Michael Horton’s Covenant Theology as a Defense of Reformation
Theology in the Context of Current Discussions

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A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Wycliffe College and the Department of Theology at the Toronto School of Theology.

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Abstract

In contemporary theological scholarship the federal theology of post-Reformation Reformed orthodoxy has come under trenchant criticism from two fronts: those who argue that the schema elevates the role of the human will in individual redemption to offset the problematic aspects of Augustinian predestinarianism (thereby degenerating into a form of evangelical legalism) or those who see the schema as a radical contradiction of the relation between law and gospel, which contradiction departed from the views of John Calvin, Martin Bucer, and other sixteenth century Reformers (thereby supporting a type of antinomianism).

The purpose of this dissertation is to argue, through our examination of Michael S. Horton’s covenant theology (and the views of Reformed theologians of earlier times), that classic federalism avoids both the twin dangers of legalism and antinomianism through upholding the dual covenant of works/covenant of grace structure (especially as it pertains to the doctrine of justification) and through maintaining the mutually binding aspect of the covenant of grace between God and the elect.
The study argues that post-Reformation federal theology upholds the Reformers’ cherished soteriological tenets of justification *sola gratia* and *sola fide* while at the same time preserving practical holiness in the redeemed (grounded in the bilateral character of the covenant of grace).

Ensuring the relation between God’s sovereign grace and human responsibility in salvation classic federal theology, we conclude, provides a needed antidote in contemporary, evangelical church practice and preaching, which practice and preaching appear either unbiblically to elevate the human will in salvation or unbiblically to undermine the necessity of human response to God’s prior grace.
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1. Introduction

1.1 The Historical Background and Development of Covenant Theology

What is conventionally known as covenant or federal theology is widely viewed as a distinctive trait of Reformed orthodoxy. Though the doctrine of the covenant is not exclusive to the orthodox Reformed tradition it is one of the hallmarks that define it. This is due in part to the fact that Reformed theology has consistently used the doctrine of the covenant as an organizing principle to define how God relates to human beings throughout the history of redemption.¹ During the post-Reformation period the doctrine of the covenant within the Reformed theological tradition gradually developed with a more systematic methodology and expression rooted in the theological thought of the German Reformed tradition.² The two most recognized German Reformed theologians of the early post-Reformation period, Zacharias Ursinus (1534-1583) and Caspar Olevianus (1536-1587), planted the seed for the future development and systematic codification of the twofold covenant or federal system within Reformed orthodoxy in subsequent generations through their Heidelberg Catechism and their own writings.³ This twofold covenant theology with its dual covenants of works and grace, which distinguishes the Reformed theological tradition from others, was given unambiguous expression about a century later on English soil in *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (1646). It is here that the twofold

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³ Ursinus in his *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism* (published posthumously in 1591) and Olevianus in his *Concerning the Substance of the Covenant of Grace between God and the Elect* (1585).
federal system with its *covent of works* and *covent of grace* distinction was given its clearest and most explicit formulation in a confessional manner for the first time in the English-speaking world. The fruitful soil of Reformed covenant thought, however, can go further back than the Heidelberg theologians and the Westminster Assembly. The source of Reformed covenant theology can go back to the Reformation period when law-gospel debates were taking on a polemical colour. One of the reasons, one can argue, why post-Reformation Reformed theology developed the covenant or federal schema is due to the desire by those within the Reformed tradition to organize systematically the redemptive-historical flow of Scripture along covenantal lines while firmly maintaining the typical Reformation distinction between law and gospel in regards to how one is justified before a holy and righteous God. As Mark W. Karlberg writes:

> The sixteenth-century federalists were responsible for establishing the redemptive-historical structure of biblical revelation, and the covenant structure was the distinguishing mark of Reformed theological interpretation….The entire development of the covenant idea was controlled

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4 The subject of how law and gospel (or the Old and New Testaments) should be understood together was one of the main points of contention between the Reformers and the Medieval Scholastics in the early-to-mid sixteenth century. The Reformers were greatly alarmed with the soteriological errors of the Medieval Church at that time due to their emphases on the role of the human will and its sacerdotal system that undermined the finality of Christ’s sacrificial work and God’s free grace for the salvation of sinners. During this period, the Reformers interpreted the Medieval Scholastic view of salvation as being grounded in an erroneous view of the law’s relationship to the gospel and/or an improper understanding between the Mosaic and New covenants. Martin Luther (1483-1546), in response to the Medieval Scholastic understanding of the law’s relationship to the gospel, wrote in his essay “How Christians Should Regard Moses”: “Now the first sermon, and doctrine, is the law of God. The second is the gospel. These two sermons are not the same. Therefore we must have a good grasp of the matter in order to know how to differentiate between them. We must know what the law is, and what the gospel is” (Martin Luther, *Martin Luther’s Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989], p. 136). Luther’s point was that law and gospel should be kept distinguished clearly as possible when it comes to how a sinner is declared righteous before a holy and just God. The other “giant” of the Reformation, John Calvin (1509-1564), despite having a more positive view of God’s law and the Mosaic covenant, essentially agreed with Luther on the fundamental distinction between law and gospel when it came to the justification of the sinner: “For he who thinks that in order to obtain righteousness he ought to bring some trifile of works is incapable of determining their measure and limit but makes himself debtor to the whole law. Removing, then, mention of law, and laying aside all consideration of works, we should, when justification is being discussed, embrace God’s mercy alone, turn our attention from ourselves, and look only to Christ” (John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles [Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960], 3.19.2). Calvin argued that there was an essential use of the law for the Christian in his or her earthly pilgrimage of faith, but only after the Christian has been freed from the condemning function of the law and justified freely by God’s grace alone.
and elicited by the Reformers’ understanding of justification by faith, in its fundamentally forensic sense, and the coordinate law-gospel distinction.\(^5\)

The key issue, therefore, was not only hermeneutical or theological – what was at stake, according to these theologians, was the integrity and purity of the gospel.\(^6\)

The discussion of the relationship between law and gospel along the redemptive-historical covenants of Scripture can be located first in the thought of Heinrich Bullinger (1504-1575), the Swiss Reformer who succeeded Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531) in Zurich. Though Ursinus and Olevanius laid the groundwork for future generations of Reformed thinkers to develop what is popularly known as covenant or federal theology systematically, Bullinger was one of the first to use the concept of the covenant, as demonstrated in his *De Testamento Seu Foedere Dei Unico Et Aeterno* (1534), to discuss how law and gospel (or old covenant and new covenant) are hermeneutically related to each other (though Calvin’s discussion of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments did lay the groundwork for later covenantal thinking among post-Reformation Reformed thinkers, as will be argued in the following chapter). \(^7\) A generation later in the British Isles, covenantal ideas were being clearly articulated in the writings of some well-known Scottish and English divines. The names that come to mind most notably are Thomas

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\(^6\) John Murray reflects the opinion of many within the Reformed tradition when he writes: “No subject is more intimately bound up with the nature of the gospel than that of law and grace. In the degree to which error is entertained at this point, in the same degree is our conception of the gospel perverted” (*Principles of Conduct: Aspects of Biblical Ethics* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957], p. 181).

\(^7\) Cf. Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.7-11. J. Wayne Baker argues that Bullinger’s understanding of the covenant was of a bilateral and conditional nature, which is in contrast to Calvin’s more unilateral and unconditional view of the relationship between God and the believer. Thus, he concludes that the Reformed tradition that developed out of Zurich was significantly different from the one that developed out of Geneva (see his J. Wayne Baker, *Heinrich Bullinger and the Covenant: The Other Reformed Tradition* [Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1980]). However, J. Mark Beach argues that Baker’s “historical scholarship” should be “questioned at this point” because he “fails to examine the wider corpus of Calvin’s writings, limiting himself to the Reformer’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, even as he fails to engage seriously the scholarship that treats Calvin’s view of the covenant as set forth in the *Institutes*, as well as his treatises, sermons, and commentaries” (*Christ and the Covenant: Francis Turretin’s Federal Theology as a Defense of the Doctrine of Grace* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2007], p. 30).
Cartwright (1535-1603), Robert Rollock (1555-1599), William Perkins (1558-1602), William Ames (1576-1633), and John Preston (1587-1628). For example, Ames in his systematic treatise *The Marrow of Theology* briefly discusses the administration of the covenant of grace before and after the first advent of Christ respectively in chapters 38 and 39 as part of his overall discussion on ecclesiology. One of the things he tried to emphasize in his doctrinal formulae of the covenant is the gratuitous and unconditional nature of the covenant of grace throughout redemptive history (a view that influenced significantly the Puritans of later generations). Though Ames’ expositions would not be considered *federalist* (as conventionally understood), his covenantal thought did reveal that second-generation Reformed thinkers were attempting to incorporate covenantal ideas, along the traditional Reformation law-gospel spectrum, into their overall theological frameworks. The development of covenant or federal theology in a more systematically codified form, however, happened between the late-sixteenth to mid-seventeenth centuries. The Dutch Protestant theologian Johannes Cocceius (1603-1669) organized his theology around the covenant and fully expounded a covenant theology along redemptive-historical lines in his *Summa Doctrinae de Foedere et Testamento Dei* (1648). Though his particular type of covenant theology was more developed along biblico-exegetical rather than systematic-dogmatic lines, he did provide a detailed exposition of the character of the covenant of works and the covenant of grace in God’s dealings with humanity. However, due to the methodological trajectory Cocceius took in developing his particular kind of covenant theology (using what he considered the “scriptural” and “contextual” method rather than the

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scholastic/analytic method common in his day) it is incorrect to label him the “father” of federal theology.⁹

The clearest (but mildest) exposition of what is typically known as covenant or federal theology, as discussed above, is given in The Westminster Confession of Faith (1646). We see here a fully developed twofold covenant schema that would become the “standard” expression of covenant or federal theology among those who consider themselves part of the orthodox Reformed tradition in generations to come. The Westminster divines articulated clearly the character of the covenant of works and the covenant of grace and the distinctions between them in the confession and the larger and shorter catechisms. In regard to the covenant of works, the confession states that through it “life was promised to Adam; and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience” (VII.2). In contrast, the covenant of grace is where God “freely offers unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ; requiring of them faith in Him, that they may be saved, and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto eternal life His Holy Spirit, to make them willing, and able to believe” (VII.3). Here we can see the clear contrast between the two covenants in terms of their character and significance according to the divines who drew up the confession. The first covenant, that of works, is a covenant that demands absolute personal obedience with no allowance for any transgression of God’s commands. The second covenant, that of grace, is a covenant that offers life and salvation freely to the elect on the grounds of Christ’s redemptive work alone. The only “condition” required in this covenant, according to the divines, is the exercise of personal faith in the Incarnate Son for forgiveness and salvation—a faith that, we may add, is empowered and enabled by the Holy Spirit. One can see here the unequivocal line of thinking that the divines sought to set forth by

their absolute distinction between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace: the desire to uphold the Reformation distinction between law and gospel in regard to how a sinner becomes acceptable before God.\textsuperscript{10} The divines, however, also desired to uphold the unity of Scripture and, thus, declared that the covenant of grace was *administered differently* under the Mosaic covenant dispensation (“time of the law”) and the dispensation of the new covenant (“the time of the Gospel”) (VII.5-6). In other words, according to the divines, there are not two covenants of grace but a single covenant of grace that transcends all periods of redemptive history and is administered differently in their respective redemptive-historical eras. Therefore, through this formulation, the Westminster divines were able to maintain the unity of Scripture while at the same time upholding the law-gospel distinction cherished by the early Reformers.

The twofold covenant view as articulated in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* became, with slight nuances among various theologians, the standard view among the orthodox Reformed on the European continent, the British Isles, and the colonial regions in North America. Especially among the Puritans the twofold federal system became the standard way of understanding how God and human beings relate to each other throughout the history of redemption. One most notable figure who adopted this framework was the English non-conformist theologian John Owen (1616-1683). His numerous works present a standard Westminsterian twofold covenant theology that coincides with the views of many Reformed

\textsuperscript{10} The divines set forth this position in a more unambiguous way in another part of the confession when they state: “Although true believers be not under the law, as a covenant of works, to be thereby justified, or condemned; yet is it of great use to them, as well as to others; in that, as a rule of life informing them of the will of God, and their duty, it directs and binds them to walk accordingly; discovering also the sinful pollutions of their nature, hearts and lives; so as, examining themselves thereby, they may come to further conviction of, humiliation for, and hatred against sin, together with a clearer sight of the need they have of Christ, and the perfection of His obedience” (XIX.6, emphasis added).
thinkers after him.\textsuperscript{11} Other notable figures in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries who follow this line of federalist thought include Francis Turretin (1623-1687), Wilhelmus á Brakel (1635-1711), Herman Witsius (1636-1708), John Gill (1697-1771), and Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758). In the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries this twofold federalist model was championed by the likes of Charles Hodge (1797-1878), W. G. T. Shedd (1820-1894), James Petigru Boyce (1827-1888), B. B. Warfield (1851-1921), Herman Bavinck (1854-1921), and Geerhardus Vos (1862-1949).\textsuperscript{12} The list above shows that the twofold covenant model has a long pedigree within the orthodox Reformed tradition. One can even argue that the twofold covenant system has been the mainstay of orthodox Reformed theology since the post-Reformation period. Despite the firm establishment over the centuries of the twofold covenant framework within the evangelical Reformed tradition there have been many vociferous critics of the system by contemporary theologians and scholars of religion from both the non-evangelical and evangelical traditions today.

\subsection*{1.2 Contemporary Interpretations and Criticisms of the Twofold Covenant Model}

In recent years, many church historians, scholars of religion, and theologians have vociferously criticized the twofold covenant model on various grounds. The most common criticism levelled against post-Reformation federal theology by contemporary scholars is the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{11} Richard Barcellos provides a good analysis of Owen’s covenant theology and the methodological issues involved in its development in his \textit{The Family Tree of Reformed Biblical Theology, Geerhardus Vos and John Owen: Their Methods of and Contributions to the Articulation of Redemptive History} (Pelham, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2010).
\item \textsuperscript{12} We will examine in more detail the covenant theologies of Turretin, Witsius, Gill, and Hodge in the next chapter.
\end{itemize}
charge that it inadvertently introduced a type of works-righteousness legalism into Reformed soteriology which significantly departed from the unilateral view of God’s salvific grace espoused by Calvin and other early Reformers. They essentially argue that the twofold covenant or federal framework was a significant departure from Calvin’s Augustinian *sola gratia* theology and was an excessive reaction by its codifiers to temper some of the more “unsavoury” aspects of Calvin’s unconditional predestinarianism.¹³ This particular development in Reformed thought, they aver, led to the inadvertent elevation of the role of the human will in salvation beyond what the Reformers affirmed. The culprit, according to these critics, was the introduction of a *conditional* or *bilateral* covenantal concept that became entrenched to the federalist schema. By making the covenant of grace into a bilateral-type arrangement a tragic shift occurred which opened the door for the free and unconditional nature of God’s grace (so strongly proclaimed by the Reformers) to be held hostage by the moral performance of the human beings who belonged to it. The so-called “practical syllogism” that characterized much of Puritan soteriology is a very good example, they argue, of how divine grace was starting to lose its unconditional character in post-Reformation Reformed theology and the increasing erosion of personal assurance of salvation that was reminiscent of the pre-Reformation days.¹⁴ Some notable contemporary


¹⁴ Though not a work specifically dealing with post-Reformation federal theology, R. T. Kendall’s *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 1997) argues that post-Reformation Reformed orthodoxy in England significantly departed from the views of Calvin by making saving faith “active” (in contrast to Calvin’s “passive” view of faith). In one section of his work, he takes specific aim at the Westminster divines for making faith “an act of the will.” The result of this understanding of faith, Kendall argues, comes perilously close to making justification before God a “reward for doing our best to be holy and good” which then puts the “responsibility of salvation right back on to man” (p. 206). In addition, this problem of “legalism” is exacerbated, according to Kendall, by the divines’ “experimental predestinarianism” concept (i.e., obtaining assurance of election through the evidences of grace in one’s life) that they inherited from Theodore Beza (1519-1605) and
scholars who criticize post-Reformation federal theology for these very reasons include the likes of Perry Miller, David A. Weir, J. A. Dorner, Holmes Rolston III, J. B. Torrance, Karl Barth, William Adams Brown, D. J. Bruggink, and William C. Placher.

In more recent years, however, there have been criticisms of federal theology from a very different quarter and from an entirely different perspective. The critical scholars coming from this quarter are more evangelically-inclined in theological conviction (some even belonging to the Reformed tradition itself) and more sympathetic to the conclusions of contemporary biblical research. These scholars, in direct contrast to the arguments of the critics mentioned above, argue that post-Reformation federal theology with its twofold covenant schema introduced a law-grace paradigm that led post-Reformation Reformed orthodoxy down the slippery slope of antinomianism and away from Calvin’s more *continuous* view of law and grace (or the Mosaic and Promissory Covenants). In other words, they argue that post-Reformation covenant theology with its twofold covenantal structure was a “Lutheranizing” infusion that departed from Scripture’s more unified view of law and grace and Calvin’s more sympathetic view of God’s law. The consequence of the twofold covenant structure for Reformed theology, they argue, is the undermining of the authority of the moral law in the life of the Christian and the downplaying of the conditional aspects of God’s salvific work of salvation. The most notable critics of federal theology coming from this quarter include Daniel P. Fuller, Norman Shepherd, and P. Andrew Sandlin.

Below we will provide an overview, though not by any means exhaustive, of these two major lines of criticism of covenant theology by examining the views of the critics discussed

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Perkins (p. 208). Kendall’s criticisms, however, become groundless when we see that the divines insisted that the effectual call, and the consequent saving faith, are entirely gifts from God enabled by the Holy Spirit (*The Westminster Confession of Faith*, X.2; XIV.1).
above. Thereafter, we will proceed to discuss the thesis of the study, the significance and implications of the study, and the method and structure of how the study will unfold.

1.2.1 Covenant Theology as a Reaction to Unconditional Predestinarianism and a Degeneration into Works-Righteousness Legalism

If there is one scholar in the last one hundred years who has had quite a major influence on the study of Puritanism it is the American intellectual historian Perry Miller. Miller’s critical evaluation of post-Reformation covenant theology, especially within the context of New England Puritanism, has become the prevailing view among religious historians and contemporary theologians. Though Miller’s analyses focused on the beliefs of New England Puritanism, his critical assessment of the covenant theology as set forth by the New England Puritans can be understood as a general critique of the way the wider post-Reformation Reformed tradition in general understood the complex theological issue of the relationship between divine grace and human responsibility. Miller basically argues that federal theology as a system was developed by post-Reformation Reformed scholastics as a means to offset some of the more problematic, and even embarrassing, aspects of Calvin’s unconditional and inexplicable predestinarianism. By attempting to overcome a view of God that is totally transcendent and whose secret decrees are hidden from the minds of the human creature (especially when it came to personal assurance), the federal theologians of the post-Reformation era developed the twofold covenant framework (along with a bilateral understanding of the covenants) in order to put greater emphasis on human responsibility and induce believers to fulfill the moral imperatives of Scripture. The

16 Ibid., pp. 50-56.
consequence of this development in Reformed orthodoxy, Miller argues, was an inadvertent degeneration into a type of works-righteousness legalism that was opposed to the cherished principles of *sola gratia* and *sola fide* held by Calvin and other early Reformers. In essence, post-Reformation Reformed orthodoxy (especially the Puritan variety) put much emphasis on the idea that those who are in covenant with God will lead a life of obedience to the law of God and show themselves thereby as being part of the elect. This view also had a devastating effect on personal assurance since those who embraced this religious system of thought could not be totally assured as to whether they had done enough to be recognized as those who are favoured by God. As Miller writes: “Setting forth from the nature of God as defined by the covenant, these theologians enjoyed clear sailing to the haven of assurance. The covenant of grace defines the conditions by which Heaven is obtained, and he who fulfills the condition has an incontestable title to glorification, exactly as he who pays the advertised price owns his freehold.”17 This way of thinking, Miller argues, was in stark contrast to Calvin’s more purely passive and unconditional concept of divine election.18 Miller even posits that Calvin, along with Luther, hardly made any mention of the covenant.19

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17 Ibid., p. 71.
18 Ibid., pp. 53-54. Though it is true that Calvin understood divine election as a purely passive and unconditional decree apart from any quality inherent in the human person, it is wrong to assume that Calvin did not have a vigorous understanding of the Christian life. Even a cursory examination of his *Institutes* 3.15-19 reveals that Calvin did not view the Christian life as a merely passive thing where the regenerate only sit on their laurels as the drama of redemption unfolds before their eyes. For Calvin, as can be seen in his view of the role of the law and the sacraments in the life of the believer, the Christian life is an active one that constantly struggles against temptations and hindrances to godliness (cf. Victor Shepherd, *The Nature and Function of Faith in the Theology of John Calvin* [Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing, 2004], pp. 152-171, 207-221).
19 Miller, p. 60. As we will argue in the next chapter, this assessment of Calvin by Miller is inaccurate. Calvin did use the covenant motif in his *Institutes* (2.7-11), his commentaries (cf. *Comm.* 2 Cor 3; Gal 4:24; Heb 8), and a short section in his debate with Pighius (*Concerning the Eternal Predestination of God*, trans, J. K. S. Reid [Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1997], pp. 91-92). Though not without its problems, Peter A. Lillback’s work *The Binding of God: Calvin’s Role in the Development of Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001) shows the inaccuracy of Miller’s claim.
Another scholar who sets forth a similar evaluation of classical covenant theology is the mainline Presbyterian philosopher Holmes Rolston III. His work *John Calvin versus the Westminster Confession*\(^{20}\) provides a vociferous critique of the federal theology of the Westminster divines as being a significant departure from the Genevan Reformer and his theology of grace. Rolston’s main centre of criticism in his work is on the post-Reformation federalism’s twofold covenant structure—especially in how the federal theologians viewed the covenant of works as a *purely* legal covenant based on divine law and justice.\(^{21}\) He writes: “The overall emphasis [in the covenant of works concept] was that God did not come to primal man in a relationship of grace, for man did not yet need that grace, but stood by his work.”\(^{22}\) This, according to Rolston, is in contrast to Calvin’s understanding of God’s primal relationship to human beings as a relationship primarily based on divine grace.\(^{23}\) Though Rolston does concede that the Westminster Confession of Faith receives “in its own way much praise” for its exposition of the “grandeur of grace” in its covenant of grace concept, yet, he argues, it falls severely short due to the fact that the “whole theological enterprise remains colored by the primal covenant” in which the “covenant of grace does not replace the covenant of works, but is worked out and established within it.”\(^{24}\) The consequence of this twofold covenant idea, argues Rolston, locked “Reformed anthropology into a concept of duty alien to Calvin”\(^{25}\) for which “we cannot forget that the law of God stipulates a duty of works for all men; the grace of God


\(^{21}\) Ibid., p. 16.

\(^{22}\) Ibid., p. 17.

\(^{23}\) Ibid., pp. 36-37. Though earlier he did state that Calvin “had spoken of the merit of works *ex pacto* in connection with the Mosaic covenant, and this is transferred to the universal covenant of works made with all mankind” (Ibid., p. 17).

\(^{24}\) Ibid., p. 21. Klempa echoes this concern when he writes: “When the covenant of works becomes the standard of reference for the covenant of grace, there is always a tendency for covenant to take on the meaning of contract and to lose its original meaning of God’s unconditional binding of God’s self to the human partner” (Klempa, p. 105).

\(^{25}\) Rolston., p. 46.
provid[ing] a new and special duty for believers."²⁶ For Rolston, the theology of the covenants in the Westminster Standards is a radical shift away from Calvin’s theology of salvation by reversing the order of grace so that the priority rests always on divine law. Rolston argues that while Calvin put primacy on divine grace in God’s redemptive purposes (and the religious duties done by the elect being only a grateful response to that grace);²⁷ the Westminster divines reversed this order and put primacy on divine law and justice instead. Thus, the Westminster divines (and post-Reformation Reformed orthodoxy in general), Rolston avers, degenerated into a legalistic religious system where God’s justice overshadowed his grace.

Another critic of federal theology for its alleged legalistic orientation comes from the pen of the neo-orthodox Reformed theologian J. B. Torrance. Torrance’s main criticism of federal theology is that it distorts the concept of the covenant (foedus) through its characterization as a contract—a view that was pervasive in the Reformed tradition during the post-Reformation period. This idea of the covenant being a type of contractual concept, which Torrance believes later Reformed orthodoxy is guilty of endorsing with its formulation of the prelapsarian covenant of works idea and its prioritizing of law over grace within its twofold federalist structure, was foreign to the way the Apostle Paul and the Reformers understood God’s dealings with humankind in pure grace. He writes: “God’s dealings with men in Creation and Redemption—in grace—are those of a covenant and not of a contract, and the word always used is diatheke and never suntheke in Greek—berith in Hebrew. This was the heart of the Pauline theology of grace expounded in Romans and Galatians, and this was the central affirmation of the Reformation.

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²⁶ Ibid., p. 48.
²⁷ Ibid., p. 98.
The God of the Bible is a Covenant-God and not a contract-god.\(^{28}\) He argues that this transformation of the covenant concept into a contractual one has its roots in the political struggles for religious and civil liberties in Scotland, France, England, and the New World which too often led to contractual ways of understanding God’s relationship to human beings, and that also led to a legalistic interpretation of Calvinism where federal theology was accepted as the norm.\(^{29}\) This rising legalism in Reformed orthodoxy, due to its distorted and legalistic understanding of the covenant, led to the reversal of the grace-to-law structure into a law-to-grace structure encapsulated in the federalists’ doctrine of the covenant of works (a criticism he shares with Rolston).\(^{30}\) Torrance argues that the federal theologians’ prioritization of God’s law over his grace, in contrast to Calvin’s “grace-to-law” schema, led to the radical dichotomy between nature and grace, the unbiblical separation of the Church from the world, and, most importantly, the idea that election precedes grace (making the Person and Work of Christ only a means to execute the decree of election).\(^{31}\) By making election precede grace and narrowing the scope of Christ’s work of redemption to the elect only, the practical result that came about among those who embraced this form of theology, especially among the Puritans, was the undermining of assurance among those seeking to know if they are divinely chosen in Jesus

\(^{28}\) J. B. Torrance, “Calvin and Puritanism in England and Scotland—Some Basic Concepts in the Development of ‘Federal Theology’,” *Calvinus Reformator: His Contributions to Theology, Church and Society* (Potchefstroom, South Africa: Potchefstroom University for Christian Higher Education, 1982), p. 268, emphasis in original. David A. Weir, though agreeing with Torrance’s overall thesis, criticizes Torrance’s understanding of the covenant in light of his evaluation of federal theology on precisely this point. He writes: “Torrance is correct in his observation, but he does not expose the roots of this tendency. The federal theology arose precisely because of the conflict (not the confusion) between *diatheke* and *suntheke*. It was an attempt to explain why God seemed to show two faces: one of predestinating grace through his sovereign decrees and another of conditional love. The Calvinist wanted an orthodox answer as to why God could show both appearances at the same time” (David A. Weir, *The Origins of the Federal Theology in Sixteenth-Century Reformation Thought* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1990], p. 57).

\(^{29}\) Torrance, “Calvin and Puritanism in England and Scotland,” pp. 269-270.


Christ. This problem was heightened by the fact that Reformed orthodoxy, with its twofold covenant schema as found in the Westminster Standards, urged believers to look for “signs” or “evidences” of election in their lives (e.g., doing good works, obeying God’s law, etc.). Hence, according to Torrance, Reformed orthodoxy, in contrast to Calvin and others (like the “Marrowmen”), did not view assurance as the essence of saving faith. The consequence of this type of thinking finding its way into the Reformed tradition, argues Torrance, was the undermining of God’s grace in salvation and the introduction of “conditionalism” in the covenant of grace—a covenant that Torrance sees as not only being universal in scope but also unconditional in character.

Finally, another critical evaluation of federal theology following in the similar vein of thought as the scholars discussed above comes from the American post-liberal theologian William C. Placher. Arguing from the perspective that federal theology was one of the ways that post-Reformation Christianity “domesticated” God’s grace, Placher posits that the Reformed

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32 Ibid., p. 275.
33 He writes: “The Marrowmen were to protest that this second Covenant of Grace was also presented in conditional terms, making God’s grace to the elect conditional on their faith and repentance and personal holiness” (Torrance, “The Strengths and Weaknesses of the Westminster Theology,” p. 48). However, nowhere in any of the major confessions or creeds of the evangelical Reformed churches does it state that God’s saving grace to the elect is “conditional” on personal holiness. Personal holiness is a consequence of being brought under the electing grace of God through Christ and his work.
35 He writes: “Theologically speaking, a covenant is a promise binding two people or two parties to love one another unconditionally. There is no such thing as conditional love in God or in man, and that fact is enshrined in the theological concept of a covenant of love” (Ibid., pp. 266-267, emphasis in original). However, he contradicts himself when he states shortly: “The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is the God who has made a unilateral covenant for us in Christ, binding Himself to man and man to Himself in Christ, and who summons us to respond in faith and love to what He has done so freely for us in Christ” (Ibid., p. 268, emphasis in original). Thus, for Torrance, the covenant is unconditional but human beings are to respond in faith and love to what God has done for them in Jesus Christ. Yet, the orthodox federal theologians whom he criticizes for promoting a type of legalistic works-salvation would never assign any meritorious value (whether congruently or condignly) to faith and love (as will be argued in subsequent chapters). They would agree with Torrance that the faith and love believers exhibit are only the fruits of being in covenant with God, and not as a way to merit or maintain one’s place in the covenant.
wing of Protestantism slipped into a works-based religious system during the post-Reformation era by introducing the twofold covenant structure as the basis for its overall theological thinking. Placher agrees with Torrance, Rolston, and others in the “Calvin versus the Calvinists” school that the seventeenth century federalists had significantly departed from Calvin’s own theology of salvation with its primacy on the grace of God. Taking the views of Ursinus to task, Placher argues that the twofold covenant structure, along with its bilateral interpretation of the covenants, made “for a real difference in how people thought about covenants.” He then adds: “If a covenant is a bilateral agreement, then the divine-human covenant holds only if human beings keep to their part of the bargain. If there is both a covenant of works and a covenant of grace, then it was natural to think of them in the same conceptual framework, and thus to think about the covenant of grace as rather like the covenant of works, only with easier demands.”37 While Calvin understood salvation to be a gift given to human beings on the grounds of God’s unconditional and unilateral grace in the Person and Work of Christ,38 post-Reformation federal theology, Placher argues, is characterized by a works-righteousness legalism by exhorting members in the church to look to the quality of their own spiritual and moral lives for assurance that they are among the elect.39 Therefore, for Placher, the problem with the twofold federal theology was that it dramatically shifted away from the free and unilateral view of salvation that

37 Ibid., p. 156, emphasis added. Kendall also offers this rather simplistic and inaccurate assessment. He writes: “The difference seems to be that perfect obedience was required under the old covenant and doing our best is required under the new” (Kendall, p. 206). In essence, Kendall believes that federal theology teaches a type of “condign merit” soteriology (similar to Medieval Scholasticism) where believers are called partially to earn their salvation by “doing their best” within the covenant of grace. However, this is a faulty understanding of how Reformed theologians understood the nature of this covenant and how it operates in the life of the elect. As will be argued later on in the study, the notion that the covenant of grace is merely an “easier” type of covenant of works for believers to fulfill personally is a flawed portrayal of the way Reformed orthodoxy has always understood the structural differences between the two covenants.

38 Placher, pp. 60-64.

39 He uses the Westminster Standards as an example of what the orthodox Reformed teaches on this subject: “When in doubt about our salvation, in short, Westminster invited us to look at the moral and spiritual qualities of our own lives” (Ibid., p. 160).
characterized Calvin’s theology towards a more works-based soteriology by introducing “conditions” in the covenant arrangement and seeing God’s covenant relations with his people as essentially bilateral.

So far we have surveyed the views of those who are critical of the twofold federal model of Reformed orthodoxy for its alleged shift towards a legalistic or works-righteousness way of thinking that was alien to the theology of Calvin and other early Reformers. Though there are other notable scholars who have set forth similar critical evaluations of Reformed covenant theology as the writers we have surveyed above (e.g., Leonard J. Trinterud, Karl Barth, J. A. Dorner, David A. Weir, William Adams Brown, M. Charles Bell, D. J. Bruggink, F. W. Dillistone, and others), we have only reviewed a small sample of contemporary scholarship in order to provide enough information to show current critical assessments of covenant or federal theology as a legalistic degeneration from early Reformed thought. This review is to show that the tendency among many contemporary theologians in their evaluation of covenant theology as a tragic compromise and trajectory towards a works-righteousness soteriology is a commonly accepted one today.

However, there are other critics of the twofold covenant structure—in direct contrast to the arguments of the writers above—who charge the model of dichotomizing or bifurcating law and gospel well beyond what the early Reformers and the writers of Scripture had in mind. They perceive covenant theology as another species of Lutheranism with its strict division between law and gospel. We will now survey the literature of these thinkers who argue that the twofold covenant or federal framework is actually a shift towards a “hyper-dichotomized” law-gospel structure due to an infusion of Lutheranistic tendencies that was foreign to the theological paradigms of Calvin and early Reformed theologians like Bullinger and Martin Bucer.
1.2.2 Covenant Theology as a radical dichotomizing of Law and Gospel

The most vocal critic of covenant theology coming from this angle of criticism comes from the evangelical biblical scholar Daniel P. Fuller. Coming from the perspective that Scripture should be understood consistently as a unified whole, Fuller argues that covenant theology, like classic dispensationalism,\(^{40}\) separates law and gospel in an unwarranted way that distorts the relationship between grace and obligation in salvation (albeit in a manner significantly different from the way dispensationalism does).\(^{41}\) According to Fuller, the covenant theology of Reformed orthodoxy was already problematic from the start because its formulators desired very hard to keep the law-gospel distinction intact—a desire which they inherited, whether in its Lutheran or Calvinistic form, from their Reformation forefathers.\(^{42}\) The source of the hermeneutical problem

\(^{40}\) When I use the term “classic dispensationalism” I mean the redemptive-historical system, first taught by the Anglo-Irish clergyman John Nelson Darby (1800-1882) and later popularized by American evangelicals like C. I. Scofield (1843-1921), James M. Gray (1851-1935), and Lewis Sperry Chafer (1871-1952), that was starting to become well-established in North American evangelicalism during the early twentieth century. Classic dispensationalism taught that Scripture is divided up into various redemptive epochs or dispensations (the usual number being seven). These are (from beginning to end): 1) Innocence; 2) Conscience; 3) Civil Government; 4) Patriarchal; 5) Mosaic; 6) Grace; and 7) Millennial Kingdom. The most fundamental feature of classic or normative dispensationalism is a clear separation between Israel and the Church—both having their own respective purposes and way of salvation within God’s redemptive-historical plan. As a result of this separation, law and gospel are also rigidly separated: the law being exclusively for Israel and the gospel being exclusively for the Church. For a good expression of classic or normative dispensationalism, see Charles C. Ryrie’s _Dispensationalism_, rev. and exp. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995). Though dispensationalism has undergone significant changes in recent years where there is a shift towards a more unifying understanding of Scripture (for example, the development of what is popularly known as progressive dispensationalism), even these “newer” types of dispensational schemas still maintain a clear separation of Israel and the Church, and therefore, law and gospel (cf. Robert L. Saucy, _The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism: The Interface Between Dispensational and Non-Dispensational Theology_ [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993]).


\(^{42}\) As he states: “Reformation theology from the outset, both in its Lutheran and Calvinistic branches, was…greatly concerned to distinguish properly between law and grace” (Fuller, _Gospel and Law_, p. 4).
stems from, in Fuller’s mind, covenant theology’s concept of the prelapsarian covenant of works and the soteriological dualism as a result. He writes:

According to this system, when Jesus came to earth, he fulfilled the covenant of meritorious works that Adam and Eve broke. Consequently, the gospel by which we are saved is then a “covenant of grace,” made such by Jesus’ having merited it for us by his perfect fulfillment of the covenant of works. Reformed theology declares that the covenant of grace is thus “unconditional,” though I have yet to find anywhere in Scripture a gospel promise that is unconditional.43

Thus, federal theology has the problem of setting forth two ways of salvation throughout Scripture’s entire narrative: one of perfect obedience as laid out in the terms of the covenant of works and the other of unconditional favour as set forth in the covenant of grace. The problem he sees with this systematic restructuring of Scripture’s redemptive-historical sequence is that it creates an implausible dualism running through Scripture’s entire narrative44 and undercuts the seriousness of the many exhortations given by the biblical writers that a believer’s personal obedience is a necessary requirement to enjoy God’s salvific blessings in the life to come.45 That is why Fuller argues that dispensationalism and covenant theology, despite significant hermeneutical differences between them and being long-time rival systems in modern evangelicalism, are really no different on the foundational level when it comes to understanding the relationship between law and gospel. He writes:

In comparing these contemporary statements of dispensationalism with covenant theology, we conclude that there is no longer any substantive difference between the two on the subject of the law and gospel. Both regard God as confronting men with what is generally a legal revelation so

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43 Fuller, Unity of the Bible, p. 181, emphasis added.
44 Fuller, Gospel and Law, p. 63.
45 In contrast to covenant theology, he sets forth his view by stating: “We will conclude that the antithesis [of law and grace] is only apparent and not real. This, then, will make the enjoyment of grace dependent on faith and good works” (Ibid, emphasis added).
that they will despair of their ability to save themselves and respond to revelation setting forth salvation by grace.\textsuperscript{46}

Fuller concludes that covenant theology should not be so disturbed by dispensationalism’s bifurcation of redemptive history since they largely do the same thing when they set the “legal” and “gracious” revelations pitted against each other throughout Scripture’s entire narrative.\textsuperscript{47} Therefore, the rigid law-gospel bifurcation is not only something that Lutherans and dispensationalists are guilty of doing; covenant theology, in Fuller’s opinion, does the same thing by positing that the covenant of works and covenant of grace are in a constant antithetical (but not dialectical) relationship to each other in the entire redemptive-historical narrative of Scripture.

In response to both dispensationalism and covenant theology, Fuller proposes a law-gospel hermeneutic that puts law and gospel on a \textit{continuum} rather than in \textit{contrast}. He argues that law and gospel are not two diametrically opposed ways in which God deals with the human race—as found in much of Reformation theology and its heirs—but one and the same where both grace \textit{and} obligation are inherent in the message of salvation in both Testaments.\textsuperscript{48} More importantly,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{46} Ibid., p. 45.
\item \textsuperscript{47} Ibid., p. 43.
\item \textsuperscript{48} He writes: “The conclusion...is that instead of two sets of promises in the Bible—conditional and unconditional—there is only one kind of promise throughout Scripture, and the realization of its promises is dependent upon compliance with conditions which are well characterized as ‘the obedience of faith’ (Rom 1:5; 16:26)” (Ibid., p. 105). Fuller makes much use of the Pauline phrase “the obedience of faith” throughout his work (cf. pp. 105-120) as a key to resolving the apparent tensions that exists between law and gospel, the conditional and unconditional, and James and Paul. In another place, he is more bold: “I find it impossible to abstract Moses’ work of faith, consisting in his journeying from Pharaoh’s palace to Goshen, from his conviction about the surpassing worth of Christ’s eternal treasures, so I would say that Moses was justified by the work, or obedience, of faith” (“A Response on the Subjects of Works and Grace,” \textit{Presbyterion} 9 [1983], p. 79). However, some scholars have expressed alarm at Fuller’s own formulation of the matter as seriously undermining one of the key tenets of the Reformation: justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ’s work alone. One such Reformed scholar who has expressed alarm at Fuller’s theological trajectory is Robert L. Reymond. He writes: “The irony in all this is that Fuller declares that this ‘grace’ does its work of justification through what he calls the ‘work, or obedience, of faith,’ insisting that many Scripture passages make good works the \textit{instrumental cause} of justification (he is quick to insist that such good works are not meritorious). Accordingly, a view that insists upon ‘grace’ everywhere winds up with true grace nowhere and a kind of works principle everywhere, with his
however, Fuller sees the practical and pastoral consequences of covenant theology’s way of understanding law and gospel as contrasting features to be serious and possibly harmful. For him, the issue has enormous significance in how an individual believer lives out his or her faith before God. He makes this concern quite clear when he writes:

[The] most vital advantage that covenant theology would achieve by thinking of responding to God only in terms of an obedience of faith, which produces the good works of faith (Gal 5:6; 1 Thes 1:3; 2 Thes 1:11), would be that the instrumental cause for both justification (God’s imputation to the obedient believer of his perfect righteousness) and sanctification (the progressive inherent righteousness in the believer) would be the same….Consequently, covenant theology would not make itself vulnerable to the charge of Galatianism, which as Galatians 3:2-3 makes clear, is the error of thinking that while justification is by faith alone, yet progress in sanctification comes by bringing forth works that are not exclusively the product of faith (Gal 2:20)….Living the Christian life is greatly simplified and expedited by understanding that one will do good works that are pleasing to God simply as he seeks to keep himself in God’s love (Jude 21), or to put it another way, as he abides in Christ (John 15).

In other words, the problematic feature of covenant theology from a practical and pastoral point of view is that it not only sets law and gospel apart in an unwarranted way as two antithetical principles but that it divides faith and works when it comes to justification and sanctification (the former brought about by faith alone; the latter brought about by good works). Structuring law and gospel as a continuum, however, removes the unbiblical notion of merit and at the same time takes seriously Scripture’s call to believers, with its intended eternal consequences, to abide in Christ (John 15:1-6) and have faith work itself out through acts of love (Gal 5:6). Therefore, covenant theology, according to Fuller, in rendering law and gospel disparate, through its highly

representation of the relation of works to justification coming perilously close to what late medieval theologians would have called works having not condign but congruent merit. One thing is certainly clear from Fuller’s representation of this whole matter: he has departed from the *sola fide* principle of the Protestant Reformation” (Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998], pp. 431-432, emphasis in original).

