: the covenant. As John Webster (1955–2016) highlighted, “The gospel, that is, concerns the history of fellowship—covenant—between God and creatures.”² This book, therefore, focuses on covenant theology through the lens of communion with God.

Reformed theologians have long understood how covenant theology is the best way to discuss our communion with God. Francis Roberts (1609–1675) highlights, “The Lord God brings man into communion with himself, by that sweet familiar way of covenant, in all ages, from the foundation to the consummation of the world.”³ Likewise, Francis Turretin (1623–1687) writes, “As God wished in every age to have a church in which he might dwell and which might cherish communion with him for the fruition of happiness, so it pleased him to institute that communion in no other way than that of a covenant.”⁴ So, as the Reformed have grasped, to understand covenant theology is simply to explore the depths of our relational communion with God.⁵

Knowing *that* covenant characterizes our relationship with God is one thing, but knowing *how* covenant theology shapes, defines, and informs our life as we traverse this pilgrim land on the short side of glory is another matter. This book unpacks what it means to live in covenant with God by exploring the major biblical themes connected to covenant as they have been articulated in traditional Reformed theology. The most important emphasis is that the covenant delivers Christ to his people, so that sinners encounter God in grace only through the Lord Jesus in all times and places. Even in eternity’s depths, God established the covenant as the place where we would meet Jesus Christ, forging even his covenant with Adam before the fall in such a way as to provide “a type of the one to come,” namely, Christ himself (Rom 5:14). As John Owen (1616–1683) writes, God delivers all his promises to us through the one covenant of

2. Webster, “Will of the Lord to Bruise Him,” 143; also D. Glenn Butner Jr., *Trinitarian Dogmatics: Exploring the Grammar of the Christian Doctrine of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022), 1–10.

3. MMB, sig. A3v–A4r.

4. *TI*, 12.2.1.

5. Geerhardus Vos, *The Teaching of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), 41–45.

grace: “But whereas all the promises belong unto the same covenant, with all the grace contained in them and exhibited by them, whoever is interested by faith in that covenant is so in all the promises of God that belong thereunto, and hath an equal right unto them with those unto whom they were first given.”⁶ To say that we have communion with God by covenant, therefore, is simply to affirm that sinners have fellowship with the Lord because of Christ. So, this book explains how the whole Bible is about God’s one, unified, unfolding plan of salvation through the work of our Savior Jesus Christ, expressed through covenant.

Covenant theology should then delight God’s people’s hearts, even seeing how Scripture often describes our life in covenant with God in moving language. For example, Psalm 105:8–11 uses the theme of covenant to remind God’s people of how faithful our Lord is to us.

He remembers his covenant forever,
 the word that he commanded, for a thousand generations,
 the covenant that he made with Abraham,
 his sworn promise to Isaac,
 which he confirmed to Jacob as a statute,
 to Israel as an everlasting covenant,
 saying, “To you I will give the land of Canaan
 as your portion for an inheritance.”

God remembers his covenant, not as if he forgot and now recalls it, since God is all-knowing and unchanging, but in the sense that his previous promises prompted him to act for his people. God’s acts of remembering his covenants signify his commitment to enact his covenant promises.⁷ God’s covenants are then a moving source of hope that he will faithfully do what he has promised for his people.

Believers should find immense comfort in knowing that God does not determine his faithfulness to us by how he might feel at any given moment but has made infallible promises to people of ages past and has kept those

6. John Owen, “Work of the Holy Spirit in Prayer,” in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, 16 vol. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1862), 4:261.

7. Bruce K. Waltke with Cathi J. Fredericks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 141.

promises even to believers today.⁸ Covenant theology then reminds us that our God is unchanging in who he is and in his faithfulness to us.⁹ When our unchanging God makes a promise—Psalm 105 reminds us how he did so for Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—then God’s promise is also unchanging.

The Bible itself highlights the comfort we should find in God by emphasizing his covenant with us. Every Christian knows something about feeling overwhelmed, crushed, and distressed. The psalmist reminds us in Psalm 106:44–45 that when God’s people are in distress, God’s covenant is an unshakeable foundation that prompts God into action on our behalf:

Nevertheless, he looked upon their distress,
 when he heard their cry.
 For their sake he remembered his covenant,
 and relented according to the abundance of his steadfast love.

