

The Committee for the Study of Republication: 2013 Address to the PNW

The Reformed Presbyterian community is known for its accentuated concept of covenant.¹ A more or less recent contention has arisen over the question of the Mosaic covenant's relation to the covenant of works established in Eden. It came into full focus with the release of a collection of essays under the title, *The Law Is not of Faith: Essays on Works and Grace in the Mosaic Covenant* (eds., B. D. Estelle, J. V. Fesko, D. VanDrunen, Phillipsburg: P&R, 2009). While a clearly defined thesis of the book remains elusive in the opinion of many reviewers, not the least on account of a sizable array of contributors with varying emphases, the main thrust of its argument advances the claim that the Sinai covenant is "in some sense"² a republication of the covenant of works.

The present paper is not an attempt to furnish a decision on the issue (as if this committee could do so), but to identify key areas of inquiry for the sake of soliciting peaceful discussion. Such deliberation will not, of course, occur in a doctrinal vacuum. The OPC is a confessional body, with the notion of covenant already delineated in Chapter 7 of the Westminster Confession of Faith.³ Its first three articles introduce the concept as entailing a divine inception of "voluntary condescension" (7.1), in order to distinguish the covenant of works made with Adam as representative of the human race (7.2) and the covenant of grace with Jesus Christ as federal head (7.3). The former promised Adam and his posterity life "upon condition of perfect...obedience," a condition that Adam did not fulfill. In response to the fall of man, God then made the latter, promising sinners life in Christ through faith in him. The antithesis of the two covenants is that of perfect human works and divine grace as the means by which life is granted.

In the concluding articles of the Confession (7.5-6), the Mosaic covenant is subsumed under the umbrella of the covenant of grace, making it the governing principle of redemptive history. Consequently, the covenant of grace "was differently administered in the time of the law (i.e., under Moses) and in the time of the gospel (i.e., under Christ, 7.5), so that "there are not therefore two covenants of grace, differing in substance, but one and the same, under various dispensations" (7.6). The debate regarding the concept of republication centers on the question of whether the Mosaic covenant under the controlling sway of the covenant of grace advances a principle of meritorious work in the sense that this was the case in the Adamic covenant. It is important to retain an important distinction, namely that the terms "law" and "covenant" should not be interpreted to be co-extensive. While WCF 19.1-2 certainly affirms the republication of the moral law in a more elaborate form at Sinai, it says nothing of a republication of the covenant of works as such. By the same token, the moral law written on Adam's heart as the *imago dei* did not in itself constitute the covenant of works. It took special revelation in the legislation of the tree of knowledge (Gen 2:16-17) to define the covenant.

There is notable diversity of opinion concerning the issue of the distinct nature of the Mosaic covenant, not only in the present, but the history of Reformed theology shows a long pedigree of appreciation.⁴ Even among proponents of republication the spectrum of approaches is considerable.⁵ T. D. Gordon tends to view the entire Mosaic treaty as essentially characterized by works that either merit blessing or cursing, with a predictable outcome, due to man's inability to obey God's standards,⁶ while others wish to limit an operative meritorious principle of works to Israel's tenure of the land of Canaan.⁷ In the latter case, the national fidelity required by law is often claimed to have been not perfect or total, but only "sincere."⁸

Whatever view is espoused, the conviction that the Mosaic covenant reiterated the merit-based probation known from the prelapsarian covenant of works implies a degree of discontinuity with the covenant of grace, first made explicit to Abraham in Gen 12:1-3, and then fully enacted or ratified in the New Covenant in Christ's blood. The proposed parenthetical function of the Sinai covenant remains at the heart of the discussion. The committee for the study of republication offers the following remarks in recognition of the most salient points of contention.

1. Merit and Obedience under the Mosaic Covenant

No (known) participant in the discussion concerning republication argues that the Sinai covenant was given with the divine intention of affording a real venue to obtain life by keeping its stipulations.⁹ To the contrary, the consensus is that the demands of the law fulfilled a pedagogical function to lead Israel (and us) to Christ (Gal 3:24), a notion that coincides with the so-called second use of the law (*usus elencticus sive paedagogicus*) in Reformed scholasticism.