49 Fuller, “A Response on the Subject of Works and Grace,” p. 77.
legalistic view of the covenant of works and its unconditional understanding of the covenant of grace, risks falling into both legalism and antinomianism.\(^\text{50}\)

Following in generally the same line of thought as Fuller is the analysis given by the Reformed theologian Norman Shepherd.\(^\text{51}\) Shepherd’s main contention is that some circles within the Reformed tradition do not satisfactorily resolve, in his opinion, the tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility—especially in regard to reconciling unconditional predestinarianism with the necessity of evangelism.\(^\text{52}\) He suggests that the best way to overcome this apparent conundrum is by making Reformed evangelistic methodology be “consciously oriented to the doctrine of the covenant, rather than to the doctrine of election.”\(^\text{53}\) In other words, Shepherd faults much of the evangelical Reformed tradition for its excessive focus on election rather than on the covenant when it comes to preaching and sharing the gospel. The consequence of this type of thinking, he argues, is that the Reformed variety of evangelism cannot actually offer the good news of the gospel (i.e., that Christ died for your sins) to any particular person since only God knows who the elect are.\(^\text{54}\) The main culprit for this apparent deficiency in typical Reformed evangelistic methods is a defective understanding of the character of the biblical covenants and how law and promise are integrated. Shepherd believes that federal theology puts too much distance between law and grace as a means to uphold the purity of the

\(^{50}\) Fuller, *Unity of the Bible*, pp. 181-182.

\(^{51}\) Shepherd once held the position of professor of systematic theology at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia (from 1963 to 1981) before he was removed from his position by the seminary’s Board of Trustees in 1981 for teaching a doctrine of justification that many felt was inconsistent with the historic Reformed position. Some notable scholars who objected to Shepherd’s idiosyncratic view include Sinclair B. Ferguson, Meredith G. Kline, W. Robert Godfrey, Mariano Di Gangi, Edmund P. Clowney, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Philip E. Hughes, George W. Knight III, Morton H. Smith, and William Hendriksen. For an overview of what is often euphemistically labelled the “Shepherd Controversy” which took place at the seminary during that time see O. Palmer Robertson’s *The Current Justification Controversy* (Unicoi, TN: The Trinity Foundation, 2003).


\(^{53}\) Ibid., p. 79.

\(^{54}\) Ibid., p. 81.
gospel; the solution he maintains lies in reorganizing the relationship between the Mosaic and Promissory covenants so that they lie in greater continuity with each other. He also shares Fuller’s concern for the federalist espousal of a law-based merit theology grounded in the covenant of works doctrine.\(^{55}\) Not only does the covenant of works doctrine, argues Shepherd, undermine the view that God *always* deals with the human creature *in grace*; it is also the very reason for the unwarranted bifurcation of law and gospel (or the Mosaic covenant and the Promissory covenants) that is typical of much post-Reformation Reformed orthodoxy.\(^{56}\) This bifurcation of law and gospel, rooted in the covenant of works doctrine, has serious practical consequences for the Christian. He writes: “The controlling covenant of works doctrine reduces soteriology to justification so that sanctification and the cultural involvement of his image bearers take a subordinate place. In some traditions, sanctification becomes a second blessing,

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\(^{55}\) He writes: “[R]eformed theology took a wrong turn toward the end of the sixteenth century with the introduction of an unbiblical works principle into soteriology. We need the humility now to go back to the point where we took the wrong turn in order to get our bearings from the word of God and to move on from there” (Norman Shepherd, “The Imputation of Active Obedience,” *A Faith that is Never Alone: A Response to Westminster Seminary California*, ed. P. Andrew Sandlin [La Grange, CA: Kerygma Press, 2007], p. 278).

\(^{56}\) Shepherd makes it clear that he takes issue with Reformed thinkers who view the Mosaic covenant as a type of legal covenant that principally operated on a merit/works system (e.g., Louis Berkhof, Mark W. Karlberg, Meredith G. Kline, Michael S. Horton, and others). He writes: “Scripture shows that the Mosaic covenant is not a covenant of works embodying a works/merit principle at its core. It is not a republication of an original covenant of works….Rather, the Mosaic covenant is an administration of covenant grace. At its core, the Mosaic covenant does not simply drive us to Christ, but further unfolds the gracious covenant relationship that the Lord established with Abraham and his children” (Shepherd, *The Call of Grace*, pp. 26-27). Cf. also idem, *The Way of Righteousness: Justification Beginning with James* [Mount Hermon, CA: Kerygma Press, 2009], pp. 72-78. Many Reformed theologians recently have taken issue with Shepherd’s formulation of the significance and character of the Mosaic covenant. Though not disagreeing with Shepherd that God’s grace was operative during the Mosaic dispensation, they take issue with his unique understanding of the role the Mosaic covenant played in the salvation of the elect within Israel. By rejecting the antithesis between the Mosaic (law) and Promissory covenants (gospel), Reformed theologians like Jeong Koo Jeon have declared Shepherd to be not only outside the orthodox Reformed tradition, but the Reformation tradition as a whole. Jeon writes: “Shepherd rejects the adoption of the Reformation hermeneutical tradition rightly developed by Calvin and adopted by the Calvinists and the Westminster Standards. In doing so, he radically reinterprets Leviticus 18:5. Certainly, in the Reformed hermeneutics and theology after the pattern of Calvin’s hermeneutical and theological tradition, Leviticus 18:5 has been used as a mirror of the antithesis between Law and Gospel….Accordingly, in Shepherd’s hermeneutics and theology, there is no room for justification by faith alone and salvation by grace alone, which was rightly expounded and understood during the Protestant Reformation and adopted and developed in the Reformed hermeneutics and theology” (Jeong Koo Jeon, *Covenant Theology and Justification by Faith: The Shepherd Controversy and Its Impacts* [Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2007], pp. 48-49).
and in others it almost falls out of view all together.”⁵⁷ In other words, the typical twofold covenant model, with its rigid law-gospel distinction, undermines the necessity of sanctification and the impetus for the Christian to live out his or her divine calling to be salt and light in the world. Therefore, in Shepherd’s opinion, post-Reformation federal theology with its bifurcated law-gospel structure inadvertently cut the vital nerve that connects Christian ethical living with soteriology, and thus, falls into a type of antinomianism.

P. Andrew Sandlin is another thinker within the overall Reformed tradition who has also expressed serious reservations about the way traditional federal theology has sharply divided law and gospel as two antithetical ways of salvation. Sandlin, like Shepherd, is concerned that the twofold covenant model promotes a soteriology that inadvertently severs the necessary link between Christian discipleship and the gift of salvation (which he is also concerned will lead to an antinomian view of grace).⁵⁸ Like Fuller and Shepherd, he also argues that the main cause for this trajectory in post-Reformation Reformed orthodoxy is the covenant of works doctrine that the tradition developed within its federalist framework. Taking Clark’s view to task again, Sandlin writes:

R. Scott Clark, following Martin Luther and a significant segment of the Reformed tradition, has argued that Gospel and Law are mutually exclusive divine messages from God to man: Law is the message of “Do this [actively] and live”; Gospel is the message of “Rest in Jesus [passively] and

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⁵⁷ Shepherd, “The Imputation of Active Obedience,” p. 271, emphasis added.
⁵⁸ After taking R. Scott Clark’s covenant theology to task, he writes: “Therefore, while we agree with the motivation of theologians like Clark who espouse the antithetical Gospel-Law paradigm and who wish to avoid identifying the reception of the Gospel with human achievement, we cannot agree that the imposition of certain moral demands and reproof of certain transgressions as aspects of the Gospel open the door to human achievement. Nor do we agree that the imposition of these demands threatens a gracious, monergistic soteriology. Conversely, we are convinced that to wrench these requirements from the Gospel is to come dangerously close to succumbing to an antinomian message that Paul excoriates (Rom. 6:15)” (P. Andrew Sandlin, “The Gospel of Law and the Law of Gospel: An Assessment of the Antithetical Gospel-Law Paradigm,” A Faith that is Never Alone: A Response to Westminster Seminary California, ed. P. Andrew Sandlin [La Grange, CA: Kerygma Press, 2007], p. 215, emphasis added).
His work alone.” Law is the demand for human performance before God. Gospel is the assurance of Jesus’ performance on our behalf that invites our passive reliance (“resting and receiving”). Essential to this theological construct is the Covenant of Works, which holds that eternal life is the reward for man’s entire, unblemished obedience to God’s commands. Eternal life is merited by man’s righteous works established by God….At its foundation, eternal life is a reward for works-righteousness. Since man can no longer perform those works impeccably, Jesus performs them on his behalf. Foundationally, therefore, God deals with man on the basis of Law—“Do this and live; fail to do it and die.” Gospel is the means of fulfilling this Law after the Fall: Jesus keeps the Law and merits God’s favor as a substitute for man. This is the antithetical Gospel-Law paradigm.\(^59\)

One can also see why Sandlin is also adverse towards the doctrine of the imputation of Christ’s “active obedience”; the potential practical consequences of the doctrine.\(^60\) As a result, Sandlin suggests that to overcome the theological and pastoral problems resulting from this antithetical law-gospel paradigm of federal theology we must revert to the “unified Gospel-Law” paradigm that characterized early Reformed theology (especially that of Bullinger).\(^61\) Once the Reformed tradition recognizes the error of the covenant of works doctrine and the law-gospel bifurcation that results from it, we not only do away with the unbiblical notion of merit but can also solve the problem of overcoming the apparent conflict between the necessity of walking in good works (and the dire consequences of failing to do this) and the Reformers’ doctrine of justification by faith alone.\(^62\) By recognizing that the law includes the gospel and that the gospel embodies the law, we can avoid having a truncated view of salvation where the legal and forensic aspects are given paramount place at the expense of the regenerative and transformative. In contrast to the type of gospel message espoused by much of post-Reformation Reformed orthodoxy, Sandlin maintains that the biblical gospel message (as he understands it to be) is much more dynamic and

\(^{59}\) Ibid., pp. 242-243.  
\(^{60}\) Ibid., p. 231.  
\(^{61}\) Ibid., p. 201.  
\(^{62}\) Ibid., pp. 205, 239-242.
transformative, and affects not only the spiritual condition of individual human beings but the whole created order:

[T]he Gospel is the message of the King, not merely the Savior—or, more positively, it is the message of the Savior-King. He atoned for the sins of humanity, rose from the dead for their justification (Rom. 4:25) and commands individuals to repent of their sins and follow Him. The goal of the Gospel is the worldwide submission of humanity to Christ the King (Phil. 2:5-11), and as His obedient servants we are charged to press His claims in all areas of life and thought, working toward the eventual and inevitable triumph of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ in earth, a kingdom engendered by the Gospel. The Gospel is not only a message to be believed; it is a command to be obeyed.63

Sandlin, however, fears that the so-called antithetical law-gospel paradigm of classic federal theology fails to provide the impetus for the church—and the individuals within it—to do this very thing. For him, the twofold covenant paradigm, with its law-gospel dichotomy, fails to provide an “authentic message of salvation to a dying world” compared to the so-called “lawful gospel” that he espouses.64

1.2.3 Assessing the Various Interpretations of Federal Theology in Contemporary Scholarship

The various interpretations of federalism examined above was not meant to be exhaustive but to indicate the assorted scholarly criticism for the purpose and structure of this study. As the above interpretations of federal theology have demonstrated, contemporary opinions on its development, character, and significance are polarized. Although various nuances exist among these writers and their interpretations, the most widespread assessment of the development and

63 Ibid., p. 217.
64 Ibid., p. 247.
The significance of covenant or federal theology is that it was a codified response by orthodox Reformed theologians to temper some of the more problematic and objectionable aspects of Calvin’s unconditional predestinarianism. Many, though not all, who follow this train of thought trace the development of post-Reformation federalism primarily within a religio-historical perspective, especially within the context of the various doctrinal debates that arose during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (i.e., Reformed orthodoxy’s conflicts with Rome and the Anabaptists). Although acknowledging that theological issues played a significant role in the rise of federalism in Reformed orthodoxy, they basically argue that Reformed orthodoxy developed the twofold covenant schema as a way to respond constructively to the charge that its monergistic predestinarian doctrine was detrimental to civic morality, socio-political stability, and personal ethics. Others, from a different perspective, argue that federalism was a systematic formulation to maintain the “Lutheranized” law-gospel dichotomy in Reformed orthodoxy so as not to fall prey to any form of legalism as well as to guard itself from the ever-present spectre of the works-righteousness heresy of Rome. Although these scholars who interpret federal theology from this perspective are numerically small compared to those who view federal theology as a reaction to Calvin’s unconditional predestinarianism, it still remains a vocal camp among those who are involved in the debates that involve the character and significance of Reformed covenant theology.

The assessment given above demonstrates that scholarship on the development, structure, and significance of post-Reformation federal theology lacks clear consensus. Although we have shown that there are two major approaches to covenant theology within contemporary scholarship, the methodological approaches taken by these scholars differ also. For example, Miller and Weir principally take a socio-historical approach to the rise and significance of
federalism in Reformed orthodoxy; while others, like Torrance, Rolston, and Placher interpret
the rise and significance of federalism largely through a theological standpoint. As a result of the
growing interest in federal theology in the last few decades, accompanied by recent discussions
in New Testament scholarship on whether the Reformers interpreted Judaism and Paul correctly
in light of current research in biblical studies, it is important to understand the rise and
significance of post-Reformation covenant/federal theology in its own proper context. This is
especially the case since a vast majority of the contemporary scholars who have critically
evaluated post-Reformation federal theology have usually approached the subject through their
own modern presuppositions, either resulting in a misreading of federalism due to their own
particular theological perspectives controlling the discussion or coming to conclusions based on
methodological approaches that are indefensible.

1.3 Thesis

1.3.1 Overall Thesis

In light of the current discussions regarding the development and significance of covenant
or federal theology as we have examined above, the purpose of this study is to argue that post-
Reformation federal theology, in contrast to the arguments brought forth by contemporary
scholarship on federal theology examined above, offers a proper balance between law and gospel
which, in turn, carefully navigates between the dangers of both works-righteousness legalism and
soteriological antinomianism or libertinism. In other words, Reformed orthodoxy developed the
twofold covenant or federal theology to provide a proper biblico-theological rationale, through
its particular interpretation of Scripture’s redemptive-historical flow, for the Reformers’ doctrine of justification by faith alone in Christ alone along with their overall Augustinian theology, while at the same time seriously taking Scripture’s many exhortations to believers to lead a life of godliness as the necessary fruit and evidence of regeneration. The overall purpose of this study, therefore, is to argue that classic Reformed covenant theology does not put at risk the Reformers’ doctrine of justification by faith alone and their Augustinian view of grace (as argued by Miller, Rolston, Torrance, Placher, and others) nor does it undermine the requirement of believers to fulfill God’s moral law and risk falling into a type of soteriological libertinism (as argued by Fuller, Shepherd, and Sandlin).

### 1.3.2 Michael Horton’s Covenant Theology as the Context for the Thesis

The thesis set forth above will be argued by examining and analyzing the covenant theology of the contemporary evangelical Reformed theologian Michael S. Horton. The study will seek first to argue that Horton’s covenant theology is nothing new or novel but a faithful, contemporary articulation of the covenant theology that was framed and codified by orthodox Reformed thinkers during the post-Reformation period. In contending against the arguments of Miller, Placher, Barth, Rolston, Torrance, Weir, Klempa, and others the study will argue that the covenant theology as expounded by Horton (and other orthodox Reformed thinkers in general) is not a redemptive-historical system imposed on Scripture’s narrative to temper Calvin’s doctrine of predestination and which inadvertently undermined the Reformers’ Augustinian view of grace and early essential Reformed soteriological tenets like justification sola gratia and sola fide. Instead, the study will argue, by examining Horton’s articulation of his own covenant theology,
that the classic twofold covenant model (with its clear distinction between law and gospel or the Sinaitic and Promissory covenants) was a carefully formulated systematic exposition through a careful synthesis between biblical exegesis and theological reflection to provide a rationale for the Augustinian view of grace as espoused by early Reformed theology with its concomitants: salvation and justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. It will also argue that Horton’s strictly legal understanding of the prelapsarian covenant of works, a view which he shares with other federal theologians of the past, and the necessary dichotomy between the Sinaitic (law) and the Promissory covenants (gospel), is essential in maintaining the exclusively gracious character of the postlapsarian covenant of grace which is grounded solely in the person and work of Christ. Finally, the study will also maintain, in contrast to recent evangelical interpreters of covenant theology like Daniel P. Fuller, Norman Shepherd, P. Andrew Sandlin, and those within the Federal Vision movement, that Horton’s covenant theology does not lead to an antinomian understanding of divine grace and is not a compromising influence in regard to the personal obligation that the Christian has to God’s moral law. Rather, in contrast to these latter critics of the twofold covenant model, the study will argue that Horton’s covenant theology also emphasizes the necessity for Christians personally to fulfill God’s law—not as a means to merit congruently or condignly eternal life but only as the necessary fruit and evidence of election and justification.

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65 The Federal Vision movement is a contemporary movement within the evangelical Presbyterian/Reformed tradition that seeks to revise significantly the standard twofold covenant theology with its law-gospel dualism as found in much post-Reformation Reformed theology. The adherents of this movement are known for questioning the concept of the covenant of works (at least a merit-based legalistic understanding of it), maintaining a more “objective” view of the covenant of grace, rejecting the sharp distinction between law and gospel, emphasizing more the continuity between the Mosaic and New covenants, being apprehensive about the visible and invisible church distinction, and placing a much higher value on the sacraments as a means to salvation. Their views can be found in a book titled The Federal Vision, ed. Steve Wilkins and Duane Garner (Monroe, LA: Athanasius Press, 2004).
1.4 Significance and Implications

Through our study of Horton’s covenant theology we intend to show that classic covenant theology, whether articulated by post-Reformation Reformed thinkers or expounded by evangelical Reformed scholars of the present, is not a degeneration into legalism or an inadvertent promotion of antinomianism. We will argue, through an investigation of Horton’s covenant theology, that the classic twofold federal model is a promising alternative to other perspectives with respect to providing a proper balance between law and gospel, unconditional election and human responsibility, and justification (how sinners are set right before God through the person and work of Christ) and sanctification (how believers are progressively conformed unto Christ’s image by the work of the Spirit). The significance of this study for ministry, personal growth in the faith, and evangelism is substantive. Classic federal theology, when properly understood, then, is a systematic model that clearly expounds the abundant grace of God towards sinners while at the same time never downplaying Scripture’s call to believers to lifelong submission to God in humble trust, obedience, and love.

With the criticisms levelled throughout the years that classic expressions of Reformed theology never adequately resolved the tension between God’s sovereign grace and human responsibility at various points, this study will argue that Reformed federal theology does satisfactorily harmonize the apparent conflict between the two on all levels. It is hoped that this study will foster more discussion and debate among contemporary theologians so as to gain a better appreciation of the federal theology that was codified by those living in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries who were struggling with difficult theological issues like the relationship between grace and merit or divine election and human responsibility. One of the purposes of the
study is to encourage thinkers today to look upon federal theology as anything but a dogmatic relic of the past (and scarcely that maintained by a handful of Reformed evangelicals within the overall Christian tradition) that has no fruitful role in contemporary discussions in biblical studies. The study will also show that classic federal theology can show contemporary thinkers how certain hermeneutical methods can yield fruitful results with respect to understanding the overall redemptive-historical structure of Scripture and how this can impact other areas of Christian thought and practice.

1.5 Method and Structure of the Study

1.5.1 Method

The methodological approach of this study will provide a sustained defense of the thesis posited above by offering a descriptive account and analysis of Horton’s ideas and arguments in regard to covenant theology. The sources that will be used to provide this descriptive examination will come primarily from Horton’s published works: books, essays in edited compilations, and journal articles. These sources will be relied upon as the main bases for establishing the argument of the thesis set forth above. The rationale for this is that the study provide a clear and accurate picture of the type of covenant theology expounded by Horton when comparing and contrasting his view with other orthodox Reformed thinkers, past and present, on the subject. On the other hand, critical evaluation of some of Horton’s exegetical conclusions on relevant Scriptural passages will also be given when necessary for the purpose of furthering the aims of this study. Secondary literature, particularly of the writings of Reformed theologians of the past and present who are in general agreement with Horton’s covenant theology, will also be
examined in order to provide a sustained defense of what this study seeks to accomplish: that Horton’s covenant theology is 1) nothing novel but a recapitulation of the classic twofold covenant framework of post-Reformation Reformed orthodoxy, and is 2) also consistent with the key soteriological perspectives of early Reformed theology, especially the doctrine of justification by faith alone and its strongly Augustinian view of grace.

Other types of secondary literature, in this case those highly critical of classic Reformed covenant theology, will also be examined as a way of demonstrating the challenges to the overall thesis set forth in this study. Some examples of those who are critical of the tradition for the very reason that it is a form of works-righteousness legalism and whose works, when necessary, will be examined in the study are Perry Miller, William Placher, Karl Barth, Holmes Rolston III, J. B. Torrance, R. T. Kendall, and J. Wayne Baker. These secondary sources will be examined for the purpose of analyzing the arguments and challenging the assumptions of these scholars who are critical of the twofold covenant or federal model due to a perceived shift away from the more unilateral view of salvation held by the early Reformers. In addition, the thesis will examine the writings of scholars within the overall Reformed tradition who are critical of the traditional twofold covenant model but for reasons diametrically opposite from the ones given by the critical scholars mentioned above. These scholars include Daniel P. Fuller, Norman Shepherd, P. Andrew Sandlin, and those within the Federal Vision movement. As discussed above, the critics who come from this side of the argument posit that the twofold covenant framework brought unintended consequences that led the Reformed tradition to depart from the supposedly early

66 When I say “scholars within the overall Reformed tradition” I mean those who embrace the “doctrines of grace” as articulated in the early Reformed confessions (The Heidelberg Catechism, The Belgic Confessions, the Canons of Dordt, and the Westminster Confession of Faith) though they may not agree with everything set forth in these confessions and have an ecclesial affiliation outside the mainstream evangelical Presbyterian/Reformed denominations.
Reformed stance (i.e., Calvin) of maintaining a closer continuity between law and grace, demand and promise, and the Mosaic and Promissory Covenants. They see the classic twofold covenant framework as a later “Lutheranizing” element within the Reformed tradition that departed from Calvin’s and his Reformed contemporaries’ view of law and gospel. Their writings will also be examined for the purpose of dispelling the notion that the classic twofold covenant formula has the unintended consequence of overthrowing the moral law as a rule of life for the regenerate and ignoring any continuity between the promissory and bilateral aspects of the covenant of grace.

1.5.2 Structure

In terms of the structure of the study, we will provide a chapter-by-chapter analysis of essential themes and issues related to the rise, character, and significance of covenant theology. However, before we give a descriptive exposition and analysis of Horton’s covenant theology, the following chapter will deal with the history of covenant theology in Reformed thought since Calvin. It will provide various expositions of covenant theology by notable thinkers within the Reformed tradition since the time of the Reformation and how it was understood by them. The prominent figures that will be discussed in this chapter include John Calvin, Thomas Watson, Francis Turretin, Herman Witsius, John Gill, Charles Hodge, and Louis Berkhof. This chapter

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67 Some have concluded that post-Reformation Reformed federal theology significantly departed from Calvin’s understanding of the biblical covenants within the overall purpose of God’s redemptive-historical work. However, in the next chapter we will argue that though Calvin did not develop a covenantal theology in his writings that can be properly classified as covenant or federal theology (as conventionally understood by Reformed scholars) his thoughts on this subject (as revealed in his Institutes and commentaries) can be considered the seedbed for later federalist views of post-Reformation Reformed scholasticism (as argued by Peter Lillback, Jeon, J. V. Fesko, etc.).
will provide the historical background for the study in order to establish the foundation for what will be argued in subsequent chapters.

The third chapter will discuss the form and content of Horton’s covenant theology. It will examine and analyze Horton’s twofold covenant structure and discuss how he understands the character of the covenant of works/creation/life and the covenant of grace and their relationship to each other. The chapter will also discuss and examine Horton’s argument that the Mosaic/Sinai covenant is similar in form and character to the suzerain-vassal treaties of the ancient Near East and his contention that the Mosaic/Sinai covenant is basically a republication of the covenant of works established in history (in this section of the chapter there will be a discussion on how Horton’s understanding of the Mosaic covenant differs significantly from that of current biblical scholarship [e.g., the arguments of W. J. Dumbrell and others] and why his argument regarding the \textit{pure legality} of the Mosaic covenant has merit). It will also discuss Horton’s motivation for upholding the covenant of works as a \textit{strictly legal} arrangement between God and his human creatures and the rationale behind this argument in order to maintain consistently the Reformation doctrine of justification \textit{sola gratia} and \textit{sola fide} (in contrast to the opinions of Rolston, Torrance, Barth, Klempa, Bruggink, and Placher). The discussion here will also revolve around how Christ is fulfilling the rigorous demands of the covenant of works and earning a perfect righteousness on behalf of his co-heirs, which Adam had failed to do in Paradise, is the only grounds for the elect to be reckoned perfectly righteous before a holy God. In addition, there will also be some discussion of Horton’s understanding of a pre-temporal \textit{co ventil of redemption} (the \textit{pactum salutis}) enacted between the Father and the Son as the surety for the establishment of the covenant of grace between God and the elect in history. This chapter will essentially argue that Horton’s covenant theology, in contrast to the arguments of
many contemporary scholars on Reformed federalism, is Christologically focused and consistent with a high view of grace that characterized the soteriology of Calvin and other early Reformers.

The fourth chapter will analyze Horton’s understanding of the law-grace antithesis in his covenant theology and how it impacts the way he understands the doctrine of justification. The chapter will argue that Horton’s particular law-grace paradigm is consistent with the traditional twofold covenant model and is a necessary requirement in order to uphold the classic Reformation position that sinners are justified through faith alone in Christ alone apart from anything within themselves. The chapter will also discuss how Horton hermeneutically and systematically relates the various covenants of biblical history (the Abrahamic, Sinaitic, and New) together, and explains why he posits that it is essential that the Sinai covenant be understood in a radically different way from the promissory covenants (Abrahamic and New) in order for the Reformation soteriological tenets to be uncompromisingly upheld. This chapter will argue that the position held by Horton, following the majority of orthodox Reformed thinkers of the past, is substantially different from the views of some recent evangelical interpreters (i.e., Fuller, Shepherd, Sandlin, the Federal Visionists, advocates of the New Perspective on Paul, and others) who attempt to establish greater continuity between the Sinai and the Promissory Covenants. It will also argue that the covenantal paradigm of these evangelical interpreters dangerously conflates law and gospel and, therefore, undermines the traditional doctrine of justification by faith alone in principle, despite the use of the sola fide terminology in much of their writings.

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68 This is sometimes called the “one-covenant tradition” or monocovenantalism within Reformed circles. See Jeon, Covenant Theology and Justification by Faith, pp. 1-53.
The fifth chapter will deal with the application and operation of the covenant of grace in the historical life of the elect in Horton’s covenant theology. This chapter will essentially deal with crucial soteriological and ecclesiological subjects pertinent to our discussion of Horton’s brand of covenant theology. The issues that will be discussed here include: the necessity of repentance and faith for entrance into the covenant of grace, the relationship between the covenant of grace and sanctification, the relationship between the covenant of grace and the law, and the role of the sacraments in the covenant of grace. The chapter will basically argue that although Horton’s covenant theology is largely consistent with previous Reformed thinkers on this subject and uncompromisingly upholds the Reformers’ Augustinian theology and their central soteriological tenets such as sola gratia, sola fide, and solus Christus, it does not undermine the necessity of Christian discipleship and a believer’s personal obligation to God’s moral law (summed up in Christ’s command to love God and one’s neighbour [Matt 22:37-40]). In fact, the chapter will argue that Horton’s covenant theology is an appropriate response to those who maintain that the covenant theology espoused by historic Reformed orthodoxy, due to its highly juridical and sharply dualistic covenantal model, inadvertently erodes the vital nerve that connects the juridical and transformative aspects of salvation and undermines a Christian’s duty to fulfill God’s moral law (i.e., soteriological libertinism). In addition, there will be some discussion of Horton’s doctrine of the believer’s union with Christ (unio Christi) in relation to his covenant theology and the Reformed ordo salutis to reinforce the argument just stated. We will argue that Horton’s doctrine of the unio Christi counters the notion that classic covenant theology ignores the relational and transformative aspects of salvation and separates justification and sanctification to an unscriptural degree (to the point where the latter becomes almost irrelevant). Through this method of examination and analysis, the chapter will contend that
Horton’s covenant theology is consistent with the way classic Reformed theology has always synthesized these soteriological and ecclesiological themes through the lens of its own covenantal framework.

The last chapter will provide a summary and conclusion of the study. It will essentially restate the thesis of the study and explain why classic covenant theology cannot be accused of either degenerating into a legalistic works-righteousness theology which is inimical to the views of the Reformers or that it strays towards a soteriological antinomianism where God’s moral law plays no necessary role in the life of the Christian.
2. Covenant Theology in Historical Perspective: A Survey of the Covenantal Views of Significant Voices Within the Reformed Tradition

Despite the different approaches taken in understanding the historical rise and significance of covenant theology in modern scholarship, modern scholars have generally assumed it to be a theological innovation within the Reformed tradition that marked a significant departure from the views of Calvin. Those who advance the opinion that the covenantal/federalist theology that was fundamental to later Reformed orthodoxy was virtually non-existent in Calvin’s thought are usually scholars of religious history or those who have been influenced by Karl Barth. Perry Miller, as mentioned in the previous chapter, boldly claims that Calvin, alongside Luther, hardly made any mention of the covenant concept.¹ William C. Placher, a post-liberal Reformed theologian, asserts that the covenant of works and covenant of grace concepts as set forth in post-Reformation federalism were never mentioned by Calvin in any of his writings.² The mainline Reformed theologian, D. J. Bruggink, puts it quite strongly by claiming that “despite its popularity, federal theology was not a logical development of Calvin’s theology. Rather it was a perversion of great seriousness, for it introduced a covenant of works as a valid relationship between man and God, and then carried works into the very covenant of grace.”³ The consensus, therefore, among modern scholarship on Calvin and Reformed theology is that there is a

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significant discontinuity between the Genevan Reformer and later Reformed orthodoxy in regards to understanding how the biblical covenants operate throughout redemptive history.

In recent years, however, the “discontinuity view” has also been seriously questioned at various points by scholars within the Reformed tradition. In fact, many of those critical of the discontinuity perspective argue that there is significant continuity between Calvin and later Reformed orthodoxy on the doctrine of the covenant. John Murray, the well-known Scottish-born Presbyterian theologian of the last century, writes that it “might appear from certain expressions that John Calvin enunciated the doctrine of what came later to be known as the Covenant of Works.”\(^4\) Although he admits that Calvin was more restrained on the matter compared to the Reformed divines in later generations (especially in regards to whether or not Hosea 6:7 actually sets forth a covenant of works between God and Adam), Murray does aver that this restraint “does not mean that the doctrine of Adam’s representative headship, which later on came to be formulated in terms of the Covenant of Works, is absent from his teaching.”\(^5\)

More recently, Jeong Koo Jeon argues that federal theology’s dichotomous understanding of the relationship between the covenant of works and covenant of grace is drawn from Calvin’s unique antithetical law-gospel hermeneutics, especially in regards to understanding the former as governing the Adamic administration.\(^6\) Jeon also maintains that though Calvin never used the term *foedus operum* to describe the situation that existed in the prelapsarian state in Eden he does state that, for Calvin, the “eschatological goal” of the human race during that period was

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\(^5\) Ibid., p. 219. Anthony Hoekema posits that though the “covenant of works” concept is not found in any of Calvin’s writings the “covenant of grace” doctrine was an important facet to his theology (Anthony Hoekema, “The Covenant of Grace in Calvin’s Teaching,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 2 [November 1967], pp. 133-134).

governed by the principle of law. In other words, Calvin pioneered the antithetical law-gospel hermeneutic that paved the way to the distinctive bi-covenantal structure of federal theology in later Reformed orthodoxy. Hence, Jeon concludes that Calvin’s theology is “fully congruous with the Reformed orthodox hermeneutical principle of the antithesis between the covenants of works and grace.” If there is one work, however, that comprehensively and painstakingly deals with this subject from the perspective that Calvin and later Reformed orthodoxy were generally in accord on this matter it would have to be Peter A. Lillback’s significant work titled The Binding of God. Lillback’s thesis centres around the argumentation that Calvin’s theology did have a pivotal place for the covenant and, contrary to much modern scholarship, that his views were not inconsistent with the bi-covenantal federalism of later Reformed thought. Lillback also attempts to refute the prevalent notion within current scholarship, represented by such thinkers as Charles S. McCoy and J. Wayne Baker, that the theologies of Geneva and Zurich were fundamentally different and incompatible with each other (the former emphasizing God’s unconditional election; the latter emphasizing human responsibility). Although Lillback admits that Calvin was not the “initiator” of what is typically known in Reformed circles as covenant theology (the honour, he believes, belongs to Huldrych Zwingli) he does maintain that Calvin “is the first of the early theologians to integrate the covenant concept extensively into his theological system. Thus covenant theology owes its existence in various ways to Calvin,” and by “using the covenant extensively and in new ways, Calvin provided the foundation upon which later

7 Ibid., p. 95.
8 Ibid.
generations of Reformed scholars could build the federal system.”¹¹ In spite of some questionable conclusions regarding Calvin’s views on the covenant in his work, Lillback has brought to attention that the more simplistic approaches by much of contemporary scholarship regarding Calvin and his connection (or lack thereof) to later Reformed orthodoxy on the doctrine of the covenant are wanting in numerous ways. The importance of Lillback’s work is that he has provided much in terms of allowing us to see that there is a great deal of continuity between Calvin and his contemporaries in Zurich, but also and more importantly, between Calvin and later Reformed orthodoxy on this subject.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the historical development of Reformed covenantal or federalist thought by discussing the views of several notable Reformed thinkers since the Reformation period to provide a helpful context for this study. One of the aims of this chapter is to indicate how Calvin’s law-gospel structure provided the hermeneutical basis for later Reformed thinkers in their development of the bi-covenantal structure in their respective covenant theologies. In addition, the chapter is also meant to provide some historical context before we discuss Michael Horton’s covenant theology in the following chapters and the implications of his covenant theology for the various facets of soteriology in the evangelical Reformed tradition today.

2.1 John Calvin (1509-1564)

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Although scholars of Calvin and Reformed theology are generally in unanimous agreement that the typical features of federal theology are not found in Calvin’s writings, there is still discussion and debate among scholars on whether or not there are any rudimentary ideas of later federalist thought in Calvin’s theology. As mentioned above, the debate is polarized between those who argue that federalist ideas are completely alien to or absent from Calvin’s more Trinitarian and predestinarian theology and those who argue that Calvin extensively incorporated covenantal concepts into his overall theology which became the precursor to covenantal or federalist ideas in later Reformed orthodoxy. Despite the ongoing debate between both sides, there appears to be significant evidence, based on Calvin’s writings (e.g., Institutes, II.10-11), that Calvin did incorporate covenantal ideas into his overall theological structure based on an antithetical law-gospel hermeneutic that was a characteristic feature of later Reformed orthodoxy. Though Calvin never fully developed a dual covenant of works (foedus operum) and covenant of grace (foedus gratiae) framework, he did discuss at significant length the differences and similarities between the Sinaitic covenant and the new covenant that became the forerunner to key tenets of later federalism. In addition, Calvin’s law-gospel antithesis (when it came to the justification of the sinner) was the hermeneutical seedbed that later Reformed divines drew upon to structure Scripture’s redemptive history around the two opposing covenants of works and grace. Calvin’s sensitivity in regards to conflating and law and gospel, as a reaction against

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12 Mark Karlberg, agreeing with the arguments of the “continuity school,” writes: “Although Calvin does not apply the term ‘covenant’ to the original creation arrangement, nevertheless his doctrine is fully compatible with the later development of the Covenant of Works conception....Unhesitatingly, Calvin perceives that the principle of works-inheritance governs the original state of integrity” (Mark Karlberg, Covenant Theology in Reformed Perspective: Collected Essays and Book Reviews in Historical, Biblical, and Systematic Theology [Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2000], p. 23).

13 Henri Blocher is quite straightforward in this regard: “In Calvin, we find the seeds of the later developed ‘federal’ theology, which has established itself, to this day, as the main form of orthodox Reformed doctrine” (“Old
the works-righteousness soteriology of Rome, is what is essentially carried forward to later
Reformed thinkers with their antithesis between the covenants of works and grace in the
salvation of the individual. As Peter Golding writes: “This is one of the most important aspects
of traditional and historic Calvinistic teaching on the covenant. The antithesis between law and
gospel denotes two principles of inheritance, appropriate to the Pauline teaching on the two
Adams in Romans 5. The forensic contrast between the order of law (creation) and the order of
grace (redemption) is one of opposition.”\textsuperscript{14} In short, Calvin consistently maintained this law-
gospel hermeneutic which paved the way for the development of the twofold covenant structure
of federalism in later Reformed thought.\textsuperscript{15}

Calvin’s doctrine of the covenant can be enunciated through his understanding of the law
and gospel or the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. One of the fundamental
tenets of Calvin’s theology of salvation is that the law, though good in and of itself, can never be
a means to justification and life for those who are under the bondage of sin. For him, the problem
is not that the law of God is inherently defective and unable to accomplish redemption (in fact,
he consistently maintains that the law in itself is good), but the fact that sinners who share in the
fall and corruption of the first parents cannot achieve salvation by their own efforts through the
law.\textsuperscript{16} The reason for this is due to the fact that the law requires perfect and complete compliance
for those who wish to be reckoned righteous by it: “If it is true that in the law we are taught the

\textsuperscript{14} Peter Golding, \textit{Covenant Theology: The Key of Theology in Reformed Thought and Tradition} (Ross-shire,

\textsuperscript{15} Michael McGiffert maintains that even though Calvin never explicitly set forth a covenant of works
doctrine in his writings the drift toward “duality” in later Reformed thought (especially among the English
Calvinists) was rooted in Calvin’s own formulation of a single-covenant theory (Michael McGiffert, “Grace and
Works: The Rise and Division of Covenant Divinity in Elizabethan Puritanism,” \textit{Harvard Theological Review} 75/4
[1982], p. 486).

\textsuperscript{16} Calvin, \textit{Comm.} Rom 3:23.
perfection of righteousness, this also follows: the complete observance of the law is perfect righteousness before God. By it man would evidently be deemed and reckoned righteous before the heavenly judgment seat.”  

In one sense, justification and salvation are possible through personal fulfillment of the righteous requirements of the law; on the other hand, due to the fallen condition inherited by all through the transgression of the first parents, obtaining salvation by this method is impossible and entirely excluded. Since the law requires perfect compliance, Calvin avers, no human being can ever be saved in this manner. He writes: “We have already shown above how, if we cleave to the law, we are bereft of all blessing and a curse hangs over us, one ordained for all transgressors [cf. Deut. 27:26]. For the Lord promises nothing except to perfect keepers of his law, and no one of the kind is to be found.”  

As François Wendel puts it, “legal justification is identified, by Calvin as by the other Reformers, with justification by works: the latter being excluded, because impossible, there is no longer any reason for bringing the Law into our justification.”  

Calvin also emphatically points out that the law of God is something that all human beings inherently have knowledge of. Despite the fact that the Gentiles during the Old Testament period did not receive any direct divine revelation of the law, in contrast to the Israelites at Sinai, their disobedience to the law is still inexcusable since God has engraved his law in the hearts of all. Basing his argumentation on Paul’s statement on the matter in Romans 2:14-15, Calvin writes: “Because it might seem absurd that the Gentiles perish without any preceding judgment, Paul immediately adds that for them conscience stands in place of law; this is sufficient reason for their just condemnation. The purpose of natural law, therefore, is to

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18 Ibid., III.17.1.  
render man inexcusable.”

Even the Gentiles who have never been in a special covenant relationship with God are still obligated to uphold the righteous requirements of the law, with due punishment forthcoming even for the most minute infraction, based on the inherent knowledge they possess of the law (i.e., natural law).

In this schema, Calvin, like the later Reformed orthodox, upholds the temporal priority of the law over gospel (contra the arguments of Barth, Torrance, Holmes Rolston III, Bruggink, and others) in the redemptive purpose of God throughout history. This priority emphasizes what human beings owe to God, and the salvific provision that God bestows on them through his Son due to their inability to fulfill this obligation in a satisfactory way. In other words, one of the primary functions of the law in the context of sin, according to Calvin, is to condemn sinners for falling short of the will of God so that they will look to God’s gracious provision found in Christ alone for forgiveness and eternal life (i.e., the first use of the law). That is why Calvin argues so fervently, which the later orthodox Reformed have consistently followed, that Christ, as the perfect God-man, fulfilled the righteous requirements of the law on behalf of the elect so that his righteousness is imputed to them and they are, thus, justified completely before the court of God. The only way this can happen is if Christ himself, as a fully human being, was also under the legal demand to obey the Father. We see here, therefore, that Calvin’s doctrine of the law is

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20 Calvin, *Institutes*, II.2.22.

21 “He [Paul] reasons from what is of an opposite character,—that righteousness is not brought to us by the law, because it convinces us of sin and condemns us; for life and death proceed not from the same fountain. And as he reasons from the contrary effect of the law, that it cannot confer righteousness on us, let us know, that the argument does not otherwise hold good, except we hold this as an inseparable and unvarying circumstance,—that by showing to man his sin, it cuts off the hope of salvation” (Calvin, *Comm*. Rom 3:20).

22 Calvin, *Institutes*, III.11.23.

23 As Wendel observes: “Calvin goes on to point out that it is by the obedience of the Christ that we are justified, but that he could not have manifested that obedience except in his quality as a servant; that is, according to his human nature” (Wendel, p. 260).
highly congruous with the later orthodox Reformed understanding of the legal and forensic character of the prelapsarian covenant of works.

