

WESTMINSTER CONFESSION OF FAITH: WAS THE MOSAIC COVENANT A REPUBLICATION OF THE COVENANT OF WORKS?

By Robert B. Strimple

The phrase "covenant of works" appears six times in the Westminster Standards. In WCF 7:2 ("The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works..."), and in WLC 30A ("...into which they fell by the breach of the first covenant, commonly called the covenant of works"), the reference is to the covenant made with Adam "as a public person, not for himself only, but for his posterity, all mankind descending from him by ordinary generation..." WLC Q. 22A. In WCF 19:6 (two times) and WLC 97A, the reference is to the fact that "true believers" (WSC 19:6)--"they that are regenerate, and believe in Christ" (WLC 97A)--are "delivered from the moral law as a covenant of works" (WLC 97A).

Only in WCF 19:1,2 is the phrase "covenant of works" used in a context that refers also to the Mosaic covenant, and there it used to draw a *contrast* between the law as given to Adam ("as a covenant of works"), and the law as it continues to be for everyone "after his fall... a perfect rule of righteousness," which is also as it was delivered ("as such") "by God upon Mount Sinai..." Note well that the contrast is *not* between the *law* given in to Adam and the *law* given to all men after Adam's fall, including those who received the *law* delivered upon Mount Sinai. It is *the moral law of God* that is in view in each case. The contrast lies in the *purpose* or *function* for which that moral law was given in each case, the purpose expressed in those three phrases that begin with "as" (sec. 1, the preposition "as" means "in the role, function, or status of"), "to be" (sec. 2), and again "as" (sec. 2).

It will be helpful to quote here the entire text of WCF 19:1 and 2—

Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 19 *Of the Law of God*

- "1. God gave to Adam a law, as a covenant of works, by which he bound him and all his posterity to personal, entire, exact, and perpetual obedience, promised life upon the fulfilling, and threatened death upon the breach of it, and endued him with power and ability to keep it.**
- 2. This law, after his fall, continued to be a perfect rule of righteousness; and, as such, was delivered by God upon Mount Sinai, in ten commandments, and written in two tables: the first commandments containing our duty towards God; and the other six, our duty to man."**

It is difficult to know how best to organize my thoughts here, but let me delay an exposition of those two sections—the only "exposition" required, I believe, being simply to emphasize what the Confession actually *says* here!—until I have first noted what the editors of *TLNF* say is the meaning of these sections, and what the argument of Dr. Clark is on which (according to one of those editors) that understanding is based.

I noted above, in introducing the text of WCF 19:1-2, that a *contrast* is drawn there between the law as given to Adam, and the law as it continues to be for everyone "after his fall... a perfect rule of righteousness," and as it was delivered ("as such") "by God upon Mount Sinai..."—the latter uses of the law (for all men and women after Adam's fall, and as God delivered this law upon Mount Sinai) being linked together by the phrase "and, as such". But in spite of this clear *contrast* in purpose/function, both the editors of *TLNF* on pages 10-11, and Dr. Fesko in the last paragraph of his essay (p. 43)—immediately after they quote for the reader the key parts of those sections of the Confession—assert that "in other words (! RBS), in some sense, the covenant of works was republished at Sinai" (p. 11). Here in the WCF, it is claimed, "one also finds the same legal characterization of the Mosaic covenant even in terms of the republication of the covenant of works..." (p. 43). And I wrote in the margin of my copy: "No, no, no!" That is precisely what is *not* found in the Confession!

Now, how can the editors of *TLNF* read these sections of the Confession that way—a way that seems directly contrary to the point being made by the Confession? All that is said by way of argument on p. 11 is that "the divines

saw that the law given to Adam was of a piece with that given to Israel at Sinai." That statement is certainly and clearly true. But the "of a piece" factor seen by the Confession is, as I have noted above in the second paragraph of p. 1 of this essay, the fact that it is the same *moral law* given to Adam "as a covenant of works" that is given to all his posterity as "a perfect rule of righteousness." To say that, of course, is not to say that that law was not "a perfect rule of righteousness" for Adam also—that it obviously was, for that is what God's moral law always is—and that is indicated by the Confession's saying that the law, after Adam's fall, "*continued* to be" a perfect rule of righteousness."

So the question at issue comes down to this: for what purpose/use/function does the Confession view the law to have been given upon Mount Sinai? Was it given upon Mount Sinai as a covenant of works (as well as a perfect rule of righteousness)? Or was it given upon Mount Sinai as a perfect rule of righteousness only? Well, the Confession answers that question with the words "as such" in 19:2, words which in that sentence obviously refer back to the immediately preceding reference to the "perfect rule of righteousness" that all continued to be under after the Fall. (See more on this below.) The law was not "delivered by God upon Mount Sinai" as a covenant of works (as it was to Adam, sec. 1), but as "a perfect rule of righteousness," which it continues to be for *everyone* after Adam's fall.

