**There Was Never a Covenant of Works Between God and Man**

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God did not require Adam to perform any good works prior to creating him. Seems obvious, doesn’t it? So the original gift of life was based on grace. Then why do theologians say that the original covenant between Adam and Eve and God was a “covenant of works?”

The reformed faith teaches that even in the Old Testament, among His people Israel, God did not save any individual based on works. It was always by grace, specifically by faith in a savior to come. It has always troubled me that the Reformed faith is consistent regarding salvation by grace throughout history until it gets to the Garden of Eden before the Fall. If God is a God who never changes, how could he impose a covenant of works at one point in history but a covenant of grace at another?

The Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF), revised by American Presbyterians in 1788, states in Chapter 7, paragraph 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.

Actually, that is incorrect. Genesis states the following:

And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, “Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.”

Genesis 2:16-7, KJV. One law they had to obey. It says nothing about “perfect and personal obedience.” All God asked was that they allow Him to be who He was – the King of the universe, the determiner of good and evil, and their protector and lord and father. And none of that ruled out His merciful and gracious attributes. He can never be less than who He is, and His most prominent attribute, as taught by the New Testament, is His attribute of grace. Yet they disobeyed Him anyway. How?

In addition to disobedience to God, what was the deeper problem behind eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil?

Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said unto the woman, “Yea, hath God said, ‘Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?’” And the woman said unto the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden: But of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden, God hath said, ‘Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die.’” And the serpent said unto the woman, “Ye shall not surely die: For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.” And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat.

Genesis 3:1-6, KJV.

Therefore, their disobedience was so much more than just disobedience. It was, among other things, an alliance with Satan, an aspiration to become like God taking his place on the throne of the universe, an act of betrayal of the nefarious kind, akin to a betrayal and murder of one’s parents, only worse. In addition to this treachery against their cosmic parent, it was a rejection of God’s grace. Why? Because instead of eating from the tree of life, they ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Eternal life was available for them to partake even after they sinned, for God said, “Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever: . . . .” Genesis 3:22, KJV.

What did it take for Adam and Eve to eat of the tree of life? It was not the “condition of perfect and personal obedience,” as the WCF states.

Here’s “the work” that it took for Adam and Eve to receive eternal life. They would have reached forth their hand and taken and eaten of the fruit of the tree of life. “O taste and see that the LORD is good: blessed is the man that trusteth in him.” Psalm 34:8, KJV. The tree of life was a gift of grace, available to Adam and Eve as a gift, not as a result of works. How the reformers ever confused grace and works in the Garden of Eden is hard to understand. The conditions for receiving eternal life by grace in the Garden of Eden is no different from the conditions for receiving eternal life through Christ.

What about the loss of eternal life? Perhaps that’s where the reformers made their mistake. Perhaps they thought that being obedient to the command to not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which would have protected them from the curse, was the same as “perfect and personal obedience.” But let’s compare Adam and Eve’s situation to that of the Christian now carefully.

Christ advised his followers that He is “the vine” and we are “the branches.” See John 15. The vine is a tree of life. How? It’s how we bear fruit. “As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; no more can ye, except ye abide in me.” John 15:4, KJV. Fruit only grows from living things. We know that Christ gives life, for He told the Jewish people: “He that believeth on me, as the scripture hath said, out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water.” John 7:38, KJV.

What happens to those who don’t abide in the tree? “If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned.” John 15:6, KJV. To not abide in Christ means to not abide in His word (John 15:3, 7), to seek your own way (John 15:5), to depend upon your own works (John 15:7), all of which is to not trust Christ fully. In other words, it means you choose to eat of “a tree to be desired to make one wise” (Genesis 3:6) and “be as gods, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:5) for yourself - without relying upon Christ.

To refuse to eat of the freely-given tree of life and to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in order to become as gods, independent of the author of life, is no different from refusing to abide in the vine, Christ who is the Prince of Life (Acts 3:15), subjecting yourself to being cast into the fire and burned. In other words, Adam and Eve clearly lived under a covenant of grace, not a covenant of works. They faced death for turning from grace, which was freely available in the gift of the tree of life, and seeking independence from the “Prince of life.” We also face death and the curse if we don’t abide in the vine, who is Christ and the grace that is freely available in Him.

Doing away with the invented concept of the “covenant of works” preserves several critical doctrines that are damaged, if not eliminated, by attempting to retain the “covenant of works.” We preserve the unchangeable character of God, which is also the foundation for His faithfulness. Also, the fact of God’s attribute of graciousness, which did not appear suddenly on the scene of history with the coming of Christ but was always one of God’s attributes. If we are to retain the aseity of God from all eternity, we must admit that salvation by grace is and always has been the manner of His communications with His creation. Otherwise, the covenant works becomes some contrived period in which God becomes more severe in his dealings with His creation contrary to His normal dealings with man throughout history.

Recognizing God’s graciousness toward His premier creation does not detract from man’s sin. In fact, man’s sin appears even more heinous when we consider the leniency of the gracious God who gave only one law, a law of love and paternal loyalty, and freely offered to man eternal life, which was available by the simple act of eating. Isn’t it interesting that Christ, the Prince of Life, offered Himself to mankind in the same way?

And Jesus said unto them, “I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst.”

Romans 6:35, KJV. How did we go so wrong as to think that God could ever act contrary to His nature and impose a covenant of works at any time on His creation?!