Another way Calvin deals with the covenant concept of Scripture is in the way he understands the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. Calvin, in attempting to combat the Marcionite error of certain members of the Anabaptist movement, argues vigorously that Scripture should be understood as a unified whole. One way he maintains the unity of Scripture is by arguing that the substance of the covenant in the Old Testament is really no different from the substance of the covenant in the New Testament (although they differ in the way God’s grace is administered). For instance, he writes: “The covenant made with all the patriarchs is so much like ours in substance and reality that the two are actually one and the same. Yet they differ in the mode of dispensation.” He even goes on to state that the law that God covenanted with his people since the beginning of the world is the same law that governs the people of God in all the periods of redemptive history. Also, the law, he maintains, was a shadow of the gospel—where the gospel provides greater clarity and substance to what the law pointed to during times past—and the latter did not supplant the former in order to bring forth a different way of salvation. The reason why Calvin eagerly sought to maintain the continuity between the old and new covenants (or law and gospel, redemptive-historically) was so that the

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24 Calvin, Institutes, II.10.1-5.
25 Ibid., II.10.2. Hoekema sums up Calvin’s view of redemptive-history in relation to the covenant of grace very accurately when he writes: “For Calvin the covenant idea is the thread which ties salvation history together. God saves his people by means of the covenant of grace which, though it passes through various phases, is basically one. That covenant is founded in Christ, who is therefore the center of history” (Hoekema, p. 139).
26 Calvin, Institutes, II.10.1.
27 Ibid., II.9.4. When Calvin here talks about the law as a shadow and promise of what is to come he is not talking about God’s universal and trans-historical law imposed on all human beings. Rather, he is talking specifically about the Mosaic covenant given to the Israelites and its function as a pointer to Christ and the gospel. As a result, he can argue that salvation under the old and new covenants have the same source and substance—God’s grace alone in Christ’s work alone. The only difference between the believers under the old covenant and believers under the new covenant is that the former only saw the substance of the gospel through the law and the elaborate ceremonies.
gospel of pure grace in Christ and the truth of justification by faith alone be untarnished with the
soteriological errors of Rome and certain sectarians (who placed great importance on human
merit in salvation). That is why he emphasizes so strongly that the terms of justification and
salvation in both Testaments are the same: through faith in God’s pure mercy grounded on the
intercessory work of Christ alone.28 That is why he writes, the “covenant by which they [the
Jews under the Mosaic covenant] were bound to the Lord was supported, not by their own
merits, but solely by the mercy of the God who called them,” and that they “had and knew Christ
as Mediator, through whom they were joined to God and were to share in his promises.”29 He
later goes on to state: “For the same reason it follows that the Old Testament was established
upon the free mercy of God, and was confirmed by Christ’s intercession. For the gospel
preaching, too, declares nothing else than that sinners are justified apart from their own merit by
God’s fatherly kindness; and the whole of it is summed up in Christ.”30

All the Old Testament saints, Calvin argues, were forgiven and redeemed by God’s grace
alone grounded in the person and work of the Messiah foretold in the law and the prophets. Here,
we can see something akin to the trans-historical covenant of grace doctrine of later Reformed
orthodoxy in Calvin’s thought. What is also important to note here is that Calvin thought of the
blessings of the Mosaic covenant as having a fundamentally spiritual and eternal focus, despite
the temporal and “carnal” language to describe what was promised in the terms of that covenant.
He writes: “[W]e hold that carnal prosperity and happiness did not constitute the goal set before

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28 Brevard S. Childs captures well the reasoning behind Calvin’s insistence on the unity of the Testaments
when he writes: “In two well-known chapters (Inst. II.x-xi), Calvin pursues in detail the similarities and differences
between the testaments. Of course, his insistence that the two covenants are one and the same in substance and
differ only in the mode of administration arises from his profound concern for the selfsame inheritance, a common
salvation, and the grace of the same Mediator which is shared by both the Patriarchs and the church today (II.x.1)”
(Brevard S. Childs, Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments: Theological Reflection on the Christian Bible
29 Calvin, Institutes, II.10.2.
30 Ibid., II.10.4.
the Jews to which they were to aspire.”

For Calvin, the Mosaic covenant was not a covenant that dealt only or even primarily with the temporal and earthly interests of the Israelites. The Mosaic covenant, like the new covenant, had as its ultimate goal the eternal felicity of the faithful in the future Kingdom of God. In fact, the earthly blessings that the Israelites enjoyed, Calvin maintains, were merely the “mirrors” or “types” of the future inheritance awaiting those who entrusted themselves unto God’s salvific promises by faith. That is why Calvin was strongly against the idea entertained by Servetus, which states, for instance, that the Mosaic covenant had only to do with temporal matters and earthly blessings, while the new covenant dealt exclusively with spiritual matters and eternal blessings. For Calvin, therefore, there is only one “covenant of grace” where the requirements for justification and salvation are the same in all periods of redemptive history: faith in God’s salvific promises in Christ apart from personal merit. As Jeon writes: “Calvin made a great theological point when he demonstrated that there is only one covenant of grace which unifies redemptive history. Even the Old Testament believers were justified by faith alone in Christ, in whom they had everlasting hope and spiritual life, while they enjoyed earthly blessings when they faithfully complied with God’s law.” In this way, Calvin can maintain the covenant continuity between the two Testaments while uncompromisingly upholding the Reformation doctrine of justification sola gratia and sola fide.

Although Calvin is insistent that all of Scripture should be read as a unified whole, he is not unaware of the significant differences that exist between the Old and New Testaments. As we have pointed out above, Calvin never clearly articulated a doctrine of the covenant of works as found in later Reformed orthodoxy in any of his writings (though his view of the law can be seen

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31 Ibid., II.10.2.
32 Ibid., II.11.1-3.
33 Jeon, p. 23.
as a precursor to it). He does refer to a “legal covenant” (*foedus legale*),
though the reference of this terminology is directed towards the Sinaitic covenant established after the Exodus rather than a prelapsarian covenant between God and Adam. Nevertheless, Calvin did discuss in considerable detail some of the differences that exist between the old and new covenants *in terms of the mode of administration*. For Calvin, one of the principal differences between the Mosaic covenant and the new, as mentioned earlier, is that the former consisted of types and shadows (through earthly signs) of the eternal and spiritual realities that were to be fully revealed and fulfilled in the latter through the Mediator. He writes:

> Now this is the first difference between: the Lord of old willed that his people direct and elevate their minds to the heavenly heritage; yet, to nourish them better in this hope, he displayed it for them to see and, so to speak, taste, under earthly benefits. But now that the gospel has more plainly and clearly revealed the grace of the future life, the Lord leads our minds to meditate upon it directly, laying aside the lower mode of training that he used with the Israelites.  

Even the physical punishments that the disobedient Israelites endured foreshadowed the spiritual death and eternal punishment awaiting all the impenitent. Furthermore, another difference between the Mosaic and new covenant is that the latter is efficacious in bringing forth its goal

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35 Although Richard L. Greaves agrees with many contemporary scholars that a covenant of works doctrine is nowhere to be found (or even anticipated) in Calvin’s writings, he does maintain, however, that there is significant continuity between Calvin’s understanding of the relationship between law and grace and the development of covenant theology in later Reformed orthodoxy. He writes: “Calvin was careful to state that the covenant made with the Old Testament patriarchs is in substance and reality the same as that made with contemporary believers, the only difference being the mode of administration. Having said this, however, he draws a much more distinct line between law and grace than did Zwingli and his followers in his lengthy description of how ‘the legal covenant is compared with the gospel covenant, the ministry of Christ with [that of] Moses.’ On the one hand the law was literal and temporal, whereas the gospel is spiritual and eternal; the law, as the ministry of damnation, brings death, but the gospel, as the ministry of righteousness, brings life. *By making such a definite distinction between law and grace in a covenant context*, and by describing the covenant as essentially God’s promise to man, Calvin became the fountain-head of a second stream of thought which contributed to the development of covenant theology” (Richard L. Greaves, “The Origins and Early Development of English Covenant Thought,” *The Historian* 31 [1968], pp. 25-26, emphasis added).
37 Ibid., II.11.3.
because of the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit, unlike the former: “But the coming of Christ would not have been sufficient, had not regeneration by the Holy Spirit been added. It was, then, in some respects, a new thing, that God regenerated the faithful by his Spirit, so that it became not only a doctrine as to the letter, but also efficacious, which not only strikes the ear, but penetrates into the heart, and really forms us for the service of God.”\(^{38}\) The problem with the Israelites under the old covenant is that they could not truly fulfill the stipulations of the law; while their slavish obedience to the law was merely a fruit of a hypocritical heart. The new covenant, however, brings with it the power and desire to do what God requires through the Spirit.\(^{39}\) However, the more fundamental difference between the Mosaic covenant and the new is the temporary nature of the former and the perpetual character of the latter. Due to the legal nature of the Mosaic covenant and its unstable character due to its rigorous requirements (which the Israelites as a nation could not meet),\(^{40}\) God had to make a new covenant which would remain steadfast and inviolable. Basing his argument from Jeremiah 32:40, Calvin writes:

> The Prophet then, no doubt, brings Christ before us, together with the new covenant; for without him there is not the least hope that God would make another covenant, as it appears evident from the whole Law and the teaching of the Prophets. Then Christ is here opposed to Moses, and the Gospel to the Law. It hence follows, that the Law was a temporary covenant, for it had no stability, as it was that of the letter; but that the Gospel is a perpetual covenant, for it is inscribed on the heart. And for the same reason it is also called a new covenant, for the Law must have become obsolete, since the perpetuity of which the Prophet speaks has come in its place.\(^{41}\)

The temporary nature of the Mosaic covenant is also due to the fact that the promise of eternal redemption has its source in the Abrahamic covenant. The Mosaic covenant never supplanted or


\(^{41}\) Calvin, *Comm. Jer* 32:40, emphases added.
replaced the Abrahamic covenant but merely confirmed the promises given to the Patriarch. As Calvin points out:

Now, as to the new covenant, it is not so called, because it is contrary to the first covenant; for God is never inconsistent with himself, nor is he unlike himself. He then who once made a covenant with his chosen people, had not changed his purpose, as though he had forgotten his faithfulness. It then follows, that the first covenant was inviolable; besides, he had already made his covenant with Abraham, and the Law was a confirmation of that covenant. As then the Law depended on that covenant which God made with his servant Abraham, it follows that God could never have made a new, that is, a contrary or a different covenant….These things no doubt sufficiently shew that God has never made any other covenant than that which he made formerly with Abraham, and at length confirmed by the hand of Moses.⁴²

The Mosaic covenant, then, was only a temporary arrangement for the Israelites. It confirmed the Abrahamic covenant but in and of itself had no salvific efficacy because righteousness and eternal life were ultimately grounded on the promises of the Abrahamic covenant. That is why Calvin is able to contrast the righteousness that comes by the law and the righteousness that is based on God’s grace apart from any human merit by setting forth the differences between the Mosaic and Promissory covenants in regards to their purpose and character within redemptive history. Calvin makes this emphatically clear when he writes: “He [Paul] tells us that God made two covenants with men; one through Abraham, and another through Moses. The former, being founded on Christ, was free; and therefore the law, which came after, could not enable men to obtain salvation otherwise than by grace, for then, ‘it would make the promise of none effect.’”⁴³ Here we see Calvin’s contrasting of the Mosaic and Abrahamic covenants as thus: the former had no power in bringing forth righteousness to the

doers of the law, while the latter effectively brings righteousness to the elect because of God’s grace in Christ alone. Therefore, the hermeneutical structure of Calvin’s covenant theology is based on the strict continuity between the two Testaments and the proposition that God’s grace alone apart from human merit is the constant principle of salvation regardless of the period in redemptive history. In this way, Calvin’s covenantal theology, along with his law-gospel hermeneutic, was not only a systematic defense of the Reformation tenet of justification sola gratia and sola fide, but also provided the basis for later Reformed thinkers to draw upon to formulate their own covenantal formulae and law-gospel hermeneutic.

One of the questions often posed when discussions of Calvin’s covenantal theology are brought up is whether or not he viewed the Promissory covenants as being entirely unilateral. As discussed in the previous chapter, contemporary Reformed thinkers like Torrance, Rolston, Placher, and Partee have argued that Calvin’s doctrine of salvation is thoroughly unilateral in contrast to the more “legalistic” views of the later Reformed orthodox. The problem with this prevalent but faulty understanding is that Calvin never conceived of the Promissory covenants as

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44 Calvin, Institutes, II.11.4.
45 Some scholars maintain that some of Calvin’s statements that appear to express antipathy towards the law only had to do with the legalistic misuse of it in order to buy one’s way to heaven (i.e., the law as a means to justify oneself before God apart from the gospel). On the other hand, these scholars point out, Calvin viewed the law positively when it is joined to faith because only then does it fulfill its proper function within God’s redemptive-historical purpose (cf. Victor A. Shepherd, The Nature and Function of Faith in the Theology of John Calvin [Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing, 2004], pp. 143-148). However, the problem with this view is that Calvin understood the law by itself as genuinely conferring justification to anyone who perfectly observes its requirements. He writes: “That by the law they [the Jews] could not be justified, except they fulfilled the law, that if they transgressed it, a curse was instantly pronounced on them. Now we do not deny but that perfect righteousness is prescribed in the law: but as all are convicted of transgression, we say that another righteousness must be sought” (Comm. Rom 2:13, emphases added). Calvin’s contention against the law pertained to the fact that due to human sin no person could ever be justified before God by observing it. In other words, for Calvin, law and gospel are antithetical in principle when it involves how a Christian is justified in God’s courtroom. Therefore, it is not merely the legalistic misuse of the law that is the problem but the law in and of itself as a means to forensic righteousness in light of humanity’s sinfulness. In this way, Calvin shares the same qualitative law-gospel antithetical view as the later orthodox Reformed theologians.
containing absolutely no stipulations to be fulfilled on the human side.⁴⁶ For example, commenting on Genesis 17:1 in regards to God’s command to Abraham to “walk before me, and be blameless,”⁴⁷ Calvin writes:

The foundation, indeed, of the divine calling, is a gratuitous promise; but it follows immediately after, that they whom he has chosen as a peculiar people to himself, should devote themselves to the righteousness of God. For on this condition, he adopts children as his own, that he may, in return, obtain the place and the honour of a Father. And as he himself cannot lie, so he rightly demands mutual fidelity from his own children.⁴⁸

We can see here that Calvin never envisioned the covenant with Abraham as existing without any stipulations entailed on the part of the human beneficiaries. Though the covenant is gracious by nature, it still demanded personal fidelity from Abraham and his spiritual seed as a means (but not the grounds) to enjoy the promises contained therein. He further extrapolates upon this when commenting on Jeremiah 31:33: “By these words ['they shall be my people'] then the Prophet briefly intimates, that the main object of God’s covenant is, that he should become our Father, from whom we are to seek and expect salvation, and that we should also become his people.”⁴⁹

The idea of the redeemed becoming God’s people entails that they will walk according to his commandments and laws. The notion that an individual can be part of God’s covenant people while living in a way that directly opposes God’s law goes against the character of the covenant arrangement and is contrary to what is revealed in Scripture: “For we cannot know him as Lord and Father, as he shews himself, without being dutiful children and obedient servants. In short,

⁴⁶ John von Rohr argues that even though Calvin’s understanding of the conditionality of the covenant was minimized due to his doctrine of double predestination and his emphasis on the sovereignty of God in salvation, he still insists that there is a conditional factor in Calvin’s covenant theology. He writes: “There was for Calvin...a conditional factor for those within the covenant itself, for covenant inclusion mandates responsibility for faithfulness, that is, obedience to the requirements of God’s law” (John von Rohr, The Covenant of Grace in Puritan Thought [Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2010], p. 194).
⁴⁷ All Scripture references, unless indicated otherwise, are from the English Standard Version.
⁴⁸ Calvin, Comm. Gen 17:1, emphasis added.
the doctrine of the gospel is a lively mirror in which we contemplate the image of God, and are transformed into the same, as Paul teaches us in 2 Cor. iii.18.”

Therefore, the Promissory covenants, according to Calvin, are mutually binding and bilateral in character.

Despite Calvin’s understanding of the Promissory covenants having a mutually obligatory character, we must be careful not to ascribe any type of works-righteousness legalism to Calvin’s soteriology and later covenant theology in general. Calvin, like the Reformed orthodoxy after him, never attributes any meritorious value to the good works that believers do. First, the good works that believers do have as their ultimate source the regenerating work of God through the Holy Spirit. This work is solely by God’s gracious will and never as a result of something inherent in the believer. “Since…no good comes forth from us except in so far as we have been regenerated, but our regeneration is entirely and without exception from God, there is no reason why we should claim an ounce of good works for ourselves.”

Second, sanctification, just like justification, is a result of the believer’s personal union with Christ by faith. Hence, as a result of this union, God can accept the imperfect obedience of the Christian without seeing it as impure or defiled. Third, the good works that believers do are never the means to earn God’s justifying favour or to maintain his justifying grace, but are only the fruits and evidences that one truly has been justified and adopted by God. As Calvin makes this point poignantly: “Take note that we do not justify man by works before God, but all who are of God we speak of as being ‘reborn’ [cf. I Peter 1:3], and as becoming ‘a new creation’ [II Cor. 5:17], so that they pass from the realm of sin into the realm of righteousness; and we say that by this testimony they confirm their calling [II Peter 1:10], and, like trees, are judged by their fruits [Matt. 7:20; 12:33; Luke

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50 Calvin, Comm. 1 John 2:3.
51 Calvin, Institutes, III.15.7.
52 Ibid., III.16.1.
53 Ibid., III.15.4.
6:44].”  Those who have put on Christ, therefore, are not freed from the righteous requirements of God’s law but, through the power of the Spirit working in them, they “labor mightily to contrive and forge good works upon good works.” However, it is also important to point out that this obedience that believers give to God through the Spirit will never be perfect in this life or before the eschatological consummation of all things.

By integrating both the electing love of God with the bilateralness of the Promissory covenants Calvin is able to harmonize skilfully God’s sovereign grace in salvation with God’s demand for fidelity among the redeemed within the terms of the covenant. In this way, Calvin is able to avoid both the dangers of works-righteousness legalism and antinomianism. As Hoekema puts it: “Calvin’s teaching on the covenant of grace helps us to see the great Reformer in a new light. As he unfolds various facets of the doctrine of the covenant, we see him insisting, not just on the sovereign grace of God, but also on the serious and urgent responsibility of man.” Therefore, the argument that Calvin’s predestinarian soteriology was at variance with the covenantal theology of the Rhineland Reformers and later Reformed orthodoxy falls to the ground when the evidence is carefully examined.

2.1.1 Excurses: Was Calvin at Odds with later Reformed Orthodoxy on the Relationship Between Law and Gospel?

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54 Ibid., III.15.8.
55 Ibid., II.8.5.
56 Ibid., III.3.10-15.
57 This does not mean that Calvin believed that keeping fidelity with God and obeying his commandments are mechanical acts without any sense of loyalty formed by love and as an expression of faith. As Victor A. Shepherd writes: “Calvin maintains that it is precisely faith’s awareness of the Father’s constant love which effects faith’s obedience to the law. From the standpoint of the transformation which that love effects in believers, in turn, the source and cause of obedience is the love wherewith faith embraces God as Father” (Shepherd, p. 161).
58 Hoekema, p. 161.
As mentioned previously, many interpreters of Calvin in recent years have posited that Calvin and later Reformed orthodoxy were at variance in regards to how God relates to his human creatures in the context of salvation. Charles Partee, who is the most recent advocate of this “discontinuity school” of Calvin scholarship (as represented by the likes of Barth, Torrance, Rolston, Placher, and Bruggink), writes:

Turning from the law’s purpose to its effects, Calvin suggests that the moral law would produce eternal salvation if it could be completely observed ([Institutes], II.7.3). In this line Calvin veers closest to the Westminster Confession’s concept of a once-valid-but-now-rejected covenant of works. However, Calvin’s comment is directed to the gracious purpose of the law in the context of his insistence that the teaching of the moral law, which includes the Decalogue and Jesus’ summary, by being so far above human capacity makes its fulfillment impossible.59

Despite differences in nuances and details, the discontinuity school of Calvin scholarship as a whole has persistently assumed that Calvin’s understanding of the divine-human relationship is based only on grace before the fall and throughout redemptive history. One of the key arguments made by those who belong to this school is that later Reformed orthodoxy inserted a duality in God’s dealings with the human race by positing that God’s offer of eternal life comes in two forms: either law or grace (a notion, they claim, is alien to Calvin and contrary to his more “singular” view of God’s dealings with human beings). It is granted, as mentioned above, that Calvin never uses the phrase “covenant of works” (foedus operum) in any of his writings (Calvin even rejects the typical Reformed interpretation of Hosea 6:7 [he takes the phrase “like Adam”—found in modern English translations like the ESV and NIV—as “like men”]). Having said that, he does assert that a strict merit-works principle is operative during the prelapsarian state based on his interpretation of Genesis 2:16. He writes:

Moses now teaches, that man was the governor of the world, with this exception, that he should, nevertheless, be subject to God. A law is imposed upon him in token of his subjection; for it would have made no difference to God, if he had eaten indiscriminately of any fruit he pleased. Therefore, the prohibition of one tree was a test of obedience. And in this mode, God designed that the whole human race should be accustomed from the beginning to reverence his Deity; as, doubtless, it was necessary that man, adorned and enriched with so many excellent gifts, should be held under restraint, lest he should break forth into licentiousness.\(^{60}\)

As Richard A. Muller correctly notes: “If Calvin did not speak of the prelapsarian state as bounded by covenant, he certainly assumed that it was governed by law.”\(^{61}\) Even after the fall a strict merit-works principle is still operative, according to Calvin, in God’s dealings with those who are still in Adam:

We admit that the doers of the law, if there were any such, are righteous; but since that is a conditional agreement, all are excluded from life, because no man performs that righteousness which he ought. We must bear in memory what I have already stated, that to do the law is not to obey it in part, but to fulfil everything which belongs to righteousness; and all are at the greatest distance from such perfection.\(^{62}\)

In addition, when commenting on Philippians 3:9, he avers:

He [Paul] says, that believers have no righteousness of their own. Now, it cannot be denied, that if there were any righteousness of works, it might with propriety be said to be ours. Hence he leaves no room whatever for the righteousness of works. Why he calls it the righteousness of the law, he shews in Romans x. 5; because this is the sentence of the law, He that doeth these things shall live in them. The law, therefore, pronounces the man to be righteous through works [emphasis added]. Nor is there any ground for the cavil of Papists, that all this must be restricted to ceremonies. For in the first place, it is a contemptible frivolity to affirm that Paul was righteous only through ceremonies; and secondly, he in this way draws a contrast between those two kinds of righteousness—the one being of man, the other, from God. He intimates, accordingly, that the one is the reward of works, while the other is a free gift from God [emphasis added]. He thus, in a general

\(^{60}\) Calvin, Comm. Gen 2:16.


\(^{62}\) Calvin, Comm. Gal 3:12, emphasis added.
way, places man’s merit in opposition to Christ’s grace; for while the law
brings works, faith presents man before God as naked, that he may be
clothed with the righteousness of Christ.\footnote{Calvin, Comm. Phil 3:9.}

As we can see by his commentary on both passages Calvin, like later Reformed orthodoxy,
uncompromisingly stresses the clear and absolute distinction between law and gospel as two
diametrically opposed ways set forth by God for the justification of the individual. In other
words, contrary to the views of Partee, Barth, Torrance, and others, Calvin maintains that God
not only relates to human beings salvifically by grace but also according to the strict
requirements of his law throughout the ages. Therefore, considering that Calvin believed that
eternal life would be given to anyone who performs all the requirements of the law (even though
this is impossible due to humanity’s fall into sin), it is inaccurate to say that he believed that God
dealt with the human race only by grace before and after the fall.

2.2 Thomas Watson (1620-1686)

Thomas Watson was an English non-conformist Puritan clergyman who wrote prolifically
on the subjects of theology and spirituality. His works were highly devotional in nature but were
also quite systematic in character when it involved theological subjects. One of his well-known
works, A Body of Divinity, is a concise and devotionally-oriented systematic theology based on
the Westminster Assembly’s Shorter Catechism. In this work, Watson lays out the classic bi-
covenantal federalist model set out in the Westminster Standards with its dichotomized law-
gospel hermeneutic. He posits that the covenants of works and grace must be strictly set apart if
the gracious character of the gospel is to be upheld. Watson argues that the reason why God
entered into a covenant relationship with Adam and his posterity is due to the fact that he is the Monarch and they are his creatures. In this way, God reveals to human beings that he has rightful sovereignty over them. Furthermore, like many orthodox Reformed thinkers during his time and after, he views the covenant established in Eden as a merit-based covenant that requires complete obedience to the natural law revealed in the human conscience. In this covenant God required Adam and his posterity to earn the right to eternal felicity through the perfect fulfillment of the law, with mercy being unavailable to those who transgressed the covenant even for the least infraction. He highlights three distinctive features of this covenant that makes it purely legal-based:

The covenant of works was very strict. God required of Adam and all mankind, (1.) Perfect obedience. Adam must do all things written in the ‘book of the law,’ and not fail, either in the matter or manner. Gal iii 10. Adam was to live up to the whole breadth of the moral law, and go exactly according to it, as a well-made dial goes with the sun. One sinful thought would have forfeited the covenant. (2.) Personal obedience. Adam must not do his work by proxy, or have any surety bound for him; but it must be done in his own person. (3.) Perpetual obedience. He must continue in all things written in the ‘book of the law.’ Gal iii 10. Thus it was very strict. There was no mercy in case of failure.

We see here that Watson’s legalistic understanding of the covenant of works has affinities with Calvin’s view that a works-merit principle was operative during the prelapsarian period in Eden (cf. Comm. Gen 2:16). The only difference between Calvin and Watson (and Reformed orthodoxy in general) is that the latter unambiguously defines the works-merit principle established during the prelapsarian period as a covenantal arrangement. Essentially, Watson follows Calvin’s law and gospel hermeneutic in which the former has temporal priority over the latter and where the latter follows the former sequentially. This typical Reformation

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64 Thomas Watson, A Body of Divinity (Edinburgh, UK: Banner of Truth, 1890 [first published 1692]), p. 128.
65 Ibid., pp. 129-130, emphasis added.
understanding of the law and gospel is the foundation for Watson’s understanding of the covenant of works in his overall federalist schema. He bases this understanding on the fact that during the prelapsarian period, human beings were under the strict requirements of the moral law—which they instinctively knew from the heart—rather than under any principle of grace: “Man in his primitive state of innocence, was endowed with ability to keep the whole moral law. He had rectitude of mind, sanctity of will, and perfection of power. He had the copy of God’s law written on his heart; no sooner did God command, but he obeyed.”

During the state of innocence, no grace was needed because human beings were morally upright by nature with no trace of corruption in them. Additionally, Adam had the inherent ability either to obey or disobey—although he was created in innocence he was mutable in regards to whether he would remain in obedience. Watson writes:

Adam was created holy, but mutable; having a power to stand and a power to fall. He had a stock of original righteousness to begin the world with, but he was not sure he would not break. He was his own pilot, and could steer right in the time of innocence; but he was not so secured but that he might dash against the rock of temptation, and he and his posterity be shipwrecked; so that the covenant of works must needs leave jealousies and doubtings in Adam’s heart, as he had no security given him that he should not fall from that glorious state.

The fact that Watson views Adam as having the innate capacity to obey God’s commandments before the fall reveals that he did not believe that grace was part and parcel of the first covenant arrangement. This covenant was strictly merit-based in which Adam had to earn personally his title to everlasting glory: “The form of the first covenant in innocence was working; ‘Do this and live.’ Working was the ground and condition of man’s justification. Gal iii. 12.”

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68 Ibid., p. 129.
Watson sees the covenant of works as a “condescension of God” towards his human creatures and as God’s “sign of friendship” and “royal act of favour” to them, he is still careful to maintain that this does not entail that the covenant of works, in contrast to the covenant of grace, is gracious in character. The reason for this is because even a single failing annuls the covenant with no hope of remedy for transgressors: “The first covenant being broken, allowed the sinner no remedy, all doors of hope were shut; but the new covenant allows the sinner a remedy: it leaves room for repentance, and provides a mediator.” Therefore, this understanding of the covenant of works as a strictly legal-based covenant is based on Watson’s adoption of the Pauline distinction between law and gospel where the two are in antithetical relationship to each other, rather than in a continuum, in terms of how a person is declared righteous before God.

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69 Ibid., p. 130.
70 Ibid., p. 155.
71 In recent years, some scholars have argued that the reading of Paul by many post-Reformation Protestants (in which they understand Paul pitting law and gospel against each other in a qualitative sense in regards to justification) is a misreading of the Apostle’s statements on the law within his first century Jewish-Christian context (cf. E. P. Sanders, Paul and Palestinian Judaism: A Comparison of Patterns of Religion [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1977], pp. 431-523; N. T. Wright, Justification: God’s Plan and Paul’s Vision [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009]; James D. G. Dunn, “New Perspective View,” Justification: Five Views, eds. James K. Beilby and Paul Rhodes Eddy [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011], pp. 176-201). Some of these scholars, like Sanders, have argued that Paul’s polemic against the Judaizers was not because they tried to achieve salvation through the law but because they sought salvation outside of Christ with the coming of the new age in redemptive history (Sanders, p. 482). Others, like Wright and Dunn, argue that Paul’s remarks against the Jewish “works of the law” has only to do with the “boundary marking” aspects of the Torah that exclude Gentiles from becoming members of God’s covenant family (Wright, pp. 116-118; Dunn, pp. 189-195). The problem with these “newer” views of Paul is that it does not do full justice to the force of the Apostle’s statements regarding the law in passages like Romans 3:20 and Galatians 3:10 (negatively here and based on Deut 27:26) that righteousness before God can only be obtained by flawlessly obeying the entire law and, therefore, is antithetical to the way of salvation grounded in God’s pure mercy in Jesus Christ alone (cf. also Paul’s faith vs. works contrast throughout Romans 4 [esp. verse 5]). In other words, Paul’s statements in his letters that place law and gospel at variance with each other must not only be viewed in light of the new Messianic age or his apostolic calling to be a missionary for the Gentiles but as a fundamental distinction between two diametrically opposed ways of salvation: the one by the law and the other by the free grace of God in Jesus Christ. Therefore, the phrase “works of the law” primarily does not refer to the obsolete character of the law in the new era of salvation history (Sanders) nor does it only refer to the “boundary marking” aspects of the law that bar Gentiles from God’s salvific blessings (Wright and Dunn). Rather, the primary meaning of the “works of the law” in the Pauline language refers to the law and its demands in its entirety as a means to justification and righteousness before God (cf. Thomas R. Schreiner, 40 Questions About Christians and Biblical Law [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2010], pp. 53-58).
In contrast to the arguments made by modern Reformed theologians like Barth, Torrance, Bruggink, and Placher, the exclusively meritorious character of the covenant of works is what makes it clearly contrastable with the exclusively gracious character of the covenant of grace. In other words, the firm covenant of works/covenant of grace dichotomy is accentuated when we understand the former as being a purely legal covenant. In fact, Watson views this meritorious character of the covenant of works as a necessary implication in order to uphold the traditional Reformation understanding of salvation *postlapsarian* as a work of God’s grace alone through the perfect Mediator alone. Only on the grounds that the covenant of works is a legal-based covenant is it possible for the Son of God in human flesh to *earn* righteousness and salvation for the elect by flawlessly obeying the law within the covenant of works. He writes: “Christ did everything which the law required; his holy life was a perfect commentary upon the law of God; and he obeyed the law *for us.*” As a result of Christ’s perfect obedience to the law under the strict terms of the covenant of works—an obedience that is then imputed to the elect at the time of faith—can God’s people have a right standing in the divine courtroom, assurance of full pardon, and no fear from the condemnatory function of the law. He writes: “Where God remits sin, he imputes righteousness. This righteousness of Christ imputed is a salvo to God’s law, and makes full satisfaction for the breaches of it. This righteousness procures God’s favour. God cannot but love us when he sees us in his Son’s robe, which both covers and adorns us.” The covenant of grace, then, is the other covenant that God establishes between himself and his people based on the meritorious work of Christ—the purpose of which is to bring reconciliation between God and the elect sinners. Equally important, however, this covenant, in contrast to the first covenant, is founded upon God’s grace alone apart from any human merit and has all the

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essential characteristics of grace. That is why Watson also calls it a “royal charter.” In addition, the covenant of grace highlights the grace of God by the fact that sinners no longer have to merit heaven with the constant fear of failure: they only need to entrust themselves by faith to God’s mercy enacted through the obedience and sacrifice of the Mediator for justification and life eternal. As Watson writes:

If we could weep rivers of tears, out-fast Moses on the mount, if we were exact moralists, touching the law blameless, if we could arrive at the highest degree of sanctification in this life, all this would not save us, without looking to the merits of him who is God. Our perfect holiness in heaven is not the cause of our salvation, but the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

Furthermore, Watson makes it clearly known that those who continue to attempt to earn God’s favour by their personal righteousness are still under the covenant of works and are bound to keep the law in its entirety—with the consequence of a single breach of the law being eternal condemnation. He writes: “Whosoever they are that look for righteousness and salvation by the power of their freewill, or the inherent goodness of their nature, or by virtue of their merit, as the Socinians and Papists, they are all under the covenant of works. They do not submit to the righteousness of faith, therefore they are bound to keep the whole law, and in case of failure they are condemned.” Thus, the notion of earning God’s favour through personal righteousness is excluded in the covenant of grace: it is only by the righteousness and blood of Christ that sinners can receive full pardon for their sins and justification. Watson sees this as the key difference between the covenants of works and grace: “The covenant of works would not admit of a surety; it demanded personal obedience: but this privilege we have by the gospel, which is a court of chancery to relieve us. If we have nothing to pay, God will accept a surety. Believe in Christ’s

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75 Ibid., pp. 154-155.
76 Ibid., p. 165.
77 Ibid., p. 131.
blood, and the debt is paid.” Additionally, the covenant of grace, in contrast to the covenant of works, is perpetual for those who belong to it. Although believers may have moral failings during their spiritual journey to the New Jerusalem they cannot forfeit their standing in the covenant because of God’s oath and Christ’s sacrifice: “The first covenant was not sure, it stood upon a tottering foundation of works. Adam had no sooner a stock of righteousness to trade with, but he broke; but the covenant of grace is sure; it is confirmed with God’s decree, and it rests upon two mighty pillars, the oath of God, and the blood of God.” Believers, therefore, can also have the assurance that they will not fall from grace—a blessing grounded in their union with Christ and their position in the covenant.

Although Watson insists that the covenant of grace and its eternal blessings are a result of God’s unmerited grace, he does not fall into the antinomianism of certain sectarians who conclude that the covenant of grace contains no claims. In contrast to the antinomians, Watson is careful to maintain that though the covenant of grace is gracious in character this does not absolve the Christian from following the law of God as a rule for his or her life in faith. He writes: “But though the moral law be thus far abolished, it remains as a perpetual rule to believers. Though it be not their Saviour, it is their guide. Though it be not foedus, a covenant of life; yet it is norma, a rule of life.” Here we can see Watson’s indebtedness to Calvin in terms of seeing the law as having a “third function” (i.e., a rule for believers). Even though the law no

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79 Watson, *A Body of Divinity*, p. 158. Later on when he discusses the doctrine of justification, he writes: “Justified persons may fall from degrees of grace, they may leave their first love, they may lose God’s favour for a time, but not lose their justification” (p. 229). Here he was responding to the Arminian view of justification where the loss of justifying grace was a real possibility for believers.
80 Ibid., p. 160.
81 Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, p. 44. Watson’s interchangeable use of the law for believers as a “rule” and “guide” causes confusion here: the terms “rule” and “guide” are not the same. The term “rule” has a connotation of living under the law as a command; while the term “guide” connotes that the law merely influences believers in their journey of faith.
longer has a condemning function in regards to those belonging to the covenant of grace, Watson makes it clear that following the law (i.e., doing good works and avoiding sin) serves as providing evidence of one’s justification and adoption into God’s covenant family: “Works are not required for the justification of our persons, but as an attestation of our love to God; not as the cause of our salvation, but as an evidence of our adoption.”\(^8^2\) To steer clear of any type of antinomianism, Watson poignantly asserts that those who refuse to obey God’s moral law while professing Christ as Saviour and Lord are only deceiving themselves and not true recipients of the gospel promises:

Though a Christian is not under the condemning power of the law, yet he is under its commanding power. To love God, to reverence and obey him, is a law which always binds and will bind in heaven. This I urge against the Antinomians, who say the moral law is abrogated to believers; which, as it contradicts Scripture, so it is a key to open the door to all licentiousness. They who will not have the law to rule them, shall never have the gospel to save them.\(^8^3\)

The notion that a person can profess to be a child of God while perpetually living in disobedience to God’s law is inconceivable for Watson. This is due to the fact that one of the blessings of the covenant of grace is the spiritual and moral renewal of those who have all their sins pardoned through the sacrifice of Christ: “So that whoever God forgives, he transforms. Let no man say his sins are forgiven who does not find an inherent work of holiness in his heart.”\(^8^4\)

The covenant of grace not only justifies freely apart from works; it also sanctifies necessarily by the grace of God. In fact, Watson agrees wholeheartedly with Calvin and the Reformers that justification and sanctification though always remaining distinct (and the latter never the cause of

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\(^8^3\) Watson, *The Ten Commandments*, p. 44, emphasis added.
\(^8^4\) Watson, *The Lord’s Prayer*, p. 222.
the former) are inseparably connected to each other.\textsuperscript{85} That is why God can graciously accept the good works of Christians (even if they fall short of perfection) on the grounds that they are transformed via their union with Christ and by having their works mixed with his merits.\textsuperscript{86} However, the danger of falling into an “evangelical legalism” is avoided if we understand that the good works that believers do are not by their own strength but by the strength of the One who gives them life: “Works are required in the covenant of grace, not so much in our own strength as in the strength of another….As the teacher guides the child’s hand, and helps him to form his letters, so that it is not so much the child’s writing as the master’s, so our obedience is not so much our working as the Spirit’s co-working.”\textsuperscript{87} The charge that Watson and Reformed orthodoxy in general teach a type of works-righteousness salvation (albeit with more generous demands than the strict requirements of the law) founders on the fact that the source of the Christian’s obedience is ultimately God himself. The condition to enter the covenant of grace is faith alone in the person and work of the Mediator,\textsuperscript{88} but this same faith is also a faith that obeys (no matter how imperfect that obedience might appear).\textsuperscript{89}

As one examines the covenants of works and grace dichotomy in Watson’s covenant theology, one can see that Watson owes a great deal to the Reformers and their understanding of the law and gospel as contrasting principles in regards to justification. However, Watson also makes it clear that the law-gospel antithesis in justification does not lead to antinomianism. As the grace that justifies also sanctifies, there is no room in Watson’s covenant theology where a person can claim the salvific blessings of Christ while living in continual and blatant

\textsuperscript{85} Watson, \textit{A Body of Divinity}, p. 229.
\textsuperscript{86} Watson, \textit{The Ten Commandments}, p. 188.
\textsuperscript{87} Watson, \textit{A Body of Divinity}, p. 129.
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid., p. 218.
\textsuperscript{89} Ibid., p. 219.
disobedience to God’s moral law. Therefore, by insisting that law and gospel be clearly separated when it comes to a sinner receiving God’s justifying favour, while still maintaining that those in the covenant of grace will obey God’s law and submit to Christ’s lordship through the Spirit’s work in their hearts, Watson is able to avoid both the dangers of legalism and antinomianism in his covenant theology.

2.3 Francis Turretin (1623-1687)

Francis Turretin is considered by many to be one of the most notable continental Reformed theologians of the post-Reformation period. His scholastic approach to theology and his keen interest in doctrinal precision has made him well-known in the Reformed tradition as an uncompromising defender of Calvinistic orthodoxy. His *magnum opus* work, *Institutio Theologiae Elencticae* (*Institutes of Elenctic Theology* [3 vols.] in English) published in 1679-1685, is regarded as the first comprehensive dogmatic theology that deals with virtually every doctrinal subject from a Reformed Scholastic perspective. His *Institutio* treats the covenant concept extensively from a conventional Reformed federalist perspective. Like his English contemporary Thomas Watson, Turretin espouses the classic bi-covenantal federal theology with its clear dichotomy between the covenants of works and grace.\(^90\) Although keeping with the strict contrast between the two covenants, Turretin, however, argues that the first covenant between God and Adam was *founded* upon God’s grace alone. Since God owes nothing to human beings,

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\(^90\) Though Turretin does not use the designation “covenant of works” to describe the prelapsarian covenant between God and Adam (he prefers to call it “the covenant of nature”), the essential features that belong to the covenant of works are still there. The issue is merely semantic and does not denote that Turretin departed from his orthodox Reformed contemporaries on this matter.
since they are his creations, his willingness to enter into any kind of covenant relationship with them is due solely to his divine benevolence. He writes:

Since man has all things from and owes all to God, he can seek from him nothing as his own by right, nor can God be a debtor to him—not by condignity of work and from its intrinsic value (because whatever that may be, it can bear no proportion to the infinite reward of life), but from the pact and the liberal promise of God (according to which man had the right of demanding the reward to which God had of his own accord bound himself) and in comparison with the covenant of grace (which rests upon the sole merit of Christ, by which he acquired for us the right to life).\textsuperscript{91}

The covenant established between God and Adam in Paradise, therefore, had a gracious foundation. This, however, does not mean that the covenant of works was gracious in character with no legal obligations on the part of Adam or his posterity. Like his orthodox Reformed contemporaries Turretin fully espouses the legal and meritorious character of the covenant of works:

The covenant of nature is that which God the Creator made with innocent man as his creature, concerning the giving of eternal happiness and life under the condition of perfect and personal obedience. It is called “natural,” not from mutual obligation (which God does not have towards man), but because it is founded on the nature of man (as it was first created by God) and on his integrity or powers. It is also called “legal” because the condition on man’s part was the observation of the law of nature engrained within him; and of “works” because it depended upon works or his proper obedience.\textsuperscript{92}

This is more clearly defined when Turretin discusses the respective nature and purpose of the two trees in the midst of Paradise. According to him, the “Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil” symbolized the law, revealing to the first parents what duties were required of them; while the “Tree of Life” symbolized Christ, the author and giver of eternal life.\textsuperscript{93} That is why, according to Turretin, the “law and the gospel can also be contained under this double symbol.

\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., p. 1:575.
\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., pp. 1:578-582.
For the law (as the tree of the knowledge of good and evil) is given to us as a trial of obedience and by sin (no less than that) is made the occasion of death and the minister of condemnation. The gospel, however, is the saving and quickening tree of life because it is ‘the word of life’ (Jn. 6:68). The strict dichotomy between the covenants of works and grace, therefore, was symbolized by the two trees in the middle of the Garden.

The hermeneutical structure that lies beneath this dichotomization between the covenants of works and grace is Turretin’s implementation of the Reformers’ antithetical distinction between law and gospel in regards to forgiveness and justification. Turretin’s covenant theology, and his entire soteriological schema, is grounded upon this essential duality in God’s salvific work for the human race. He states:

For as there are two covenants which God willed to make with men—the one legal and the other of grace—so also there is a twofold righteousness—legal and evangelical. Accordingly there is also a double justification or a double method of standing before God in judgment—legal and evangelical. The former consists in one’s own obedience or a perfect conformity with the law, which is in him who is to be justified; the latter in another’s obedience or a perfect observance of the law, which is rendered by a surety in the place of him who is to be justified—the former in us, the latter in Christ.