I honestly don't believe I have to appeal for support to commentators on the WCF to make this point. (But having affirmed no need to "drop names," I'll proceed to drop a few here. We all appreciate reassurance, and I did send this essay on WCF 19:1-2 to three Reformed theologians of some standing: Sinclair Ferguson, Richard B. Gaffin, and Robert W. Letham, whose recently published *The Westminster Assembly. Reading Its Theology In Historical Context* makes extensive use of Chad Van Dixhoorn's ground-breaking 7-volumes of research into the Minutes of the Westminster Assembly, asking each of them to evaluate my presentation; and all three reported full agreement with this essay.) I do believe the English sentences of the divines in 19:1-2 are quite clear. And I think it is for that reason that you will find that most commentators on the WCF do not find it necessary to comment on the force of these sentences. But here are three commentators that I found interesting:

Somewhere in my too-much-reading recently I came across Rowland Ward's name in a list of those Reformed commentators who find expressed in the

WCF what I have called for convenience "the republication doctrine." [I realize that that label can be misleading, because all we Reformed believers are "republicationists" in the sense that we all believe the moral law of God was reaffirmed—summarized or "republished" if you will—on Mt. Sinai. We have no argument there. The point at issue is whether or not that moral law was reaffirmed/republished on Mt. Sinai *as in some sense the covenant of works made with Adam.*] But I found that Ward's actual comment is an interesting example of how focusing on that one word, "republication" (a word that has perhaps become something of a "buzz word" in our circles recently) can lead to a false conclusion. Ward writes: "If we speak of the giving of the Ten Commandments as a republication *of the law written on the heart* in a form of words appropriate for its recipients—and it is *correct* to do so—we need to remember the context of redemptive grace in which the giving occurred" (*The Westminster Confession of Faith: A Study Guide*, p. 116, italics added). Note that Ward says not a word here about the law being given upon Mount Sinai as a republication *of the covenant of works*. Ward speaks of a written republication ("in a form of words appropriate for its recipients") of the law originally written on man's heart; and all of us would agree, I believe, that the Ten Commandments were that. And, I would say again, that is why it can be said that "the law given to Adam was of a piece with that given to Israel at Sinai" (*TLNF*, p. 11).

John Macpherson comments more at length on 19:2. He says that some appear to view the Mosaic Covenant as having "a tincture" of both the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. But he replies: "This would make God the author of confusion. There can be no mingling of the two covenants which are necessarily exclusive of one another. Some, again, view the Sinaitic Covenant as a peculiar exhibition or *republication* of the covenant of works....**This is not the view of our Confession**....That law which to the world is a standard for judgment, is, to those under the covenant of grace, a rule of righteousness" (*The Confession of Faith*, p. 117, italics and bold face added). But again, it is the same moral law that is given to Adam and then on Mt. Sinai, and thus they are "of a piece."

The following comments are from Robert Shaw, *An Exposition of the Confession of Faith*, pp. 193-4: On 19:1: "as a covenant of works"—"In this form, the law is to be viewed as not only prescribing duty, but as promising life as the reward of obedience, and denouncing death as the punishment of transgression....But all men are naturally under the law as a broken

covenant, obnoxious to its penalty, and bound to yield obedience to its commands."

On 19:2: "Upon the fall of man, the law, considered as a covenant of works, was disannulled and set aside; but, considered as moral, it continued to be a perfect rule of righteousness...But the original edition of the law being greatly obliterated, God was graciously pleased to give a new and complete copy of it" in ten commandments. Now, we must note that Shaw can go on to say (what the Confession does not say) that "It may be remarked that the law of the ten commandments was promulgated to Israel from Sinai in the form of a covenant of works..." But note how Shaw immediately goes on to explain what he means by speaking that way: "Not that it was the design of God to renew a covenant of works with Israel...but the law was published to them as a covenant of works (by which Shaw seems to mean simply that it was in the form of commands demanding obedience, RBS) to show them that without a perfect righteousness, answering to all the demands of the law, they could not be justified before God; and that, finding themselves wholly destitute of that righteousness they might be excited to take hold of the covenant of grace, in which a perfect righteousness for their justification is graciously provided..." In his portion of the Fesko/Godfrey Report to the WSC Board of Trustees for this May meeting, Dr. Fesko quotes Robert Shaw's statement that "the law, therefore, was published at Sinai as a covenant of works, in subservience to the covenant of grace." But he doesn't quote Shaw's immediately following explanation that I have quoted here, beginning with "Not that it was the design of God to renew a covenant of works with Israel..."; thus giving the reader perhaps a false impression of Dr. Shaw's doctrine.

