

March 28th, 2021

# The Covenant of Works: the Covenant at Creation

Gen. 2:15-17

## The question the Covenant of Works is answering

The Covenant of Works seeks to answer *this* question: how did God bind Himself in a relationship with man in the beginning? Remember the definition of a covenant: A covenant is a commitment that establishes *a relationship* between two or more persons.<sup>1</sup> Now it should shock us to think that the eternal, infinite, all-blessed God would want to commit Himself in a relationship with finite, needy creatures who don't benefit Him in the least. And yet, that's precisely what the Lord did. He wanted to be our God, and He wanted us to be His people. The Covenant of Works seeks explain what *that* looked like before sin entered the world.

## Lord over the total life of man

If you are familiar at all with the covenant of works, you understand it to be the covenant that God made with Adam not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (**Genesis 2:17**), and that is right *as far as it goes*. In fact, that is how the Westminster Confession of Faith defines the Covenant of Works. **WCF 7.2:**

“The first covenant made with man was a *covenant of works*, wherein life was promised to Adam; and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience.”

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<sup>1</sup> *Covenant Theology: Biblical, Theological and Historical Perspectives*, Ed. Guy Prentiss Waters, J. Nicholas Reid, & John R. Muether, (Wheaton, IL.: Crossway, 2020), pg. 589

However, even the Westminster Standards recognized that God's relationship with man in the beginning is more broad than the specific test of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Listen to how the Larger Catechism Q.20 puts it: What was the providence of God toward man in the estate in which he was created? In other words, 'How did God relate to humanity in the beginning?'

A. God placed man "...in paradise, *appointing him to dress it*, giving him liberty to eat of the fruit of the earth; putting the creatures under his dominion, and *ordaining marriage for his help*; affording him communion with himself; *instituting the Sabbath*; entering into a covenant of life with him, upon condition of personal, perfect, and perpetual obedience, of which the tree of life was a pledge; and forbidding to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, upon the pain of death.

Here we see the broader answer. In addition to giving man the specific test of not eating the fruit, God also gave man more general responsibilities. You see the Covenant of Works doesn't just speak to one part of man—his salvation—it speaks to the total life of man. God entered into a relationship with man such that every part of man's life is under God's care. Therefore I want us to consider the Covenant of Works under two different headings.<sup>2</sup>

**General responsibilities** - those responsibilities all mankind has to God

**Specific responsibilities** - those responsibilities Adam had in his testing period

Ignoring either of these will cultivate a serious deficiency in our Christian worldview. God's Lordship isn't limited to *merely* our salvation (as great as that is), but it extends over all of life.

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<sup>2</sup> O. Palmer Robertson is really where I got these categories from, though he called them "the general aspect" and "the focal aspect" respectively. cf. O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*, (Phillipsburg, NJ.: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1980), pg. 67

- ☆The General Responsibilities in the Covenant of Works
- ☆The Specific Responsibilities in the Covenant of Works
- ☆How Is Christ Revealed in the Covenant of Works?

## I. The General Responsibilities in the Covenant of Works

### 1. The general responsibilities *or* the creational ordinances

There are three general responsibilities often called creational ordinances that God gave in the beginning that precede the fall, precede the establishment of Israel as a nation, and precede the giving of the Law, which means these ordinances are binding on all humanity. These three ordinances are 1) Labor; 2) Marriage; 3) Sabbath

#### 1.1 The ordinance of labor

The first creational ordinance that God gave that has affected the total life of man is labor. Look with me at **Genesis 1:26-28** “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness...[v.27] So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. *And God blessed them.* And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and *subdue it, and have dominion* over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” Notice at the beginning of **v.28** it says “*And God blessed them.*” The command to subdue it and have dominion over the earth (labor) is a blessing. This should give us a clue to all of God’s dealings with us. The very first command issued in the Scripture towards man is called a blessing. Now this blessing/command to subdue the earth is often called “the Cultural Mandate.” Mankind is to be a worker and a keeper of this lush garden called Earth (**Genesis 2:15**), creating, building, gathering, organizing, beautifying everything from math to music, from carpentry to the culinary arts, echoing God’s original work of Creation and reflecting His great glory in all our labor. In fact, our labor is one of the chief

ways we worship God. In the NT, “Paul made it quite plain that good standing within the Christian community hinged in part on a proper respect for work.”<sup>3</sup> **2 Thessalonians 3:10-12** “If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.” So that is **the first responsibility** within the covenant that God made with man at the beginning that is still binding on all men: labor.<sup>4</sup>