Turretin’s espousal of the view that the law requires perfect conformity is in response to the Council of Trent’s assertion that the believer’s “inherent righteousness” is the ground for his or her justification. He argues that Trent’s position is incorrect because no human being being still under

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94 Ibid., p. 1:582. Turretin appears to stretch too far here in attempting to find a law-gospel dualism (“the double symbol”) in Genesis 2. By positing that the “Tree of Knowledge” represents the law and the “Tree of Life” represents Christ is to impose a theological framework onto the narrative. In addition, what makes Turretin’s interpretation of the passage more implausible is due to the fact that after the fall God prevents Adam and Eve from re-entering the garden to partake from the Tree of Life (which is the symbol of Christ) so that they do not live forever in sin (Gen 3:22-24) (if the Tree represents Christ and the gospel, why would God prevent the first couple from partaking of the tree to restore them to life?). The most natural reading of the narrative is to understand it as God’s testing of the first couple if they would trust his word and obey him without compromise by not partaking of the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge (while having continual access to the Tree of Life and the eventual reward of a more glorified existence sometime in the future for remaining obedient).

95 Ibid., p. 2:637.
Adam’s federal headship can perfectly fulfill the righteous requirements of the law (since there is no room for “gracious acceptation” in God’s courtroom). In fact, Turretin avers that any soteriological system that allows a believer’s inherent righteousness to possess any justifying value in the courtroom of God confuses the two covenants of works and grace. In addition, the covenant of works, in contrast to the covenant of grace, had no mediator between God and Adam (or his posterity). Since God established this covenant with the human race in innocence, there was no need for a mediator due to the fact that the human creature was engraved with God’s law (so that he knew naturally the legal mandate of the covenant) and had the power to avoid sin (unlike those born after the fall who are non posse non peccare). As a result, the covenant of works required exact, wholehearted, and perpetual obedience from the human creature if he or she was to be granted the eternal inheritance, while no accommodation was given even for the least violation. Therefore, for Turretin, the covenant of works (and the law attached to it) is a strictly legal and meritorious covenant—with the ultimate goal of this covenant being, contrary to the Socinians, entrance into everlasting glory.

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96 Ibid., p. 2:640.
97 He writes: “[i]f justification were by inherent righteousness, justification will be of the law, not of the gospel, and the two covenants will be confounded which are nevertheless constantly opposed as diametrically opposite to each other. Legal justification takes place in no other way than by inherent righteousness, whether actual or habitual; gospel justification is to be sought not in us, but in another” (Ibid., p. 2:643).
98 Ibid., p. 1:575.
99 Ibid.
100 Ibid., pp. 1:570-571.
101 Ibid., pp. 1:577-578. Also, Turretin understands Leviticus 18:5 (“You shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them: I am the LORD”) to be the expression of the strict demand/sanction of the law and not as a form of the gospel (Ibid., pp. 1:576, 583).
102 Ibid., p. 1:583. J. Mark Beach argues that the covenant of works in Turretin’s covenant theology should not be viewed as a “covenant of merit” since human creatures have no inherent right to expect a reward from God (J. Mark Beach, Christ and the Covenant: Francis Turretin’s Federal Theology as a Defense of the Doctrine of Grace [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2007], p. 146). Although granting that the covenant of works is established by God’s goodness and love, it is faulty to argue, however, that based on the Creator-creature distinction that the concept of merit is excluded in God’s covenant dealings with human creatures. Beach’s argument is problematic here due to the fact that the covenant of works, articulated by Turretin and many others, demands perfect and perpetual obedience from the human creature (by his or her own inherent powers) to God’s
Turretin further enunciates his antithetical law-gospel paradigm in his federal theology when he discusses the purpose, character, and continuity of the covenant of grace. He maintains, agreeing with the majority of orthodox Reformed thinkers of his time, that the covenant of grace is the same in substance across the various dispensations of Scripture. In response to the views of the Socinians, Anabaptists, and the drafters of the Remonstrants, Turretin argues that the covenant of grace offered the same promises and required the same conditions in both Testaments: forgiveness and eternal life through faith in Christ the Mediator alone. Turretin posits that the covenant of grace was first revealed in the protoevangelium of Genesis 3:15. Although the revelation given of this covenant was not as clearly conveyed as compared to the times of Moses or Christ, it was still clear enough for the first parents to know what God was salvifically planning for them and their posterity through the Messianic Seed. As Turretin states, we “readily gather that the primeval promise given to our first parents (although somewhat obscurely) contained as in a compendium the principal parts of the covenant of grace and of the gospel.” The covenant of grace, therefore, was gradually revealed with clearer revelations of the promises through the successive periods of redemptive history from Adam to Moses. The key, however, is how Turretin understands the relationship between the covenant of grace and the administration of the law under the Mosaic covenant. Turretin maintains that the Mosaic covenant and the Decalogue belonged to the covenant of grace. This, however, does not mean

law in the covenant in order to obtain eternal glory. The purpose of grace, on the other hand, is to provide a gift to fallen human creatures because they themselves (due to sin) are unable to meet the conditions of God’s law or covenant for salvation. More specifically, God’s grace, based on Christ and his merits, is divine favour shown to those who come to him in humble trust for life without offering anything from their own hands. Therefore, contrary to the opinions of Barth, Torrance, Rolston, and others, viewing the covenant of works as a legal and merit-based covenant does not inculcate any type of works-righteousness legalism in covenant theology but rather expounds the grace of God more fully since it reveals that God’s grace to sinners is shown apart from their works through another covenant, the covenant of grace mediated by the perfect Lamb of God.

103 Turretin, pp. 2:192-205.
104 Ibid., p. 2:194.
105 Ibid., p. 2:222.
that the law under the Mosaic economy offered eternal life to anyone who faithfully followed it. He makes this clear by stating that there is no mention in the Decalogue “either of a surety or promise of salvation” given to sinners, but only “a bare promise of life to those doing and a threatening of death to transgressors.”\textsuperscript{107} Nevertheless, the Mosaic covenant was considered part of the covenant of grace in a redemptive-historical sense because 1) it convicted the Israelites of their sin in the face of the law so that they can turn to God’s mercy for forgiveness; 2) it took account of the infancy of those living during that time; 3) it put off the first advent of the Son of Man and his satisfactory death; 4) it gave the Israelites an “external religion” that God could approve of; and 5) it provided external symbols through the ceremonies (types and shadows) to reveal to the Israelites the good things to come.\textsuperscript{108}

As stated above, Turretin nowhere suggests that the Mosaic covenant itself was the means to eternal life—since fallen human beings can never fulfill the absolute requirements of the law (whether the law is engraved in their hearts or on literal tablets). That is why he suggests that the Mosaic covenant understood strictly was a covenant of works with the unbearable legal ceremonies added to it.\textsuperscript{109} The faithful compliance to the terms of the Mosaic covenant, however, allowed the Israelites as a nation to inhabit the land of Canaan and enjoy physical rest and blessing in it—an image of the heavenly rest of the future (Heb 4:3, 9).\textsuperscript{110} Only internally then did the Mosaic covenant contain the substance of the covenant of grace and the gospel by pointing to the person and work of Christ through the ceremonies and oracles.\textsuperscript{111} The elect living during the Mosaic covenant dispensation understood the true nature of the ceremonies and

\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., p. 2:226.
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., pp. 2:226-228.
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., p. 2:234.
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., p. 2:227.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., pp. 2:230, 267-268.
oracles and, thus, repented and put their trust in the coming Messiah for justification and eternal life.\textsuperscript{112} In essence, they were equal partakers of the blessings of the covenant of grace (due solely to the grace of God and the merits of Christ) with the elect under the new covenant administration.\textsuperscript{113} Therefore, according to Turretin, the Mosaic covenant did not replace the Abrahamic covenant nor did it have an antithetical relationship to the covenant of grace. The Mosaic covenant was a necessary interlude in redemptive history to make the law more concretely known and provide a clearer pointer (through the ceremonies and types) of the Messiah to come. Essentially, it served the overall purpose of the covenant of grace.

Although Turretin expounds a covenant theology that undergirds the dichotomous law-gospel paradigm of the Reformers, his view of the covenant of grace was by no means unilateral. Even though the covenant of grace is wholly gratuitous in its establishment and character, Turretin also makes it clear that the covenant requires certain “duties” from the beneficiaries of it. The reason for this is based on the fact that the covenant of grace is a mutually binding arrangement between God and his people.\textsuperscript{114} The mutuality of this covenant is revealed by the two principal duties demanded in the covenant: faith and repentance. He states: “Now these are the two principal duties demanded—faith and repentance. The former embraces the promises; the latter fulfills the commands; the one answers to the promise of grace—‘Believe and thou shalt be saved’; the other is commanded by the evangelical law—‘Walk before me, and be thou perfect’ (Gen. 17:1).”\textsuperscript{115} This unequivocally excludes the notion that the benefits of the covenant

\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., p. 2:234.
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., p. 2:256.
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., p. 2:183.
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., p. 2:184.
of grace are applied universally apart from the exercise of faith and repentance.\(^\text{116}\) Additionally, the covenant requires that God’s people walk in the ways of wholehearted worship and obedience.\(^\text{117}\) Those who refuse to take up this duty towards the God they profess to be in covenant with deceive themselves into thinking they are the recipients of the salvific blessings of the covenant: “In vain do we hope that God will be our God, unless in turn we are his people and bear witness to the love of the Father, unless we give the obedience of children to him. In vain do we hope that he will bestow the promised blessings, unless we perform the duties required of us.”\(^\text{118}\) Turretin here is basically repeating the standard argument of the Reformers that justification and sanctification, though distinct, can never be separated from each other.\(^\text{119}\) Those who are in the covenant of grace and receive its benefits will fulfill the righteous requirements of the covenant and give evidence that they are truly partakers of God’s salvific grace. This is only made possible, however, due to the fact that believers are in union with Christ and indwelt by the Holy Spirit—thus, the obedience that believers give to God is not by their own strength but solely from the One who requires it.\(^\text{120}\) Therefore, although Christ perfectly fulfilled the law and the stipulations of the covenant of works in order that the benefits of the covenant of grace may be bestowed upon the elect most graciously,\(^\text{121}\) believers are still bound by the duties set forth in

\(^{116}\) Although Turretin makes it clear that faith and repentance are required in the covenant of grace (the former as a means to receiving the blessings of the covenant, and the latter as the duty within the covenant), he makes it clear that these two “requirements” are gifts of God: “Although these two duties [faith and repentance] are commanded by God as works due from man, still they are also promised by him as his gifts. Thus they are here to be considered at the same time both as the duties of man and as the blessings of God: ‘I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes’ (Ezk. 36:27)” (Ibid).

\(^{117}\) Ibid., p. 2:183.

\(^{118}\) Ibid., p. 2:184.

\(^{119}\) He maintains: “Although we think that these two benefits [justification and sanctification] should be distinguished and never confounded, still they are so connected from the order of God and the nature of the thing that they should never be torn asunder” (Ibid., p. 2:691).

\(^{120}\) Ibid., pp. 2:180-181.

\(^{121}\) Ibid., pp. 2:177-178.
the covenant of grace and are required to walk in the ways of God’s law as the fruit of salvation and evidence of being in saving union with Christ.\textsuperscript{122}

\section*{2.4 Herman Witsius (1636-1708)}

Herman Witsius was a noted Dutch Reformed theologian who attempted to reconcile Calvinistic orthodoxy with the prevailing covenant theology. He was known for his efforts at combining biblical theology with the established views of Reformed orthodoxy during his time. This is demonstrated in his significant work titled \textit{De oeconomia foderum Dei cum hominibus} (Eng. \textit{The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man} [originally published in Latin in 1677]). Following in the model of the federal theology advanced by his contemporary Johannes Cocceius, Witsius develops his covenant theology along redemptive-historical lines. Although he takes the view that Reformed federal theology corresponds with the redemptive-historical course of Scripture, he strongly sets forth the rigid dichotomy between the covenants of works and grace. While acknowledging in his work that the commonality between both covenants is that the ultimate end be the glory of God through the glorification of the human creature (conditioned on his or her perfect obedience to the law),\textsuperscript{123} he clearly states that the differences are far more

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\textsuperscript{122} Beach provides a good summary of how Turretin, through his understanding of Christ’s work and his union with believers, reconciles the tension between the unilateral and bilateral aspects of the covenant of grace coherently: “Those who are united to Christ by faith do not work their way to God; rather, Christ bears the penalty of the divine law, specified in the covenant of works, undergoes its terrible sanction of death and curse, and satisfies God’s justice for sinners in doing so. Thus Turretin’s exposition of this covenant makes clear that the conditions of this covenant involves Christ undergoing the penalty of the covenant of works and fulfilling its obligations so that the human parties of the covenant may come to faith; and by faith, being brought into union with Christ, all the benefits and blessings of Christ belong to them. In both respects, Christ fulfills the conditions of the covenant—first \textit{for sinners} and also \textit{in sinners}” (Beach, p. 211, emphases in original).

\end{flushleft}
significant and numerous. This is demonstrated by the fact that Witsius takes the standard orthodox Reformed view of the covenant of works and treats it as a legal covenant that requires perfect obedience to the law contained within the covenant—with the reward for perfectly complying with the law of the covenant of works being eternal life and glory.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 1:69-70.} Accordingly, Witsius states that human beings in the state of innocence required no Mediator to fulfill this covenant because they were originally created holy and upright. They were already endowed with the natural law of God and had the power to fulfill it by their own strength.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 1:60, 69.} Against the Papists, who argued that Adam had a right as an adopted son of God to everlasting felicity and could only forfeit this through disobedience, Witsius contends that Adam needed to \textit{acquire} this privilege by fulfilling the terms of the covenant of works by perfectly complying to its rigid demands. In fact, he is not inhibited in describing the outcome of this perfect obedience as “a reward.”\footnote{Ibid., pp. 1:69-70.} Also, Adam’s reward was not that he would remain perpetually in a probationary state in Paradise but that he would ascend to a higher life in a more spiritual and happy condition in glory after his trial was complete.\footnote{Ibid., p. 1:80.} Witsius, therefore, posits forcefully that the covenant of works arrangement was a legal one that required perfect and sustained obedience to the law if Adam or his posterity were to earn the right to inherit a glorified existence in heaven.

Furthermore, according to Witsius, it is not unbecoming for God to engage in a covenant arrangement with his rational human creatures since he “cannot but bind man to love, worship, and seek him, as the chief good; nor is it conceivable, how God should require man to love him and seek him, and yet refuse to be found by man, loving, seeking, and esteeming him as his chief
good, longing, hungering, and thirsting, after him alone." Also, due to God being the God of uncompromising perfection, justice, and holiness, he cannot but mandate that the human creature enjoy continual happiness only if he or she fulfills the terms of the covenant of works without fault. He states:

And the justice of God no less requires, that man, upon rejecting the happiness, offered on the most equitable terms, should be punished with the privation of it, and likewise incur the severest indignation of God, whom he has despised. Whence it appears, that from the very consideration of the divine perfections, it may be fairly deduced, that he has prescribed a certain law to man, as the condition of enjoying happiness, which consists in the fruition of God; enforced with the threatening of a curse against the rebel. In which we have just said now, that the whole of the covenant consisted.

God’s justice and holiness requires that his moral statutes be observed without even the least degree of infraction within the bounds of the first covenant. That is why, according to Witsius, the special end of the covenant of works was “the manifestation of the holiness, goodness, and justice of God, conspicuous in the most perfect law, most liberal promise, and in that recompense of reward, to be given to those, who seek him with their whole heart.” Thus, God’s holiness and justice, not his grace, determined the character and conditions of the covenant of works.

In addition, the penal sanction of the covenant that Adam endured for his original disobedience was not localized in him alone—it affected his posterity most profoundly and assuredly. Here, Witsius provides the standard argument of the orthodox federal theologians that as covenant head Adam by his violation of the covenant of works imputed his unrighteousness to his posterity—just as if they personally transgressed the covenant themselves. The federal

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128 Ibid., p. 1:46.
129 Ibid.
130 Ibid., p. 1:50.
131 Ibid., p. 1:147.
headship of Adam, therefore, is an important doctrine to uphold, according to Witsius, as it has significant implications of how one understands the relationship between Christ and the believer within the covenant of grace arrangement. Finally, as an implication of the notion that the goal of the covenant of works is an unfulfillable objective due to sin entering the human race, Witsius, following in the line of Cocceius, argues that the covenant of works is in some sense abrogated. This is due to the fact that God has declared that no human being due to his or her fallen nature can fulfill the terms of the covenant perfectly and receive, in turn, the reward that is due to those who meet its rigid requirements.\footnote{Ibid., p. 1:158.} That, however, does not mean that God’s moral principles are done away with for good, according to Witsius. The covenant, in fact, contained three “immutable” and “eternal” truths: 1) that human beings are obligated to fulfill their duties before God as his moral creatures; 2) that eternal life can only be inherited through perfect obedience to the law of God; and 3) that no act of disobedience will go unpunished—the punishment being eternal death.\footnote{Ibid., p. 1:151.} Human beings, as a result, still owe God the obedience he requires of them. Although the way to eternal life through the law is impossible due to sin, it is still required of them to obey this law because they are God’s rational creatures made in his image.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 1:151, 160.} The only hope that fallen humans have is through another covenant (i.e., the covenant of grace) that God establishes through a Mediator—the One who perfectly fulfills the stipulations of the covenant of works in his own body and puts to death the condemning functions of the law.

According to Witsius, the covenant of grace has two distinct facets to it: 1) the one enacted between the Father and the Son (usually called the \textit{covenant of redemption})\footnote{Also referred to as the \textit{pactum salutis.}} where the latter promises to fulfill the required stipulations of the first covenant on behalf of the elect; 2) the
other, between God and the elect, where the former most graciously bestows eternal salvation and everything pertaining to it to the latter.\textsuperscript{136} The significant point to make here is that the covenant of grace presupposes the covenant of redemption and, therefore, the latter is the grounds for the former.\textsuperscript{137} For Witsius, it was necessary for the Son of God to become fully human and subject to the entire law of God if he were to undertake faithfully his covenantal task as Mediator and Surety on behalf of the elect:

For, as the law likewise required \textit{punishment} to be inflicted on the transgressor, and Christ bound himself by his engagement, to fulfill the whole law; it was necessary “he should come in the likeness of sinful flesh, to condemn sin in the flesh” Rom. Viii. 3….Now Christ considered simply as a righteous person, might have been exempted from these miseries, and from such a death; but after having once, by a \textit{voluntary engagement}, submitted himself to the law for us, he became bound to satisfy also this sanction of the law, which threatened death to sinners; for all these things arise from the mediatorial \textit{covenant}, and belongs to Christ as Mediator.\textsuperscript{138}

It is because Christ, the God-man, willingly undertook to fulfill the required stipulations of the covenant of works and the law contained therein that he is able to \textit{earn} the title of eternal life on behalf of the elect.\textsuperscript{139} As the covenant head of all the elect, Christ is inextricably bound to his elect and that whatever pertains to him also pertains to them (especially his meritorious righteousness). Witsius states:

And the merit of Christ \textit{for himself} is so far from being prejudicial to his merit \textit{for us}, that on the contrary, they are inseparably conjoined. For if he merited \textit{for himself}, in order to be the head of the elect in glory, and to receive gifts for them, he certainly at the same time, merited for \textit{the elect}, in order to their being glorified, and enriched with gifts becoming the mystical body of Christ.\textsuperscript{140}

\textsuperscript{136} Ibid., p. 1:165.
\textsuperscript{137} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{138} Ibid., p. 1:182, emphases in original.
\textsuperscript{139} Ibid., pp. 1:190-191.
\textsuperscript{140} Ibid., p. 1:191, emphases in original.
It is only based on the fact that Christ perfectly fulfills the stipulations of the law and the demands of the first covenant that the elect throughout history—who are under Christ’s federal headship and joined to him in mystical union—can obtain that righteousness necessary for them to be justified and given the standing that allows them to be received into glory at the eschaton. In addition, contrary to the views of the Remonstrants, this satisfactory work that Christ performed on behalf of the elect provides full remission of sins and immunity from all the miseries that might fall upon the elect: “The Lord Jesus obtained for the elect, by his satisfaction, an immunity from all misery, and a right to eternal life, to be applied unto them in effectual calling, regeneration, sanctification, conservation, and glorification, as the scripture declares.”

As a result of Christ’s perfect compliance to the demands of the covenant of works, believers are now fully justified in God’s presence, quickened spiritually, and possess the title to eternal glory. All these spiritual benefits that the elect receive are due solely to Christ’s work of obedience and not by their own righteousness through the law. Despite this, the question still remains: if Christ as perfect Mediator and Surety fulfilled all that the covenant and law demanded for the justification and salvation of the elect, are there any conditions that the elect must fulfill themselves within the covenant of grace arrangement to enjoy its blessings?

Witsius is quick to point out that within the covenant of grace the notion that it contains certain “conditions” to be met by the elect themselves to give them a right to a reward must be

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141 Witsius criticizes Jacobus Arminius and his followers (called the Remonstrants) for denying the full efficacy of Christ’s death as a complete atoning sacrifice for the sins of believers. They, according to Witsius, do this by arguing that God “can, without satisfaction, and without the violation of his essential justice, let sins go unpunished, and that the contrary is highly absurd: Christ therefore procured nothing by his death. For what he is said to have obtained by it did already exist without it” (Ibid., p. 241). Arminius and his followers, Witsius maintains, can only hope for the remission of sins and possibility of justification so long as certain conditions are met—namely, faith and repentance (what he calls the “impetration” of remission and justification) (Ibid., pp. 239-240, 242). Consequently, for Arminius and his followers, Christ’s sacrificial death itself is not the decisive factor in securing salvation for believers but rather the exercise of faith and repentance by the believers themselves.

142 Ibid., p. 1:235, emphases in original.
entirely excluded from view. This is due to the fact that Christ himself performed these duties so that the believer does not have to meet these conditions himself or herself in order to earn a legal favour before God. He writes:

A condition of a covenant, properly so called, is that action, which, being performed, gives a man a right to the reward. But that such a condition cannot be required of us in the covenant of grace, is self-evident; because a right to life neither is, nor indeed can be founded on any action of ours, but on the righteousness of our Lord alone; who having perfectly fulfilled the righteousness of the law for us, nothing can, in justice be required of us to perform, in order to acquire a right already fully purchased for us.\textsuperscript{143}

Having said that, Witsius is not entirely adverse to the principle of “mutuality” when he discusses the responsibilities that the elect are bound to within the covenant of grace arrangement. Although the principle of personal merit is excluded in the covenant of grace (in contrast to the covenant of works), Witsius also argues that (based on his reading of Scripture) the blessings of the covenant of grace cannot be enjoyed apart from faith, repentance, and personal holiness. He writes:

In the covenant of works God promised life to man, on condition of perfect obedience, but he did not promise to produce, or effect this obedience in man. In the covenant of grace he not only promises life eternal, but also at the same time faith and repentance, and perseverance in holiness, without which life cannot be attained, and which being granted, life cannot but be obtained.\textsuperscript{144}

Faith and repentance are the stipulatory requirements of receiving the salvific blessings of the covenant of grace (just as perfect obedience was the stipulation in the covenant of works),\textsuperscript{145} while personal holiness is required as a way of framing one’s life that is suitable to the grace and glory that is promised in the covenant.\textsuperscript{146} This is so because even within the covenant of grace

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{143} Ibid., p. 1:284, emphases added.
\item \textsuperscript{144} Ibid, emphasis added.
\item \textsuperscript{145} Ibid., p. 1:289.
\item \textsuperscript{146} Ibid., p. 1:288.
\end{itemize}
the duties required by the law of God can never be dissolved. In fact, only by conforming one’s life to the law of God (although imperfect in this life) can a believer enjoy the assurance that he or she is a genuine recipient of the salvific promises offered in the covenant of grace. In this way, even though the covenant of grace is gracious in origin and character, it is still a mutually binding arrangement between God and his elect. However, Witsius is also quick to point out that faith has a different relation in respect to the enjoyment of the blessings of the covenant of grace compared to the other duties. This is so because faith’s character is about accepting and receiving the divine favour offered in the covenant of grace based on Christ’s merits—the receptive character of faith revealing the surety of God’s truth and the irrevocability of Christ’s work of salvation. Nevertheless, some may misconstrue Witsius’ formulation of the matter as an inadvertent slip into a subtle form of works-righteousness legalism. This misunderstanding can be cleared up when we recognize that Witsius, like other Reformed divines, argues that the transformation that believers experience, and the good works that follow, have as their ultimate source their union with Christ via the Spirit. He states:

He applies, he unites the elect to himself by his Spirit: and then the virtue of his death and resurrection flows from him to them….For, he himself being raised from the dead, has received, not only for himself a new and glorious life, but a fountain of a new and holy life for all his people; from which, by a continued influence, the most refreshing streams flow to all his members; hence, from his own life, by a most conclusive argument, he inferred the life of his people, John xiv. 19.

Another way of putting this is that the foundation of a believer’s experiential sanctification is the imputed righteousness of Christ—the inner transformation coming only about as a result of a

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147 Ibid., pp. 1:288-289.
149 Ibid.
150 Ibid., pp. 2:19-20, emphasis in original.
believer already receiving the external righteousness of Christ through faith.\textsuperscript{151} Additionally, the good works that believers do (even though imperfect and stained with sin) will be found acceptable before God on the last day because they are the fruits and effects of their union with Christ.\textsuperscript{152}

Witsius’ covenant theology stands confessionally in line with the majority of the orthodox Reformed theologians of his time. The remarkable aspect of his work is that he is able to uphold the prevailing view of Reformed orthodoxy on this subject while remaining sensitive to the redemptive-historical structure of Scripture (a sensitivity he acquired from his contemporary Cocceius). He stands clearly in the orthodox Reformed tradition by maintaining the unity of the covenant of grace throughout the different redemptive epochs,\textsuperscript{153} while clearly recognizing the differences among the various dispensations of Scripture.\textsuperscript{154} Also, Witsius stands by the prevailing orthodox view by upholding the legal and meritorious character of the covenant of works with its uncompromising demand for perfect compliance to God’s law for eternal life—which Christ perfectly fulfills on behalf of the elect. Finally, like the Reformed thinkers discussed above, he skilfully is able to maintain, through his responsible use of the Scriptural

\textsuperscript{151} Ibid., p. 1:419.
\textsuperscript{152} Ibid., pp. 1:423-424.
\textsuperscript{153} Ibid., pp. 1:291-306.
\textsuperscript{154} Ibid., pp. 1:307-324. In his treatment of the Decalogue (which is also his discussion of the Mosaic covenant), Witsius argues that the covenant established at Sinai (with the giving of the Two Tables of the law) was not a reestablishment of the covenant of works (as some later Reformed theologians like Mark W. Karlberg have argued) nor was it the covenant of grace in a formal sense (Ibid., pp. 1:182-186). Rather, according to Witsius, the Mosaic covenant was a \textit{national} covenant between God and Israel which contained both promises and warnings (Ibid., p. 1:186). However, the Mosaic covenant, with its rigid laws and regulations, functioned in a way \textit{to remind} the Israelites of the covenant of works in order “to convince them of their sin and misery, to drive them out of themselves, to shew them the necessity of a satisfaction, and to compel them to Christ” (Ibid., pp. 1:183-184). Thus, the elect within the nation of Israel were not eternally saved by virtue of the Mosaic covenant but rather through the covenant of grace (Ibid., pp. 1:185-186).
Therefore, Witsius’ covenant theology is a defense of the key soteriological concerns of the Reformers (*sola gratia, sola fide*, and *solus Christus*), while at the same time avoiding the pitfalls of any type of antinomianism.

### 2.5 John Gill (1697-1771)

John Gill may be considered one of the staunchest proponents of Calvinistic orthodoxy the Reformed tradition has ever produced. He was an English Reformed Baptist clergyman and theologian who once ministered at the largest Baptist church in the United Kingdom while the first Great Awakening was occurring in Protestant Europe and across the Atlantic in colonial America. Intellectually, Gill can be considered one of the Baptists’ own Reformed Scholastic, whose approach to theology included vigorously espousing the tenets of Calvinism through the use of defensive polemics\(^{156}\) and organizing his thoughts in a highly rational way that produced his well-known systematic theology titled *A Body of Doctrinal Divinity* (1767). He was also the first Baptist scholar to produce a multi-volume commentary on every book in the Bible. Gill, however, is more recognized within evangelical circles for advancing ideas that sometimes can

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\(^{155}\) Murray puts Witsius’ covenantal tension between divine grace and human responsibility in this light: “This unilateral character of the covenant [of grace] does not... remove the obligations descending upon him who accepts the promises of the covenant. He binds himself to the duties, and only thus can he assure himself of the fulfillment of the promises. In this respect the covenant is mutual. And Witsius does not regard the unilateral character as interfering with the free overtures of grace in the Gospel nor as toning down the threatenings pronounced upon unbelief” (Murray, *The Collected Writings of John Murray: Studies in Theology and Reviews*, vol. 4, p. 232).

\(^ {156}\) Gill’s renown work *The Cause of God and Truth* (1735-1738) is an example of this.
be misconstrued as promoting hyper-Calvinism\textsuperscript{157} rather than for his systematic advocacy of covenant theology. Despite this, Gill does provide a thorough treatment of the character and Scriptural basis of covenant theology through his systematic theology and exegesis of certain biblical passages in his commentaries.\textsuperscript{158}

Gill’s covenant theology is another example of the Reformation’s dichotomous law-gospel principle set forth in a more elaborate framework. Like many other Reformed divines, he posits a sharp contrast between the covenants of works and grace in his detailed expositions of both. Gill begins his treatment of the covenant of works doctrine by stating that the principle of law is what governs God’s relationship with his rational creatures, whether angels or humans. He writes:

\begin{quote}
The manner in which God governs rational creatures is by a law, as the rule of their obedience to him, and which is what we call God’s moral government of the world; and as he gave a law to angels, which some of them kept, and have been confirmed in a state of obedience to it; and others broke it, and plunged themselves into destruction and misery: so God gave a law to Adam, and which was in the form of a covenant, and in which Adam stood as a covenant head to all his posterity.\textsuperscript{159}
\end{quote}

That law is the operating principle of the covenant of works is made explicit by Gill. This law, which he calls the “law of nature,” is imprinted in the consciences of Adam and all human beings after him.\textsuperscript{160} Although God’s establishment of the covenant of works with humans was an act of condescension and goodness on his part,\textsuperscript{161} grace is nevertheless excluded from this covenant arrangement. He makes this clear when he states that the covenant of works required

\textsuperscript{157} Peter Toon’s work \textit{The Emergence of Hyper-Calvinism in English Nonconformity, 1689-1765} (London, UK: The Olive Tree, 1967) is an example of a work that argues that Gill was a hyper-Calvinist.


\textsuperscript{160} Ibid., p. 312.

\textsuperscript{161} Ibid.
personal, perfect, and perpetual obedience to its stipulations (as reflected in the natural law).\footnote{162} The most significant point here is that it required perfect obedience: God requiring Adam and his posterity to fulfill the terms of the covenant flawlessly and completely. Gill states:

\begin{quote}
It was perfect obedience that was required of him, both as to parts and as to degrees; it was to be yielded to all the commandments of God, without exception, and to be performed in the most perfect manner; as to matter, all the commands of God, natural and positive, were to be observed; and as to manner, just as the Lord commanded them.\footnote{163}
\end{quote}

The requirement of perfect obedience indicates that the principle of merit was the foundation of the first covenant arrangement. Gill also emphasizes the legal character of the covenant of works by arguing that Adam’s perpetual obedience to its terms did not earn him a right to eternal glory but merely allowed him to remain continually in his sinless condition in Paradise.\footnote{164} That is why he also labels the covenant of works as a “natural covenant.”\footnote{165} This idiosyncratic view of the final purpose of the covenant of works is undergirded by the fact that Gill desires to keep grace and works as separate as possible in regards to the basis of inheriting eternal glory in the consummated Kingdom. For Gill, Adam’s earthly reward for personal obedience must be set in contrast with the gift of eternal life given to the elect based solely on the grace of God through the work of Christ:

\begin{quote}
Eternal life is only through Christ as the Mediator of the covenant of grace; it comes by no other hands but his; it is through Christ Jesus our Lord; he came to open the way of it, that we might have life, and that more abundantly; a more abundant, durable, and excellent life, than Adam had in innocence: Christ as Mediator, had a power to give eternal life to as many as the Father has given him; and he does give it to all his sheep, that know
\end{quote}

\footnote{162} Ibid., p. 314.
\footnote{163} Ibid, emphasis in original.
\footnote{164} The position Gill is espousing here is not held by the majority of orthodox Reformed theologians. The established view within the Reformed tradition maintains that if Adam had perfectly fulfilled the rigid demands of the Edenic covenant that he would have been rewarded with eternal life in glory—a manner of existence that is far superior to his original condition in Paradise.
\footnote{165} Ibid.
his voice, hearken to him, and follow him….If eternal life could have been by Adam’s covenant, it would have been by works; for that covenant was a covenant of works; and if by works, then not of grace; it would not have been the gift of God, as it is said to be; *The Gift of God is eternal life*, χαρίσμα, a free grace gift.  

Although Gill may have overstated his case by suggesting that Adam’s reward for his perfect compliance to the covenant of works is different from the gift of life given to the elect in the covenant of grace through Christ and his work, it is due to this recognition of the sharp contrast between the two covenants (and, hence, law and gospel) that he formulates the matter in this way.  

Furthermore, as with the customary view of orthodox federalism, Gill maintains that Adam did not act alone when he was under the authority of the covenant of works: he acted as the federal head of his posterity. When Adam sinned his posterity was affected in the most profound way—occurring through the imputation of his sin to them and the corruption of the human race as a result. Gill also views Adam’s federal headship over his posterity as a type of Christ’s federal headship over all the elect in history—the offspring of the former being children of disobedience and death, while the offspring of the latter being children of righteousness and life. In this way, Gill understands the relationship between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace as two antithetical ways governed by two radically different principles: the former by the law and the latter by grace.

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166 Ibid., pp. 314-315, emphases in original.
167 One of the more problematic features of Gill’s position is that if Adam’s obedience merely allowed him to stay in a sinless condition in the earthly Paradise, how can the promise of *eternal life in glory* truly be the final end for God’s purpose for humanity? The only conclusion that can be reached here is that God’s prohibition to Adam not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge was only an illusion since God’s hidden and true purpose for his human creatures was that they would fall into sin and inherit eternal life in glory through Christ’s vicarious obedience and death. Hence, this understanding makes Christ merely become a means to an end (cf. Ascol’s critique of Gill on exactly this point [pp. 143-145]).
169 Ibid., pp. 316, 324-337.
170 Ibid., p. 316.
Congruent with the prevailing view of Reformed orthodoxy, Gill argues that the covenant of grace is of the same substance and character throughout the various periods of redemptive history— with Christ being the focal point of the covenant. He writes:

The covenant of grace is but one and the same in all ages, of which Christ is the substance; being given for a covenant of the people, of all the people of God, both Jews and Gentiles, who is the same in the yesterday of the Old Testament, and in the to-day of the New Testament, and for ever; he is the way, the truth, and the life, the only true way to eternal life; and there never was any other way made known to man since the fall of Adam; no other name under heaven has been given, or will be given, by which men can be saved.  

In essence, all the elect throughout history, according to Gill, were saved by the same covenant, the same Mediator, and on the same terms. Although each period of redemptive history had its own mode of administering the blessings of the covenant of grace, all of them pointed to Christ as the perfect Mediator of the covenant of grace who alone atones for the sins of the elect and gives them life. Gill especially highlights the differences between the Mosaic and new covenant in regards to their respective modes of administration. Although both the promises and blessings of the covenant of grace are the same in both periods, they are exhibited differently. In the new covenant, in contrast to the old, the blessings of the covenant of grace are given more clarity, more realized in the Incarnation, have a larger and more plentiful effusion of the Spirit, less held in bondage to the elements of the world, wider in scope to include Gentiles, and set forth more freely. Nevertheless, the elect within the theocracy of Israel, just as the elect within the church today, ate the same spiritual meat and drank the same spiritual drink that is Christ (cf. 1 Cor 10:3–4)—the Rock that followed the Israelites in the wilderness and who was later

\[171\] Ibid., p. 345, emphases in original.  
\[172\] Ibid.  
\[173\] Ibid., p. 347.
crucified for their sins.\textsuperscript{174} Therefore, according to Gill, all the elect throughout history receive the same salvation, justification, forgiveness of sins, and renewal of heart—which will culminate in life eternal in the age to come.\textsuperscript{175}

One of the more pertinent questions often raised when the subject of covenant theology comes up is what role Christ plays as the Mediator of the covenant of grace. Gill, like the other Reformed divines we have discussed above, argues that Christ merited eternal life on behalf of the elect through his perfect obedience to the law. He calls this substitutionary fulfilling of the law the “active obedience of Christ.”\textsuperscript{176} This obedience, he writes, was

\begin{quote}
\textit{wrought out in the room and stead of his people; he obeyed the law, and satisfied it in all its demands, that the righteousness of it might be fulfilled in them, or for them, in him, as their head and representative; hence he, being the end of the law for righteousness unto them, it is unto them, and comes upon them.}\textsuperscript{177}
\end{quote}

The benefits of Christ’s active obedience to the law is \textit{imputed} to the elect due to them being under his covenantal headship. Since God cannot justify a person who has failed to keep the law perfectly, he must condemn the violator or provide a substitute who will keep the law perfectly on his or her behalf. It is because Christ fulfills the law in a vicarious manner that the elect are able to stand justified in God’s courtroom. Gill writes:

\begin{quote}
It is that God that justifies, who will not admit of an imperfect righteousness, in the room of a perfect one: man’s righteousness is imperfect, and cannot be reckoned as a perfect one by him, whose judgment is according to truth; nor will it stand in judgment, nor answer for the sinner at the bar of God, and justify in his sight; and yet God justifies; but then it is
\end{quote}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{174} Ibid., p. 346.  \\
\textsuperscript{175} Ibid.  \\
\textsuperscript{176} Ibid., pp. 396-401.  \\
\textsuperscript{177} Ibid., p. 400.
\end{flushright}
through the perfect righteousness of Christ, who is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believes, Rom. x. 4.\textsuperscript{178}

Since no human being under Adam is able to fulfill the law personally in order to be justified and receive eternal life, salvation can come in no other way except through the person and work of Christ.\textsuperscript{179} The grandeur of the covenant of grace is that Christ as Mediator completely does what is required in the law so that the elect are justified freely by God’s grace and given eternal life apart from any inherent righteousness of their own.\textsuperscript{180} Gill even goes so far as to say, due to Christ’s pivotal role in the covenant, that Christ is the covenant itself.\textsuperscript{181} Therefore, since Christ is the one who takes on the role of substitute by fulfilling the rigid demands of the law on behalf of the elect, they personally do not need to fulfill the strict demands of the law in order to inherit the promises contained therein.

One of the more curious and controversial aspects of Gill’s covenant theology is his view that the covenant of grace between God and the elect was established in eternity. The vast majority of Reformed theologians throughout history have argued that the covenant of grace was established in history postlapsarian in response to the failure of the first parents to fulfill the requirements of the covenant of works. Although some Reformed scholars have posited that a covenant of redemption was established amongst the members of the Trinity in eternity, they are keenly aware that this covenant must never be confused with the covenant of grace instituted in

\textsuperscript{178} Ibid., p. 505, emphasis in original.
\textsuperscript{179} In his exegesis of Romans 2:13 and the phrase “the doers of the law who will be justified” Gill agrees with Calvin’s interpretation of the passage that Paul is talking about the just demands of the law for righteousness rather than what the Christian is required to do if he or she seeks to be justified on the last day. He writes: “[By] whom are meant, not such who merely literally and externally fulfil the law, as they imagine; for the law is spiritual, and regards the inward as well as the outward man, and requires internal holiness, as well as external obedience; and the apostle is speaking of justification before God, who sees the heart, and not before men, who judge according to outward appearance: nor are such designed who are imperfect doers of the law; for the law requires a perfect obedience, and what is not perfect is not properly righteousness; nor does it, nor can it consider an imperfect righteousness as a perfect one; for it accuses of, pronounces guilty, curses, and condemns for every transgression of it” (Gill, Exp. Rom 2:13).
\textsuperscript{180} Ascol, p. 185.
\textsuperscript{181} Gill, A Body of Doctrinal Divinity, p. 226.
time. Gill, however, blurs the line between the covenant arrangement between the Father and the Son in eternity and the covenant arrangement between God and the elect in history. For instance, he writes that the covenant of grace is “an eternal covenant; not merely as to duration, being what will continue to eternity, and so is called an everlasting covenant, but as to the original of it; it was made in eternity, and commenced and bears date from eternity.”\textsuperscript{182} He even goes so far as to state that the blessings of the covenant of grace are given to the elect before the beginning of history: “The blessings of the covenant were put into the hands of Christ so early, and the elect were blessed with them in him, as they were chosen in him before the foundation of the world, and are the grace given to them in him, before the world began, Eph. i. 3, 4. 2 Tim. i. 9.”\textsuperscript{183} It is true that Reformed orthodoxy has consistently maintained that all the elect throughout history will most assuredly receive the eternal inheritance through Christ and his work, but the tradition has also consistently maintained that the elect cannot enjoy the salvific blessings of the covenant apart from personal faith and repentance. Gill, on the other hand, argues that these blessings were already received by the elect since eternity. In fact, even the justification of the elect is something that takes place before time.\textsuperscript{184} It is this view of the eternality of the covenant of grace that impels some to accuse Gill of hyper-Calvinism. Despite Gill’s laudable efforts at maintaining the gratuitous character of the covenant of grace by locating the establishment of it in eternity, the position he espouses virtually collapses history and makes the real acts of faith and repentance exercised by the elect as being virtually irrelevant. Christ merely becomes a means to execute the decree of election and not the telos of God’s redemptive purpose itself.

\textsuperscript{182} Ibid., p. 247, emphasis in original.
\textsuperscript{183} Ibid, emphases in original.
\textsuperscript{184} “Justification...is not only before faith, but it is from eternity, being an immanent act in the divine mind, and so an internal and eternal one; as may be concluded” (Ibid., p. 205). The problem with this view is that Gill confuses God’s free act of justification with his sovereign decree of election—something that orthodox Reformed theologians have always kept distinct.
addition, if the elect are already justified in eternity, why take seriously the many Scriptural exhortations calling people to faith and repentance (cf. Mark 1:15; Luke 13:3; John 3:16-18)? It appears that Gill’s view of the eternality of the covenant of grace faces insurmountable problems in light of the accepted views of Reformed orthodoxy and, more importantly, the Scriptural witness.