Dr. Fesko says on p. 43 of *TLNF* that the WCF speaks of "the Mosaic covenant...in terms of the republication of the covenant of works," but as a matter of fact it doesn't. The Confession nowhere affirms that. Dr. Fesko says that "space does not permit a full-blown exposition of these points," but in fact he offers nothing at all in his essay to support his "republication" interpretation of the WCF. When in conversation I mentioned this to him, he appealed to two blogs by Dr. Clark. So let's look at the arguments of those blogs now.

The more recent one is dated December 23, 2009. There Dr. Clark writes that "the WCF itself clearly suggests [note that "suggests" is a far weaker verb than "says" or "teaches", RBS] the very doctrine of the republication of

the covenant of works." He states that the expression "covenant of works" occurs four times in the WCF, which tells us nothing of course about how the Confession applies that phrase to the Mosaic covenant, since *none* of those occurrences refers to the Mosaic covenant as a covenant of works.

Dr. Clark then presents his argument. He emphasizes that the words "This law" with which 19:2 begins have as their antecedent the law referred to in 19:1—which is certainly true—but he insists that therefore "this law" is "the very same 'law' which the confession described in 19:1 as the covenant of works"—which is certainly *not* true. Think about it. The phrase "this law" appears *again* in section 3; and it is clear that the "law" referred to in sec. 1, "this law" referred to in sec. 2, and "this law" described in sec. 3, are all the very same law, the law which we learn in sec. 3 is "commonly called moral," the law "beside" which God also gave Israel "ceremonial laws" (sec. 3) and "judicial laws" (sec. 4). That moral law was given to Adam "as a covenant of works" (sec. 1), but it "continued to be" for *all* Adam's posterity "after his fall...*a perfect rule of righteousness.*" That moral law "doth forever bind all, as well justified persons as others, to the obedience thereof" (section 5).

In other words, Dr. Clark's argument would prove too much, far too much. If "this law" in section 2 *equals* the covenant of works described in sec. 1 (as he insists), and that is the same law spoken of again in sec. 3 as "this law," then (ergo) that law ("the very same 'law' which the confession described in 19:1 as the covenant of works," Clark) continues to bind "all, as well justified persons as others" (section 5), and that includes you and me.

That is clearly not what the Confession is saying (or even "suggesting"). In section 6 the Confession says explicitly that "true believers be not under the law, as a covenant of works...", and the implication of that sentence is that "true believers" *in all ages, including the Mosaic era*, have *never*, in any sense, been under the Law as a covenant of works. Section 6 tells us what it means to be under the law as a perfect rule of righteousness, though not as a covenant of works. And note especially what is said about that moral law later in section 6:

"The promises of it, in like manner, show them God's approbation of obedience, and what blessings they may expect upon the performance thereof: *although not as due to them by the law as a covenant of works.*"

You see, a distinction must be made between the moral law of God and the purpose it served *before* the fall ("as a covenant of works"), and the moral law of God and the purpose it serves *after* the fall (see sec. 6), for which purpose it was delivered upon Mount Sinai (see sec. 2); i.e., as "a perfect rule of righteousness." The Confession says that the moral law that God gave to Adam as a covenant of works is the "very same law" (Dr. Clark) that continues to be a perfect rule of righteousness for us; and it was that law (I shall refer again below to the force of the "as such" in section 2) that "was delivered by God upon Mount Sinai." But that law does *not* continue as a covenant of works for us, and it was *not* delivered upon Mount Sinai as a covenant or works for the children of Israel. This is what the Confession teaches. It may not be what some on our faculty would like it to teach. But it is what the Confession teaches.

I believe a careful reading of WCF 19:1-2 must conclude that the Confession is not simply "neutral" on this matter of whether the law was delivered upon Mount Sinai as a republication of the covenant of works made with Adam—which is the view of some on our faculty; in other words, they disagree with both me and Dr. Clark—the Confession teaches that the law was delivered upon Mount Sinai as a perfect rule of righteousness, as opposed to the function for which the law was given to Adam, namely, "as a covenant of works, by which..." I have pondered how to make clear to those who see the WCF as "neutral" on this point what I believe the WCF says here. Let me try this: [I confess I remember little from my university course on "symbolic logic."] If someone says that he gave gift x to person A for purpose 1, and he gave that same gift x to person B for purpose 2, there is no reason to think that what that someone *meant* was that he gave gift x to person B for purpose 1 *as well as* for purpose 2 *unless speaker "someone" says so*. If that illustration is unhelpful, just go back to what the Confession actually says.