## 1.2 The ordinance of marriage

Look with me at **Genesis 2:18** “Then the Lord God said, “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.” v.21-22 “So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman and *brought her to the man.*” Wow! The *Lord brought her* to the man. God in His abundant grace blessed humanity with the most intimate of all human relationships: husband and wife, and He gave them the pleasure of sex, and the responsibility to propagate the human race through their union. Now a couple things need to be said. 1) Marriage is both a unspeakable blessing *and* a command: “Be *fruitful and multiply and fill* the earth” (1:28). So this was not something that mankind in general can simply opt out of. 2) Marriage more than any other human relationship displays the intimacy God wants with His people. God was said to be Israel’s husband (**Isaiah 54:5; Ezekiel 16:8-21**); the Church is said to be Christ’s bride

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<sup>3</sup> Robertson, pg. 81

<sup>4</sup> This labor ordinance will continue on into eternity. In Matthew 25, when Jesus gives the parable of the talents, He describes their rewards by telling them that He will put them in “*charge of many things.*” I don’t want to press the parable too far, but Jesus was painting a picture of responsibilities that were given to glorified men in eternity, namely continued labor. This makes sense since work was created before the fall and was described as “very good.” This line up with the Biblical evidence that the covenantal ordinance of labor will always be in effect, because ultimately this labor speaks about how God works all things perfectly for his glory.

(Ephesians 5:32). Human marriage is important to God because it communicates to us, His love and care and desire to be in relationship with us. So that is **the second responsibility** within the covenant that God made with man at the beginning that is still binding on all men: marriage.

### 1.3 The ordinance of Sabbath

What is the ultimate goal of creation? “The ultimate goal of creation [is] for humanity to dwell with God.”<sup>5</sup> That’s Sabbath. Look at how Moses writes about the first Sabbath in **Genesis 2:1-3**: “Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God finished his work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on it God rested from all his work that he had done in creation.” Now God resting here simply means He stopped working. His making this day “holy” is what is key. Holy here means “consecrated to God.” For who? For us. You see the first six days of creation were simply the opening act, the prelude, the preparation for God’s ultimate aim: for humanity to live in His presence in love and worship and delight forever. We could say it like this: the Sabbath is the chief end of man: God made us to rest and rejoice in His presence forever. So that is **the third responsibility** within the covenant that God made with man at the beginning that is still binding on all men: Sabbath.

### The curse of the creational ordinances

It is not without accident, that we find these three things *specifically* to be cursed in the fall. Yes, Adam and Eve forfeited their lives, *because* Adam ate of the tree. But additionally, these three creational ordinances: labor, marriage, and Sabbath were cursed, *precisely* because they were belong to the general responsibilities that God gave to man at creation.

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<sup>5</sup> L. Michael Morales, *Who Shall Ascend the Mountain of the Lord?: A Biblical Theology of the Book of Leviticus*, (Downers Grove, IL.: InterVarsity Press, 2015), pg. 40

## II. The Specific Responsibilities in the Covenant of Works

### The foundational text

Now let's look to the foundation text concerning the Covenant of Works: **Genesis 2:15-17**. This deals the central responsibility that Adam had in the beginning, specifically not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Before we look, I want to answer the principle objection to calling this a 'covenant,' which is this: "*the word 'covenant' is not found in these verses.*" How can we call this a covenant if the word 'covenant' is not here? Two answers. **First**, when God made a covenant with David in **2 Samuel 7**, the word 'covenant' is not found there either. However, David in **2 Samuel 23:5<sup>6</sup>** specifically calls the promise that God made to him a covenant. The same is true here about this arrangement that God makes with Adam. **Hosea 6:7** calls this a covenant. In **Hosea 6:7** the prophet is making a comparison to how Israel as a people broke the covenant that God made with their nation. He says "But *like Adam* they [Israel] transgressed the covenant; there they dealt faithlessly with me." Did you hear? Just as Adam broke the covenant, so did Israel. What is Hosea referring to? This covenant right here in **Genesis 2:15-17**.<sup>7</sup> In other words, though the word 'covenant' is not here, other Scripture specifically calls this a covenant.