Although Gill’s view of the eternality of the covenant of grace is liable to the charge of fatalism and antinomianism, he does not deny the notion of mutuality in his covenant theology. Due to the fact that the character of the covenant of grace is holy, to suggest that those within the covenant can live in a way opposed to God’s law can only be seen as a contradiction. In fact, the covenant not only bestows the blessings of forgiveness and justification but also the renewal of the inner person where the law of God becomes a delightful claim to be followed. He writes:

[T]he covenant provides fully for the sanctification of all the covenant-ones; expressed by writing the laws of God in the hearts of them, putting his fear into them, giving them new hearts and new spirits, taking away the stony heart from them, and putting his own Spirit within them, to enable them to walk in his statutes, keep his judgments, and do them, Jer. xxxi. 33. and xxxii. 39, 40. Ezek. xxxvi. 26, 27.\(^\text{185}\)

Believers are still bound to God’s law, not as a condemning principle as it was under the covenant of works, but as a rule of life where God’s will is plainly revealed to them through it. The law, therefore, according to Gill

continues as a rule of walk and conversation to them, as before observed; and is to be regarded by them as in the hands of Christ; by whom it is held forth as King and Lawgiver, in his church; and who, and not Moses, is to be heard, and his voice hearkened to, as the Son and Master, in his own house. Believers though freed from the law, in the sense before declared, yet are not without law to God, but under the law to Christ, and obliged to regard it; and the rather, as it was in his heart, and he was made under it, and has

\(^{185}\) Ibid., p. 250.
fulfilled it; and therefore may be viewed and served with pleasure, 1 Cor. ix. 21.\textsuperscript{186}

It is made clear here that Gill eschews any type of antinomianism. Believers are still bound to God’s law (which is written in their hearts) and are enabled to fulfill it through the power of the Spirit.\textsuperscript{187} Like the Reformed thinkers we have discussed above, Gill teaches that the transformation that enables believers to obey God’s law is a benefit of their being in covenant with God and having Christ as their federal head. In fact, according to Gill, the promise of the transforming work of the Spirit in the covenant of grace makes it impossible to conceive of salvation as being separate from the experience of sanctification—the latter even being necessary to the former. He writes:

Sanctification is absolutely necessary to salvation. It is necessary for many things; it is necessary to the saints, as an evidence of their election and redemption; this is the closing work of grace, and is the evidence of all that goes before….Sanctification is necessary as a meetness for heaven; for the inheritance of the saints in light; without regeneration, in which sanctification is begun, no man shall see, nor enter into the kingdom of God.\textsuperscript{188}

This, however, does not mean that the believer’s obedience to the law is the grounds for his or her obtaining the eternal inheritance. Instead, the obedience rendered by the believer is merely the evidence that he or she is justified and redeemed by God’s work of grace—which is a necessary evidence of being transformed for the conditions of the life to come. Therefore, Gill’s particular understanding of the covenant of grace does not undermine the necessity of obedience

\textsuperscript{186} Ibid., p. 372, emphasis in original.
\textsuperscript{187} Gill, Exp. Jer 31:33.
\textsuperscript{188} Gill, A Body of Doctrinal Divinity, p. 559, emphasis in original.
in the Christian life. Rather, the renewal of the hearts of believers through the Spirit inevitably leads them to walk in love as reflected in the law of God. 189

2.6 Charles Hodge (1797-1878)

Charles Hodge is considered by many to be one of the foremost American Reformed theologians in the nineteenth century. Coming out of the old Princeton Calvinism Hodge was a prominent defender of Calvinistic Presbyterian orthodoxy decades before Presbyterianism in America was mired in controversy over the inspiration and authority of Scripture. Considering his staunch advocacy of classic Reformed theology it is no surprise that Hodge’s covenant theology contained no innovative aspects but was merely a faithful reiteration of the federalism advanced by the Westminster divines two hundred years prior. His well-known three volume Systematic Theology was used by many Reformed seminaries in North America as the standard text for introductory theology courses for many years. Considering Hodge’s theological legacy in American Reformed circles it is essential, therefore, that we discuss what he said about the doctrine of the covenant as set forth in his systematic theology volumes.

Hodge’s covenant theology is typical of the prevailing view of historic Reformed orthodoxy with its strict dichotomy between the covenants of works and grace. Though he concedes that the word covenant is not used in the first chapters of the Genesis narrative he

189 Ascol, in response to the accusations of antinomianism levelled against Gill, rightfully notes: “Because the participants in the covenant of grace have the law written on their hearts, their obligation to keep it, far from being abrogated, is greatly enhanced. Their duty derives from the law, not as a covenant of works, as if justification could be attained through obedience, but as an eternal revelation of God’s will for his creatures. The law is a rule for the Christian’s sanctification. This point is so frequently and forcefully stressed in his writings that one wonders in amazement at the repeated charges of antinomianism which have been leveled against Gill throughout history” (Ascol, p. 247).
maintains that a covenant arrangement between God and Adam is plainly represented there. His rationale for this view is based on the fact that the gospel way of salvation (or the new covenant) is always kept in antithesis to all the legal covenants (not just the Sinaitic) of Scripture. Thus, if the way of salvation through the gospel is called a covenant, the way of salvation through the law must also be called a covenant. Hodge makes a case for the meritorious and legal character of the covenant of works by arguing that God, as the judge or moral ruler, always deals justly with his rational creatures. That is why the condition of the covenant of works is nothing less than perfect obedience to the divine law. In fact, he argues that God’s requiring perfect obedience from his human creatures in order for them to be counted righteous in his divine courtroom is everywhere assumed in Scripture. Hodge even goes on to state that the whole argument of the Apostle Paul in his letters to the Romans and Galatians that a single transgression condemns a person “falls to the ground” if it is not granted that the law demands perfect obedience. That is why, basing his reasoning again from Paul (cf. Romans 2), Hodge can state:

And hence the Apostle in the second chapter of his Epistle to the Romans, says that God will reward every man according to his works. To those who are good, He will give eternal life; to those who are evil, indignation and wrath. This is only saying that the eternal principles of justice are still in force. If any man can present himself before the bar of God and prove that he is free from sin, either imputed or personal, either original or actual, he will not be condemned.

In regards to the promise of the covenant of works, Hodge states that if Adam successfully complied with the rigid stipulations of the covenant he would have enjoyed “the happy, holy,
and immortal existence of the soul and body.”\textsuperscript{195} Thus, the reward Adam would receive for perfectly obeying the terms of the covenant of works is not perpetual existence in Paradise in his original state (in contrast to Gill’s position) but life everlasting in glory. On the other hand, the punishment for disobedience is the opposite of the life promised: misery and death, bodily and eternally.\textsuperscript{196} Additionally, Hodge, like the Reformed theologians prior, argues that the promise of reward or threat of punishment contained in the covenant of works was not restricted to Adam alone. Whatever Adam earned or suffered, respectively through his obedience or disobedience, would be applied and reckoned to all of his posterity.\textsuperscript{197} This is based on the representative nature of Adam’s covenant headship over all his offspring. Hence, due to Adam’s original transgression, all are imputed with his guilt and condemned before God’s tribunal: “In Adam, says the Apostle [Paul], all died. The sentence of condemnation, he teaches us, passed on all men for one offence. By the offence of one all were made sinners.”\textsuperscript{198} That is why the covenant of works is in some sense no longer in effect after the fall because every human being in Adam fell with him and became guilty.\textsuperscript{199} Therefore, according to Hodge, all those who are born in Adam belong to a race of condemned sinners with no hope of redemption and only an expectation of eternal punishment due to the guilt incurred.

Due to the hopeless condition of Adamic humankind on account of Adam’s original transgression, God by his sovereignty and goodness set in motion a plan of salvation. This plan included the establishment of a second covenant—the covenant of grace. According to Hodge, this second covenant is founded upon another covenant from eternity—the covenant of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{195} Ibid., p. 2:118.
\item \textsuperscript{196} Ibid., p. 2:120.
\item \textsuperscript{197} Ibid., p. 2:121.
\item \textsuperscript{198} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{199} Ibid., p. 2:122.
\end{itemize}
redemption (the *pactum salutis*). The covenant of redemption, as mentioned above, is the covenant established between the Father and the Son in eternity. In it, the Father commissions the Son to fulfill certain stipulations with a reward for its successful completion. This arrangement between the Father and the Son has all the characteristics of a covenant, Hodge avers: “The Father did give the Son a work to do, and He did promise to Him a reward upon its accomplishment. The transaction was, therefore, of the nature of a covenant. An obligation was assumed by the Son to accomplish the work assigned Him; and an obligation was assumed by the Father to grant Him the stipulated reward.”

The work that the Son was assigned to carry out included three duties: 1) to take on human flesh in humility; 2) to be under God’s law and fulfill perfectly its righteous requirements; and 3) to bear the sins of God’s people and die as a propitiatory sacrifice. As a reward for successfully fulfilling the duties of the *pactum salutis*, the Son would not only personally receive an unblemished tabernacle in glory but would also receive for himself a redeemed people bought by his blood. However, Hodge is careful to note that the covenant of redemption and the covenant of grace are not to be confused—both must be recognized as two distinct covenants. This is crucial since it clearly defines what role Christ plays in each covenant: in the former, Christ is one of the covenant parties; in the latter, he is the Mediator and Surety for the elect. Hodge agrees with the consensus view of Reformed orthodoxy that the covenant of grace is rooted in Christ’s perfect obedience to the law (his active obedience) and his propitiatory death on the cross (his passive obedience). Just as Adam would have earned the right to eternal glory for himself and his posterity if he perfectly obeyed the law;

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200 Ibid., p. 2:358.
201 Ibid., p. 2:361.
203 Ibid., p. 2:362.
204 Ibid., pp. 2:358-359.
205 Ibid., p. 2:358.
Christ, as the Second Adam, did earn the right to eternal glory for himself and his elect by fulfilling the righteous requirements of the law: “The work of Christ was...of the nature of a satisfaction to the demands of the law. By his obedience and sufferings, by his whole righteousness, active and passive, He, as our representative and substitute, did and endured all that the law demands.” As a result of Christ’s vicarious obedience, believers do not need to fulfill the strict demands of the law themselves in order to be justified before God. They are reckoned righteous due to the promise of the covenant of grace which is based on Christ’s perfect obedience and sacrifice.

Characteristic of his faithful adherence to the classical form of federal theology, Hodge argues for the strict continuity of the covenant of grace throughout Scripture. He maintains that the elements of the covenant of grace are uniform in all the periods of redemptive history: having “the same promise, the same Saviour, the same condition, and the same salvation.” In fact, due to this continuity of the covenant of grace Hodge even maintains, against the Anabaptists, that the church existed prior to the first advent of Christ. He writes:

The covenant of grace, or plan of salvation, being the same in all its elements from the beginning, it follows, first, in opposition to the Anabaptists, that the people of God before Christ constituted a Church, and that the Church has been one and the same under all dispensations. It has always had the same promise, the same Redeemer, and the same condition of membership, namely, faith in the Son of God as the Saviour of the world.

Despite the covenant of grace being of the same character throughout the history of redemption, Hodge is not unmindful of the differences that exist between the various dispensations—especially between the Mosaic dispensation and the Gospel dispensation. In regards to the

\[\text{206 Ibid., p. 2:494.}\]
\[\text{207 Ibid., p. 2:368.}\]
\[\text{208 Ibid., p. 2:373.}\]
Mosaic covenant, Hodge argues that it was a national covenant exclusively for the Israelites. Furthermore, it was a legal covenant that had Moses as the mediator between God and the Israelites— with obedience to the legal code resulting in national security and prosperity for the people. In one sense, then, the Mosaic covenant was “a renewed proclamation of the original covenant of works.” Due to the legal character of the Mosaic covenant, justification and eternal life were never obtained by obeying the stipulations of the Mosaic legal code. The priesthood, ceremonies, and symbols were only pointers to the coming Redeemer and his role as the ultimate prophet, priest, and king. Only the elect within the theocratic nation properly understood the messages conveyed in the law and the prophets and, thus, entrusted themselves by faith in the future Mediator for forgiveness, justification, and eternal life. That is why Hodge states that the “Old Testament is full of the doctrine of redemption by the Messiah.” Therefore, even in the law-strict Mosaic economy, Christ was revealed as the only true Source for the redemption of the human race. Those who received justification and salvation during the Mosaic dispensation were those who placed their trust in the coming Redeemer alone. The Mosaic covenant did not undermine the gratuity of the covenant of grace because it only temporarily served the function of the latter by pointing to the future Mediator through the types and shadows. Those who mistook the nature of the Mosaic covenant believed that justification and salvation came by obeying the strict demands of the law given at Sinai.

Although it is clear from the discussion above that Hodge believed in the absolute gratuity of the covenant of grace in antithesis to the covenant of works and the law, a question that still must be addressed is whether he taught that the covenant of grace contains any obligations on

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209 Ibid., p. 2:375.
210 Ibid.
211 Ibid., p. 2:372.
the part of the human beneficiaries. We have already established that Hodge believed that faith in the Mediator is absolutely necessary in order for the fallen human creature to enjoy the benefits of the covenant of grace. In fact, Hodge has no misgivings of calling faith a “condition” of the covenant. He states:

The condition of the covenant of grace, so far as adults are concerned, is faith in Christ. That is, in order to partake of the benefits of this covenant we must receive the Lord Jesus Christ as the Son of God in whom and for whose sake its blessings are vouchsafed to the children of men. Until we thus believe we are aliens and strangers from the covenant of promise, without God and without Christ.212

However, Hodge is quick to assert that this faith cannot be considered a meritorious work of the believer. The exercise of faith by the elect cannot be viewed in the same way as Adam meriting eternal life by fulfilling the uncompromising demands of the Edenic covenant or Christ meriting righteousness through the law on behalf of the elect. The latter, in fact, rules out any notion that believers must merit, whether congruently or condignly, eternal life within the covenant of grace. The reason why faith cannot be viewed as a meritorious work is because faith, albeit a condition, is an act of asking for and receiving the gift contained in a promise—in this case, Christ’s meritorious work for the justification and salvation of believers213—and has as its source the work of the Spirit in the hearts of believers.214 Faith, then, can only be viewed as a condition in the sine qua non sense.215 Nevertheless, Hodge is aware that the view he espouses may be misunderstood as teaching a type of antinomianism where God’s law has no place in the life of the Christian.216 However, this misunderstanding is clarified by the fact that the covenant of grace not only bestows the blessings of justification and adoption but also makes the elect to

212 Ibid., p. 2:364.
216 In his treatment of the doctrine of justification, he is aware that some object to the classic Protestant position due to its supposed liability towards moral license and immorality (Ibid., pp. 3:171-173).
be God’s own treasured people who “are rendered perfectly conformed to his image, devoted to his services, and obedient to his will.”\textsuperscript{217} The mutuality of the covenant of grace is made apparent by the fact that God and his elect are bound to each other through Christ. That is why Hodge calls Christ both the Mediator (Μεσίτης) and Surety (Ἐγγυος) of the covenant of grace because he not only fulfills the conditions of the covenant of redemption for the justification and salvation of the elect but his work also “renders certain the gifts of God’s grace, and the perseverance of his people in faith and obedience.”\textsuperscript{218}

The view that classic federal theology, therefore, is a theological system that inadvertently cuts the nerve between obedience and salvation is unfounded when examined closely. Hodge, like the majority of Reformed thinkers, argues that final salvation cannot be bestowed upon those who fail to experience the grace of sanctification and continually live in a way that contradicts their profession of faith. He goes on to state that Protestants universally admit that an immoral life is inconsistent with a state of grace; that those who wilfully continue in the practice of sin shall not inherit the kingdom of God. The Protestants while rejecting the Romish doctrine of subjective justification, strenuously insisted that no man is delivered from the guilt of sin who is not delivered from its reigning power; that sanctification is inseparable from justification, and that the one is just as essential as the other.\textsuperscript{219} Furthermore, the obligation of believers to God’s law is further reinforced by the fact that even they will have to give an account on the last day based on how they lived during their earthly pilgrimage. Hodge writes:

But although Protestants deny the merit of good works, and teach that salvation is entirely gratuitous, that the remission of sins, adoption into the family of God, and the gift of the Holy Spirit are granted to the believer, as well as admission into heaven, solely on the ground of the merits of the

\textsuperscript{217} Ibid., p. 2:366.
\textsuperscript{218} Ibid., p. 2:364.
\textsuperscript{219} Ibid., p. 3:238.
Lord Jesus Christ; they nevertheless teach that God does reward his people for their works.220

Although the believer’s obedience in this life will always remain imperfect due to the fallen condition, it will still be found acceptable in the divine courtroom and rewarded because of God’s grace and for the sake of the Mediator.221 This reward, however, has only to do with a believer’s position in the future kingdom and not his or her entrance into eternal glory which comes by faith alone in Christ and his work alone.222 Therefore, Hodge, like the other Reformed divines we have examined above, is able to maintain carefully the tension that exists in Scripture between divine grace and human responsibility in his covenant theology.

2.7 Louis Berkhof (1873-1957)

One of the most influential evangelical Reformed theologians of the last century is Louis Berkhof. Although born in the Netherlands, he spent the majority of his life in the United States where he eventually became a highly influential figure in North American Reformed circles in the first half of the twentieth century. Having been influenced greatly by the Dutch Calvinist tradition, and especially by the insights of prominent Dutch Reformed theologians like Abraham

220 Ibid., p. 3:244.
221 Ibid.
222 Ibid. Murray provides an excellent statement on the relationship between justification sola fide and the eschatological rewards for good works. He writes: “We must maintain therefore, justification complete and irrevocable by grace through faith and apart from works, and at the same time, future reward according to works. In reference to these two doctrines it is important to observe the following: (i) This future reward is not justification and contributes nothing to that which constitutes justification. (ii) This future reward is not salvation. Salvation is by grace and it is not as a reward for works that we are saved. (iii) The reward has reference to the station a person is to occupy in glory and does not have reference to the gift of glory itself. While the reward is of grace yet the standard or criterion of judgment by which the degree of reward is to be determined is good works. (iv) This reward is not administered because good works earn or merit reward, but because God is graciously pleased to reward them. That is to say it is a reward of grace” (John Murray, The Collected Writings of John Murray: Select Lectures in Systematic Theology, vol. 2 [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1977], p. 221).
Kuyper and Herman Bavinck, Berkhof was recognized not so much for his theological creativity but rather for his faithful reaffirmation of the tenets of classic Reformed theology. His well-known *Systematic Theology* became the standard text for many evangelical Reformed seminaries in the last century since its initial publication in the early 1930s. Berkhof’s covenant theology, as set forth in his systematic theological work, generally follows the conventional bi-covenantal view of historic Reformed orthodoxy. He also taught, like Witsius and Hodge, that a covenant of redemption between the Father and Son was established in eternity (as a foundation for the covenant of grace between God and the elect in history). More significantly, the covenant theology articulated by Berkhof is structured according to the antithetical law-gospel paradigm of the Reformers. Although more restrained and nuanced on the subject than some of the more “scholastically oriented” Reformed theologians like John Owen or John Gill, he still maintains consistently the Reformation’s dichotomy between law and grace in his covenant theology.

Although Berkhof grants, like Hodge, that the early Genesis narrative does not mention the word “covenant” in any manner, he does maintain that the essential elements of a covenant are still present. He writes: “In the case under consideration [the covenant of works doctrine] two parties are named, a condition is laid down, a promise of reward for obedience is clearly implied, and a penalty for transgression is threatened.”\(^{223}\) Some may object to this reasoning by arguing that God and Adam did not establish a covenantal arrangement as equals or that evidence is lacking in terms of Adam’s agreeing to the terms laid down by God. Berkhof finds these objections specious based on the fact that all “God’s covenants are of the nature of sovereign dispositions imposed on man. God is absolutely sovereign in His dealings with man, and has the perfect right to lay down the conditions which the latter must meet, in order to enjoy His

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favor.”224 As a result, he maintains that the covenant of works is a covenant that God imposes with gracious terms.225 This does not mean that the covenant of works is an earlier form of the covenant of grace, but rather that the covenant of works was founded upon grace due to the fact that a sovereign God was willing to condescend to establish this covenant with his human creatures. Despite his opinion that the covenant of works was established by God’s pure gratuity, Berkhof agrees with the majority opinion of the Reformed that the character of the covenant is legal in substance. In fact, he calls it “a legal compact.”226 The legal character of the covenant of works is established on the fact that the condition of the covenant “was that of implicit and perfect obedience,” and that the “divine law can demand nothing less than that, and the positive command not to eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, relating as it did, to a thing indifferent in itself, was clearly a test of pure obedience in the absolute sense of the word.”227 Nothing less than perfect obedience to the law contained in the covenant of works would give Adam the promised reward.228 This is more the case considering that Adam was created upright and had God’s law written in his heart.229 In some sense, then, the covenant of works is still operative despite Adam’s transgression of it based on the fact that God always relates to human beings on the principles of the law (which they possess in their hearts) (cf. Lev

224 Ibid.
225 Ibid.
226 Ibid., p. 215.
227 Ibid., p. 216, emphasis added.
228 Unlike many of the Reformed divines before him, Berkhof maintains that the inheritance Adam would have received if he perfectly fulfilled the demands of the law should not be classified as a reward in the strict sense. His rationale for this is that whatever obedience Adam would have rendered to God would have been as an unprofitable servant rather than as an equal partner (Ibid., p. 215). However, even if the definition of reward is inappropriate to use in regards to the consequence of Adam’s obedience, this does not detract from the legal nature of the covenant of works since it still demanded absolute and flawless obedience to its stipulations.
229 Ibid., p. 216.
18.5; Rom 10:5; Gal 3:12). The only difference between Adam and his posterity is that the latter cannot in any way, due to sin, comply with the demands of the covenant.\textsuperscript{230}

In terms of what Adam would have inherited if he successfully passed the probationary trial, Berkhof again agrees with the majority opinion of the Reformed that he would have inherited a life which was beyond and superior to the life he was given in Paradise. It would be a life forever free from the possibility and presence of sin, corruption, and death. The ultimate destiny of the human race, therefore, was not that they would continually exist in Paradise and constantly under probation but to be raised unto eternal glory and blessedness. He writes:

> When the Lord says, “for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die,” his statement clearly implies that, if Adam refrains from eating, he will not die, but will be raised above the possibility of death. The implied promise certainly cannot mean that, in the case of obedience, Adam would be permitted to live on in the usual way, that is, to continue the ordinary natural life, for that life was his already in virtue of his creation, and therefore could not be held out as a reward for obedience. The implied promise evidently was that of life raised to its highest development of perennial bliss and glory.\textsuperscript{231}

Likewise, the penalty Adam would have to suffer for disobedience is death in its fullest sense of the term: physical, spiritual, and eternal (with the most tragic of these being eternal separation from God).\textsuperscript{232} Berkhof also maintains, as classic federalism taught, that Adam’s original sin and its consequences were not confined to him alone. Adam, as he writes, “was constituted the representative head of the human race, so that he could act for all his descendants.”\textsuperscript{233} As a result, Adam’s guilt due to his original transgression was \textit{imputed} to all his posterity, and thus, the whole human race was condemned in him.\textsuperscript{234} In this way, Berkhof makes the move of classic

\textsuperscript{230} Ibid., p. 218.
\textsuperscript{231} Ibid., p. 216.
\textsuperscript{232} Ibid., p. 217.
\textsuperscript{233} Ibid., p. 215.
\textsuperscript{234} Ibid., p. 214.
federalism by arguing that Adam was given the responsibility to assume the role of covenant head for all his posterity, and that the guilt and punishment for his initial disobedience has now made his offspring guilty and liable to punishment without equivocation. On the other hand, as we will see below, Christ takes on the same representative role by becoming the Mediator of the covenant of grace, but this time with the consequences of this being justification and new life for the elect.\textsuperscript{235}  

As mentioned above, Berkhof espouses the view that the covenant of grace has as its basis the covenant of redemption established between the Father and the Son in eternity. In fact, he argues that the historical covenants between God and humans have as their archetype the covenant life amongst the persons of the Trinity with their own distinctive roles for the redemption of the elect. He also describes this intra-Trinitarian covenant as the eternal prototype of the covenant of grace.\textsuperscript{236} That is why the plan of salvation, Berkhof maintains, was included in the eternal decree or counsel of God.\textsuperscript{237} In this covenant arrangement, then, the Son takes on the role of the executor of this redemptive plan decreed from eternity. He becomes, in this role, the Surety of the covenant of grace by promising to atone for the sins of the elect by bearing the necessary punishment and meeting the strict demands of the law on their behalf.\textsuperscript{238} More specifically, the Father required three duties from the Son in order for him to become this atoning sacrifice for his people and provide them with justification and life: 1) like them, the Son had to assume human flesh by being born of a woman with all the infirmities attached to it; 2) he should be placed under the divine law, not only in a natural way but also in a federal and penal

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\textsuperscript{235} Berkhof, drawing from the argument of the Apostle Paul in Romans 5:12-21, calls the representative roles taken up by Adam and Christ as being parallel (Ibid).
\textsuperscript{236} Ibid., p. 270.
\textsuperscript{237} Ibid., p. 266.
\textsuperscript{238} Ibid., p. 267.
\end{flushright}
way in order to merit eternal life for them; and 3) having merited forgiveness and eternal life on their behalf that he should also apply to them the fruits of his merit: complete pardon and renewal of their lives through the power of the Holy Spirit. As a result of the Son’s successful completion of the duties required in the covenant of redemption, he becomes the perfect Mediator between the Father and the elect within the covenant of grace: the Son having earned the necessary righteousness by perfectly fulfilling the law (his active obedience) and willingly sacrificing himself on the cross (his passive obedience), the elect are imputed with his perfect obedience to the law (justification) and have all their sins taken away (forgiveness). Therefore, nothing inherent in the elect is the cause of their receiving a righteous standing in the divine courtroom and having their sins forgiven. On the grounds of what Christ did on their behalf as the Surety of the covenant of redemption, the guilt of the elect arising from Adam’s original sin is reversed and they stand completely forgiven and justified. In this way, Berkhof is able to keep law and gospel clearly distinct in regards to the justification of the elect sinner.

As expected, Berkhof, like the Reformed thinkers discussed above, believes in the strict continuity of the covenant of grace throughout redemptive history. In his discussion of the relationship between the Sinaitic covenant and the Abrahamic covenant, he argues that the former covenant “somehow eclipsed” the free and gracious character of the latter covenant with all kinds of external ceremonies and forms, yet this “eclipsing” did not entail that the covenant with Abraham was brought to a halt or discontinued. Furthermore, basing his argument

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239 Ibid., p. 269.
240 Ibid., p. 523.
241 Ibid., pp. 296-297.
242 Ibid., p. 297. Berkhof’s use of the word “eclipsed” is problematic here and can lead to some confusion. A more appropriate word used would be “obscured” since the term “eclipsed” connotes blotting out or removal from sight (which the Mosaic covenant never did in regards to the Abrahamic covenant). The confusion is accentuated since Berkhof also maintains that the Sinai covenant is essentially the same as the Abrahamic covenant established many years before.
according to the Apostle Paul in Galatians 3, Berkhof argues that the law was never intended to displace the Abrahamic promise but was a means to serve the latter’s gracious ends. In other words, the covenant established at Sinai was essentially the same as the covenant established with Abraham 430 years prior (although the form differed).\textsuperscript{243} Therefore, the salvation of the elect within the nation of Israel during the Sinaitic dispensation was on the same foundation, which is the work of the Messiah revealed through ceremonies and types,\textsuperscript{244} as those living before the establishment of the Sinaitic covenant and those living during the new covenant dispensation. Although the covenant of grace was administered differently in the various periods of salvation history, the reception of the promise was always through faith in the Messiah/Christ and his perfect obedience to the law.\textsuperscript{245}

Even though Berkhof stresses the continuity of Scripture, in contrast to the perspective of the dispensationalists of his time, he does acknowledge that the Sinaitic and new covenants are discontinuous in certain respects. To prevent the collapse of the legitimate distinctions between law and grace, and thus the gracious character of the gospel, certain discontinuities between the two covenants must be clearly recognized and defined, according to Berkhof. For one thing, in contrast to the Abrahamic and new covenants, the Sinaitic covenant was truly a \textit{national} covenant where Church and State in large measure became one. Berkhof writes: “At Sinai the covenant became a truly national covenant. The civil life of Israel was linked up with the covenant in such a way that the two could not be separated.”\textsuperscript{246} Furthermore, and more significantly, the Sinaitic covenant contained a positive reminder to the Israelites of the strict demands of the covenant of works (even though it was not a republication of the covenant of

\textsuperscript{243} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{244} Ibid., p. 298.
\textsuperscript{245} Ibid., p. 280.
\textsuperscript{246} Ibid., p. 298.
works) and, thus, was made subservient to the covenant of grace. The Sinaitic covenant and its
law, therefore, served the purposes of the covenant of grace by (1) increasing the consciousness
of sin (Rom. 3:20; 4:15; Gal 3:19), and (2) being a tutor unto Christ (Gal. 3:24).

Finally, the strict requirements of the Mosaic law did not bestow salvation to the Israelite who faithfully kept
it but only allowed him or her to keep his or her standing in the theocratic nation and enjoy the external blessings associated with it. Instead, justification and salvation for the Israelite under the Sinaitic economy was based on the future sacrificial work of the coming Messiah—the salvific benefits of which being received through child-like faith in this gracious promise of God. Berkhof writes:

The giving of the law did not effect a fundamental change in the religion of Israel, but merely introduced a change in its external form. The law was not substituted for the promise; neither was faith supplanted by works. Many of the Israelites, indeed, looked upon the law in a purely legalistic spirit and sought to base their claim to salvation on the scrupulous fulfilment of it as a body of external precepts. But in the case of those who understood its real nature, who felt the inwardness and spirituality of the law, it served to deepen the sense of sin and to sharpen the conviction that salvation could be expected only from the grace of God. The essence of real piety was ever-increasingly seen to consist in a confident trust in the God of salvation….Even in the period of the law faith is distinctly soteriological, looking to the Messianic salvation. It is a trusting in the God of salvation, and a firm reliance on His promises for the future.

In this way Berkhof is able to maintain the continuity between the Old and New Testaments without conflating law and gospel when it came to justification and salvation.

Although Berkhof strongly asserts, like his orthodox Reformed predecessors, the gratuitous character of the covenant of grace based on Christ perfectly meeting the conditions of the covenant of works on behalf of the elect, he also recognizes that the covenant is mutually

247 Ibid.
248 Ibid.
249 Ibid., pp. 498-499.
binding and obliging. It is not mutually binding in the sense that believers are required to meet certain conditions *meritoriously* in order to obtain the blessings or that the “reception of every separate blessing of the covenant is dependent on a condition,” but rather, it is mutually binding in the sense that *conscious enjoyment* of the blessings of the covenant is dependent upon the exercise of faith. This exercise of faith, then, is necessary to enter the covenant and enjoy the blessing of justification, but can only be viewed as a necessary requirement in the *sine qua non* sense (as also asserted by Hodge). However, even this act of faith cannot be considered a requirement in the strict sense of the term since it is a divine gift brought about by the gracious work of regeneration. Although establishing the fact that faith is a requirement of the covenant of grace, the question still must be asked whether there are other non-meritorious requirements contained in the covenant. Berkhof believes so. He includes the process of sanctification—which is the gradual unfolding and completion of the covenant life on earth—as a “condition” of the covenant. This is akin to saying that justification and sanctification, though distinct blessings of the covenant of grace and being in union with Christ, can never be separated in a believer. In addition—due to the fact that the covenant of grace has a dual aspect to it—Berkhof argues

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250 Ibid., p. 280.
251 Ibid., pp. 280-281.
252 Ibid., pp. 280, 503.
253 He writes: “If in our purview we include not only the beginning, but also the gradual unfolding and completion of the covenant life, we may regard sanctification as a *condition* in addition to faith. Both are *conditions*, however, within the covenant” (Ibid., pp. 280-281, emphases added).
254 In regards to the relationship between justification and sanctification, Berkhof writes: “In justification the sure foundation is laid for that vital spiritual union with Christ which secures our sanctification. It really leads right on to the only conditions under which we can be truly holy in principle. The man who is justified also receives the spirit of sanctification, and is the only one who can abound in good works which will glorify God” (Ibid., p. 524).
255 Berkhof, following the covenantal ideas of Kuyper, Bavinck, and Geerhardus Vos, argues that the covenant of grace can be viewed as having two distinct sides (the so-called “dual aspect”): as a legal relationship and as a communion of life (ibid., p. 286). The *legal relationship side* of the covenant has to do with externals where there are outward demands and promises set forth before those who seek to enter the covenant and live according to its stipulations. Those who are connected to the covenant in this way include not only believers but also their children. On the other hand, the *communion of life side* of the covenant only pertains to the regenerate who are in living communion with Christ through faith. In the latter case, both sides of the covenant cannot be conceived as being separate but inextricably tied together (Ibid., pp. 286-287).
that adults “not merely take upon themselves the performance of certain external duties; nor do they merely promise in addition to this, that they will exercise saving faith in the future; but they confess that they accept the covenant with a living faith, and that it is their desire and intention to continue in this faith.”\textsuperscript{256} This living faith, Berkhof states elsewhere, is something “that is fruitful in good works.”\textsuperscript{257} These good works also provide evidence that a person genuinely has the faith that issues in salvation, which itself is a gift from God.\textsuperscript{258} The covenant of grace, then, is both unilateral and bilateral: it is unilateral in the sense that Christ has fulfilled all the legal requirements of the law on behalf of the elect so that they do not need to merit justification and eternal life through their own efforts at keeping the law; it is bilateral in the sense that faith is required to enjoy the benefits of the covenant and that the evidence of being in this covenant is a living and working faith that perseveres.\textsuperscript{259} Therefore, Berkhof’s covenant theology does

\textsuperscript{256} Ibid., p. 287.
\textsuperscript{257} Ibid., p. 521.
\textsuperscript{259} One of the more interesting aspects of Berkhof’s covenant theology is his understanding of the relationship between the unregenerate members of the visible church and the covenant of grace. Unlike the view of the majority opinion among the Reformed divines since the post-Reformation period, Berkhof argues that unregenerate persons within the visible church may be considered actual members of the covenant of grace (not merely partakers of the external benefits of the covenant, as argued by the likes of Turretin). He gives examples like Ishmael, Esau, the wicked sons of Eli, and the great majority of the Jews during the time of Jesus and the apostles who belonged to the covenant people and shared in the covenant promises yet were unregenerate (\textit{Systematic Theology}, p. 288). According to Berkhof, these people do not receive the full saving benefits of the covenant of grace, yet they belong to the covenant in these ways: 1) they belong to it as far as being bound to the responsibilities contained in it (where they are duty-bound to believe and repent); 2) they belong to it in the sense that they may lay claim to the promises of God; 3) they belong to it due to the fact that they are subject to its ministrations; and 4) they belong to it in so far as they receive the common (or external) blessings of the covenant (ibid., p. 289). That is why Berkhof even argues that the covenant of grace can be broken by those who are in it, even though the covenant \textit{in principle} is eternal and inviolable. The only difference between the elect and the non-elect within the covenant of grace is that the former will never break the covenant through apostasy, while the latter will break it by failing to meet its requirements, and thus, be constituted as covenant violators (ibid.). A critical problem of this view is that Berkhof fails to explain how the essential distinction between the elect and the non-elect in the covenant can be defined with any clarity. If the non-elect within the covenant of grace can enjoy the common blessings of the covenant and even act and feel like the elect for some period of time, how is it possible for a person who has entrusted himself or herself to Christ by faith to have the assurance that he or she will persevere to the end and not be found in the company of the reprobates? If this view is embraced, the assurance of being justified is something that a believer cannot truly have until he or she is glorified at the eschaton. The believer, at most, can only hope that he or she is not a reprobate who will one day act treacherously.
maintain the Reformation’s dichotomous law-gospel paradigm in regards to the justification of the sinner, while insisting that the justified are still bound to the law of God and will demonstrate this, through the power of the Spirit, by persevering not only in faith but also in holiness.\textsuperscript{260}

\section*{2.8 Conclusion}

The purpose of the chapter was to provide a historical overview of covenant thought by notable thinkers within the Reformed tradition since the Reformation period. We have argued that Reformed covenant theology has its roots in Calvin despite the fact that he never fully developed a covenant theology in his writings. The seedbed of later covenantal or federalist thought, however, was drawn from his view that law and gospel are in an antithetical relationship to each other when it came to the justification of the sinner and his understanding of the strict continuity between the Old and New Testaments when it came to the salvation of the elect. Some, like Lillback and Murray, have even argued that there is a rudimentary type of \textit{foedus operum} doctrine in Calvin’s covenantal thought that influenced the way later Reformed divines formulated their own covenant theologies. We have also argued that during the post-Reformation period the covenant theology (or federalism) of the early Reformed theologians took on a more codified status and was framed in a more highly structured way. In our examination and analyses of the covenant theologies of post-Reformation Reformed thinkers like Watson, Turretin, Witsius, Gill, Hodge, and Berkhof, we conclude that despite some of the
to the covenant and its Mediator. Thus, Berkhof’s view that the circle of the covenant of grace is larger than the circle of election makes present assurance virtually unattainable and fails to appreciate the full salvific efficacy of the new covenant (as the climactic expression of the covenant of grace) as described in Jeremiah 31:31-34 and Ezekiel 36:26-27.
\textsuperscript{260}Ibid., p. 543.
differences and nuances on certain points of detail that all of them held to the fundamental
dichotomy between the covenants of works and grace. In essence, the covenant theology of the
Reformed tradition is a more elaborate and structured expression of the Reformation’s law-
gospel antithesis in regards to God’s act of free justification. As Jeon rightly notes: “[W]e need
to recognize that the dichotomy between the covenants of works and grace is nothing
fundamentally different from the antithesis between Law and Gospel, which was developed by
the Reformers and applied to the doctrine of justification by faith alone.”

Contrary to the opinions of modern scholars like Miller, Bruggink, Rolston, Torrance, and
Placher, the covenant theology of post-Reformation Reformed orthodoxy was not a system that
was developed to alleviate the more questionable aspects of Calvin’s doctrine of election nor
was it something that was formulated to give human responsibility a more pivotal place in
salvation against the backdrop of God’s predestinarian grace. Rather, the covenant theology of
post-Reformation Reformed orthodoxy was a result of bringing together insights from Calvin’s
thought on the relationship between works and grace in redemptive history and a codified
reinforcement of the Reformation’s dichotomous law-gospel paradigm. Although the Reformed
orthodox never entertained the notion, against the antinomians, that believers are freed from the
unchanging moral stipulations of God’s law, they consistently maintained that the justification of
believers before God is by grace through faith apart from any works of the law. This is based on
Christ perfectly fulfilling the strict requirements of the law and imputing his righteousness to
them for their salvation. The obedience that believers produce after they have been justified in
Christ and forgiven of all their sins is a result of their union with Christ and the power of the
Spirit working in their hearts, both of which are also blessings of the covenant of grace. This

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261 Jeon, p. 34.
obedience of faith, however, can only be viewed as the *evidence* and *fruit* of belonging to the covenant of grace. Thus, the charge that Reformed covenant theology either promotes works-righteousness legalism *or* antinomianism cannot stand when the evidence from the writings of the post-Reformation Reformed divines are carefully examined.
3. The Structural Features of Michael Horton’s Covenant Theology

The essential features found in Michael Horton’s covenant theology are generally in accord with the federalism of earlier Reformed thinkers we have examined in the previous chapter. Horton maintains the conventional dichotomy between the covenant of works (which he calls the covenant of creation) and covenant of grace found in post-Reformation Reformed orthodoxy in his own covenant theology. Even with the varied nuances in his covenant theology compared to the previous Reformed thinkers examined above he still maintains the rigid law-gospel antithetical paradigm in his own understanding of the subject. One of Horton’s main arguments for the viability of covenant or federal theology as a way of understanding Scripture’s redemptive-historical structure is based on the fact that divine-human relationships in the Bible are organized around the concept of the covenant. While many Reformed theologians of the past found the covenant concept useful in terms of coherently and systematically organizing the Reformers’ dichotomous law-gospel paradigm or as a way of upholding the gracious character of God’s salvific acts for fallen humankind, Horton posits that the covenant concept itself is the central motif in terms not only of establishing a consistent Christian theological method but also in terms of how we understand God’s actions in regard to the divine-human relationship in redemptive history (i.e., the “divine drama”).\(^1\) It is only through the covenant motif, he argues, that the Christian doctrine of salvation avoids becoming a timeless abstraction with no historical basis and that the drama of redemption as found in Scripture avoids falling into any type of

depersonalization. In addition, covenant theology itself provides the necessary hermeneutical grounding on important biblical-theological themes such as the relationship between law and grace, the interplay between divine sovereignty and human responsibility, and the structural unity of Scripture. Before we proceed to articulate and analyze Horton’s covenant theology, however, we will first discuss the concept of the covenant and its essential features as found in Scripture.

### 3.1 Defining the Meaning of Covenant

When discussions of the biblical covenants are brought to the fore it is essential to understand the root meanings of the word “covenant” as drawn from the Scriptural data and other ancient Near Eastern sources. This etymological study of a biblical concept is necessary for establishing a foundation to ascertain the concept and analyze the term for the purpose of understanding how covenantal thought in biblical and systematic theologies developed.

#### 3.1.1 The Old Testament Meaning of the Word “Covenant”

The word “covenant” found in the Old Testament is drawn from the Hebrew word בְּרִית. Scholars throughout the years have found it difficult to determine exactly what the word means. The difficulty is also exacerbated by the fact that the precise origin of the word is of uncertain derivation. Various scholars, however, have suggested that the word בְּרִית derives possibly from

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2 Ibid., pp. 131-139, 191-219.
the Hebrew word *bārā* which means “eat bread with”, the Akkadian noun *birītu* which means “fetter”, or the preposition *birīt* when translated means “between.” Others, however, argue that the word merely refers to a “bond” or “relationship” between two parties (whether between divine and human parties or between two human parties) who have made a commitment to each other through oaths and signs. If we take the covenant within the milieu of the Old Testament we must maintain that it is best to define it as a solemn commitment between two parties guaranteeing promises and obligations undertaken by one or both parties. However, there must also be careful consideration of the biblical context when determining the exact meaning of the term by recognizing the limited functions of etymology and the importance of defining the lexical parameters of the word according to its particular usage. In addition, the nature of a particular covenantal arrangement also depends on who the covenanting parties involved are. As Morton H. Smith points out, sometimes “covenants involve mutual bargaining between equal parties, but at other times they are sovereignly administered by God without any bargaining.” In other words, the *bĕrît* can either involve a mutually arranged oath between two equals or a superior (whether human or divine) unilaterally imposing promises and stipulations on an inferior. Therefore, the range of the meaning or uses of the term is much more flexible and broader within the parameters of the canonical collection of Scripture. Nevertheless, regardless

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9 As Anthony A. Hoekema states: “Whether the word *berith* denotes a two-sided covenant or a one-sided disposition (or arrangement) depends not on the word but on the parties who are involved in it” (Anthony A. Hoekema, *Herman Bavinck’s Doctrine of the Covenant* [Clover, SC: Full Bible Publications, 2007], p. 128).
of who arranges it and how it is enacted the covenant concept in general within the Old Testament context, despite any etymological implications, refers to two parties who bind themselves to each other with promises and obligations.