In the context of Psalm 106:40–43, God’s people had been remarkably unfaithful, bringing God’s discipline upon their rebellion. Despite their self-inflicted distress, God was good to them, freeing them from it because they were his people with whom he had covenanted.

The importance and helpfulness of exploring covenant theology should then be clear. Covenant theology’s doctrines concern what it means to live before God and in fellowship with him. Covenant theology is about knowing how we relate to our Maker and Redeemer and especially how we, as sinners, might know that we are accepted in his sight and have the guarantee of his eternal love. We have communion with God by covenant. Covenant then helps us see the full scope of God’s one plan to create a treasured people for himself, and about how, as Paul said in 1 Corinthians 1:20, all of God’s promises find their yes and amen in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

8. Michael S. Horton, “Covenant,” in *OHRT*, 435–36.

9. WCF 2.1 makes this point by stating that God is without passions; *COC*, 3:606.

WHAT IS COVENANT THEOLOGY?

A covenant is most simply a formal relationship.¹⁰ Although they might sound exotic, covenants daily surround us. Covenants have analogies to the agreements we sign to buy a home, lease a car, or accept a new job. We certainly make a covenant by committing ourselves in love to a spouse when we are married. Covenants are not exactly contracts, since commercial exchanges may not do full justice to the relational aspect of covenants, but these examples still embody relationships where people become *bound* to one another in some fixed way.¹¹

Covenants entail agreements, but many are made between parties, one of whom may be superior in authority.¹² Covenants are then flexible, diverse in kind, capable of relational dynamics, but also fundamentally legal and binding.¹³ They include some sort of obligatory terms, making them committed arrangements, even when those committed terms are to love one another unconditionally, as in marriage. Most importantly, though, they are a biblical way of describing relationships, since God made covenants across the Scripture with his people as individuals or as a collective body, with varying types of functions and foundations.

Covenants further inform every relationship that God has with us. In other words, human beings cannot have a relationship with God that is not covenantal.¹⁴ Although Reformed theologians disagree about whether God created Adam in covenant (as suggested here) or added the covenant relationship to Adam's created state, the issue is ultimately beside the present point that God has used covenants to define his relationship with us in every state of our existence.¹⁵ Covenant has always been that aspect of our relationship with God that lets us know where we stand

10. TI, 8.3.1, 3; EC, 1.1.9; MT, 1.10.9–11; CMT, 62; CW, 1–4; KP, 1–6; BOC, 16; KTC, 164–66, 172–73; O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1981), 4–7; Richard C. Barcellos, *The Covenant of Works: Its Confessional and Scriptural Basis* (Palmdale, CA: RBAP, 2016), 64–67; Thomas R. Schreiner, *Covenant and God's Purpose for the World* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 13–14; Daniel I. Block, *Covenant: The Framework of God's Grand Plan of Redemption* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 1–2.

11. ACW, 55–76.

12. MMB, 14–15.

13. MMB, 16–17.

14. Walter Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, trans. J. A. Baker, 2 vol. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961), 1:36–45.

15. ACW, 385–88.

with him. Robert Rollock (1555–1599) argued that “all the Word of God appertains to some covenant, for God speaks nothing to man without the covenant.”¹⁶ If, therefore, God had not made a covenant with us, then we would have been left without a way to know what to expect from him. Certainly, creatures never have the right to demand something from God, as Luke 17:10 says, “So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.’” But because God is good, kind, and loving, he made a covenant even with Adam in the garden of Eden, so that we might always know exactly how we relate to him and so that there is a foundation to our relationship with him.

The Westminster Confession of Faith describes the general premise of God’s covenanting with humanity: “The distance between God and the creature is so great that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of him as their blessedness and reward but by some voluntary condescension on God’s part, which he has been pleased to express by way of covenant” (WCF 7.1).¹⁷ As creatures, we inescapably owe allegiance and obedience to God, but we could never expect anything in return just because we did what we were supposed to do. God, who is kind and loving, made a covenant, attaching a promise to reward our obedience with further blessing, namely, everlasting life in the new creation—a point explored throughout part 1. For now, we see that God uses covenants to facilitate our communion with him. He forges communion with us by covenant, also using covenants to offer us even greater blessings in communion with him.

This covenantal principle is like when a mother tells her son to clean his room but promises to take him for ice cream if he cleans it well. The mother owns the home where her son lives and has authority to impose obedience without the reward of ice cream. In kindness, however, this mother condescends to offer that reward to her son upon fulfillment of the agreement. God too condescended to offer reward to humankind, doing so by means of covenants.