**Secondly**, the reason why we can call this a covenant is because all the elements of a covenant are present. Let's look at it now:

The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."

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<sup>6</sup> "For does not my house stand so with God? For he has made with me an everlasting covenant..." Also cf. Psalm 89:3; 89:28; and 132:11-12

<sup>7</sup> For further discussion on this, see *Covenant Theology*, pg. 66-67

Alright so let's query the text. Do we see at least two **parties** in this covenant? Yes. God and man. Do we see **conditions** set or commands given? Yes. God commanded Adam to eat from every tree in the garden *except* he was not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Do we see a **curse** threatened? Yes. "...in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." Do we see a **promise**? Yes, it is implied, if Adam were to obey God and pass this probationary test, he would be given eternal life. This can be seen more clearly *after the fall*. Look at **3:22** "Then the Lord God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil. Now, lest he reach out his hand and *take also of the tree of life and eat, and live forever—*" therefore the Lord God sent him out from the garden of Eden." All the elements of a covenant are present: the parties, the conditions, the curse, and the promise.

### **The tree of life**

But there is another element of a covenant that is here that is easy to miss. There is a sign and seal of the covenant as well. It's safe to say that most if not all covenants signs and seals that are visible tokens of the promise of the covenant. In marriage, the sign and seal of a covenant is the wedding ring. God's covenants also have signs and seals. In the New Covenant, Jesus gave baptism and the Lord's Supper as signs and seals; in the Abrahamic covenant circumcision was the sign and seal; in the Noahic covenant the rainbow was the sign and seal.<sup>8</sup> Was there a sign and seal of the Covenant of Works? Yes. It was this tree of life in the garden. It was a pledge that God would give Adam life if he were to obey. It was a visible promise that God would fulfill His end of the covenant and reward Adam for his obedience.

### **The tree of the knowledge of good and evil**

So what was with this tree of the knowledge of good and evil? God made mankind to have dominion over the earth, but this one tree represented that God

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<sup>8</sup> It seems the Sabbath was a sign and seal of the Mosaic Covenant - Exodus 31:13

was the one true King over all. But some one may ask: “how does know this tree represents God’s Lordship over all?” Well think about it: what if God were to make the test something like: “don’t lie to your wife?” If God were to do that, then the essence of sin would have been obscured. Listen to how theologian Geerhardus Vos answers the question “why is this the test?”

“Because by this tree the essence of evil was, as it were, objectified for Adam. The essence of evil came most clearly to the fore when it was rid of all incidentals, harmful consequences, etc.”<sup>9</sup>

A man may choose not lie to his wife because he loves her. But in that choice, he can have zero love for God. Him not lying to her proves nothing about his relationship to God. Therefore God chose a command that stripped sin to it’s skeletal structure. The essence of sin is *not* the harm that bring upon other people. Eating the tree wouldn’t have hurt anybody. And that’s the point, the essence of sin is not the hurt you bring to others, but the dishonor you do to God. That tree represented that Adam did not have the right to live as he pleased. He had a Master. He was made in the image of God and therefore He had an moral obligation made clear by this command to image forth God in the world. God was saying “I want you to obey me, simply because of who I am, simply because you love me and trust me more than anything.”<sup>10</sup> That is the *true* knowledge of good and evil. That’s why this tree is the test—to strip the nature of good and evil down to it’s skeletal structure. The greatest good is loving, obeying and treasuring God simply because He is God. The greatest evil is anything else.

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<sup>9</sup> “If God had commanded Adam to treat the animals well and had made this the point of [testing], then in the ill-treatment of the animals, evil would have revealed itself as cruelty to animals and not so directly as transgression against God.” Geerhardus Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics, Vol. 2: Anthropology*, (Bellingham, WA.,: Lexham Press, 2012), pg. 48

<sup>10</sup> Tim Keller, *Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Word to God’s Work*, (New York, NY.,: Penguin Group, 2012), pg. 84



## A gracious covenant

A couple more things before we conclude this point. **First**, this was a completely gracious covenant. “God could have required obedience without any promised reward.”<sup>11</sup> As the WCF says, we owe obedience to God simply because we are His creatures (7.1). For God to reward us for what we owe Him, is grace.<sup>12</sup>

So then why call it the “Covenant of Works?” That brings us to our **final** consideration under this point. Some have chosen to call this a “Covenant of Life.” The Westminster Standards in fact call it both a “Covenant of Life” (WSC 12) and “the Covenant of Works” (WCF 7.2). To me, either is fine. As Richard Belcher points out “The term *covenant of life* emphasizes that life is the reward for Adam if he would keep the covenant. The term *covenant of works* highlights that the condition of the covenant is perfect obedience.”<sup>13</sup> Regardless of which term you prefer, understand this, that this covenant is still essentially a gracious act on God’s part.