3.1.2 The New Testament Meaning of the Word “Covenant”

When one reads through the Septuagint (LXX) it will become obvious that the translators decided to render the Hebrew word bĕrît with the Greek word diathēkē. Ordinarily the Greek word for “contract” or “compact,” when it involves two equal contracting parties, is synthēkē. The significance of the decision by the Septuagint translators to use the word diathēkē rather than synthēkē is due to their recognition that biblical covenants established by God with human beings are not fully mutual but rather arrangements imposed by a superior (God) over his subjects (the human beneficiaries). Even though the diathēkē can be accepted or rejected by the “lesser” party it is still a covenant arrangement where only the superior party is allowed to set forth the stipulations and promises. However, this does not entail that the covenant is entirely unconditional or unilateral with no obligations to be fulfilled by the lesser party. In other words, even if the covenant is unilaterally established by the one in the superior position this does not extirpate the requirement of certain duties to be performed by the other (lesser) party. Therefore, scholars like J. B. Torrance are incorrect when they maintain that the covenants between God and human beings contain absolutely no conditions whatsoever based on the fact that the biblical

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10 Archer, p. 278.
writers used the word *diathēkē* rather than *synthēkē* when describing God’s covenant with his people.\textsuperscript{12}

In the New Testament itself, the word *diathēkē* is used some thirty times (with around half of them used in Hebrews). However, in two notable passages—Galatians 3:15 and Hebrews 9:15-17—the word *diathēkē* loses its normative definition. Many scholars argue that in these two passages the word is denoting a “will” or “testament” rather than a “covenant” (although the latter passage has more interpretative challenges than the former).\textsuperscript{13} The remaining usages of the word *diathēkē* in the New Testament carry with it the same, normative Old Testament meaning. Therefore, we can conclude that both in the OT and NT the words *bĕrît* and *diathēkē* describe a solemnly binding arrangement between two parties that contains both promises given and the required stipulations set forth for the parties involved.

Understanding the meaning of the words *bĕrît* and *diathēkē* does influence how we understand the development and structure of post-Reformation covenant theology. Some will object to the understanding of the biblical covenants given above by arguing that it is incompatible with the Reformers’ (and the Protestant scholastics’ after them) understanding of salvation—which is grounded solely on God’s grace apart from any human merit or worthiness. This argument will have some force if we understand the Promissory biblical covenants—particularly the Abrahamic and New—between God and his people as synergistic arrangements where the human creature *cooperates* with God’s grace to maintain or bring to final fulfillment his or her salvation. As we will argue in the rest of the study, however, post-Reformation


\textsuperscript{13} Estes, p. 793.
covenant or federal theology avoids falling into this danger by positing that all the stipulations required in the *covenant of grace* are fulfilled by God through Christ’s vicarious obedience and the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit for the elect.\(^{14}\)

### 3.2 The Covenant of Creation (or Works)

Like the vast majority of post-Reformation Reformed theologians Horton, as mentioned above, upholds the dual covenant of works and covenant of grace structure in his covenant theology where both are in antithetical relationship to each other. However, unlike many Reformed thinkers since the seventeenth century Horton prefers to designate the prelapsarian covenant as a *covenant of creation*.\(^{15}\) Despite this difference in regard to how the Edenic covenant should be designated, Horton is in agreement with previous Reformed thinkers regarding the essential characteristics of the covenant of creation (or works). In addition, although no explicit mention of a *bērît* is found in the first three chapters of Genesis, Horton maintains that the essential features of a covenant are implicitly present in the creation-fall narrative of Genesis 1-3.\(^{16}\) He also agrees with the majority opinion among the Reformed that the covenant of creation requires these elements to be recognized truly as a covenant of *works*: (1)

\(^{14}\) Wayne Grudem puts it this way: “The parties to this covenant of grace are God and the people whom he will redeem. But in this case Christ fulfills a special role as ‘mediator’ (Heb. 8:6; 9:15; 12:24) in which he fulfills the conditions of the covenant for us and thereby reconciles us to God” (Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994], p. 519, emphasis in original).


that Adam was created in integrity with the inherent ability to obey God’s commandments during the time of probation (he did not need grace to obey God in his original condition); (2) that law preceded grace—or the covenant of creation was a non-gracious and merit-based covenant which required *perfect* law-keeping in order for the inheritance to be obtained; (3) that the *reward* for satisfying the strict terms of the covenant was entrance into the *eschatological* Sabbath with everlasting confirmation in righteousness; and (4) that the consequences of Adam’s obedience or transgression were not restricted to him alone but affected all his posterity since he federally represents them as their covenant head. In addition, Horton also argues, like many of the orthodox Reformed before him, that the covenant of creation continues to be in force—demonstrated in God’s perpetual requirement for perfect obedience to his law—even after the fall. We will now proceed to discuss each of these elements in more detail below.

### 3.2.1 The Original Condition of Adam Under Probation

One of the key premises of Horton’s exclusively meritorious understanding of the covenant of creation is the view that Adam, in his original condition, had the intrinsic ability to obey God’s covenant stipulations with no need of grace. Horton sees this as an important feature for establishing the legal character of the covenant of creation because it maintains the integrity of the human creature (or humanity in “a state of unblemished nature”) by positing that he was created upright as God’s viceroy. It is only when Adam is viewed as a human creature with a

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19 Ibid., 83. We can see here that Horton echoes John Calvin’s understanding of Adam’s original state during the probationary period. Calvin writes: “In this integrity man by free will had the power, if he so willed, to attain
will originally unhindered by corruption that he can rightly take up the role as not only God’s vice-regent over creation but also as a true covenant partner with God. As Horton writes, “Adam is created in a state of integrity with the ability to obey God completely, thus rendering [sic] a suitable human partner. Further, God commands such complete obedience and then promises, upon that condition, the right to eat from the tree of life.”

Or to put it another way, the “covenant of creation is an arrangement that is suited to the intelligence, wisdom, and virtue of the human creature. Humanity, as created by God, was big enough, we might say, for the relationship.”

Horton’s insistence on the integrity of the original human creature, so as to protect the legal character of the covenant of creation, is based on his reaction against the views of creation espoused by Karl Barth and Roman Catholicism. Despite the differences between both regarding the character of creation in its original state, Horton argues that the logical end of both views is the same: the confusion (or conflation) of law and grace in God’s salvific purposes. In regard to Barth, Horton argues that his view sees God as relating to humanity only on the principle of grace since grace is always needed for those already created as sinners.

For Barth, God’s law eternal life....Therefore Adam could have stood if he wished, seeing that he fell solely by his own will. But it was because his will was capable of being bent to one side or the other, and was not given the constancy to persevere, that he fell so easily. Yet his choice of good and evil was free, and not that alone, but the highest rectitude was in his mind and will, and all the organic parts were rightly composed to obedience, until in destroying himself he corrupted his own blessings” (John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles [Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960], I.15.8, emphases added).

21 Ibid., p. 132.
22 Horton, *The Christian Faith*, p. 336. Horton is responding to Barth’s view that sin is not a result of the first parents’ transgression against God’s law but as a consequence of humanity being created in finitude. For Barth, there was no period in human history where human beings existed in a state of integrity. In fact, he is bold enough to claim (based on his reading of Psalm 51:5) that there “can be no question that the verse in the Psalm is not describing something which actually takes place in the world, forcing man to confess that he is from the very first a transgressor and in a state of sin and guilt; rather we have here a precise form of the confession itself, an even more radical statement of the ‘from his youth’ of Gen. 8:21. The verse tells us that there is no time prior to man’s transgression: the life of man is transgression from the very first” (*Church Dogmatics*, vol. 4/1, trans. G. W. Bromiley [New York: T & T Clark International, 2004], p. 500). Therefore, according to Barth’s understanding,
cannot exist apart from his grace—a grace that is revealed only in Jesus Christ.\textsuperscript{23} In fact, this grace always precedes the law in God’s salvific economy.\textsuperscript{24} The problem with this view, according to Horton, is that the law of God cannot exist apart from the gospel. This, in fact, emasculates Adam’s role as a true covenant partner of God before the fall who had the intrinsic ability to fulfill all of God’s law as stipulated in the covenant and merit the eschatological glory as the reward.

Horton also makes a similar argument against the Roman Catholic view of creation (with its attendant understanding of the relationship between nature and grace) and its resultant collapsing of the law-grace distinction as also found in Barth’s schema. According to Horton, Roman Catholicism translated the matter-spirit dualism found in ancient philosophy into a dualism of nature and grace. As a result, grace is always necessary for nature to be elevated beyond itself towards supernature (the *donum superadditum*).\textsuperscript{25} The Roman Catholic view of creation, therefore, has profound implications concerning how Adam’s role is to be understood during the prelapsarian period. One good example of what Horton has in mind comes from the pen of the thirteenth century Dominican theologian Thomas Aquinas. In his *Summa Theologica*, Thomas argues that the first man, Adam, was created in grace. He writes: “But the very rectitude of the primitive state, wherewith man was endowed by God, seems to require that, as others say, he was created in grace, according to Eccles. vii. 30, *God made man right*.\textsuperscript{26}”

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\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., pp. 44-45.
\textsuperscript{25} Horton, *The Christian Faith*, pp. 421-422.
\textsuperscript{26} Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1948), Ia q. 95 a.1, emphasis in original. The Roman Catholic doctrine of *concupiscence* (the
the Roman Catholic view, grace is needed even for the prelapsarian Adam if he wills to obtain the eschatological inheritance of glory. Salvation by *strict* merit, in other words, is ruled out as a possibility even under conditions where sin has yet to corrupt the human race. For Horton, the disconcerting aspect of this view is that not only does it denigrate the creation as originally created by God but collapses the law-gospel dichotomy found throughout Scripture by pitting grace not against sin but rather against nature. Therefore, according to Horton, Barth’s “grace precedes law” view and the Roman Catholic “grace perfects nature” view both arrive at the same conclusion: the conflation of law and grace in God’s redemptive purposes for humankind.

Horton views the upright condition of the first parents at creation and the merit-based understanding of the covenant of creation as inseparably connected. For Horton, it is necessary for Adam to be created without the aid or need of grace in order for his role as God’s covenant partner during the prelapsarian state to be a genuinely *legal* one. As he writes:

> Prior to the fall, humanity in Adam was neither *sinful* nor *confirmed* in righteousness. He was on trial: would he follow his covenant Lord’s pattern of working and resting, subduing and reigning, or would he go his own way and seek his own good apart from God’s Word? Created for obedience, he was entirely capable of maintaining himself in a state of integrity. Therefore, it is anachronistic to require grace or mercy as the foundation of

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28 Another contemporary orthodox Reformed theologian, Mark W. Karlberg, faults the post-Barth neoorthodox theologians for following the same line of thought. He writes: “According to Barthian interpretation, there is no contrast—no antithesis—between the Law and the Gospel. Barthians speak of law in grace, or grace in law. They point to the Pauline expression ‘the obedience of faith’ in support of their understanding of the correlativity between faith and works in the article of justification” (Mark W. Karlberg, *Gospel Grace: The Modern-day Controversy* [Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2003], p. 246).
creation and covenant in the beginning, as Karl Barth and many recent Reformed theologians do.\textsuperscript{29} In this way, when Adam violated the stipulations of the covenant it was he who \textit{solely} became responsible for breaking the covenant and, thus, could not fault God for not giving him enough grace to persevere. Adam had the natural ability (i.e., the freedom to choose) originally to obey God’s law and persevere in the covenant of creation. This was so because sin had yet to enter into the human race and corrupt the will and faculties of the human person.\textsuperscript{30} Only after the fall was divine grace needed to restore human beings to the condition that God had originally intended them to be. As Horton states: “Grace and mercy are shown to covenant-breakers and reflect the divine commitment to restore that which is fallen.”\textsuperscript{31} In contrast to the Roman Catholic view, there was nothing in creation before the fall that needed “perfecting” by God’s grace: creation, before the entrance of sin, was already in an upright condition with \textit{only} the risk of sin entering it and corrupting everything in it.\textsuperscript{32} Therefore, according to Horton, Adam’s original state of integrity \textit{and} his ability to attain everlasting confirmation in righteousness apart from grace is what makes the covenant of creation exclusively a meritorious and legal one (and hence, puts law \textit{before} grace during the prelapsarian period as the discussion below posits).

\textsuperscript{29} Horton, \textit{God of Promise}, pp. 83-84, emphases in original.
\textsuperscript{30} Horton, \textit{Lord and Servant}, p. 147.
\textsuperscript{31} Horton, \textit{God of Promise}, p. 93. Also, as Karlberg points out: “‘Grace’ as a term descriptive of God’s beneficence is not applicable to the pre-Fall situation. To be sure, God’s work in creating all things and fashioning his covenant-son, Adam, in his own image is exceedingly good and beneficent (Gen 1:31), but it is not ‘gracious.’ \textit{Grace is what is bestowed upon undeserving sinners}. Hence, the vital and necessary distinction between the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace” (Mark W. Karlberg, \textit{Federalism and the Westminster Tradition} [Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2006], p.12, emphasis in original). However, Karlberg’s definition seems more satisfactory since Horton assumes that “grace” and “mercy” are synonymous concepts. Rather, God’s mercy towards sinners becomes a reality when his grace meets their sin in Jesus Christ, and therefore, issues into the \textit{shalom} of forgiveness, reconciliation, and salvation (cf. Eph 2:4-7).
\textsuperscript{32} Horton writes: “Nature \textit{as} nature is in no need of supplemental grace for its perfection but is already oriented toward the perfection that is within Adam’s power to attain” (Horton, \textit{The Christian Faith}, p. 432, emphasis in original).
3.2.2 Law Preceding Grace during the Prelapsarian Period

The majority opinion among the post-Reformation Reformed orthodox, as indicated in the previous chapter, always maintained that law precedes (or has priority over) grace in God’s method of salvation throughout redemptive history. In the last century, however, as mentioned in the introductory chapter, this view has been challenged by scholars such as Barth and other contemporary Reformed theologians (J. B. Torrance, D. J. Bruggink, H. Rolston III, and W. C. Placher). According to these thinkers, the post-Reformation scholastics veered away from the theology of (unconditional) grace of Calvin and the Reformers by positing that God’s dealings with humankind began with the law rather than grace. The antipathy towards any notion of a covenant of works amongst these scholars is due in part to this rejection of the “law preceding grace” schema as found in the Westminster Standards and the works of numerous Reformed scholars during and after the seventeenth century. In essence, what the Reformed scholastics’ law-to-grace structure amounts to, according to these contemporary Reformed thinkers, is another form of legalism.

Horton, in response to these recent criticisms, argues that the “law preceding grace” structure as revealed in the covenant of creation is necessary in demonstrating God’s strict justice and character as a holy Judge of his human creatures. He writes: “The priority of law in the covenant of creation establishes that God cannot acquit the guilty nor simply forgive sinners. In the context of the covenant of creation, the law must be perfectly satisfied, either personally or representatively.” It is necessary, in other words, for the covenant of creation to be a covenant of works (or law) in order to establish the fact that God principally deals with his human

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33 Horton, Lord and Servant, p. 133.
creatures, before and after the fall, in accordance with his holy and strict justice.\footnote{Some may object to Horton’s (and Reformed orthodoxy’s) understanding of the matter by arguing that it prioritizes God’s justice over his love. However, Horton would respond to this objection by arguing that both God’s love and his strict demands under the law (or covenant of works) are integrally connected. This is due to the fact that God’s uncompromising demands under the law, according to him, is not antithetical to his love but rather an expression of it (and in a perfect way). Only when God’s strict justice found in the law (or covenant of works) is viewed abstractly and not within the context of his personal relationship with his human creatures can this objection have any force (cf. Michael S. Horton, “Obedience Is Better than Sacrifice,” The Law is not of Faith: Essays on Works and Grace in the Mosaic Covenant, eds. Bryan D. Estelle, J. V. Fesko, and David VanDrunen [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2009], p. 316).}

In fact, this understanding is consistent with Horton’s previous point that humanity was originally created in an upright condition without the need for grace (though the creation act itself was grounded in divine love)\footnote{Horton makes the worthwhile point that Christians must never confuse God’s grace with his love when it comes to God’s creation of the world and human beings. He writes: “The integrity of creation as natural is also affirmed by the recognition that it was conceived and formed in love, but not grace. Grace presupposes fault. It is true, of course, that God’s creation of the world and us in it is in no way conditioned by us, but that does not make it gracious” (Horton, The Christian Faith, p. 336, emphasis in original). Horton, however, could have been more careful with his terminology here since it is not so much that grace presupposes fault but that it is God’s mercy that presupposes fault.} and with the intrinsic ability to obey God’s law perfectly. Furthermore, the legal character of the covenant of creation is further established by the fact that human beings are innately aware of God’s law (the so-called “argument from conscience”). Following after the opinion of Johannes Cocceius (who also drew his ideas from Calvin), Horton argues that human beings know the reality of the covenant of creation through: (1) conscience, (2) the longing for eternal life, and (3) the daily and continual benefits that come to human beings in which they are then urged to seek God and to love, glorify, and thank him.\footnote{Horton, God of Promise, p. 92.} In a manner of speaking, then, human beings are “wired” to know the law because it is natural and universal (unlike the gospel).\footnote{Ibid., pp. 92-93. Heinrich Heppe puts it this way: “God founded His covenant with Adam in the first instance by setting up the law, inscribing in his inmost part, as man’s ideal and as the norm he must follow, that which is the expression of His own holy nature. I.e. God revealed the law to man in the form of the law of nature, this revelation of the law being so vouchsafed to man, that he recognized it by his own self-consciousness” (Heinrich Heppe, Reformed Dogmatics, trans. G. T. Thomson [Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2007], p. 291, emphasis in original).} Horton concludes, therefore, that whatever “gracious support God gives in this life to
those who remain ‘in Adam,’ the final judgment will be according to works and *entire perfection* will be the only acceptable standard.”

Horton’s advocacy of the exclusively legal character of the covenant of creation (i.e., the law preceding grace in paradise) is not only due to his desire to defend God’s just and holy character but also due to a desire to uphold the graciousness of the gospel. Some may find this theological move peculiar considering that this turns grace apparently on its head by prioritizing law *over* gospel. However, Horton and many other orthodox Reformed thinkers in the past assert that the only way for the gospel—which is given after the fall—to be uncompromised by any type of works-righteousness legalism is by maintaining the strict dichotomy between law and gospel in terms of how a person is justified before God. According to Horton, the problem with finding grace in the covenant of creation is that it collapses the proper distinction between these two diametrically opposed paths (the path of the law or the path of the gospel) to salvation: “If we begin with an a priori definition of covenant that requires grace, we will miss the sharp distinction between law and promise that we find in Scripture.” This is the problem Horton finds in some contemporary forms of covenant theology and law-gospel hermeneutics. When he criticizes some of these contemporary revisions of classic covenant theology or post-Reformation law-gospel hermeneutics he has in mind people like Norman Shepherd, N. T. Wright, other proponents of the New Perspective on Paul (NPP), and those who belong to the so-

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38 Horton, *God of Promise*, p. 94, emphasis added.
39 Ibid., p. 97. In another place, Horton is more emphatic about this dichotomy: “Everything in the Bible that reveals God’s moral expectations is *law* and everything in the Bible that reveals God’s saving purposes and acts is *gospel*” (Michael S. Horton, *Christless Christianity: The Alternative Gospel of the American Church* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008], p. 109, emphases in original). Some may object to this rigid understanding of the law-gospel dichotomy by pointing out that Jesus did not set the antithesis between law (or Torah) and gospel so sharply (for example, some of the sayings about the law in his Sermon on the Mount [cf. Matt 5:17-20]). Horton, however, would argue that this antithesis *only* applies when it deals with the justification of the sinner. As we will see in chapter five (§ 5.3), Horton certainly does view the law as having a regulative function for the Christian in his or her pilgrimage of faith.
called Federal Vision movement. Horton argues that these “revisionists”—by insisting that law and grace are never in an antithetical relationship—turn the law into a “grace modified” one where the law no longer becomes a strict requirement placed before sinners so that they can come to the realization that they can never merit righteousness before God through it. Rather, these revisionists turn the law into a “kinder” or “gentler” version for believers to fulfill for their justification by lowering the law’s strict requirements and characterizing it as a “law of grace” (i.e., turning the law into another “gospel”). The result of this is that the believer’s eschatological justification is not entirely based on Christ’s perfect righteousness to the law imputed to him or her but is in some way partially dependent upon his or her non-meritorious good works done after conversion. As Horton writes:

Monocovenantalism old and new attempts to combine merit and grace, and the result is that both concepts are weakened. The place traditionally given in Reformed theology to Christ’s full and meritorious obedience as our representative is eclipsed or even denied, while our own obedience (however weak) is seen as a condition of justification.

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40 Although recognizing some of the interpretive differences between Norman Shepherd, N. T. Wright, other advocates of the NPP (e.g., E. P. Sanders, James D. G. Dunn, etc.), and those within the Federal Vision movement (and even those within this movement do not agree on every detail on how to understand the law’s relationship to the gospel), he posits that all these thinkers share the same basic conclusion that there is no prioritization of the law over grace in Scripture, that all the biblical covenants are salvifically-oriented with the same promise and demand structure, and that the antithesis between law and gospel is an illegitimate way to understand how God relates to humankind in redemptive history (an understanding Horton calls, following after Jeong Koo Jeon and others, “monocovenantalism”) (cf. Michael S. Horton, “Which Covenant Theology?,” *Covenant, Justification, and Pastoral Ministry*, ed. R. Scott Clark [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2007], pp. 211-221).


42 Horton writes: “Every command in Scripture is a form of law, telling us what we must do. The gospel is not a new law, a relaxation of moral rigor, but the free announcement of forgiveness and justification in Christ alone” (Horton, *The Christian Faith*, p. 665). He equates the views of modern revisionist Reformed theologians as coming to similar conclusions as the Medieval theologians, post-Reformation Arminians in Continental Europe, and “neonomians” in England such as Richard Baxter who relax the demands of the law yet turn the gospel partially into a form of works-righteousness doctrine by making it into a “new law” (Horton, “Which Covenant Theology?,” p. 205).

43 Ibid., pp. 200-201.
By denying the law’s priority over grace and by weakening the law’s strict requirements, Horton argues that the revisionists’ reinterpretation of Reformed covenant theology (and their revised law-gospel hermeneutic) undermines the *sola gratia* and *sola fide* character of justification by positing that the law is “gracious” and, therefore, fulfillable for eschatological justification by those empowered by the Spirit through the new birth. Horton finds this new hermeneutic problematic because it compromises the freeness of the gospel (apart from works) and God’s favourable forensic declaration of sinners on the grounds of Christ’s work alone—biblical truths, according to him, espoused passionately by the Reformers and their heirs. Horton, therefore, like many of the Reformed covenant theologians before him, emphatically sets forth the notion that the law must precede grace in order to uphold the justice of God and maintain the proper distinction between law and gospel (especially in regard to justification). Horton finds this proper order and distinction grounded on the meritorious nature of the covenant of creation (or works) doctrine. By fully recognizing the legal and works-based character of the covenant of creation Horton maintains that we are then able to uphold the purely gracious character of justification and avoid falling into a type of “law-softened” evangelical legalism.

44 Robert L. Reymond, another Reformed theologian critical of the views of the revisionists, puts the matter this way (through his critique of Daniel P. Fuller’s view of the relationship between law and grace [another form of monocovenantalism]): “The irony in all this is that Fuller declares that this ‘grace’ does its work of justification through what he calls the ‘work, or obedience, of faith,’ insisting that many Scripture passages make good works the *instrumental cause* of justification (he is quick to insist that such good works are not meritorious). Accordingly, a view that insists upon ‘grace’ everywhere winds up with true grace nowhere and a kind of works principle everywhere, with his representation of the relation of works to justification coming perilously close to what late medieval theologians would have called works having not condign but congruent merit” (Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* [Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998], pp. 431-432, emphasis in original).

45 John Bolt, another Reformed theologian sympathetic to the classic federalist view, succinctly points out that “dropping the covenantal notion in the creation stories threatens the classic views of the atonement and of salvation” (John Bolt, “Why the Covenant of Works Is a Necessary Doctrine: Revisiting the Objections to a Venerable Reformed Doctrine,” *By Faith Alone: Answering the Challenges to the Doctrine of Justification*, eds. Gary L. W. Johnson and Guy P. Waters [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006], p. 185). Bolt also insists that the prelapsarian covenant must be understood as having a fundamentally legal/forensic character while at the same time not reducing it to “a legal one” (Ibid., p. 184).
3.2.3 The Reward of the Covenant of Creation: The Eschatological Sabbath

Like the majority of the orthodox Reformed theologians, Horton argues that if Adam had successfully completed his probationary trial under the covenant of creation he would have been rewarded with a type of life that was superior to and more glorious than the one he was given at the time of creation. God’s ultimate purpose for the first parents and their descendants was not for them to remain in perpetuity in the Garden of Eden (despite the abundant blessings associated with it) but to attain to a higher life that was characterized by glory and greater magnificence. Creation, in other words, was not the goal of God’s purpose for humankind but only the beginning of that path to the eschatological telos. As Horton maintains: “Creation was the stage—the ‘beautiful theater’—for God’s drama, not an end in itself. Life in the garden was not intended to simply go on in perpetuity but was merely the point of departure for the great march of creation behind God’s vice-regent into the everlasting life of God’s own Sabbath-rest.” In addition, human identity “was not finished at creation but was to be perfected by fulfilling the trial of the original covenant, winning the right to eat from the tree of everlasting life and righteousness.” Therefore, for Horton, the goal of creation and the covenant of creation was not for the human race to exist continually in Eden but for them to obtain a higher quality of life that went beyond the corporeal existence that was already given to them at creation.

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46 Horton, Lord and Servant, pp. 80, 95.
As mentioned above, the notion of merit or reward is pivotal in Horton’s understanding of the legal character of the covenant of creation and the goal set forth in it. He makes this clear when he writes:

Humankind was created to pass through the probationary period and attain the right to eat from the Tree of Life. Thus, the telos of human existence was not fully present in creation, but was held out as a future reward. Humankind would lead creation in triumphal procession into the consummation, represented by the Tree of Life. Adam was to imitate God’s sovereign session and, as a creature, climb the steps of eternal glory to claim his prize for himself and his posterity, and take his place as vassal king under the great Suzerain.49

As we can see here Horton wants to emphasize that what Adam was commissioned to acquire under the terms of the covenant of creation was not a gift grounded in divine grace but a reward bestowed upon him for successfully completing the probationary trial as a morally responsible viceroy of God’s creation. Although the covenant of creation was established by God’s initiative and freedom, the character of the covenant is exclusively legal (similar to the Near Eastern suzerain-vassal treaties) in which God deals with humanity not according to grace but according to justice.50

In recent years, however, this exclusively legal understanding of the covenant of creation/works has come under heavy criticism not only from Reformed theologians of neoorthodox persuasion but among Reformed scholars with strong evangelical convictions (especially those within the Federal Vision movement). One such scholar, Peter J. Leithart, has criticized the traditional federalist understanding of the covenant of works due to this very point.

49 Horton, God of Promise, p. 106, emphases added.
In contending against the view of Bryan D. Estelle, Leithart posits: “Life was not something Adam had to earn. He had to pass no test. The only ‘qualification’ for eating from the tree of life was hunger, and trust in the God who all but handed Adam the fruit.” In addition, he maintains, the sharp discontinuity between humanity’s salvific (or covenant) relationship to God before and after the fall should be done away with. This is due to the fact that God sets forth the same conditions for the enjoyment of eternal life and fellowship with him on both sides of the fall. As he states:

The original covenant was a covenant of access; the postlapsarian covenant is premised on Adam’s exclusion. The difference between the covenants has nothing to do with how one has fellowship with God, or receives rewards from God, or with the shape that the life of godliness takes. In the garden and out, what God requires of Adam is the “obedience of faith.”

Another revisionist theologian, Norman Shepherd, shares a similar concern with Leithart regarding the classic Reformed view of the covenant of works when he writes:

Since Adam was created righteous and holy he was just in the judgment of his Creator from the very beginning of his existence. That is to say, he was created as a justified man. He did not have to become righteous or holy. He was not created morally neutral or indifferent. He did not have to do anything in order to earn or achieve the status of a justified person, or to enter into a justified state. We read nothing of that kind in Genesis 1, 2, or 3.

Shepherd, like Leithart, wants to eradicate any notion of merit as he views it as a dichotomizing hermeneutic that has left a problematic legacy in traditional Reformed theology in regard to how it understands God’s salvific relationship to his people. As another way of putting it, if one

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53 Ibid., p. 189, emphases in original.
removes the concept of merit altogether, whether in the prefall or postfall stage, the apparent discrepancies between Paul and James, law and gospel, divine grace and human responsibility, and the Promissory covenants and the Mosaic covenant are entirely eliminated.  

Horton, on the other hand, finds these recent theological moves among some Reformed theologians as being problematic due to their undermining of the Reformers’ doctrine of grace and the free justification of sinners through their obscuring of the legitimate discontinuities between promise and law, the Promissory covenants and the Mosaic covenant, and faith and works. For Horton, it is imperative that the meritorious character of the covenant of creation be uncompromisingly maintained in order uphold the view that Christ—as the Last Adam—earned for us a perfect righteousness that will stand before the Father’s judgment seat (which the first Adam failed to do) through his flawless obedience to God’s law within the covenant (his “active obedience”). He writes:

The terms of the covenant of creation cannot be set aside, nor their sanctions simply abandoned. Yet because of his extravagant love, God himself became human and fulfilled in the place of his elect the righteousness required in this original covenant. This is what Reformed theology understands as the active obedience of Christ.  

The only way that the active obedience of Christ can be maintained as a legitimate approach to understanding what Christ did on behalf of his elect is by understanding the covenant of creation as an exclusively merit-based covenant. As Horton states, “Jesus is the faithful Israelite who fulfilled the covenant of works so that we could through his victory inherit the promises according to a covenant of grace.”  

of creation goes hand-in-hand with the “law preceding grace” structure as discussed above which was codified in Reformed orthodoxy (and along with it, the strict law-gospel dichotomy in relation to justification which was so highly cherished by the Reformers). In addition, the strictly legal character of the covenant of creation keeps the two antithetical modes to justification and salvation always apart: the one by perfect obedience to the law (which no sinner can fulfill personally) and the other by God’s grace alone through Christ’s righteousness alone. The importance of this particular understanding of the covenant of creation (or works), as we will discuss below, is that it provides the solid basis for understanding the covenant of grace as being wholly gracious in character, and with it, provides a sound defense for the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone, the necessity of positive imputation for the sinner’s full acceptance before God, and the permanency of salvation in regard to covenant members.

3.2.4 The Effects of Adam’s Original Disobedience to his Posterity: Adam as Federal Head

Like many of the orthodox Reformed theologians prior, Horton argues that the consequence of either Adam’s obedience or disobedience to God’s law within the covenant of creation would not be restricted to him alone but would be passed down to his posterity. This is a result of the binding solidarity the human race has with Adam—by which, in turn, he acts as their federal head. If Adam had obeyed God and fulfilled the terms of the original covenant the

58 As Horton states: “We need the law and the gospel, but each does different things. When we confuse law and gospel, we avoid both the trauma of God’s holiness and the liberating power of his grace” (Horton, Christless Christianity, p. 124).
righteousness that resulted from his perfect obedience would be imputed to his progeny and they would also forever be confirmed in righteousness. Horton writes: “If Adam obeyed, out of covenant love (ḥesed) for his Creator and his fellow creatures, he would win the right to eat from the Tree of Life, confirmed in everlasting peace and righteousness. And as our covenantal head, he would win this right not only for himself but for all of his posterity.”⁵⁹ This is also the basis, as we will discuss below, for the Last Adam, Jesus Christ, earning a perfect righteousness by his uncompromising obedience to God’s law for his elect which then becomes the sole ground for their justification before God in time and at the eschaton.

In terms of Adam’s original disobedience, Horton argues that the negative consequences passed down to his posterity as a result of his original sin not only affected them relationally and existentially but also legally before God. He writes:

> A canonical reading of this episode [Genesis 1-3] brings into still sharper focus the corporate and representational character of Adam’s covenantal role. Not only was he in covenant with God; all of humanity is represented as being in covenant with God by virtue of participating federally in Adam. Indeed, all of creation was in some sense judged in Adam (Gen. 3:17-18; Rom. 8:20).⁶⁰

The problem for those still in Adam is not only that their minds, bodies, and spirits are corrupted by Adam’s original sin but also that they are legally implicated with Adam as transgressors of the law and covenant violators. Every person, therefore, is “judged guilty in Adam, and the effects of this curse extend even to the rest of creation (Ge 3:17-18; Ro 8:20).”⁶¹ Horton, like many orthodox Reformed theologians before him,⁶² understands fallen humanity’s solidarity

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⁶² A. T. B McGowan presents the conventional federalist understanding of Adam’s role in humanity’s guilt when he writes: “When Adam broke the covenant (Hosea 6:7) he did so as a public figure on behalf of humanity and therefore his sin was imputed to all those whom he represented in the covenant, that is, everyone except
with Adam as the basis for their implication in the original guilt. In recent years, however, some have questioned this “imputative” understanding of Adam’s sin and its legalistic implications for his posterity for its dualistic connotations. For example, the neo-orthodox Reformed theologian Otto Weber writes:

“Imputation” is understood as “immediate imputation” (the reckoning of Adam’s sin and the “liability” it renders to every man) and as “mediate imputation” (the reckoning of effective guilt which every man has assumed on the basis of the sinfulness passed on to him, his sinful condition [habitus]). The distinction we find in the Reformed Orthodox between “imputed sin” and “inherent sin” results in the same dualism: “inherent sin” is then also imputed.

This dualism, however, is only apparent when we recognize that the sinner’s personal sinful acts flow from his or her corrupt nature as a result of Adam’s transgression which adds to the original guilt. The problem that Weber highlights can be overcome if it is recognized, as Horton points out, that sin “is first of all a condition that is simultaneously judicial and moral, legal and relational,” and that “we sin because we are sinners rather than vice versa.”

Others, like Barth, view any notion of sin being hereditary (whether through immediate or mediate imputation) as being fraught with serious theological problems. As he states:

“[H]owever we may conceive and express this, there can be no doubt that the idea of a hereditary sin which has come to man by propagation is an extremely unfortunate and mistaken one.” To put it another way, the problem with the traditional Reformed view of original sin (and its

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66 Ibid., p. 427, emphasis in original.
67 Barth, Church Dogmatics, vol. 4/1, p. 500. It is natural that Barth takes this position considering that he interprets Genesis 1-3 as a “biblical saga” and rejects Adam as a historical person who once lived on earth (Ibid., p. 508).
transmission) is that it has a “hopelessly naturalistic, deterministic and even fatalistic ring” to it that only leads to a contradiction in itself (*contradictio in adiecto*). Horton’s response to Barth’s (and similar) objections to the traditional Reformed view is that if hereditary sin (along with the *imputatio* of Adam’s transgression) is done away with this renders Paul’s federalist parallelism between Adam and Christ as found in Romans 5:12-21 unintelligible. In other words, by adopting Barth’s approach on this subject there no longer is “any historical basis for Christ’s work as the Last Adam, undoing the curse and fulfilling the terms of the covenant of creation.”

Therefore, it is only by embracing the view that the historical Adam’s original sin is *imputed* to his posterity that Christ as the federal head—who *merits* a perfect righteousness for the elect by his successful obedience to the covenant of creation—makes Paul’s federalist parallelism in Romans 5:12-21 theologically intelligible.

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68 Ibid., p. 501. In response to the classic Reformed view of original sin, Barth offers the suggestion that the *peccatum originale* is merely the repetition of Adam’s sin committed by every human being throughout history. No human being, however, has to be like Adam and every one of them is freely responsible for their own sins (Ibid., p. 509). G. C. Berkouwer, sympathetic to Barth’s and neoorthodoxy’s criticism of the traditional federalist view of the imputation of Adam’s sin, argues in another trajectory against the traditional view when he states that one cannot speak “of a ‘similarity’ between the *imputatio primi peccati* and the *imputatio justitiae Christi*. The ‘as if,’ in the case of salvation, is a thankful confession of faith and *aliena justitia*; but there is no similar ‘as if’ or *alienum* in the situation of our guilt” (G. C. Berkouwer, *Sin*, trans. Philip C. Holtrop [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971], p. 453).


70 Horton, “Post-Reformation Reformed Anthropology,” p. 53. Although Hoekema finds it questionable to describe what is happening in the opening chapters of Genesis as a covenant of works between God and Adam, he still maintains that the “doctrinal truths” that lie behind the covenant of works are still present there. As a result, the parallelism between Adam and Christ as covenantal representatives of unbelievers and believers, respectively, still stands. He writes: “Though we should not...read the opening chapters of Genesis as a description of a ‘covenant of works’ between God and Adam before the Fall, we must indeed maintain the doctrinal truths that lie behind the concept of the covenant of works. We must, for example, insist that Adam was indeed the head and representative of the human race that was to descend from him; that he was given a ‘probationary command’ to test his obedience; that his disobedience to that command brought sin, death, and condemnation into the world; and that he was therefore a type of Christ, our second head, called ‘the last Adam’ in 1 Corinthians 15:45, through whom we are delivered from the sad results of the first Adam’s sin” (Anthony A. Hoekema, *Created in God’s Image* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986], p. 121, emphases added).
3.2.5 The Perpetual Nature of the Covenant of Creation

One of the hallmark traits of the covenant of creation/works doctrine of orthodox Reformed federalism is its perpetualness even after the failure of the first parents to abide by its stipulations.71 Horton, like many other Reformed thinkers, views the covenant of creation as remaining in force even after Genesis 3. He writes:

The fall could not eradicate the covenantal relationship between God and humanity; but now, after the covenant curses, humanity is divided between Cain’s proud city (Ge 4:17-24) and the city of God represented by Seth. Though upheld by God’s common grace, those who do not call on the name of Yahweh for salvation remain “in Adam,” under the reign of condemnation and death according to the original covenant of works.72

The continuing normativity of the covenant of creation is also established on the very fact of who human beings are by nature: creatures made in God’s image. In other words, the covenantal relationship between God and humankind is “not something added later but is intrinsic to our creation in God’s image. A legal command to love God and neighbor and to subdue any ethical threat to this reign of God, this original covenant is indelibly written on the human conscience.”73 Therefore, all humanity outside of Christ are still under the legal sanctions of the covenant of creation/works and are judged according to its strict stipulations. As Horton puts it another way, the “absolute, personal, perfect obedience to God’s law is the measure for acceptance in the covenant of works that God made with all of humanity in Adam.”74 However, due to sin, all human beings outside of Christ will be condemned for falling short of its

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71 Reymond’s statement reflects many orthodox Reformed thinkers on this subject: “It is true that the covenant of works per se contained no provision for redemption from sin in the event that Adam should fall, but this fact should not be construed to mean that the covenant of works is no longer in force or was rendered null and void by the entrance of the covenant of grace” (Reymond, A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith, p. 440).
73 Ibid., p. 384, emphasis added.
74 Horton, God of Promise, p. 38.
uncompromising requirements as revealed in God’s law. As Horton states, “According to Paul, no one will be justified by ‘works of the law,’ not because there has never been an arrangement in which that was possible (i.e., creation), but because since the fall (which the history of Israel recapitulates), all of humanity (including Israel) is now ‘in Adam.’”

Horton’s rationale for embracing this approach is that it provides the theological basis for the law-gospel dichotomy that runs through the whole of Scripture. He locates the post-Reformation federalist understanding of the covenant of works/covenant of grace antithesis as originating in the Reformers’ particular law-gospel hermeneutic: “According to the federal theologians themselves, the covenant of creation/works-covenant of grace scheme was a further elaboration of the Reformation’s broader law-gospel distinction.” In fact, it is Reformed orthodoxy’s antithetical covenant of works/covenant of grace paradigm that provides the structural answer to resolving the tension between the biblical passages that talk about the strict demands of the law and passages that talk about God’s unilateral promises (i.e., the gospel). As Horton puts it: “Within the context of the covenant, one can distinguish two subsets of divine discourse—two distinct illocutionary forces or stances: commanding and promising. This is one of the insights of the Reformers and their successors. Both Luther and Calvin insisted upon the distinction (though not separation) between law (command) and gospel (promise).” The continuing normativity of the covenant of creation/works after Genesis 1-3, then, is further indication that humanity is still under the law and are obligated to fulfill it perfectly for justification and life. As a result, the clear distinction between law and gospel remains in place.