16. Robert Rollock, *A Treatise of God’s Effectual Calling*, trans. Henry Holland (London: Felix Kyngston, 1603), 6.

17. *COC*, 3:616.

Reformed theology has long emphasized how the biblical theme of covenant importantly informs the scriptural storyline's full breadth, having fulfillment in Jesus Christ. Scripture describes how God made many covenants with individuals, such as Noah (Gen 6:18; 9:1–17), Abraham (Gen 12:1–3; 15; 17:1–14), and David (2 Sam 7:1–17), and with his corporate people, such as the Sinai covenant (Exod 19–24) and the new covenant (Jer 31:31–34). Each historical covenant plays a special role in advancing God's one story of salvation, which he authors for his own glory and for our benefit.¹⁸ Alongside recognizing the important role that each covenant plays in the unfolding but unified drama of redemption, Reformed theology has also summarized the main points of this drama and the main aspects of theology under the heading of three doctrinal covenants. Two of these covenants occur in history involving God and humanity, and one is eternal involving the Triune God alone.

First, *the covenant of works* was a covenant that God made with Adam, offering reward based on Adam's perfect obedience. In this covenant, God appointed Adam as the representative of all humanity, meaning that Adam's success or failure determined whether all humanity would receive reward or condemnation. Christians know that Adam failed, fell into sin, and so plunged the rest of us into sin with him.¹⁹

Second, *the covenant of redemption* is a pact among the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in which each person participates in executing the plan of salvation, their personal properties clearly shining forth as the Triune God works salvation for his people. The Father arranges salvation by electing some from the mass of fallen humanity and giving them to the Son to redeem. The Son accomplishes salvation by completing his mission to fulfill all the requirements of salvation on our behalf and so procure everlasting life for us. Finally, the Spirit applies salvation by joining us to Christ by faith.²⁰ This covenant was made among the Trinity in eternity, so in that regard it precedes the covenant of works. Still, this covenant addressed the need created by Adam's breach of the covenant of works. In this respect, the covenant of redemption was a covenant of works for

18. KTC, 34–37 *mutatis mutandis*.

19. WSC 16; COC, 3:679.

20. WSC 30; COC, 3:682.

the Son but is a covenant of grace for us. Although other outlines could be used effectively, this book explains the covenant of redemption after the covenant of works to highlight how it expounds God's plan of rescuing us from the situation created by Adam's fall.

Third, *the covenant of grace* is God's one way of saving his people from their sin by Christ's work, which is applied to believers in history through each biblical covenant, which unifies the Triune God's saving work from Genesis 3 to Revelation 22. God has always saved his people by administering the same promise of grace through various historical covenants, but the underlying premise of the entire covenant of grace is that God has been our God because of Christ's work. James Ussher (1581–1656) explained: "What then is the sum of the covenant of grace? That God will be our God and give us Life everlasting in Christ, if we receive him, being freely by his Father offered unto us."²¹ This book focuses on unpacking these three doctrinal covenants from the texts of Scripture.

Before progressing, we should note two reasons why covenant theology should be helpful for Christ's disciples, drawing from Exodus 2:23–25: "During those many days the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel—and God knew." First, covenants clarify our relationship with God, providing confidence that he will act for us. Abraham's descendants were in distress, but God would act to rescue them. They were unlikely the only people struggling in the world at that time as, undoubtedly, other peoples even felt the Egyptian empire's weight. Nonetheless, God acted particularly to free Abraham's descendants from their plight, precisely because he had covenanted with Abraham. God's covenant, therefore, establishes a special promissory bond with his people, which even the passing centuries cannot break. God's promise is unchangeable because he makes his promises within covenants that obligate him—of course by his own choice—to be faithful to those promises. "God saw the people of Israel—and God knew" precisely in the sense that he knew them as the people who were special to

21. James Ussher, *A Body of Divinitie* (London: Thomas Downes and George Badger, 1645), 159.

him as his own treasured possession *because* he had covenanted with their forefather Abraham. God's promise to Abraham still applies to his people today, as the apostle Paul clearly explained in Galatians 3–4, entailing that Christians can be equally as sure that God will act on our behalf and has done so in Christ. So, covenants are a source of clarity and assurance about how you relate to God.