The question that continues to drive the discussion, however, hinges on the definition of merit. The corporate blessings and curses of Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 may serve as a convenient test case. There is no doubt that they entail notions of merit and demerit based upon obedience and transgression. Are they absolute (presuming a covenant of works) or are they relative (presuming the Mosaic covenant to be essentially gracious)? In the latter case, the promises & warnings of these passages can be read analogous to covenantal promises and warnings under the New Covenant. According to 1 Cor 11:27-32, unworthy participants of the Lord's Supper (who are thus participants in the covenant) are being judged even to the point of death. Likewise, the seven letters to the churches of Asia Minor in Revelation 2-3 issue a barrage of threats to the unfaithful in the covenant, with the final stage of judgment being the removal of the "lampstand" (i.e., the end of the local body, Rev 2:5). While the use of the word "merit" comes pregnant with theological freight and may therefore not be most suitable to describe the textual import, there are blessings due to obedience and curses based upon

disobedience even under the New Covenant, which do not warrant the postulation of a works principle.

Closely related to this is Paul's treatment of key OT texts, such as Lev 18:5 and Deut 30:12-14 (Lev 18:5: "I am YHWH your God. You shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules. If a person does them, he shall live in them. I am YHWH") in Rom 10:5ff. and Gal 3:12. Does Paul in these passages argue what he perceives to be an inherent works principle of the Old Covenant, or does he address a legalistic misappropriation of the maxim of Lev 18:5 (or Deut 30:12-14) in order to refute it?¹⁰ There is no consensus among interpreters, but this committee believes that any exegesis of these texts must take due account of the broader context of gracious deliverance in which the covenant of Sinai and its subsequent revision in the plains of Moab are couched (cf. Exod 20:1; Deut 5:6).¹¹

The issue of merit and obedience is also definitive for the view that Israel's keeping possession of the land of Canaan was based on imperfect meritorious works. If the required conformity to law was less than perfect, how can the notion of a covenant of works, even if limited to a corporate, typological sense, be maintained in a meaningful way? Is such a construct perhaps also casting a shadow of doubt on God's own standard of righteousness, which is absolute and holy? In any case, confining a works principle to "the typological sphere"¹² will demand the laying of much convincing groundwork to navigate the suspicion of gratuity and arbitrariness. In the view of this committee, there remains unfinished theological business in this area. While parallels between Eden and Canaan as the garden of God abound in biblical literature, a covenantal republication with implicit or explicit stipulation of meritorious works is a point of contention.

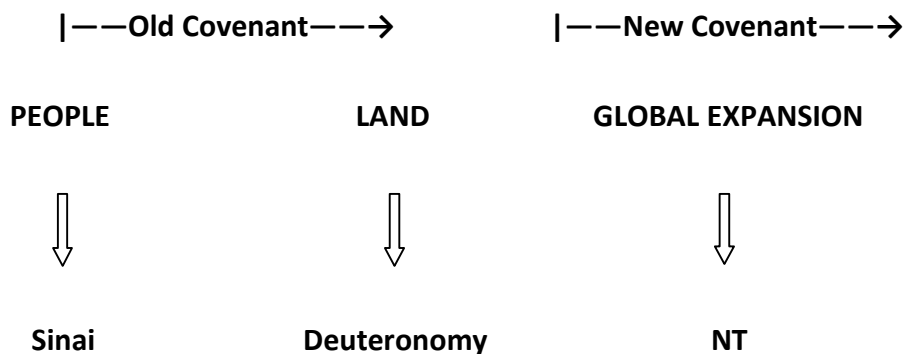
The Sinai covenant has declarative legal character, which, if read in abstraction, leads to misinterpretation, but despite its peculiar features, it should be remembered that even the retention of the land of Canaan in the history of the Old Testament is best evaluated in the context of divine grace. Just as grace kept rebellious Israel in the covenant, so also it was grace that kept them in the land. Israel's return to the land under the same covenant is portrayed as an act of sovereign grace and forgiveness, too (cf. Deut 30:1-10), which seems to favor grace and not works as the underlying theological trajectory.

2. Continuity and Discontinuity between Mosaic and New Covenant

At times the NT describes the relation of Old and New Covenant in terms of strict discontinuity. Not only does Gal 4:24ff. distinguish two covenants, one associated with Sinai, the other with "Jerusalem above" (i.e., the New Covenant, 4:26), but Heb 7:18 calls the Mosaic treaty "weak and useless," on account of which it became "obsolete" (Heb 8:13). The contrast cannot be relegated to semantics, positing a principle of works, however, is not the only way of

accounting for the antithesis. If indeed the confessional standard of “one and the same” covenant “under various dispensations” (7.6) is an accurate reflection of scriptural teachings on the subject, there must be a more compelling way of elucidating the said controversial references.