## III. How Is Christ Revealed in the Covenant of Works?

### 1. Both Adam and Christ are representative men

There are two primary ways that Christ is revealed in the Covenant of Works. The **first** is that both Adam and Christ are representative men. Turn with me to **1 Corinthians 15:20-23**. Paul here is arguing against some of the Corinthians who believed there was no resurrection. But he reasons that if there is no resurrection of the dead then not even Christ is raised, and our faith would be in vain. He then develops this argumentation even further by showing how

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<sup>11</sup> *Covenant Theology*, pg. 69

<sup>12</sup> Luke 17:10 “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.’”

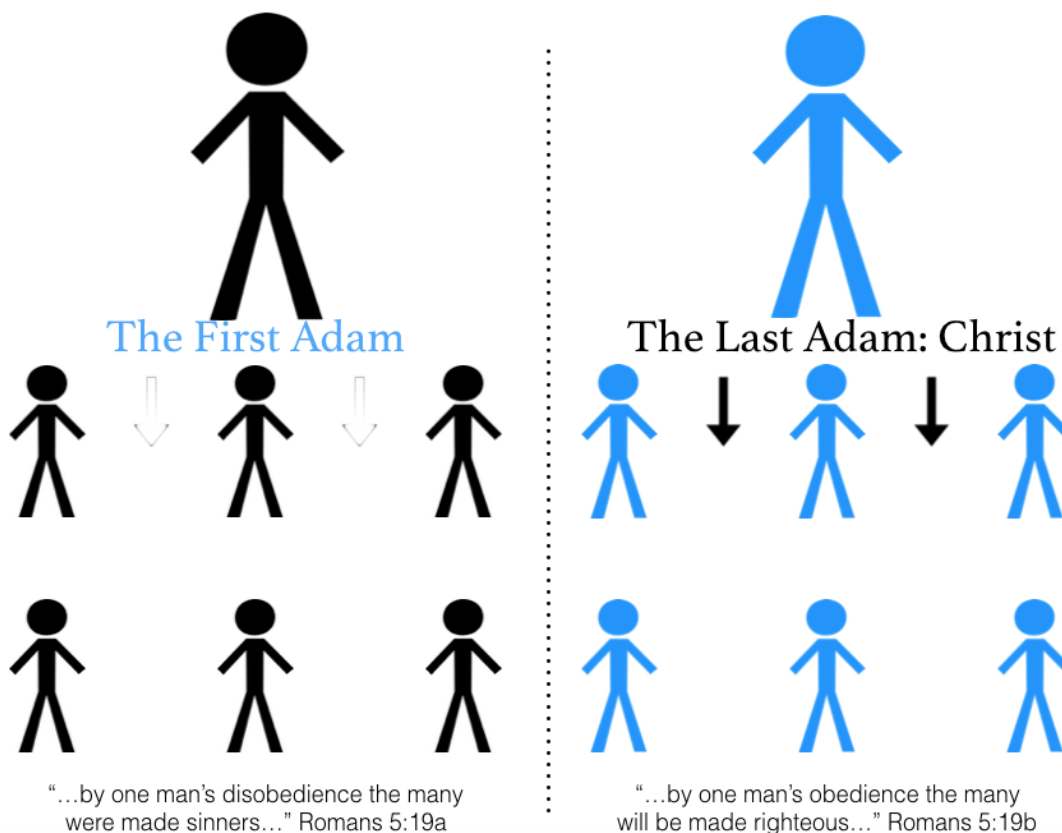
<sup>13</sup> *Covenant Theology*, pg.69

Christ's resurrection guarantees ours, because Christ is the federal head or covenantal head who represents us. Starting in **v.20**

“But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. *For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.* But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ.”