Second, covenants unite the biblical storyline. As we will see particularly regarding the covenant of grace, covenant theology at least in part concerns Scripture's narrative about the drama of redemption. That concern helps us understand that God has been writing one unified story of salvation from Genesis 3 to the actual events described in Revelation 22. The principles of covenant theology unify the Bible's story about God redeeming a people for himself. Even though we have to read our Bibles well to discern the doctrines of covenant theology, in return covenant theology helps us to read our Bibles more deeply.

Covenant theology makes us more aware of how the God who is sovereign has been directing history, certainly toward his people's redemption, but particularly toward their redemption in Christ. Christ is the scope of all Scripture in that all Scripture points to him who achieved the forgiveness of our sins and grants us access to God's throne of grace. Christ was not God's backup plan but first plan of salvation at every point of the biblical narrative. So, covenants also help us read our Bible with depth and clarity.

TWO COVENANTAL PRINCIPLES

This chapter's remainder explains one of Reformed covenant theology's fundamental principles, namely, that our relationship with God must be *founded* on only one of two distinct premises: law or gospel. The point is not to oversimplify each historical covenant as each neatly belonging to one category but that two thoroughly distinct covenantal principles—namely, works and grace—undergird the two mutually exclusive ways of relating to God.²² Although the biblical covenants' features vary their emphases concerning obligation and promise, the principle basis by which we relate to God, personal obedience or God's grace, cannot be mixed. To be clear, these principles of works and grace are opposed, not

22. Horton, "Covenant," 436–41.

in themselves or in God, but regarding us as sinners.²³ The following discussion does not, then, erase the complexities concerning the historical features of the biblical covenants nor believers' experience within them. Rather, it highlights that however these complexities may be present in a covenant's *administration*, contributing in various ways to the developing biblical narrative, ultimately, a person's relationship with God necessarily rests *in principle* upon the *basis* of either law or gospel—specifically, concerning how to be right with him and obtain his blessings.

Reformed theology has historically emphasized that our categories of the covenants of works and grace explain why grace and works cannot be mixed concerning the basis for our relationship with God, undergirding the law-gospel distinction.²⁴ Even at the confessional level, the Second Helvetic Confession 13.1 states, “The gospel is certainly opposed to the law. For the law works wrath and announces the curse, but the gospel proclaims grace and blessing.”²⁵ The law-gospel distinction is then a confessional issue rather than a matter of private opinion.

Interestingly, the Reformed commentary tradition prominently features this law-gospel distinction, showing its nature as a biblical deduction more than simply a doctrinal construct. John Calvin (1509–1564), commenting on Galatians, said the principles of law and grace are a “contradiction of the premises,” since “the law binds every human under the curse” making it “vain to strive for blessing by it.”²⁶ In other words, “salvation by the law and by the promise are contrary,” so that “establishing one destroys the other certainly because the promise has respect to faith, but the law to works.”²⁷ William Perkins (1558–1602), arguing that this law-gospel distinction is an essential part of what Jude 1:3 calls the faith once for all delivered to the saints, wrote, “The law and gospel are two parts of the Word of God and are divers kinds of doctrine. By the law, I understand that part of God's Word which promises life to the obeyer. By the gospel, that part which promises it to the believer.”²⁸ Perkins saw

23. ACW, 199.

24. Michael S. Horton, “Covenant Theology,” in *CDT*, 36–41.

25. *COC*, 3:260.

26. *CO*, 50:208; *CC*, 21:1.88–89.

27. *CO*, 50: 214; *CC*, 21:1.98.

28. *WWP*, 4:53 (commentary on Jude 3).

the same teaching in Paul's letter to the Galatians as well, writing: "Let us again mark here the difference between the law and the gospel. The law promises life, but to the worker for his works, or upon condition of obedience. The gospel called by Paul "the promise" offers and gives life freely without the condition of any work and requires nothing but the receiving of that which is offered."²⁹ Likewise reflecting on Galatians 3:12, Rollock explained the significance of "the law is not of faith" by arguing "these two—law and faith—thus far fight, so that if a person would be righteous by faith, now he would not be so by the law ... certainly, when someone seeks for the meritorious cause of justification and its principal effect, surely then, at this point, these two are reciprocally split apart from each other, so that if you set up one, it is necessary that you refuse the other."³⁰ The Reformed exegetical tradition, then, saw the principles of law and gospel as a thoroughly biblical doctrine.