Taking our cue from the first comprehensive enunciation of the covenant of grace in Gen 12:1-3, the discontinuity between Old and New Covenant can be shown to consist not in a works-grace (or: gospel, as preferred among Lutherans) antithesis, but in the successive fulfillment of the three salient aspects of the Abrahamic promise of people, land (12:1-2), and global expansion (“all the families of the earth,” 12:3). The fulfillment of the threefold promise occurred under the Old Covenant in two installments with corresponding covenantal formalizations at Sinai and then in a renewal of the covenant tailored for life in the promised land in the plains of Moab. The first step is recorded in Exod 19:1-24:18 and represents the covenantal footing for Israel’s status as the people of God. The second consists of the entire book of Deuteronomy, which is essentially an expansion of the Sinai covenant with an unmistakable focus on the land to be conquered and possessed. The third aspect of the Abrahamic promise identifies with the New Covenant. The following conspectus illustrates the successive fulfillment of the elements of Abraham’s promise:



The two Old Testament covenants (i.e., the Old Covenant) mark or anticipate (as in the case of Deuteronomy) the fulfillment of the first two aspects of the threefold promise. They are not only preliminary to (being a shadow of better things to come, Heb 7:22; 10:1) but stand in the way of the third aspect of the promise. They are by nature limited to the covenanted people of a particular ethnic identity as well as to a geographical region and aim to protect the purity of both (cf. Deut 23:1-7; Num 35:34; Deut 21:23). As long as these boundaries of the Old Covenant remained, Abraham’s promise could not be fulfilled in total. But because the covenantal inclusion of the nations as the consummate fulfillment of the promise had always been God’s design (cf. Gal 3:8, Scripture...”preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham”), the situation

required a terminal break with the old in order to bring in the new, which found its canonical expression in the New Testament. This successive fulfillment with a terminal clause for stages one and two already built into the design explains why Gal 4:24ff. can unequivocally speak of two covenants, although there remains but one covenant of grace spanning the entire sweep of redemptive history and into the present. As a preliminary fulfillment of Abraham's promise, the Old Covenant was made with and limited to Israel and the geographical boundaries of Canaan. It could not survive God's turning of the page to the final stage of the promise in which all things come to be gathered up and united in Christ.

The Mosaic covenant is thus distinct from the New Covenant, but not from the covenant of grace as pronounced in Gen 12:1-3. Rather, it can be seen as the formalized covenantal expression of the fulfillment of the first two aspects of the covenant of grace. It was the very nature of its two initial stages of formalization that rendered it "old" and "obsolete" when the fullness of time had come. Viewed in this light, some of the distinctly legal features of that covenant may appear to be more incidental than often recognized. While these features in part bring into focus affinities between the covenant of works and the Mosaic covenant (especially with respect to holy space conceived in strictly geographical terms),¹³ they do not require the conclusion that the meritorious works principle of the Adamic covenant was "in some sense" reiterated at Sinai and subsequently in the plains of Moab. That said, the doctrine of republication is a well-attested approach within the Reformed tradition and for this reason alone deserves better than to be labeled with inappropriate red-flag slogans or terms. As long as the Confession's basic tenet of one governing covenant of grace (WCF 7.5-6) is affirmed, the differences of views among members of the body of Christ ought to be discussed with a due sense of mutual respect and, most of all, proportionality.

Concluding Observations

Attention has already been drawn to the OPC's confessional standards in the introduction of this paper. But the controversy over republication also exhibits the fact that the use of confessional standards can come with significant liabilities. It is all too common to react to doctrinal differences (or dare we say *diversity*?) in the denomination with what W. B. Evans calls "confessional positivism,"¹⁴ a pre-emptive appeal to an external religious authority. Apart from the reality that even confessions are still of necessity subject to interpretation, how do we employ these standards and what can we expect of them? The Westminster Confession of Faith as the ruling pennant of the OPC is a product of its own time. It is a fine summary of the faith that was once delivered to the saints, and we have vowed adherence to its system of teaching, but in the nature of the case, it cannot function as the arbiter of all things theological, particularly in areas that are at best peripheral to its original purpose. As good and specific as it

is, it is neither a trans-historical phenomenon nor a timeless coordinate because it will always remain fallible and subject to reform, just as the church ought to be.