Notice **v.22** “For as in Adam *all* die, so also in Christ shall *all* be made alive.” Adam and Christ are representative men, meaning that their actions determines the destiny of everyone within their group.

## Representative Men: The Heads of Two Covenants



When Adam sinned, his sin was counted to us. His sin was imputed to us, meaning that our legal standing in God’s courtroom is that of guilty sinners. And we can see this immediately in the narrative in Genesis. Cain inheriting his sin from Adam, killed Abel in Genesis 4.<sup>14</sup> This is why Paul says in **Romans 5:19a** “...by one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners...” The human race was made guilty because Adam—their representative—sinned and fell in the Covenant of Works

On the other hand, when Christ—the second Adam came into the world — He accomplished where the first Adam failed. “...as true God and true human, [He] takes up the one frustrated covenantal relationship and brings it to competition through his sufferings, death, and resurrection in the world.”<sup>15</sup> But Jesus didn’t act for Himself, but like Adam, He acted for all those whom He represented. This is why Paul says in **Romans 5:19b** “...by one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous...” God’s elect were made righteous because Christ—their representative—obeyed for them and was punished for them in the Covenant of Grace. All mankind are under one of these two covenants.<sup>16</sup> That’s the first way Christ is revealed in the Covenant of Works: He is the second Adam, sent by God to represent His people as their Covenant Head.

## 2. Jesus came to fulfill the Covenant of Works

The second way Christ is revealed in the Covenant of Works is in what it requires from us. What was required of Adam in the Covenant of Works?

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<sup>14</sup> This is what David later affirmed in **Psalms 51:5** “Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.”

<sup>15</sup> *The Jonathan Edwards Encyclopedia*, Ed. Harry S. Stout, (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2017), pg. 120

<sup>16</sup> The parallel here further justifies the doctrine of the Covenant of Redemption as seen last week. As Charles Hodge says “As Adam was the head and representative of his posterity, so Christ is the head and representative of his people. And as God entered into covenant with Adam so he entered into covenant with Christ.” Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology, Vol. 2: Anthropology*, (Peabody, MA.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), pg. 360. Also see *Covenant Theology*, pg. 57ff

Perfect and personal obedience.<sup>17</sup> In order for God to be in the covenantal relationship that *He so wanted* with man, man had to obey perfectly. God is transcendentally and ineffably holy and righteous in all His ways. That's why He required perfect and personal obedience from Adam. "The covenant of works gives the work of Christ a rationale for why he had to come and what he had to accomplish for our salvation (Romans 5:12-21)."<sup>18</sup> Why did Jesus come? He had to fulfill the Covenant of Works. God's requirement for man has not changed. God is not a man that He should lie or change His mind. Jesus came to pay the penalty that God threatened in the Covenant of Works, namely death.<sup>19</sup> Jesus did that on the cross. But that was only part of what Jesus accomplished. If Jesus only paid the penalty for us, then we are right back in the garden with Adam. We still need to obey God's requirements perfectly. God only has a covenantal relationship with those who obey Him perfectly. But that is also what Jesus accomplished as our Covenantal Head. He was holy, harmless, and undefiled, He never sinned, He accomplished every jot and tittle of God's law. Why? Because He was representing us. As Adam's record was ours by birth, so Jesus's record becomes ours by new birth. When we receive Jesus by faith, all the terms of the Covenant of Works are counted as fulfilled on our behalf. God looks at us as never eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And He offers us the tree of life for all eternity.

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<sup>17</sup> WCF 7.2

<sup>18</sup> *Covenant Theology*, pg. 78

<sup>19</sup> As R.C. Sproul says "...in creation, all sin was a capital offense...Do we realize the evil inherent in the slightest, tiniest transgression? If we seek to obey God in all things but disobey Him in the tiniest point, we are saying to Him that our will and our judgment surpass His and that He has no right to tell us what to do...Every time we sin we choose ourselves to be God rather than God to be God, which is why sin is so serious." R.C. Sproul, *Truths We Confess: A Systematic Exposition of the Westminster Confession of Faith*, (Orlando, FL.: Reformation Trust, 2019), pg. 180-181

## Representative Men: The Heads of Two Covenants



The First Adam



The Last Adam: Christ



"...by one man's disobedience the many were made sinners..." Romans 5:19a



"...by one man's obedience the many will be made righteous..." Romans 5:19b