The law-gospel distinction was also part of the Reformed dogmatic heritage. Herman Witsius (1636–1708) explained:

The Apostle teaches us this distinction (Rom. 3:27) where he mentions the law of works, and the law of faith; by the law of works, understanding that doctrine which points out the way in which, by means of works, salvation is obtained; and by the law of faith, that doctrine which directs by faith to obtain salvation. The form of the covenant of works is, "the man, which doth those things shall live by them," (Rom. 10:5). That of the covenant of grace is, "whosoever believeth in him, shall not be ashamed," (Rom. 10:11).³¹

Connecting his point to that Reformed exegetical tradition, Witsius commented on Galatians 3:11–12, "For, in vain would any seek for eternal life by the law, if never promised in it. But the Apostle places the whole difference, not in the thing promised, but in the condition of obtaining the promise."³² Herman Bavinck (1854–1921) put it similarly, "Grace and works stand at opposite poles from each other and are mutually exclusive."³³

29. WWP, 2:193 (commentary on Galatians 3:18).

30. Robert Rollock, *Analysis Logica in Epistolam Pauli Apostoli ad Galatas* (London: Felix Kyngston, 1602), 54.

31. EC, 1.1.15.

32. EC, 1.4.7.

33. WWG, 254; BRD, 4:453.

Geerhardus Vos (1862–1949) then overtly connected these distinct principles to Reformed covenant theology: “In Scripture, then, the antithesis between law and gospel is meant such that the law as the condition of the covenant of works and the gospel exclude each other.”³⁴ The Reformed consensus then is that the principles of works and grace contrast in regard to our right standing with God.³⁵

Exegetical considerations demonstrate why the Reformed so readily appropriated this distinction as a fundamental part of our doctrinal system. Paul crisply summarized how grace and works cannot both ground our relationship with God in Romans 11:6: “But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace.” Paul contrasted works and obedience on the one hand with grace and gift on the other, showing why the distinction between the covenant of works and covenant of grace is useful and *biblical*.³⁶ Romans 5:15–19 highlights this contrast:

But the *free gift* is not like the trespass. For if many died through one man’s trespass, much more have the grace of God and the *free gift* by the *grace* of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many. And the *free gift* is not like the result of that one man’s sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the *free gift* following many trespasses brought justification. For if, *because of one man’s trespass*, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive *the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness* reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ. Therefore, as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. 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.

Paul emphasized the *free gift* and how this free gift, which comes entirely through grace, results in justification, so it is *not like* the original trespass that Adam committed by breaking God’s law. Adam’s relationship with

34. VRD, 5:86.

35. TI, 8.3.4; CW, 12–13, 63.

36. Belcher, *Fulfillment*, 33–35; Horton, *Covenant Theology*, 35–50; Barcellos, *Covenant of Works*, 88–89.

God was tied to his obedience, contrasting his failure by disobeying with Christ's victory by obeying. Believers receive grace and life, not because we obey, but because someone else obeyed for us.³⁷

The biblical narrative shows how these principles apply in the history of God's people, tying this law-gospel distinction to the covenants. Genesis records the story of Abraham, a supremely important figure in the history of God's covenants. God promised to make Abraham the father of countless descendants, even as many as the stars of heaven or sands on the shore (Gen 22:17). Abraham and his wife, Sarah, were elderly though and struggled to believe God's promise, so they acted to bring God's promises about by their own works. Abraham had a son with one of Sarah's handmaids, Hagar, and this son's name was Ishmael. Despite Abraham's lack of faith and his sinful efforts to claim God's promise by his own works, God still blessed Abraham with a son through Sarah, whom they named Isaac. In Galatians 4:24–26, Paul, interpreting the difference between the two mothers of Abraham's children, connected the issues of promise and works to the covenants: "Now this may be interpreted allegorically: *these women are two covenants*. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children *for slavery*; she is Hagar. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. *But the Jerusalem above is free*, and she is our mother."³⁸ Paul's point was that although we can relate to God only by covenant, there are two kinds of covenants, one placing sinners in slavery and one making us free.³⁸

Redemptive history unfolded so that these two covenants, one with Abraham and one with Israel at Mount Sinai, would teach about the two covenantal principles that are opposed concerning the foundation of our relationship with God. Even in Galatians, Paul addressed errors about justification because the Galatians had bought the lie that sinners could and must do some act of obedience in order to be right with God, namely, in their case, circumcision.³⁹ In Galatians 3:9–19, as he explained God's

37. Michael Horton, *Justification*, 2 vol. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2018), 2:57–60.

38. Herman Ridderbos, *The Epistle of Paul to the Churches of Galatia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 172–76; Richard N. Longenecker, *Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 210–11; BTA, 105–11; Rollock, *Treatise*, 6–7; CW, 5–6.