With respect to the doctrine of republication, there has been a good deal of disagreement over how exactly the covenant of grace's different administrations are to be construed and what is the range of views that can be considered within the circle of confessional authority. This is hardly surprising. After all, the Bible's treatment of the concept of covenant is far from systematic, and its language is freighted with tension and variety on a spectrum reaching from conditional to unconditional principles. The data defies reduction to a single theme or definition, and the Confession in its current form may not be able to bear the weight of the breadth of discussion nearly 370 years after its creation.

Because of the limit of authority with which the Confession can speak on the subject, members of this Presbytery are called upon to use modesty and humility in dispute and to recognize the present volatile situation as an opportunity for displaying true Christ-like virtues. It should also be remembered that the world is watching, and that anything less than the above attitude will not only lead to further fissures and distraction within the church, but is bound to deliver ammunition to those who are outside, who have long judged the OPC to be sectarian and narrow-minded. Such charges are at times well deserved and at times fueled by sheer ignorance, but we must be intentional about avoiding needless offences. Undue controversy over issues such as republication may not be conducive to or may even hinder our mission to the world.

END NOTES

¹ Michael Horton goes so far as to claim that Reformed theology and covenantal theology are in fact synonymous. Cf. *Introducing Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009) 11.

² The phrase "in some sense/sort" is used with notoriety, cf. *The Law Is not of Faith*, 6, 171, 309, 315, etc.

³ WCF, 7.1-6, "Of God's Covenant with Man."

⁴ Cf. C. P. Venema, "The Mosaic Covenant: A 'Republication' of the Covenant of Works?,"

⁵ Summaries are found in P. Golding, *Covenant Theology* (Fearn: Christian Focus Publications, 2004) 164-75; B. C. Ferry, "Works in the Mosaic Covenant: A Reformed Taxonomy," in *The Law Is not of Faith*, 76-105.

⁶ Cf. T. D. Gordon, "Abraham and Sinai Contrasted in Galatians 3:6-14," in *The Law Is not of Faith*, 240-58.

⁷ Cf. H. Witsius, *Economy of the Covenants between God and Man*, 2 Vols. (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012) 2:184; M. G. Kline, *Treaty of the Great King* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963) 65; B. D. Estelle, "Leviticus 18:5 and Deuteronomy 30:1-14 in Biblical Theological Development," in *The Law Is not of Faith*, 135-37.

⁸ Witsius, *Economy*, 2:184; M. W. Karlberg, "Reformed Interpretation of the Mosaic Covenant," *WTJ* 43 (1981) 47. Karlberg speaks of "a necessary measure of corporate righteousness," without being able to define the limits of this measure.

⁹ In this regard, Francis Turretin's analysis remains representative: "(The Sinaitic legal covenant) must always be considered with the intention of God, which was, not that man might have life from the law..." (*Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, 2:267).

¹⁰ The latter is the verdict of J. Calvin, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005) 387. A number of contemporary theologians agrees. To list a few: N. A. Dahl, *Studies in Paul: Theology of the Early Christian Mission* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1977) 135-36; M. Silva, "Is the Law against the Promises? The Significance of Gal 3:21 for Covenant Continuity." 163-66 in *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique*. Eds. W. S. Barker and W. R. Godfrey (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990); S. R. Bechtler, "Christ, the Te, loj of the Law: The Goal of Romans 10:4," *CBQ* 56 (1994) 288-308.

¹¹ Cf. J. D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16* (Waco: Word, 1988) 601; T. R. Schreiner, *Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998) 554.

¹² M. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2006) 321.

¹³ That aspects of the Old Covenant, such as the giving of the law of Moses, bear similarities with the covenant of works can hardly be called contentious. The juxtaposition of life and death based upon choice in Deut 30:15 is one overt example of how the language of Genesis 1-3 is echoed in the Old Covenant. Cf. M. Emmrich, "The Temptation Narrative of Gen 3:1-6: A Prelude to the Pentateuch and the History of Israel," *EQ* 73 (2001) 3-20, 3-9. Positing a meritorious principle, of whatever kind it may be, however, is bound to solicit more serious lines of inquiry to clarify the proposed alignment of Eden and Sinai.

¹⁴ W. B. Evans, "How Conservative Presbyterianism Lost Its Mojo – Thoughts on why Some of the NAPARC Denominations Are Plateaued or in Decline," *The Aquila Report* (2013).