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75 Horton, Lord and Servant, p. 128, emphasis in original.
76 Ibid.
77 Horton, Covenant and Eschatology, p. 136. Horton states elsewhere: “While there are certainly more than two explicit covenants in Scripture, they can all be grouped around two kinds of arrangements: conditional covenants that impose obligations and unconditional covenants that announce a divine promise” (Horton, God of Promise, p. 36, emphasis in original).
throughout Scripture without any confusion of the two. For Horton, therefore, the importance of understanding the covenant of creation as still being in force provides the sure foundation for upholding the proper law-gospel distinction and providing the theological rationale for Christ’s role as the Last Adam who perfectly fulfills the law on behalf of sinners for their justification.78

3.2.6 Excurses: The Relationship Between the Covenant of Creation/Works and the Mosaic Covenant in Horton’s Covenant Theology

Ever since the post-Reformation period, Reformed theologians have never been in unanimous agreement in terms of how to understand the relationship between the covenant of creation/works and the Mosaic covenant. Although there has never been a consensus on this subject within Reformed orthodoxy, the tradition has generally narrowed the answers to three possible ones: 1) that the Mosaic covenant is purely an administration of the covenant of grace realized in salvation history (John Murray, William J. Dumbrell, and Norman Shepherd); 2) that the Mosaic covenant is a further administration of the covenant of grace and functions as a legal covenant based on the principle of works (Francis Turretin, Charles Hodge, and Abraham

78 One of the major criticisms that is frequently leveled against Horton’s and Reformed orthodoxy’s understanding of God’s “dualistic” dealings with humanity is that it turns the Triune God into a “schizophrenic” divine entity where at one level he deals with humanity solely on their personal merits but on another level he deals with them solely on the basis of his pure mercy and grace. Thus, according to many modern critics of classic federalism (along with its sharp law-gospel dichotomy), this makes God have two irreconcilable salvific wills existing in him at the same time—which virtually amounts to a duplicity in God’s dealings with humankind. However, this criticism is only valid if it is shown that God’s salvific ways with humanity are always ad initium based on grace and mercy. Since God is not only merciful and gracious but holy and just, he requires the necessary uncompromising obedience from human beings if they seek to be justified and escape his wrath (cf. Nahum 1:3; Rom 3:9-20; Gal 3:10; James 2:10). Horton and Reformed orthodoxy would argue that due to the fact that all human beings fall short of God’s righteousness because of sin they cannot be justified on their own merits by obeying the law (Rom 3:23). God’s grace, on the other hand, is shown to fallen human beings in Jesus Christ—who satisfies the law and gives that righteousness to those who believe (i.e., the gospel) (2 Cor 5:21; Gal 3:13). Therefore, in this way, God’s justice and grace come together in Jesus Christ.
Kuyper); and 3) that the Mosaic covenant is in some sense a republication of the covenant of works and only pertained to the nation of Israel and her relationship to the earthly-typological kingdom in Canaan (John Preston, Meredith G. Kline, and Mark W. Karlberg). Horton agrees with the third perspective that the Mosaic covenant is in some sense a republication of the covenant of creation/works realized in salvation history. Horton’s reasoning for adopting this position is due to the fact that he characterizes the covenant of creation and the Mosaic covenant as both being legal and conditional suzerain-vassal type covenants. In fact, he states that the “form and content” of the Mosaic covenant “are those of a suzerainty covenant and are evident also in the covenant between God and Adam (Gen. 2:16-17).” Furthermore, like the covenant of creation, the Mosaic covenant is “a suzerainty treaty in which the people promise fealty to the Great King, and YHWH in turn imposes stipulations and sanctions.” For both covenants, Horton maintains, there are clear promises and stipulations that characterize a typical Near Eastern suzerainty treaty where the strict requirements of the covenant must be upheld by the vassal (the beneficiary) for the promises to be realized—in the case of Adam, the right to eat from the Tree of Life and inherit everlasting glory; in the case of the Israelites, continued enjoyment of the typological land in Canaan. In that sense, the Mosaic covenant is a republication of the covenant of creation. However, Horton is not unaware of some of the discontinuities between the two covenants. For example, he points out that the “changing

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80 Horton, *Covenant and Salvation*, p.15.

81 Horton, *Lord and Servant*, p. 150.

82 Horton also views the Mosaic covenant as a republication of the covenant of creation because of Israel’s unique role in salvation history. He writes: “Since Israel was a theocracy typological of the eschatological Paradise of God, its national existence was a repetition of the covenant of creation—hence, the comparisons drawn by the biblical writers to Adam and the original creation” (Horton, *The Christian Faith*, pp. 419-420, emphasis in original).
historical contexts” of the two covenants (i.e., the Mosaic covenant being established after the fall) and the fact that God did exercise a degree of patience towards Israel (which he did not towards the first parents) are some of the key differences between the two covenants.⁸³

Horton’s main contention, however, for insisting upon the legal and suzerain character of the Mosaic covenant is that it keeps the law-gospel distinction intact throughout redemptive history in regard to the justification of the sinner.⁸⁴ Basing his understanding of the biblical covenants through the research of G. E. Mendenhall,⁸⁵ Horton argues that Scripture presents two distinct types of covenants running throughout the history of salvation: the covenants of law (the suzerain type) and the covenants of promise (the “royal grant” type). According to Horton, the covenants of creation and Sinai belong to the former, while the Noahic, Abrahamic, and new covenants belong to the latter.⁸⁶ By distinguishing these two types of covenants and keeping them separate Horton provides the theological rationale for keeping law and gospel separate in regard to a person’s justification before God no matter the time and place in redemptive history. Thus, he states, the “Mosaic (Sinai) covenant is an oath of the people swearing personal performance of the conditions for ‘living long in the land,’ while the Abrahamic covenant is a promise by God himself that he will unilaterally bring about the salvation of his people through the seed of Abraham.”⁸⁷ That is why, Horton also maintains, that the new covenant inaugurated by Christ is “not a renewal of the old covenant made at Sinai, but an entirely different covenant

⁸³ Horton, God of Promise, pp. 32-33.
⁸⁴ A more detailed discussion on the relationships between the historical covenants and how those relationships influence the way we understand the law’s relationship to the believer’s justification will be given in the following chapter.
⁸⁷ Horton, God of Promise, p. 48.
with an entirely different basis.”

Although the promissory (grant) covenants call for “genuine partnership” and “future obedience as the reasonable response,” they are still one-sided in terms of their basis (unlike the suzerain type covenants of creation and Sinai). Therefore, by designating the Mosaic covenant as a temporary suzerain type covenant and, therefore, in some sense as a republication of the covenant of creation, Horton is able to provide a reason for the clear distinction between the conditional Mosaic covenant and the promissory-grant covenants (the Abrahamic and new) in terms of their purposes and goals. In this way, the danger of conflating the law and gospel (i.e., monocovenantalism) in regard to the basis for the sinner’s acceptance before God is removed and eliminated.

3.3 The Covenant of Grace

According to Reformed orthodoxy, the covenant of grace doctrine is the “golden thread” that runs through the whole of Scripture. It is the unifying concept that binds both Testaments

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88 Ibid., p. 53.
89 Ibid., p. 56. There will be more discussion of the bilateral side of the covenant of grace in chapter five.
90 Some will object to Horton’s formulation of this matter by arguing that the Jews never understood the law in this way. They will argue, by pointing out passages like Leviticus 18:3-5; Deuteronomy 7:7-11; and Psalm 119 (where the law is viewed in a positive light and a “delight” to those who walk in the way of faith), that Horton contradicts the logic of the Old Testament by his sharp law-gospel division. Horton, however, never sets law and gospel in absolute antithesis unless it pertains to the basis of the sinner’s acceptance before God (i.e., justification). (In fact, the Apostle Paul follows this same train of thought, as a response to the “covenantal nomistic” theology of the Judaizers, when he discusses the law’s relationship to the promise [i.e., as a “guardian” of that promise] in Galatians 3:15-29 [cf. also his antithesis between law and gospel in Romans 10:5-7].) For Horton, the law serves the purpose of the gospel by (1) showing sinners their failure in meeting God’s perfect righteousness; (2) pointing sinners to another source of righteousness, that is Christ (who perfectly fulfills the law), for forgiveness and justification; and (3) giving believers a revelation of God’s will in order to regulate their lives (where the law now becomes a delight to follow) in the present age (but never as a means to maintain salvation but as a demonstration of faith in God’s promises in Christ) (see chapter five [§ 5.3] for more discussion on this subject) (cf. Horton, The Christian Faith, pp. 673-680). Therefore, the content of the law is the gospel in the sense that the law points sinners to Christ for salvation and the gospel reveals God’s will to believers in how they should conduct themselves (as an expression of faith) in the present age before the eschatological consummation.
and ties all the redeemed together from the various periods of biblical history. It is an
understatement to say that this unifying aspect of the covenant of grace is one of the
distinguishing marks of the federalism espoused by Reformed thinkers since the post-
Reformation period. In fact, it is the hermeneutical key that provides the theological basis for understanding that the salvation offered by God to his people will always be on the same basis and by the same Saviour. Another distinguishing mark of the covenant of grace is that its basis is entirely different from the covenant of creation/works: the former being by grace alone; the latter on a works-merit principle alone. Although both set forth promises and stipulations, the covenant of creation/works is a legal covenant to be fulfilled by the person’s own strength whereas the covenant of grace is a grant covenant fulfilled by God alone through Jesus Christ (even though faith is a requirement to enjoy the covenant blessings earned by Christ). Due to sin, however, the ability to fulfill personally the terms of the covenant of creation/works is beyond the reach of the sinner and the only hope for redemption is through the covenant of grace.\(^92\) As Thomas Kennedy Ascol puts it, the “violation of the first covenant provides the backdrop against which the covenant of grace makes its debut.”\(^93\) Horton, as we will argue below, follows this typical approach to understanding the covenant of grace in his covenant theology. For him, this sharp antithetical relationship between the covenant of creation/works and the covenant of grace is what provides the firm foundation for the clear dichotomy between law and grace in relation to the chief article of the evangelical faith: the sinner’s justification before God through faith alone in Christ alone. Before we proceed to discuss the substance and character of the covenant of grace in Horton’s covenant theology, however, we will first discuss the foundation that

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establishes the covenant of grace in time: the intra-Trinitarian covenant of redemption established in eternity.

### 3.3.1 The Covenant of Redemption as the Foundation of the Covenant of Grace

Horton, like some of the previous notable Reformed thinkers we have discussed above (Witsius, Hodge, and Berkhof), argues that a covenant of redemption (\textit{pactum salutis}) was established among the persons of the Trinity before time for the sake of the salvation of the elect. Although the covenant of redemption is not found in the writings of Calvin and in the ideas of some Reformed theologians after him, Horton believes that an intra-Trinitarian covenant is a revealed teaching of Scripture that is necessary in upholding the sovereign grace of God in his execution of salvation in history through Christ and his work. He writes:

The covenant of redemption underscores not only God’s sovereignty and freedom in electing grace, but the trinitarian and, specifically, Christ-centered character of that divine purpose. It all takes place “in Christ”; hence, the emphasis in covenant theology on the theme of “Christ the mediator.” Even before creation and the fall, the elect were “in Christ” in terms of the divine purpose for history, though not yet \textit{in history} itself. Far from being the result of abstract speculation, this concept of the covenant of redemption is both a revealed teaching of Scripture and the best guard against such speculation.\footnote{Horton, \textit{God of Promise}, p. 80, emphasis in original. However, we must argue that the exegetical support and theological basis for the existence of a \textit{pactum salutis} is very weak. Horton’s scriptural references to support this doctrine (e.g., John 6:39; 10:29; 17:2, 4-10; Eph 1:4-12; Heb 2:13; Rev 13:8) seem tenuous at best and exegetically inadequate at worst. One may also ask: is it truly necessary to formulate an intra-Trinitarian covenant before time to provide a theological reason for safeguarding the sovereignty of God in the salvation of the elect? It appears that the pre-temporal covenant of redemption doctrine in Reformed orthodoxy is a theological innovation deductively conceived to provide some dogmatic rationale for the interplay between Christ, election, and the covenant of grace. In response, one can argue that since all three persons of the Trinity can never have contradictory wills against each other that a covenant among them is unnecessary since all inherently work in unison to accomplish the work of redemption for the elect.}
In fact, the whole concept of the covenant of redemption does not only undergird the graciousness of the redemption enacted by God since eternity but also establishes its Trinitarian character. In this way, the *pactum salutis* reveals that the salvation of the individual is a Trinitarian act. Horton writes, “to affirm the covenant of redemption was little more than affirming that the Son’s self-giving and the Spirit’s regenerative work were the execution of the Father’s eternal plan.”

As a result of this pre-temporal determination by the persons of the Godhead, the covenants of creation and grace are established. The second person of the Trinity, therefore, assumes human flesh and fulfills the terms of the covenant of creation and then graciously bestows the blessings of the covenant of grace (which he earned through his perfect obedience) to his elect. Denying Barth’s view that Christ is the “ontological ground of creation,” Horton argues that it is “because of the fact that in the intra-Trinitarian covenant of redemption he [Christ] assumes the office of mediator, fulfilling in history the covenant of works broken by Adamic humanity and only in this way—‘by becoming obedient to the point of death’ (Phil. 2:8), administering salvation leading to consummation in what is, for us, a covenant of grace.” In this sense, the covenant of redemption, although a covenant among all three persons of the Trinity, has Christ as the locus because of his unique role in it. However, this does not mean that the Holy Spirit’s role is minimized in the covenant of redemption. Horton makes this clear when

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95 Horton, “Post-Reformation Reformed Anthropology,” p. 47.
96 Horton, *Lord and Servant*, p. 66.
97 Geerhardus Vos puts the relationship between the covenant of redemption and the covenant of grace this way: “The covenant of redemption is the pattern for the covenant of grace. However, it is more than that. It is also the effective cause for carrying through the latter. As far as its offer and application are concerned, the covenant of grace lies enclosed in the counsel of peace, so that with respect to the latter it appears completely as a gift, as a covenantal benefit” (Geerhardus Vos, *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980], p. 252, emphasis added).
98 Horton, *Lord and Servant*, p. 79.
he writes, “The Holy Spirit applies the benefits of Christ to the elect; this is part of the covenant of redemption as well. So in time, he brings the elect to repentance and faith.” In other words, the role of the Holy Spirit within the covenant of redemption is crucial because he unites the elect to Christ and works in their hearts to trust in the Saviour for forgiveness and salvation. Additionally, all the salvific gifts bestowed by Christ and given by the Spirit are not the results of the sinner’s merits or virtues but due to the Father’s sovereign decree enacted within the covenant of redemption. Horton states, “Decreed to be ‘in Christ’ from all of eternity in the intratrinitarian covenant of redemption, the elect are redeemed by Christ in history, and are united to Christ by the Spirit in a covenant of grace: now they are children of the Father rather than transgressors before a judge.” Therefore, the covenant of redemption not only establishes the temporal covenants between God and human beings in history but also provides the theological foundation for God’s unconditional decree from eternity to give the Son a people for himself.

3.3.2 Christ’s Role as Mediator of the Covenant of Grace

As discussed in the previous chapter, one of the key differences between the covenant of creation/works and the covenant of grace is the existence of a mediator in the latter. The first covenant established in Eden did not require a mediator since the first parents had the inherent

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101 Horton maintains that the covenant of redemption is a necessary doctrine because it prevents the doctrine of election from falling into a hyper-Calvinistic understanding where God the Father elects apart from the application of redemption through the works of the Son and Spirit in history. He writes: “In fact, it is precisely this trinitarian covenant that is able to counter a hyper-Calvinistic tendency toward a unitarian soteriology in which ‘God’ (i.e., the Father) sovereignly decrees salvation and reprobation apart from the working of the Son and the Spirit” (Horton, *God of Promise*, p. 81).
ability to fulfill the terms of the covenant and obtain the eschatological reward set forth in it. After the fall, however, the human race lost this inherent ability to fulfill the terms of the covenant of creation and inherit the consequent eternal blessing. The uniqueness of the covenant of grace is that the incarnate Son of God assumes the role of the perfect Mediator and, through his obedience and sacrifice, brings peace between the Father and fallen humanity. As a result of the Son’s willing compliance to the terms of the covenant of redemption he also assumes the role given to the first Adam originally under the terms of the covenant of creation. In this way, Christ earns the necessary righteousness that satisfies God’s justice and then freely confers that righteousness (and other blessings of the covenant of grace) upon those who believe.\(^{102}\) This is the way Reformed orthodoxy has typically understood Christ’s role in the covenant of grace in the economy of salvation.\(^{103}\)

True to form, Horton follows this conventional approach of federal theology when it comes to Christ’s position in the covenant of grace. Like other orthodox Reformed theologians in the past, he views Christ’s unique mediatorial role in the covenant of grace as necessary in maintaining the gracious character of the covenant (in contrast to the covenant of creation). Because Christ is the perfect Mediator of the covenant of grace, he is also the willing (penal) substitutionary servant and keeper of the sanctions of the first covenant on humanity’s behalf. As Horton writes, “It is in this covenant [of grace] that provisions are made for offenders, based on another’s fulfillment of the legal covenant on their behalf. Thus, instead of it being a covenant based on law (‘Do this and you shall live’), it is based on promise (‘Live and you will do


The key to understanding the covenant of grace as a covenant of grace is that Christ is the Last (and “eschatological”) Adam who fulfills the stipulations of the covenant of creation (which the first Adam failed to do). In this way, Christ not only brings peace between God and sinful humanity but creates a new humanity as a result of his perfect obedience:

Christ is not only the last Adam. That is, he not only undoes Adam’s disobedience and bears our guilt. He is the eschatological Adam. By fulfilling the Adamic trial, he enters into the Sabbath consummation in our flesh, as our representative. He is the “Adam” that Adam himself never was, and he therefore inaugurates a new kind of humanity. It is precisely in the covenant of grace that we come to participate in this kind of humanity that he mediates, not by mere imitation nor by an ontological participation that would make the believer or the church an extension of the incarnation, but by sharing an inheritance that belongs to Christ by right and to us by gift.

Therefore, to use the word “merit” to describe Christ’s obedience to the covenant of creation, which in turn establishes his Mediatorial role in the covenant of grace, is not inappropriate. In fact, by describing Christ’s role as the Last Adam as being meritorious in nature we are able to view Christ’s work as something done in the human flesh for those who cannot merit anything before the Father by their own strength. In this way, Christ’s humanity is maintained while at

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106 Donald MacLeod is even more emphatic when he writes: “[T]o say that the idea of merit is inherently inadmissible is to strike at the relation between God and Christ, which...was certainly one of meritorious obedience” (Donald MacLeod, “Federal Theology—An Oppressive Legalism?,” The Banner of Truth 125 [February 1974], p. 23).
107 Horton states: “When we place the person and work of Christ in the context of the covenant of redemption (pactum salutis), we underscore his identity as the eternal Son, and in the context of the covenant of creation, his identity as the second Adam....Jesus is therefore not merely the Son of God as to his divinity, but is the true and faithful Son of Adam who always obeys his Father’s will in the power of the Holy Spirit. This meritorious human life lived in full dependence on the Spirit (recapitulation) is not extrinsic but intrinsic to redemption; it is not merely a necessary prerequisite of a sacrificial offering, but part and parcel of that offering” (Horton, Lord and Servant, pp. 171-172). The only inconsistency that is found here is that Horton states that Christ’s “meritorious human life lived” was in “full dependence on the Spirit.” If Christ’s meritorious obedience was due to him being in “full dependence on the Spirit” how is that truly meritorious in the strict sense of the term? Adam was not given God’s Spirit for him to depend on for persevering obedience during his probationary trial but was left to his own God-given faculties to fulfill the requirements of the original covenant. Therefore, if brought to its logical end, the exact parallelism between Adam and Christ as respective covenant heads breaks down if the obedience earned by the latter was also in some way engendered by the Spirit.
the same time the legal character of the covenant of creation/works is upheld—both necessary for Christ’s role as the divine-human Peacemaker between God and humankind.

Christ not only becomes the perfect Mediator as the obedient Last Adam but also becomes the perfect high priest for all who participate in the covenant of grace as a gift. In fact, Christ’s ministry as high priest cannot be separated from his role as the Mediator between God and sinful humanity—both originating in the covenant of redemption. Horton writes, “Originating in the eternal covenant of redemption between the persons of the Godhead, Christ’s priestly ministry is inseparable from his role as mediator of the elect.” In other words, one cannot conceive of Christ as the perfect Mediator of the covenant if one does not bring into account the necessity of his role as the priestly servant of his people. In addition, Christ’s priestly ministry is a ministry that efficaciously and eternally removes all guilt arising from sin for his people. In this way, Christ’s priestly ministry is radically different from the Old Testament priestly system (which was ineffectual in removing guilt and permanently taking away sin). Horton writes:

Christ’s priesthood has accomplished what the Levitical office could never do and so has annulled it altogether (alteration in the covenant annuls it, as a divorce annuls a marriage: Heb 7:18). Not only a prophet greater than Moses (Heb 3:1-6), he is the mediator of a better covenant (7:22); his priesthood is eternal, because (unlike the Levitical priests) he never dies (vv. 23-25), and is sinless, so that he does not offer a sacrifice for himself but only for his people (vv. 26-28). Furthermore, while the high priests served in the earthly sanctuary, standing to offer sacrifices year after year, Jesus has entered the heavenly sanctuary, ascended to the right hand of the Father’s throne, interceding for us as one seated after completing his work (8:1-10:18, esp. 10:11-14). Finally, he has entered with his own saving blood rather than the typological blood of animals, which could never itself remove guilt (9:23-10:23).

We can see here that Horton presents the unique priestly ministry of Christ as something of enduring effect and foundation. Unlike the transitional nature of the Mosaic priesthood, Christ’s

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109 Ibid., pp. 487-488.
priestly ministry provides the full and permanent forensic righteousness found in the covenant of grace on behalf of the elect (coupled with his continual intercessory ministry in heaven). This has significant implications on how the justification of the sinner before God is understood as we will see below.

Christ’s priestly roles as the perfect sacrificial Lamb and intercessor are not the only ones that are essential to his role as the Mediator of the covenant of grace. As mentioned above, Horton sees the “active obedience” of Christ as an integral part of his role as the Last Adam who earns righteousness and salvation for his people. In contrast to his “passive obedience” (where he takes the punishment for humanity’s sins), Horton argues that Christ’s active obedience refers to his “thirty-three years of perfectly obeying the Father in order to ‘fulfill all righteousness’ (Matt. 3:15; 5:17 NRSV).” This fulfillment of “all righteousness” by his obedience to the law is then the basis for which the believer possesses the necessary righteousness that stands before God—a righteousness that is also imputed. Also, this obedience of Christ is not something he rendered towards an abstract set of “laws” but is an obedience given directly to God’s law under the terms of the covenant of creation. In this sense, scholars like Barth, Torrance, Rolston, and others are correct to say that Reformed orthodoxy espouses a works-based view of justification and salvation; the necessary works, however, coming from Christ alone. As Horton writes:

Justification is... in its deepest sense dependent and qualified by law: it is the covenant verdict pronounced on Christ and his coheirs on the basis of his merits. Therefore, in an important sense, we are justified by the works of the law—that is, by Christ’s representative work in his active and passive

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111 Horton, God of Promise, p. 93.
112 Horton writes: “God’s laws are not abstract principles for living but are stipulations in a covenant” (Horton, The Christian Faith, p. 673, emphases in original).
obedience, in his justification-resurrection, and in his ascension-exaltation.\textsuperscript{113}

For Horton and Reformed orthodoxy in general, it is imperative to uphold Christ’s meritorious law-keeping and active obedience in order to keep the clear distinction between the covenant of creation/works (law) and the covenant of grace (gospel). By Christ’s fulfillment of the strict conditions of the covenant of creation (and in this way becoming the end and fulfillment of the law),\textsuperscript{114} his perfect obedience is then imputed to believers (who have no capability on their own to fulfill the terms of the law) so that they can appear before God’s judgment seat as those who faithfully kept the terms of the covenant of creation. Therefore, as Horton writes, the “creation covenant is not set aside or subsumed under grace, but is fulfilled representatively on our behalf, and the Covenant Servant dispenses the fruit of his victory under the terms of a covenant of grace.”\textsuperscript{115}

Finally, another essential aspect of Christ’s mediatorial ministry is his role as the federal or covenantal head of the new humanity brought about by his obedience and sacrifice. As discussed above, Reformed orthodoxy has traditionally understood the first Adam as not only corrupting humanity in every aspect but also having his unrighteousness imputed to all those descended from him. In Christ, however, the curse and legal sanctions brought about by Adam’s

\textsuperscript{113} Horton, \textit{Covenant and Salvation}, p. 121, emphasis added.

\textsuperscript{114} Horton argues that Christ is the \textit{end and fulfillment} of the law (cf. Rom 10:4) in two ways: as a “redemptive-historical telos and as the termination of its condemning sentence because he offers to the Father, in the Spirit, that perfect internal and external conformity to the law in our place. Therefore, the law is not set aside but upheld—fulfilled. We are justified apart from our personal performance only because his fulfillment of the law-covenant counts as our own” (Ibid., p. 95). Although the difficult Greek word \textit{telos} in Romans 10:4 (translated as “end” in most English translations) has been variously interpreted by biblical scholars in the last century we believe F. F. Bruce provides the best explanation of what that word means in the context of Paul’s argument in Romans. He writes: “The word ‘end’ (\textit{telos}) has a double sense: it may mean ‘goal’ or ‘termination’. On the one hand, Christ is the goal at which the law aimed, in that he embodies the perfect righteousness which it prescribes....On the other hand, since Christ is the goal of the law, since in him the law has found its perfect fulfillment, a righteous status before God is available to everyone who believes in him, and that implies the termination of the law’s function (real or imagined) as a means of acquiring such a righteous status” (F. F. Bruce, \textit{The Epistle of Paul to the Romans}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed., The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985], p. 190).

\textsuperscript{115} Horton, “Image and Office,” p. 190.
disobedience are reversed. Like many Reformed exegetes in the past, Horton refers to Romans 5:12-21 to argue that Christ is the representative and federal head of this new humanity. Basing his argument on Paul’s Adam-Christ typology in that passage, Horton argues that the imputation of Adam’s sin to humanity should be understood as “the corollary” of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness (iustitia aliena) to believers. As a result, Christ, as the federal head of the elect, imputes his perfect righteousness to them, just as Adam’s sin was imputed to his posterity, so that they can be declared righteous before God’s tribunal. However, the forensic results of this federal headship (i.e., imputed righteousness) is no mere “legal fiction.” This is due to the fact that the justified person is truly “in Christ” and actually possesses the perfect righteousness that Christ earned on his or her behalf. As Horton states:

The Reformers and their heirs labored the point that it is Christ’s successful fulfillment of the trial of the covenantal representative that is imputed or credited to all who believe. This is what keeps justification from being abstract or a legal fiction, since the justified do in fact possess “in Christ” the status of those who have perfectly fulfilled all righteousness. In addition, “in Christ” their transgressions of the covenant have been borne away at the cross, and their public vindication has been realized in his resurrection.

The other fortification against the “legal fiction” charge against Horton’s (and Reformed orthodoxy’s) view of imputation, is that the believer who is under the federal headship of Christ is also organically united to him by the work of the Spirit. That is why the “alien righteousness” that Horton and the orthodox Reformed theologians speak of is not truly alien at all since “all that is Christ’s belongs to us in the baptismal reality of both a legal and organic union.” This union not only imputes the perfect righteousness of Christ to the elect but also imparts his “holy

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118 Horton, *Lord and Servant*, p. 231. Millard J. Erickson puts the relationship between the believer’s union with Christ and justification this way: “Because of our juridical union with Christ, we have right standing in the face of the law and in the sight of God. We are as righteous as is God’s own Son, Jesus Christ” (Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998], p. 967).
love in the lives of those united to him through faith.” In this way, believers are not only declared righteous before God (justification) but are progressively transformed from within to conform to Christ’s image (sanctification) so that the declaration of righteousness will become a living reality in their lives as a result of their union with Christ by the Spirit. Therefore, the imputation of righteousness cannot be a legal fiction since those who are justified by faith alone are also made new creations by their union with Christ—moving beyond the false choice between the legal and forensic aspects of salvation on the one hand and the relational and transformative aspects on the other.  

3.3.3 The Constancy of the Covenant of Grace

One of the corollaries of the monergistic nature of the covenant of grace (along with its “royal grant” character) is its constancy in regard to the human beneficiaries. Another one of the key differences between the covenant of creation/works and the covenant of grace is that while the former is breakable through a single transgression of the law the latter has a character of permanency regardless of the faithfulness (or lack thereof) of those who belong to it (not only in its outward/visible dimension but in reality). This permanency is based on two blessings of the covenant of grace: the free justification of the sinner on the basis of Christ’s merits and the

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121 Heppe states that the purpose for the establishment of the covenant of grace was so that the salvation of Christ’s own would be made certain and sure. He writes: “The effecting of an unshakeable certainty of salvation, on the basis of faith in the unchangeableness of grace, in the promise given to Christ that his seed shall never perish, and on the basis of faith that the salvation which Christ’s seed receives is to be his personal and therefore inalienable possession, belongs essentially to the purpose for which the covenant of grace was ordained at all” (Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, p. 388).
122 Horton makes the point that in contrast to the conditional covenant of creation/works, the covenant of grace “has God alone as the guarantor of the promise” (Horton, *Covenant and Salvation*, p. 132).
believer’s union with Christ by the Spirit. In regard to how the free justification of the sinner by God’s grace alone on the basis of Christ’s merits alone contributes to the permanency of the covenant of grace, Horton makes it clear that the once-and-for-all character of this justification is what makes the covenant of grace enduring for the elect. He writes:

If there is “now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1), on the sole basis of Christ’s righteousness imputed, then a reversal of the court’s verdict is impossible. That verdict has already set into motion the process of inward renewal, as the believer has been inserted by the Spirit into the powers of the age to come.\(^{123}\)

As a result of the Incarnate Son’s perfect fulfillment of the terms of the covenant of creation and his constant intercessory role in his exalted state (cf. Heb 9:24; 1 Jn 2:1)\(^ {124}\) genuine believers need not fear being “cut off” from the blessings and promises of the covenant of grace. The substitutionary nature of Christ’s active and passive obedience frees believers from fulfilling the terms of the covenant of creation themselves and provides them with the firm foundation of a righteous standing before God for all time.\(^ {125}\) In addition to the free justification of the sinner by Christ’s merits alone, the believer’s union with Christ plays an important role in terms of demonstrating the enduring character of the covenant of grace. As Horton writes:

In a covenantal approach, where union with Christ is the encompassing soteriological theme, the objectivity of the atonement is maintained without simply reducing it to the satisfaction of God’s dignity and justice. Furthermore, once the objective offering of a fulfilling human life (that is, one that is given to unbroken covenant loyalty) is made by Christ in the Spirit, that same Spirit unites us to Christ so that it is both objectively ours completely and subjectively ours definitely (in the new birth) yet imperfectly (in sanctification), and finally consummated (in glorification).\(^ {126}\)

\(^ {125}\) As Horton states: “It is because the covenant of works has been fully satisfied, not canceled, that the covenant of grace rests on an unshakable foundation” (Horton, “A Classical Calvinist View,” p. 34).
We can see here that Horton views one of the blessings that arise from the believer’s union with Christ as not only the new birth and the inner renewal by the Spirit but also the guarantee of future consummation in glory. By the believer’s union with Christ by the Spirit in the covenant of grace, the Pauline *ordo salutis* (cf. Rom 8:29-30) is worked out in the lives of believers with the starting point being God’s unconditional election established in the covenant of redemption.

The permanency and constancy of the covenant of grace can be said to be a uniquely Reformed/Calvinistic doctrine. It is integrally tied to the Reformed doctrine often known as the

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127 In recent years, some within the Reformed tradition (especially those identifying themselves with the Federal Vision movement) have argued that a believer united to Christ can be “severed” from this union through apostasy or any sin that is considered treacherous to the faith. This severing is in tandem with a believer breaking the covenant of grace through whatever acts of spiritual treachery (which, in turn, reveals that the believer was in fact reprobate and not elect). They usually look to Jesus’ metaphor of the vine and the branches found in John 15:1-7 or Paul’s metaphor of the olive tree in Romans 11:17-24 as sources for their understanding of the relationship between apostasy and the covenant (cf. Douglas Wilson, *Reformed* Is Not Enough: Recovering the Objectivity of the Covenant [Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2010], pp. 134-137). Although their desire to keep the warnings in Scripture as serious warnings is commendable, by moving in this trajectory they deny one of the key tenets of the Reformed faith: the once-and-for-all character (or permanency) of the believer’s justification before God (cf. *The Westminster Confession of Faith* [XI.5]). By elevating the mutual aspect of the covenant of grace, these scholars have turned obedience to the obligatory stipulations of the covenant as not only the *evidence or fruit* of being in covenant with God but as necessary requirements to be fulfilled in order to maintain the covenant relationship. Therefore, in practical terms, despite affirmations of the Reformed view of election, their view is essentially no different from the non-Reformed views that maintain that true believers can “lose” their justification through “mortal” sin or apostasy.

128 Horton calls the believer’s union with Christ in the covenant of grace “the matrix for Paul’s *ordo*” (*Horton, The Christian Faith*, p. 645).

129 Another basis for the surety of the covenant of grace is the divine decree to elect certain people for salvation. Herman Bavinck captures this integral link between divine election and the covenant of grace very well when he writes: “[W]hen the covenant of grace is separated from election, it ceases to be a covenant of grace and becomes again a covenant of works. Election implies that God grants man freely and out of grace the salvation which man has forfeited and which he can never again achieve in his own strength. But if this salvation is not the sheer gift of grace but in some way depends upon the conduct of men, then the covenant of grace is converted into a covenant of works. Man must then satisfy some condition in order to inherit eternal life. In this, grace and works stand at opposite poles from each other and are mutually exclusive....So far from election and the covenant of grace forming a contrast of opposites, the election is the basis and guarantee, the heart and core, of the covenant of grace” (*Bavinck, Our Reasonable Faith*, pp. 272-273). Horton echoes Bavinck but adds that the “covenant of grace provides the concrete context within which believers are assured of being chosen in Christ and belonging to the one elect people of God” (*Horton, Covenant and Salvation*, p. 135). As a result, the doctrine of election avoids being turned into an abstract and speculative doctrine (Ibid).
perseverance of the saints (sometimes erroneously called “eternal security”).\textsuperscript{130} In contrast to the views set forth by Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, Arminianism, and Lutheranism,\textsuperscript{131} Horton argues that the Reformed tradition has consistently maintained the permanency of the believer’s position in Christ based not only on the decree of election and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness but also on the character of the covenant of grace.\textsuperscript{132} Because the covenant of grace is an entirely monergistic covenant where sinners do not present their works before God to enter or remain in the covenant, the salvation of those who truly belong in the covenant will remain uninterrupted to the end. This is why Horton finds Lutheranism inconsistent on this matter because it affirms a strongly monergistic view of salvation (in contrast to the synergistic views of Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, and Arminianism)\textsuperscript{133} while espousing the view that justification and salvation can be lost either by “mortal sin” or apostasy. As a consequence, Horton labels Lutheran soteriology as a type of inconsistent monergism (in contrast to the consistent monergism of Reformed orthodoxy).\textsuperscript{134}

Although Horton affirms without compromise the permanency of justification and salvation based on the gratuitous character of the covenant of grace, he does acknowledge the real possibility of apostasy among those who belong to the visible church. Horton, consistent with Berkhof’s position discussed in the previous chapter, argues that there are those in the

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\textsuperscript{130} Horton, \textit{For Calvinism}, p. 115. Grudem defines the doctrine this way: \textit{“The perseverance of the saints means that all those who are truly born again will be kept by God’s power and will persevere as Christians until the end of their lives, and that only those who persevere until the end have been truly born again”} (Grudem, \textit{Systematic Theology}, p. 788, emphasis in original).

\textsuperscript{131} Horton, \textit{The Christian Faith}, pp. 684-686; idem, \textit{For Calvinism}, pp. 121-123.

\textsuperscript{132} Horton writes: \textit{“In this covenant of grace, there are two sides: ‘I will be your God, and you will be my people.’ God graciously gives perseverance in repentance and faith—not just in the first instance, once and for all, but for the rest of our Christian lives in the desert”} (Horton, \textit{A Classical Calvinist View}, p. 35).

\textsuperscript{133} Horton understands “synergism” to mean any view of salvation where God and the human being cooperate together in order to attain final salvation or maintain the salvation already possessed (Horton, \textit{The Christian Faith}, p. 684).

\textsuperscript{134} Ibid., p. 686.
church who are externally part of the covenant of grace but do not enjoy the full measure of the covenant blessings as the elect do (i.e., the “dual aspect” of the covenant of grace). In time their final apostasy reveals that their membership in the covenant of grace was only outward or visible. He writes:

> Whether we speak of being in Christ or being in the covenant, Christ is the mediator, and there is a distinction between being internally united to Christ in a covenant of grace and belonging in merely an external and visible sense. “For not all Israelites truly belong to Israel” (Rom. 9:6). The covenant in its outward administration is wider than election.\footnote{Horton, \textit{Covenant and Salvation}, p. 182.}

Just like Israel under the Sinai covenant, the church under the new covenant is a mixed assembly of the elect and reprobate (hence, Horton’s argument for the legitimacy of the visible-invisible distinction within the church).\footnote{Michael S. Horton, \textit{People and Place: A Covenant Ecclesiology} (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2008), pp. 116, 202. Even Calvin makes this distinction in his ecclesiology when he writes: “How are we to judge the church visible, which falls within our knowledge, is, I believe, already evident from the above discussion. For we have said that Holy Scripture speaks of the church in two ways. Sometimes by the term ‘church’ it means that which is actually in God’s presence, into which no persons are received but those who are children of God by grace of adoption and true members of Christ by sanctification of the Holy Spirit. Then, indeed, the church includes not only the saints presently living on earth, but all the elect from the beginning of the world. Often, however, the name ‘church’ designates the whole multitude of men spread over the earth who profess to worship one God and Christ. By baptism we are initiated into faith in him; by partaking in the Lord’s Supper we attest our unity in true doctrine and love; in the Word of the Lord we have agreement, and for the preaching of the Word the ministry instituted by Christ is preserved. In this church are mingled many hypocrites who have nothing of Christ but the name and outward appearance. There are very many ambitious, greedy, envious persons, evil speakers, and some of quite unclean life. Such are tolerated for a time either because they cannot be convicted by a competent tribunal or because a vigorous discipline does not always flourish as it ought” (Calvin, \textit{Institutes}, IV.1.7).} As a result, the rigid and simplistic bifurcation of the human race between the “unsaved” or “saved” is not adequate, according to Horton. In fact, there is a third type of person to consider when these discussions arise: the one who “belongs to the covenant community and experiences thereby the work of the Spirit through the means of grace, and yet is not regenerate.”\footnote{Horton, “A Classical Calvinist View,” p. 37. Horton, however, makes it clear that the operations of the Spirit among the reprobates within the new covenant community fall short of actual regeneration. According to him, these reprobates are not partially regenerated but only enjoy the ministry of the Spirit in a limited and external way. For instance, when discussing who the author of Hebrews is addressing in difficult passages like ...
forsake Christ, Horton claims, “remove themselves from the covenant of grace and place themselves under the covenant of works” where no more sacrifices remain and which they must bear the penal sanctions themselves on the Last Day.\(^{138}\) That is why for Horton apostasy is not only a hypothetical action but something that actually happens in the community of faith.\(^{139}\) However, Horton does not go so far as Douglas Wilson or the other Federal Visionists (who argue that apostates were once truly united to Christ and full members of the covenant) because “those who deny Christ to the very end, even though they may perhaps have outwardly been members of the visible church, are lost because they were never living members through faith.”\(^{140}\) Despite the existence of apostasy within the covenant community, the covenant of grace still remains steadfast and sure because those who are truly united to Christ and belong to the covenant in the fullest sense are assured of eternal glory based on God’s sovereign decree and Christ’s imputed righteousness.

Having said that, Horton does run into an inconsistency on this matter when he talks about the relationship between apostasy and the covenant of grace. The problem that arises in Horton’s formulation of the matter is the same as the one arising out of Berkhof’s treatment of the issue as discussed in the previous chapter: if a reprobate can be part of the covenant of grace in certain respects and even enjoy the same spiritual experiences that the elect do (but only transitorily) then how is it possible that a professing believer can have the assurance that he or she is truly

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\(^{139}\) Horton, For Calvinism, p. 119. The problem with Horton’s articulation of the matter is this: how is apostasy something that actually happens if one has not truly been regenerated by the Spirit or been a recipient of the full blessings of the covenant of grace? Those who receive some benefits of the Spirit’s work but have not received the full salvific blessings found in Christ cannot commit apostasy (in the true sense of the term) if they later depart from the covenant community (cf. 1 John 2:19). Despite his wording, what Horton perceives as apostasy is actually a seeming apostasy (which is not true apostasy at all).

\(^{140}\) Ibid., pp. 119-120, emphasis added.
united to Christ and not being self-deceived? In addition, Horton does not address in a coherent way how the “external” operations of the Spirit among the reprobates in the church can be differentiated from the Spirit’s work of regeneration among the elect. Since the reprobate within the church, according to Horton, can “be the recipient of the Spirit’s sealing in baptism and of the promise of forgiveness in the Supper (‘tasting the heavenly gift’), and can in some real sense ‘share in the Holy Spirit’ through word and sacrament,”\(^{141}\) one wonders how any believer within the covenant community can be assured that he or she has truly been possessed by Christ, been circumcised in the heart by the Spirit, and will not fall short of God’s grace on the day of judgment. In Horton’s schema, the only way a believer can have assurance of his or her election (and present salvation) is if \textit{he or she perseveres to the end in faith}—which results in the same problem of assurance that certain post-Reformation Reformed theologians (e.g., some New England Puritans) had to tackle on a more pastoral level (the “practical syllogism” being a prime example).\(^{142}\) Finally, when the Scriptures talk about the character of the new covenant (cf. Jeremiah 31:31-34) it does not appear to give any allowance for the notion that an unregenerate person can be a member of it. In fact, this is one of the distinguishing features of the new


\(^{142}\) The “practical syllogism” (\textit{syllogismus practicus}) was a formula set forth by the post-Reformation Reformed scholastics to help provide assurance of salvation and confirmation of election to troubled consciences based on whether or not they displayed the “marks of grace” (e.g., good works, acts of love, obeying God, etc.) in their Christian lives. The formula usually went like this:

\begin{enumerate}
\item \textbf{(A)} Major Premise: Every true believer will do good works.
\item \textbf{(B)} Minor Premise: I am doing good works.
\item \textbf{(C)} Conclusion: I am a true believer.
\end{enumerate}

Ironically, what was intended to be a pastoral aid in helping believers obtain assurance of salvation turned into an introspective device where assurance was undermined for many because they believed they were not displaying enough the marks of grace in their lives. The problem was compounded by the fact that not only were believers required to exhibit these marks of grace for assurance but they were also required to persevere in them if they sought confirmation of their election.
covenant that sets it apart from the suzerain-type Mosaic covenant (where the elect and reprobate lived under the same theocratic regime). As Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum write:

Probably the most distinguishing difference between the two communities is that Israel is a mixed community (i.e., comprised of believers and unbelievers) while the church is a regenerate community (i.e., comprised of believers who have been born of the Spirit and have professed faith in Christ). It is important to stress that, not only is this difference taught in the New Testament, it is also anticipated in the Old Testament, particularly in Jeremiah 31. Therefore, these are some of the weaknesses found in Horton’s argument that the covenant of grace is in some sense larger than the circle of election.