39. F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 19–32; David A. deSilva, *The Letter to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 7–26; Thomas R. Schreiner, *Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 390–92.

redemptive-historical purposes for the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants, Paul defended why we cannot combine the mutually exclusive principles of works and faith regarding the basis on which we relate to God.

This redemptive-historical point highlights how the lived experience of God's people often includes the temptation to categorize wrongly our endeavors to obey God as the need to keep his law to maintain our right standing with him. Those who lived under the Mosaic covenant—and especially those who tried to keep living under it after Christ came—experienced the continual threat of God's curse lingering over them as a warning against any breach against the law.⁴⁰ Although individually saved by grace alone, Israel's national experience under the law pointed to the theological reality that everyone who trusts in their works is condemned and cursed by the law (Gal 3:10; Rom 2:17).⁴¹

Christians often believe that God's law and our obedience to it serves no purpose unless we keep it to gain something from God. Some Galatians had come to think that the Mosaic law's purpose was to add the condition of obedience to faith for obtaining God's blessings. They were greatly confused about why Christians seek to obey God's law, a problem remaining today. As Calvin explained, "Where we hear that the law has no influence for conveying justification, various thoughts immediately creep up, either it is therefore useless, or it is opposed to God's covenant, or something of that sort."⁴² In truth, the Mosaic covenant served at least in part to "make transgressions known, and in this way [to] compel people to admit their guilt."⁴³ So, the law shows us how we need the promise because sinners cannot obtain God's blessings but by grace.

The principles of works and grace are then entirely opposed concerning the foundation of our relationship with God. We cannot look to our obedience as a reason for God to accept us because we need to relate to him by the kind of covenant founded on grace, which then cannot be

40. T. David Gordon, *Promise, Law, Faith: Covenant-Historical Reasoning in Galatians* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Academic, 2019), 7–25, 39–41; J. V. Fesko, *Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 63–66; Gordon, *Promise*, 114–118.

41. *WWP*, 2:169 (commentary on Galatians 3:10); *LG*, 19, 25, 41, 64–65, 139–40; Longenecker, *Galatians*, 115–16, 128–30; Ridderbos, *Galatia*, 136–37; Brian S. Rosner, *Paul and the Law: Keeping the Commandments of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 89.

42. *CO*, 50:214; *CC*, 21:1.99.

43. *CO*, 50:215; *CC*, 21:1.100.

established by works. We still strive to keep God's law as an expression of our new life and gratitude for redemption. Indeed, Christians who believe that salvation is by grace alone should long most deeply to improve in holiness. All the same, we remember that this growth in godliness is not the principle of our relationship with God, since we must know him by the covenant of grace, not the covenant of works.

CONCLUSION

Covenant theology is about our communion with God, importantly drawing our attention to the way that we live life before him, since he uses covenants to facilitate our relational communion with him. Covenant is then the context in which we find ourselves bound to our Maker, and as Christians the context in which we find ourselves bound to our Maker who is also our Redeemer and our Savior, Jesus Christ. An exploration of the biblical doctrines of the covenant, therefore, enriches and deepens our understanding of our relationship with our Triune God. Just as a child needs to understand her relationship with her parent to fathom love, discipline, and guidance, we must understand the structure of our relationship with our God in order to appreciate the deepest and most joyful relationship for which we were created. In other words, the Christian life circles around our awareness that we belong to God in Christ.

These two covenant principles show how God is supremely committed to giving his blessings to his people. Although sinners cannot obtain God's favor by our works, God has offered his gifts to us on the basis of his free grace. This distinction between two covenantal principles undergirds the difference between what the Reformed tradition has termed the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. Before the fall, God made a law covenant with Adam that established the patterns, structures, types, and a foundation for the tensions that would occur in redemptive history, all anticipating Christ and concerning what he would achieve for his people and distribute to us on the principle of grace alone.⁴⁴

44. Stephen J. Wellum, "Progressive Covenantalism," in *CDT*, 90; Stephen J. Wellum, "A Progressive Covenantalism Response," in *CDT*, 205-7; cf. *KTC*, 675.