Now, affirming that the Confession is not simply "neutral" on what I will again call the "republication" issue (simply for convenience) but actually teaches what is contrary to the "republication" doctrine, may raise a question in some minds that should be addressed quickly before concluding these comments with a consideration of Dr. Clark's earlier blog. Since it my firm conviction that the Confession in 19:1-2 teaches what I have stated two paragraphs above, the questions may naturally arise: 1) whether I could vote to ordain in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church a candidate who holds to the "republication in some sense of the covenant of works made with Adam"

view of the Mosaic covenant--(remember the opening presbytery scene in *TLNF*)-- and 2) would I support charges being brought against an OPC minister or elder holding to such a view? The answer to the first question is "yes," and the answer to the second question is "no." I personally believe that such a candidate should inform presbytery that he takes exception to 19:2 of the Confession (and perhaps some will want to follow Dr. Kline in taking exception also to 7:1, but that's another question for another time). But the question is whether this disagreement with the WCF rises to the level of one's being unable to "sincerely receive and adopt the Confession of Faith and Catechisms of this Church, as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Holy Scriptures". I do not believe it does.

The other relevant blog by Dr. Clark was published much earlier; it is dated July 16, 2007 (quoted here from footnote 87 on p. 356 of *Covenant, Justification and Pastoral Ministry. Essays by the Faculty of Westminster Seminary California*). There he presented essentially the same argument that he presented in his more recent blog (which we considered above), but with the additional factor of following Thomas Boston in appealing "to the logic implied by the grammar of WCF 19:1 and 2," and claiming that "the phrase 'covenant of works' in 19:1 is *appositive* to the noun 'law'" (italics added). "Thus the 'Law' is reckoned here as a covenant of works. Thus when, 19:2 establishes 'this law' as the subject of the verb "was delivered," the antecedent can be none other than the law defined as a covenant of works in 19:1."

Thus, if I am following the "logic of the grammar" correctly, if (as we have shown above) then *all* the references to "this law" in this chapter, since they all have the same ultimate antecedent (namely the "law" referred to in sec. 1), must also be understood as referring to "none other than the 'Law' defined as a covenant of works in 19:1." But that, of course, is impossible, for that would mean that "this law" spoken of there in sec. 2 as *continuing* for us is a covenant of works; as also the "law" spoken of in sec. 5 as "forever bind(ing) all, as well justified persons as others"; as well as the references to "the law" twice in sec. 6 as that which "true believers" are "not under...as a covenant of works"! I know Dr. Clark doesn't believe that, but that is where the logic of his argument would lead him.

When Dr. Clark says in this blog that "the phrase 'covenant of works,' in 19:1 is *appositive* to the noun 'Law'—"the second expression identifying or supplementing the first" *The American College Dictionary*—his argument is

that therefore "this law" in sec. 2 "can be none other than the 'Law' defined as a covenant of works in 19:1." But if all references to "law" or "this law" in this chapter must be references to law as a covenant of works, because that is the *definition* of law in this chapter, that would lead to the consequences noted in our previous paragraph, which cannot be true. The error in Dr. Clark's argument is that the phrase "as a covenant of works" in sec. 1 is not appositive but *restrictive*. The little word "as" in the sec. 1—"God gave to Adam a law, *as* a covenant or works—is a preposition here in the first sense listed in the *Webster New World Dictionary*: "as—preposition 1. in the role, function, capacity, or sense of ". The Confession says that God gave to *Adam* a law as a covenant of works, but it never says, or even suggests, that God ever so gave it to any person or nation after the fall.

In sec. 2 the important phrase "as such" appears, appears immediately after the reference to "this law, after his fall, continued to be a perfect rule of righteousness; and..." The first usage of the word "such" as an adjective listed in the *Webster New World Dictionary* is: "such—adjective 1. of the same kind mentioned or implied." Here in sec. 2 the phrase is "as such," where "such" is a pronoun, meaning "as being what is indicated or suggested" *Webster*. And what is indicated in the sentence in sec. 2 is the purpose/function stated in the words *immediately* preceding "as such," i.e., "to be a perfect rule of righteousness." The words "as such" do not leap over all the words in the sentence in which it appears to go back to "as a covenant of works" at the beginning of sec. 1!

Note also that the two references to "covenant of works" with *negative* force in sec. 6—"not under the law as a covenant of works" and later "although not as due to them by the law as a covenant of works"—must be read alongside the *positive* statement of sec. 2. Question: If true believers after the fall (including those who received the law on Mt. Sinai) be "not under the law, as a covenant of works" (sec. 6), how does the law relate to them? Answer: As "a perfect rule of righteousness."

The meaning of 19:1-2 is so clear that I do not understand why any question concerning that meaning should ever have arisen. To state that meaning I can use no clearer words than the words the divines used: "God gave to Adam a law, as a covenant of works... This law, after his fall, continued to be a perfect rule of righteousness; and, as such, was delivered by God upon Mount Sinai..."