### 3.3.4 The Unity of the Covenant of Grace

Although a more indepth treatment of Horton’s understanding of the unity of the covenant of grace in redemptive history will be given in the chapter following, it is appropriate to discuss his view of the unity of the covenant of grace in some length here. Horton, following the typical covenant theology of Reformed orthodoxy, argues that the covenant of grace is the same in substance and character from Genesis 3 to the consummation. Whether living during the Patriarchal period, under the Mosaic administration, or in the present dispensation after Christ’s resurrection, all the elect are justified and saved by the merits of Christ alone within the covenant of grace. That is why Horton makes the point, as Reformed theologians from previous eras have, that the two covenants of creation/works and grace run parallel with each other throughout the

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143 Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), p. 646, emphases in original. What they say above does not mean that they believe that the church contains absolutely no reprobates within its sanctuary. What they are saying, however, is that the blessings of the new covenant are bestowed only on those who have circumcised hearts, and thus, only they constitute the church in the true and spiritual sense.
Scripture without being assimilated to each other or denying the existence of the other. This is the basis for the strong law-gospel antithesis that runs throughout the whole of Scripture in regard to how a sinner becomes forensically righteous before God, according to Horton.

For Horton, then, in every period of salvation history on the basis of the covenant of grace, God sovereignly calls sinners to salvation not because of any inherent quality in them or merits they may have accrued but because of his free grace which he offers without charge to all in spiritual need. He writes: “Like the prologue to the Decalogue, the covenant of grace in every administration issues with a sovereign call simply to ‘come’ on the basis of the liberation that has already occurred and is being announced.” That is why even under the Mosaic administration, the elect were justified and saved apart from personally fulfilling the “works of the law” and by trusting in the future Mediator who would atone for all their sins. The Israelites, therefore, under the Mosaic covenant inherited eternal life based on the promises found in the covenant of grace, while their remaining in the earthly-typological inheritance in Canaan depended upon their obedience to the codified law given at Sinai. Even Moses, despite his failure to enter the Promised Land for his disobedience in the wilderness (Num 20:7-12), was justified and adopted by God’s pure mercy found in the covenant of grace and through the work of its Mediator. As Horton writes:

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144 Horton, *Covenant and Salvation*, p. 50.
147 Moses’ example reveals that even though disobedience to the Mosaic law cannot cause the forfeiture of the eternal inheritance given to elect individuals within the Israelite theocracy (even though they can forfeit their physical lives [Heb 10:28] for certain transgressions) it can cause the nation as a whole to be cut off from the land and its attendant blessings (Lev 26:33; Deut 28:64; 30:17-19). As Greg Nichols writes: “The Mosaic covenant was conditional. God required gospel compliance with the voice of God that spoke the Decalogue (Exod. 19:5) and with the book of the law (Exod. 24:8). The context and analogy of Scripture insist that God wanted gospel obedience, not legalistic works righteousness. God addressed this condition to Israel as a nation, as a community. It did not focus on how individual sinners get right with God. Rather, it focused on how Hebrew Israel as a society would
In the economy of the Sinai covenant, Moses is a servant of God’s house, while Jesus Christ is the firstborn son (Heb 3:1-6). So even Moses’ justification and adoption are dependent not on the condition of his personal fulfillment of the law-covenant made at Sinai but on Christ’s personal fulfillment of that covenant by which he has won the inheritance for his brothers and sisters in the covenant of grace.\(^{148}\)

Horton’s rationale for understanding the Israelite nation under the Sinai economy as the Old Testament church derives from his understanding that both the covenants of creation and grace are operative during that period. However, as mentioned in the previous section, not all who belong to the physical nation of Israel are spiritual descendents of Abraham (Rom 9:6). This is due to the fact that many within the theocratic nation failed to embrace the salvific promise contained in the covenant of grace by trusting in the promised Messianic Seed and giving up their own works of righteousness according to the law (Rom 10:1-3). In both Testaments, therefore, one can only receive the promise contained in the covenant of grace by inwardly receiving the Messianic Christ as personal Saviour through faith.\(^{149}\) This visible-invisible distinction within the Israelite theocracy of the Old Testament and the community of faith in the New Testament not only reveals the clear, parallel distinction between the covenants of creation (law) and grace (gospel) in the whole of Scripture but also the unity of the covenant of grace throughout redemptive history.\(^{150}\)


\(^{149}\) Horton, For Calvinism, p. 119. Bavinck makes this insightful point about the unifying aspect of the covenant of grace: “Irrespective...of the forms in which the covenant of grace manifests itself, it always has the same essential content. It is always the same Gospel (Rom. 1:2 and Gal. 3:8), the same Christ (John 14:6 and Acts 4:12), the same faith (Acts 15:11 and Rom. 4:11), and always confers the same benefits of forgiveness and eternal life (Acts 10:43 and Rom. 4:3). The light by which the believers travel differs, but their route is always the same” (Bavinck, Our Reasonable Faith, pp. 275-276).

\(^{150}\) We will discuss the implications of this approach in more detail in the following chapter.
3.4 Conclusion

The objective of this chapter was to provide a systematic account of Horton’s bi-covenental federal theology for the purpose of responding to the conclusions of a sizable number of contemporary Reformed theologians (e.g., Barth, Torrance, Rolston, Bruggink, Placher, et al) who argue that post-Reformation Reformed covenant/federal theology is a type of works-righteousness theological system that departed from the grace-oriented soteriological views of Calvin and many of his Reformation contemporaries by positing a covenant of creation/works doctrine into its system.\textsuperscript{151} When examining Horton’s works on this subject, however, we see that the strong dualistic nature of his covenant theology as demonstrated in his strong antithesis between the covenant of creation/works and covenant of grace (which characterizes the traditional covenant/federal theology of the post-Reformation Reformed theologians) is evidence that the assumptions of contemporary scholars that post-Reformation federalism is a works-righteousness system is wanting.

Although Horton, like many orthodox Reformed theologians before him, posits that the covenant of creation/works is a strictly legal suzerain-vassal type covenant which requires perfect obedience to its inflexible stipulations, it is this legal character of the covenant of creation/works that provides the biblical-theological foundation for the graciousness of the covenant of grace established between God and his elect through the Mediator, Jesus Christ. Even though many scholars today who follow Barth’s line of thought in regards to post-Reformation covenant theology have argued that the establishment of the covenant of works

\textsuperscript{151} As already mentioned in the previous chapter (§ 2.1), Calvin’s law-gospel hermeneutic, in contrast to the opinion of many neoorthodox Reformed scholars today who specialize in Calvin’s theology, was a precursor to the covenant of works doctrine of later Reformed orthodoxy.
doctrine implicitly undermined the Reformation’s soteriological principles of *sola gratia* and *sola fide*, it is due to the fact that a covenant of works doctrine exists in Reformed federalism that it can provide a sound theological answer to how Christ, by his flawless obedience and death, becomes the perfect high priest for those who are unable to fulfill the terms of the original covenant by their own power. Consequently, it is because of the legal character of the covenant of creation/works that the second person of the Trinity as a human being can *earn* the perfect righteousness on behalf of his people so that they can be *accounted* perfectly righteous themselves and be worthy to receive the eternal inheritance as promised in the covenant of creation/works but given in the form of a covenant of grace (which is the temporal-historical outworking of the eternal covenant of redemption).

In addition, recent scholarship on Old Testament studies, ancient Near Eastern treaty forms, and theological studies on the subject of the covenant have found that the covenant concept is not monolithic but varied. Horton makes much use of these recent findings to point out the sharp structural and character differences between the covenants of creation and grace within the classic federalist framework. One of the major flaws of contemporary critiques of classic federalism is that it does not take into account the different types of covenants existing in Scripture. The inadequacy of these contemporary treatments is shown by either assuming that all biblical covenants are unconditional/unilateral in nature (Barth, J. B. Torrance, and Rolston) or by transposing the legalistic suzerain-vassal character of the covenant of works onto the covenant of grace (which is a royal grant type covenant where God becomes the sole guarantor on behalf of the elect) (Miller, Bruggink, and Placher). The failure to recognize the clear differences between these two covenants in post-Reformation federalism among contemporary theologians who are critical of the system leads them to make the unwarranted assumption that
post-Reformation Reformed orthodoxy degenerated into a type of works-righteousness soteriology from the grace-focused theology of Calvin and many of his Protestant contemporaries.

In the previous chapter we discussed the structural features of Horton’s covenant theology and argued that his covenant theology is a contemporary expression of post-Reformation federalism with its dichotomy between the covenants of works and grace. We also concluded that Horton’s (and post-Reformation’s) covenant theology is a systematic elaboration of the Reformers’ law-gospel hermeneutic, in particular as it relates to the doctrine of justification. In the present chapter we will discuss how Horton’s covenant theology impacts the way the relationships between the historical covenants in biblical history are understood and the soteriological implications that arise out of it (especially in the area of the sinner’s justification before God). We will also discuss, within our analysis of Horton’s understanding of the various historic covenants in redemptive history, some recent trends within modern biblical and contemporary Reformed scholarship that have been critical of the way post-Reformation orthodoxy have traditionally understood the relationship among the various redemptive-historical covenants and the law-gospel structure (and how Horton responds to these recent departures from the classic federalist understanding of the covenants and law). The chapter, therefore, will provide a more detailed discussion of Horton’s understanding of how the covenant of grace is executed in the successive covenants of redemptive history (Abrahamic, Mosaic, and new) and how his understanding provides a solid foundation for the classic Reformation view of justification by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone.
4.1 The Execution of the Covenant of Grace in the Successive Covenants of Redemptive History

As discussed in chapter three (§ 3.2.6), Reformed theologians throughout history have not been in unanimous agreement in regards to how to understand the relationships among the various covenants of biblical history (especially between the Mosaic and new covenant). Although all post-Reformation Reformed thinkers have agreed that all the elect throughout history are justified and saved on the same basis (by the free grace of God through the work of Christ alone), there is still the contentious issue of how the covenant of grace is administered throughout the various covenants in the history of redemption. As noted above, recent revisions to the traditional doctrine of the covenant of works and the concomitant, law-gospel dichotomy typically expressed in classical federalism have posed serious challenges to the covenant theology of confessional Reformed orthodoxy. Horton, standing in line with the confessional view of the post-Reformation period, has made a robust attempt to recover the biblical viability of classic covenant theology in light of recent departures from this view within contemporary Reformed circles. The following discussion will manifest that Horton’s particular understanding of the execution of the covenant of grace in redemptive history and his understanding of the relationships between the Promissory covenants and the Sinaitic covenant provide a solid ground for the Reformational understanding of justification *sola fide* and its concomitant doctrine of salvation *sola gratia*. The discussion below will be structured around individual treatments of
each major biblical covenant in salvation history (Abrahamic, Mosaic, and new)\(^1\) in light of recent debates on the relationship between law and gospel and the character of the doctrine of justification.

### 4.1.1 The Abrahamic Covenant

Orthodox Reformed theologians since the post-Reformation period have typically looked to the creation of the Abrahamic covenant—as referenced in Genesis 15—as the first instance of the *formal* establishment of the covenant of grace in redemptive history. For instance, Louis Berkhof writes: “Up to the time of Abraham there was no formal establishment of the covenant of grace.”\(^2\) Although the *protoevangelium* of Genesis 3:15 contains the promise of redemption through a Mediator and, therefore, can be viewed as the *inauguration* of the covenant of grace in history, Berkhof is correct to insist that “it does not record a formal transaction by which the

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\(^1\) A discussion of the Noahic covenant will be excluded here due to the fact that Horton views this particular covenant as a “non-redemptive” covenant that only deals with “common grace” for the world rather than “special grace” for the redeemed. In other words, Horton understands the Noahic covenant as pertaining only to the preservation of the natural order rather than serving any salvific function. The consequence of Horton’s approach is that it puts up a rigid division between the “secular sphere” of the world (which is neither “holy” or “unholy”) and the “redemptive sphere” of God’s salvific activity in the church (cf. Michael S. Horton, *God of Promise: Introducing Covenant Theology* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006], pp. 113-119). For an opposing view that sees the Noahic covenant as possessing some redemptive purpose for humankind see William J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: A Theology of Old Testament Covenants* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2009), pp. 39-41. Dumbrell writes: “Genesis 9 has made it clear...that the covenant with Noah had the preservation of the created order in view, but this in itself is a redemptive exercise on the widest scale” (Ibid., p. 41). Against Horton’s “non-redemptive view” of the Noahic covenant, there appear to be valid reasons to argue that this covenant has a redemptive function for humankind. Since the Kingdom of God encompasses all of creation, it is theologically questionable to assert that there is a rigid division between the “secular” and “salvific” in God’s redemptive purpose for the world. As Russell D. Moore insightfully notes, the “understanding of salvation as restoration of creation negates the conception that the earth is irrelevant to the Kingdom purposes of God by demonstrating the place of the creation in the establishment of the Kingdom, *from the original creation through the Noahic covenant (Gen. 9:8-17)* to the final regeneration of the cosmos (Col. 1:20)” (Russell D. Moore, *The Kingdom of Christ: The New Evangelical Perspective* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004], p. 125, emphasis added).

covenant was established.” However, the Abrahamic covenant does serve the purpose of the promise declared in the *protoevangelium* by making the promise known in a covenantal form through a unilateral oath. Horton follows this traditional orthodox Reformed perspective that the Abrahamic covenant is a concrete establishment and ratification of the covenant of grace in history. As he states, “With Abraham, God officially ratified the covenant of grace.” What makes the Abrahamic covenant a “ratification” of the covenant of grace, according to Horton, is that it is unilateral in character (like the Noahic). Although the Abrahamic covenant is a suzerain type covenant *from God’s side*, Horton argues that the covenant is a royal grant covenant *from the human side*. He writes:

> [F]rom the divine side, the covenant made with Abraham is a suzerainty treaty in which God swears unilaterally to personally perform all of the conditions and suffer all of the curses for its violation, but from the human side, the same covenant is a royal grant, an inheritance bestowed freely and in utter graciousness on the basis of the Great King’s performance.

Like Robertson, Horton notes that the unilateralness of the Abrahamic covenant is demonstrated by the fact that it is God alone who walks between the divided animals. In other words, God’s action as described in Genesis 15:17 points to the fact that the covenant with Abraham is “a one-sided promise.” Therefore, like “the *protoeuangelion* of Genesis 3:15-16, the covenant that

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3 Ibid.
4 This is demonstrated by the fact that in Genesis 15:10-17, during the covenant ratification ceremony, it is Yahweh *alone* who walks between the torn animals (v. 17) and binds *himself* to the sanctions of the covenant. As O. Palmer Robertson writes, “In the case of the Abrahamic covenant, God the Creator binds himself to man the creature by a solemn blood-oath. The almighty chooses to commit himself to the fulfillment of promises spoken to Abraham. By this divine commitment, Abraham’s doubts are to be expelled. God has solemnly promised, and has sealed that promise with a self-maledictory oath. The realization of the divine word is assured” (O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980], p. 131).
6 In regards to the Noahic covenant, Horton writes: “The Noahic covenant is a ‘covenant of grant’ (Gen. 6:8-9), a unilateral divine oath” (Horton, *God of Promise*, p. 42).
7 Ibid., pp. 41-42.
8 Ibid., p. 41.
Yahweh swore to Abraham was unilateral and utterly gracious in its basis.  

Furthermore, the unilateral or one-sided character of the Abrahamic covenant is also grounded in the fact that the Messianic Last Adam (along with his perfect and vicarious obedience) is the fulfillment of the promises contained in it. Horton writes:

The Abrahamic covenant is fulfilled because Jesus (who also fulfills the conditions of the Mosaic covenant by his obedience) is the “seed” in whom all the nations are blessed. Jesus is the promised son of Abraham. The Mosaic covenant is not altered in any way; rather, it too is fulfilled by Jesus so that in Jesus the children of God may receive the inheritance on the basis of the Abrahamic covenant.

We can see here that Horton not only clearly contrasts the Abrahamic covenant with the later Mosaic covenant but also states that the Promised Seed fulfills the terms of the latter in order to bestow the promised blessings of the former to the elect. Again, basing his position on Paul’s contrast between the two covenants in Galatians 4:21-31, he writes:

Within the Old Testament itself, Paul finds two discrete covenantal traditions: Abrahamic and Sinaitic. Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the unilateral promises of the first and the typological fulfillment of the bilateral conditions of the second. Thus, he is the true seed of Abraham and also the true Israel, the one who has fulfilled the terms of the covenant at Sinai in the place of those who have said “We will do all these things,” and yet have in fact fallen short. To belong to God’s gracious covenant, one must come by way of Christ rather than Moses—or, as the writer to the Hebrews puts it, Mount Zion rather than Mount Sinai (Heb. 12:22).

Here we see that Horton maintains that the Abrahamic covenant is the source for the believer’s forensic righteousness and salvation—a forensic righteousness and salvation earned by Christ for all believers by being the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant through fulfilling the terms of the Mosaic covenant. In this way, the believer’s once-and-for-all justification through faith alone

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11 Horton, God of Promise, p. 69, emphasis in original.
by Christ’s righteousness alone is grounded in the unilateral covenantal promise given to Abraham many centuries before.

Despite the one-sided character of the Abrahamic covenant, there still remains the contentious issue of the “conditions” within the covenant. Some in the Reformed tradition, like John Murray, have staunchly defended the monergistic character of the Abrahamic covenant as unequivocal evidence that it is a gracious administration of the covenant of grace in redemptive history.12 Yet, at the same time, Murray and those like him also insist that despite the Abrahamic covenant being thoroughly monergistic in origin and character it still contains non-meritorious conditions that are required to be met in order for Abraham and his descendents to enjoy the promised blessings. As Murray writes,

Grace bestowed implies a subject and reception on the part of that subject. The relation established implies mutuality. But the conditions in view are not really conditions of bestowal. They are simply the reciprocal responses of faith, love and obedience, apart from which the enjoyment of the covenant blessing and of the covenant relation is inconceivable.13

This viewpoint is also shared by Norman Shepherd when he writes,

[T]he Abrahamic covenant has two parts: promise and obligation. Abraham and his seed are obliged to demonstrate new obedience. They must walk with the Lord and before the Lord in the paths of faith, repentance, and obedience. In this way, the promises of the covenant are fulfilled.14

Although it is Yahweh alone who walked between the torn animals, Murray and Shepherd insist that the human beneficiaries of the covenant are still required to fulfill certain stipulations (e.g.,

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13 Ibid., p. 19.
circumcision) to enjoy the blessings of the covenant.\textsuperscript{15} As these statements by Murray and Shepherd demonstrate, some Reformed theologians in recent years have not only emphasized the gratuitous character of the Abrahamic covenant but also its mutuality in order to reinforce the notion that a covenant requires both parties to be under certain obligations and oaths.

In contrast to Murray and Shepherd, Horton does not view these stipulations as requirements that need to be fulfilled in order for the human beneficiary to enjoy the salvific blessings of the Abrahamic covenant. For example, in regards to the circumcision commandment (Gen 17:9-14), Horton maintains that this rite should not be “treated as a condition of inheritance but as a sign and seal of the inheritance for the heir who is already entitled to it.”\textsuperscript{16} In other words, circumcision was not a ritual act to obtain the inheritance but a sign of being the inheritor of the promise (cf. Rom 4:10-11). Furthermore, Abraham’s obedience to the command to offer up Isaac as a sacrifice (Gen 22:1-18) was “not the basis of Abraham’s salvation, but the means through which that blessing comes to Abraham’s heirs.”\textsuperscript{17} In fact, Horton sees the obedience of Abraham as a typology of Christ’s future obedience—an obedience that merits righteousness and salvation for the elect.\textsuperscript{18} According to Horton, therefore, the realization of the promise for Abraham’s heirs (through his obedience) must be kept distinct from Abraham’s personal

\textsuperscript{15} One of the contentious issues in contemporary Reformed discussions on the subject of the covenant is what is truly meant by the term “conditionality” in regards to the bilateral character of the covenant of grace. Some argue that the term may be appropriate to use when describing the mutual character of the covenant of grace as long as the concept of merit is entirely excluded (as Shepherd argues). Others find the term problematic because it entails that human beings are required to do certain things to earn (partially or fully) God’s salvific grace (e.g., J.B. Torrance). We may argue that the obligatory terms set forth in the Abrahamic covenant (and the covenant of grace) are not “conditions” \textit{per se} (as obligations that must be met in order for certain outcomes to follow) but as \textit{necessary stipulations} that are required of the human covenant partner as a \textit{means to} (not \textit{in order to}) enjoy the blessings of the covenant. For example, faith is a necessary requirement to receive the salvific benefits of the covenant of grace, and yet this faith is not viewed as a condition in the sense that it is the \textit{grounds for} a person’s justification, adoption, and salvation (i.e., a meritorious work in disguise).

\textsuperscript{16} Horton, \textit{God of Promise}, p. 42.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., p. 45.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
justification before God (which comes through faith in the Messiah and his merits alone [cf. Gen 15:6]). Although the requirement for the human beneficiaries to fulfill certain obligations in the covenant remains in force (as a means to extend the Abrahamic covenant for future generations), this does not concern the justification and salvation of the individual who has become an heir of the promises of the Abrahamic covenant through faith (since it is Christ alone who fulfills the law and merits eternal life on behalf of Abraham and his spiritual descendants).  

4.1.2 The Mosaic Covenant

One of the major theological controversies today within the evangelical Reformed tradition is how the Mosaic covenant should be understood in relation to the covenant of grace and the Promissory covenants of history. Horton, like many others, views this matter as one of the main biblical-theological hinges on which the whole debate in contemporary Reformed evangelicalism regarding the law’s relationship to the gospel (and ultimately justification) is centred.  

As discussed in chapter three (§ 3.2.6) there was no consensus among Reformed thinkers since the

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19 Horton writes: “Since the promise to Abraham was a covenant, complete with ratification ceremonies, the patriarch’s faith was indeed dependent on a legal enactment. It is ‘legal’ not only because of its forensic character but also because it will only be realized in history by the personal obedience of the one who will ‘fulfill all righteousness’ (Matt. 3:15; 5:18; Luke 24:44; John 17:4)” (Michael S. Horton, Covenant and Salvation: Union with Christ [Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2007], p. 121). However, Horton’s understanding of the stipulations of the Abrahamic covenant seems inconsistent when carefully examined. If the stipulations only pertain to the extension of the Abrahamic covenant and the prefiguring of the Messiah’s obedience how does this align with Paul’s quotation of Genesis 15:6 in Romans 4:3 and Galatians 3:6 in regards to Abraham’s faith (both verses written in the context of personal salvation)? It appears that Horton has moved too quickly in asserting that the stipulations of the Abrahamic covenant apply merely to the extension of the promise and Christ’s future obedience rather than the individual salvation of the believer. It is more appropriate to maintain, based on the biblical evidence, that faith (which, if genuine, is expressed in obedience to God) is also the necessary means for an individual to enjoy the salvific blessings of the covenant (cf. James 2:22-23).

20 Cf. Ibid., pp. 11-36. Horton states that what lies at the heart of the current debates over justification revolve around how these two questions are answered: “Is the promissory covenant subsumed under (or absorbed into) the covenant of law, resulting in a covenantal nomism? Or are these two covenants always distinguished and, on the point of justification, to be treated in fact as antithetical means of inheriting eternal life?” (Ibid., p. 29).
post-Reformation period regarding how the Mosaic covenant should be understood within the progress of redemptive history. As noted before, some viewed the Mosaic covenant as a gracious covenant, others as a thoroughly legal covenant, and still others as a mixture of the two. In recent years, however, serious questions have been raised by a growing number of scholars (within and outside the Reformed tradition) on the exegetical and theological viability of viewing the Mosaic covenant as a legalistic covenant with no element of grace within it (a view held by many orthodox Lutheran and Reformed theologians). These scholars argue that the Mosaic covenant, like the Abrahamic and new, is a covenant of grace not only in its establishment but also in regards to its character and substance. For them, the opposition between law and gospel (and the apparent discontinuities between the old and new covenants) in God’s dealings with humankind has no biblical warrant and should, therefore, be reconsidered or discarded altogether.\(^{21}\)

Horton, recognizing these recent trends in biblical scholarship, responds by defending the traditional Reformed federalist distinction between law and gospel in regards to the justification of the believing sinner by arguing for the legal and suzerain character of the Mosaic covenant.\(^{22}\)

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\(^{22}\) Horton also affirms, along with many orthodox Reformed theologians of the past, that the Mosaic covenant, insofar as it “taught a principle of works,” served as “a pedagogue unto Christ and showed the Savior who alone could fulfil the terms of the law” (Michael S. Horton, “Obedience Is Better than Sacrifice,” *The Law is not of Faith: Essays on Works and Grace in the Mosaic Covenant*, eds. Bryan D. Estelle, J. V. Fesko, and David VanDruten [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2009], p. 315). Therefore, according to Horton, the primary function of the Mosaic covenant in relation to individual salvation is its revelation to sinners of their utter failure before the law and their need for another source of righteousness for their justification.
The downplaying of the legalistic character of the Mosaic covenant by these contemporary scholars, he argues, results in the Reformers’ understanding of justification being emptied of its forensic, free, and gracious character. Only by putting a sharp antithesis between the Mosaic covenant and the covenants of promise (the Abrahamic and new) can the Reformation doctrine of justification *sola fide* and *sola gratia* be protected against the influences of contemporary “covenantal nomistic” expressions of the message of salvation.\(^\text{23}\) In this way, Horton is indebted to Meredith G. Kline’s covenantal theology in how he understands the role of the Mosaic covenant within God’s redemptive purpose in history (Kline, as discussed previously, argues that the Mosaic covenant is *in some form* a republication of the covenant of works).\(^\text{24}\) For Horton, as discussed previously, the linkage between the covenant of creation/works and the Mosaic covenant (where the latter is a recapitulation of the former) is that both are legal, conditional, and suzerain-treaty type covenants. In other words, the same works-righteousness principle applies to both of them even though the former dealt with the eschatological inheritance of Adam and his children, whereas the latter dealt strictly with the Israelites’ inheritance of the typological land in Canaan and its associated blessings. Horton, like Kline, notices that the covenant ratification ceremony in Exodus 24 differs significantly from the covenant ratification ceremony between God and Abraham in Genesis 15. In the latter, as mentioned above, God alone walks between the divided animals and takes it upon himself to fulfill the promise through an oath (making it a one-sided promissory covenant); in the former, the Israelites pledge to obey God’s word and be obedient to his law in order to inherit and remain in the land of promise (Exod 24:3, 7). As Horton writes:

\(^{23}\) Horton argues that the danger of conflating the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants results in a situation where the “temporary and conditional terms of the Sinai covenant become the basis for justification and the inheritance of the heavenly Jerusalem” (Horton, “Engaging N. T. Wright and John Piper,” p. 24).

The oath that Israel took at the foot of Mount Sinai has clear affinities with the suzerainty treaty. God had delivered them from Egypt and taken them for his people, but now they had to own Yahweh as their covenant Lord. Hearing the terms (stipulations), they replied, “Everything the Lord has said we will do” (Exod. 24:3 NIV). The covenant at Sinai was an oath sworn by the Israelites, just as in the suzerainty treaty. The elements of the treaty form were clearly present: the historical prologue (liberation from Egypt), the stipulations (ten words or commandments), sanctions with the usual blessings and curses formula, with the warning that the Israelites were “but [God’s] tenants” (Lev. 25:23 NIV) and were subject to eviction if they violated the covenant.25

According to Horton, therefore, the fact that the Israelites swore an oath to fulfill the stipulations contained in the Mosaic law makes this a typical suzerain-vassal treaty that differs greatly from the royal grant covenant that characterizes the Abrahamic covenant (and later, the new covenant).26 As a result, there are two covenant types running parallel during the Mosaic dispensation: the Abrahamic covenant of promise (which results in justification and eternal life for the elect based on the merits of Abraham’s ultimate offspring—Christ), and the Sinaitic covenant of law (which binds the Israelites to God’s commands if they seek to inherit and maintain the typological land of promise).27 Horton believes, contrary to the views of N. T. Wright28 and others, that Paul’s polemic against his Judaizing opponents in Galatians had to do with their confusing these two covenants with their respective terms and promises. He writes:

25 Horton, God of Promise, p. 31.
26 Interestingly enough, despite holding to the view that the Abrahamic and Sinai covenants are continuous with each other, F. C. Fensham remarks: “Although it might have been implied, it is nowhere stated that the minor partner in the covenant of Abraham must keep to certain conditions. In the covenant of Sinai this fact is emphasized” (F. C. Fensham, “Covenant, Promise and Expectation in the Bible,” Theologische Zeitschrift 23/5 [September-Oktober 1967], p. 313).
28 Wright believes that Paul’s combative tone against the Judaizers in Galatians has to do with the fact that their insistence that all believers need to keep the Torah (especially circumcision) to be part of God’s covenant family hinders the Abrahamic promise from going out to the Gentile world. Therefore, for Wright, the issue in Galatians is not about how to remove good works in the equation when it comes to a person’s justification before God (or confusing the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants) but about doing away with Jewish “legal badges” so that
As Paul’s critics had confused the principles of law and promise, they had also confused the relative fidelity required in the national covenant and thus they remain in the typological land with the absolute faithfulness required of every person in order to fulfill all righteousness and thus appear safely in God’s heavenly presence. The Abrahamic covenant leads to Christ and thus the heavenly realities of everlasting liberty; the Sinaitic covenant was a “schoolmaster” (Gal. 3:24 KJV) leading to Christ by types and shadows and by showing that we could not keep it. All who seek to be justified by it no longer seek salvation as Abraham’s heirs. The tables are now turned: the very people who seek the closest affinity to Moses and Sinai end up missing the fulfillment of the prior covenant of promise in the seed who is received through faith alone.  

Just as Paul’s first-century opponents mixed law and grace in regards to justification by confusing the two covenants, Horton argues that this same hermeneutical confusion is being practised in various ways not only by Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox theologians but also contemporary evangelical scholars who seek to “flatten” the clear distinctions between the Promissory and the Mosaic covenants for the sake of advocating a strict continuity of Scripture or to eliminate any type of exclusivistic soteriology that hinders particular groups from entering God’s covenant household.

Gentiles can also be incorporated into the Abrahamic covenant and receive its blessings (cf. N. T. Wright, Justification: God’s Plan and Paul’s Vision [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009], pp. 122-136). In response, we should say that Wright’s narrow view of Paul’s polemic against the Judaizers in Galatians is inadequate and misses the mark. The reason why Gentiles can be the recipients of the promise given to Abraham is due to the fact that they are justified through faith alone apart from any law-keeping—the grounds of which is Christ’s meritorious obedience and sacrifice. As a result of Jews and Gentiles being under the same sentence of condemnation due to their failure to fulfill all aspects of the law (Rom 1-2), their only recourse for justification and life is the perfect righteousness of the Last Adam who kept the law fully on their behalf. Therefore, as a result of this free and forensic justification through faith apart from keeping the law, Gentiles can now be freely included in God’s covenant family and receive its attendant spiritual blessings (Gal 3:6-9).

29 Horton, God of Promise, pp. 38-39, emphases in original.
30 In regards to the law-gospel hermeneutic of Eastern Orthodoxy, Horton writes: “Discerning in these New Testament lines of thought a clear distinction between law and gospel—that which commands without promise or assistance and that which gives without command or judgment—Reformation theology observes in Orthodox theology a serious confusion on this point” (Michael S. Horton, “Are Eastern Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism Compatible? No: An Evangelical Perspective,” Three Views on Eastern Orthodoxy and Evangelicalism, ed. James J. Stamoolis [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004], p. 136).
31 Horton’s main points of reference for this type of hermeneutical manoeuvre (i.e., the method in which the distinction between the old and new covenants [or law and gospel] is overcome by conflating the two) are from the Jewish scholar Jon D. Levenson and the Roman Catholic Pope Benedict XVI. Although recognizing the
Despite Horton’s criticisms of the various monocovenantal hermeneutical methods that attempt to conflate law and gospel, he is also critical of those systems that attempt to bring an essential discontinuity between the Old and New Testaments. Horton has in mind here modern dispensationalism (with its tendency to divide sharply Israel and the church) and the two-covenant theory popular in mainline Protestantism (with its advocacy of a separate salvific covenant for the Jews). However, Horton sees both understandings of the old covenant as leading to the same problem: a failure to recognize the strictly conditional nature of the old covenant by treating the land promise as being eternal and irrevocable.\textsuperscript{32} In essence, the inadequacy of both of these approaches is that it does not take the sanctions or threats of the Mosaic covenant seriously.\textsuperscript{33} For Horton, therefore, classic covenant theology captures the proper balance between dispensationalism/two-covenant theory and the various monocovenantal approaches of past and present by maintaining both continuity and discontinuity between the old and new covenants. Accordingly, the continuity aspect has to do with the fact that a single promissory covenant of grace runs throughout the whole of Scripture; whereas, the discontinuity aspect has to do with the fact that the legal Mosaic covenant only pertained to Israel (and her

\textsuperscript{32} Horton, \textit{God of Promise}, p. 47.

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.
keeping the typological land) in contrast to the covenants of promise that offered justification and eternal life to all those who trust in Abraham’s Seed and his sacrifice.\textsuperscript{34}

\textit{4.1.3 The New Covenant}

Despite significant differences in their respective covenant theologies, Horton would agree without reservation with Murray’s statement that “the new covenant is the expansion and fulfilment of the Abrahamic [covenant].”\textsuperscript{35} Horton makes this clear when he contrasts the failure of the Sinaitic covenant in redemptive history (due to Israel’s hard-heartedness) with the glorious promises contained in Jeremiah 31. He writes: “Even though the Israelites have broken the covenant they made at Sinai, Yahweh nevertheless promises a new covenant in which the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant will finally be realized.”\textsuperscript{36} In fact, like Murray, Horton understands the new covenant as being the disclosed “apex” of God’s relationship to his people and saving activity in redemptive history. This apex is the result of the promise, as foretold in Jeremiah 31, culminating in the vicarious death and resurrection of the Messianic Saviour—Jesus Christ. As Horton states, “Christ’s death inaugurates the new covenant as a royal grant—that is, a last will and testament that dispenses an inheritance based on his perfect, personal, and perpetual obedience rather than our own (Mt 26:26-30 par.; Gal 3:10-29; 4:21-28; Heb 8:1-13; 9:15-28).”\textsuperscript{37} Under the new covenant, therefore, the Abrahamic promise is not only opened to the

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\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., pp. 74-75. As Horton summarizes elsewhere: “While individual salvation was assured by faith in the promise (Heb. 4:2), the typological kingdom was conditional. No Israelite could be saved simply because of his or her genealogy, and occasionally outsiders were saved apart from it. But Israel was God’s garden as long as obedience was maintained” (Horton, “A Classical Calvinist View,” p. 34).


\textsuperscript{36} Horton, \textit{God of Promise}, p. 53.

Gentiles (Eph 3:6) but the fullness of forgiveness and salvation is finally realized in Abraham’s Seed. That is why under the sacrificial system of the Mosaic covenant the guilt of sin could not be truly and permanently removed for transgressors—it only reminded them of their shortcomings before the law and pointed them to a future Saviour. With the coming of Christ and the establishment of the new covenant, however, the Mosaic covenant and its sacrificial system was not only fulfilled but also became obsolete. Horton writes:

The New Testament maintains a consistent witness to the belief that the identity of belonging to God—in other words, the inheritance—was centered around Christ rather than Sinai. This is why the “new covenant” inaugurated by Christ’s sacrifice looks back through Jeremiah 31 to David and Abraham. In Hebrews we read that it is not like the old covenant in that it coalesces around a Son rather than a servant in God’s house, a better covenant, one enacted on better promises (see Hebrews 8). The writer says of Jeremiah’s prophecy, “By calling this covenant ‘new,’ he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear” (8:13 NIV; see also 9:11-23). All attention shifts from Israel, the oath-taking party at Sinai, to Christ, the seed of Abraham and Son of David.

In summary, then, the old covenant already served its unique role in God’s redemptive purpose in history by making the people (through the law and sacrifices) conscious of their guilt, their need for forgiveness, and of the coming Lord who will become their saviour by taking away their sins forever by his sacrifice.

According to Horton, positing the clear dichotomy between the Mosaic and new covenant is crucial to counter effectively the various hermeneutical approaches that seek to confuse or conflate law and gospel (in which the gratuitous and forensic character of justification becomes

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38 Horton, God of Promise, pp. 59-60.
40 Horton, God of Promise, p. 59.
undermined). Horton’s main contention against the various monocovenantal (or covenantal nomistic) approaches in resolving the discontinuities between law and gospel is that they collapse the fundamental distinction between the Mosaic and new covenant by asserting that both are the same in qualitative substance (as gracious covenants) while only differing in outward administration. According to him, these scholars who espouse a monocovenantal hermeneutic do this either by saying that the antithesis between the old and new covenants has mainly to do with the obsoleteness of the former in the course of redemptive history (Hafemann and Shepherd) or that it pertains primarily to the fact that the latter is an inclusive covenant in contrast to the exclusive character of the former (James D. G. Dunn and Wright). Horton finds both of these approaches, or those similar to them, as severely inadequate because it does not take the clear law-gospel dichotomy seen throughout the course of the whole biblical narrative seriously. In fact, for Horton, the antithesis between the Mosaic and new covenants has to do with the fundamental antithesis between law and gospel when it comes to the sinner’s justification. That is why he maintains:

42 Although John Calvin does speak about the old and new covenants having the same substance but only differing in the “mode of dispensation”, he does not view the continuity of both covenants in the same way modern monocovenantalist scholars we examined above do. Calvin argues for the strict continuity between the Testaments (against certain Anabaptist thinkers) in order to uphold the notion that the eternal salvation (i.e., the inheritance of the heavenly life) of old covenant saints were of the same source (by God’s grace alone), same foundation (on the grounds of Christ and his work alone), and same means (through faith alone) as the saints of the new covenant (cf. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles [Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960], II.10.2, 4). Even though Calvin does not posit a sharp dichotomy between the old and new covenants as Horton does, he nevertheless still vigorously espouses the view that the justification of the sinner in all periods of redemptive history is through faith in Christ alone apart from any personal keeping of the law (cf. Ibid., II.9.4; III.17.7). Thus, Calvin avoids the neonomianism of the likes of Shepherd, Sandlin, Wright, Fuller, and others by clearly distinguishing law and gospel in regards to justification even while maintaining a strict continuity between the old and new covenants.

43 Cf. Horton, “Which Covenant Theology?,” *Covenant, Justification, and Pastoral Ministry*, ed. R. Scott Clark (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2007), pp. 211-221; idem, *Covenant and Salvation*, pp. 82-87. In response to Wright’s perspective, Horton writes: “Restricting the ‘works of the law’ to ethnic boundary markers and the new covenant’s good news to the inclusion of Gentiles in Abraham’s worldwide family simply does not make sense of the deeper contrast between law and promise as covenantal principles of inheritance” (Horton, “Engaging N.T. Wright and John Piper,” p. 23). However, Horton is also careful to maintain that law and gospel are
Unlike the covenant that Israel swore at Sinai, the covenant (royal grant) that God swore to “the fathers” (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) is inviolable, and this unwavering faithfulness of Yahweh to his promise in spite of the faithlessness of his human partner is also expressed in the covenant with David (2Sa 7) and in the new covenant (Jer 31:31-34). In the day that God fulfills his promise, he will act unilaterally in salvation: forgiving and renewing them, to the end that “I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (Jer 31:31-33).44

The complete forgiveness of believers and God’s unwavering faithfulness to them is grounded on the fact that the new covenant is a covenant that differs significantly from the breakable and legal covenant founded at Sinai not only in its outward administration but in its inward substance. Also, Christ fulfills all the stipulations of the Mosaic covenant on behalf of the elect for their righteousness, justification, and acquittal before God’s tribunal which further establishes this fact of discontinuity. Therefore, the new covenant that was established by Christ’s obedience and sacrifice and foretold in Jeremiah 31 is a royal grant covenant like the previous promissory covenants in redemptive history (Noahic, Abrahamic, and Davidic). Not only is the new covenant a fulfillment and expansion of the promissory Abrahamic covenant; it is also a covenant that is set in clear distinction from the suzerain-type Mosaic covenant given to the Israelites. In this way, by positing a sharp distinction between these two covenants, the dichotomy between law and gospel is uncompromisingly maintained when it comes to an individual’s juridical acceptance before God.

Although Horton maintains without reservation that the new covenant is a promissory covenant unlike the conditional and legal Mosaic covenant, he does acknowledge that the new covenant does contain a bilateral aspect to it. In fact, some of Horton’s statements regarding the bilateral aspects of the new covenant may appear as if he is retreating from his other statements not opposed to each other (even though they are always distinguished) unless it involves a person’s judicial acceptance before God (Horton, God of Promise, p. 128).

regarding the promissory and unconditional character of the new covenant. For example, he writes:

The New Testament lays before us *a vast array of conditions for final salvation*. Not only initial repentance and faith, but perseverance in both, demonstrated in love towards God and neighbor, are part of that holiness without which no one shall see the Lord (Heb. 12:14). Such holiness is not simply definitive—that is, it belongs not only to our justification, which is an imputed rather than imparted righteousness, but to our sanctification, that inner renewal by the Spirit.\(^{45}\)

Also, in another place he maintains:

The newness of the new covenant, then, is not the abolition of the law but its fulfillment finally through a substitute, a representative head. It is not true that the old covenant had both threats and promises and the new covenant has only promises, for Christ still “stands like the theophanic ordeal pillar of fire in the midst of the seven churches,” in threat and promise, and warns through his apostle that Gentiles grafted onto the covenantal tree can be broken off (Rom. 11:17-21; cf. Matt. 8:12; John 15:1-8; Heb. 6:4-8).\(^{46}\)

Here we see that Horton clearly recognizes the bilateral aspect of the new covenant grounded on the many biblical exhortations to faith, repentance, holiness, and endurance. That is why Horton also insists that even though believers are freed from obeying the law as a means to justification before God they are not freed from the law in an absolute sense.\(^{47}\) In fact, believers have a greater obligation to the law because their hearts have been circumcised by the Spirit.\(^{48}\)

However, this new covenant obedience is never the grounds for obtaining the eschatological inheritance but is only the *fruit* of God’s gracious gifting of the believer with a new heart that engenders true submission to the law (as described in Jeremiah 31:31-34 and Ezekiel 36:26-

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\(^{45}\) Horton, *God of Promise*, p. 182, emphasis added. Horton appears to be inconsistent here in comparison to his other statements regarding the promissory and unconditional nature of the new covenant. If the new covenant, as he staunchly argues elsewhere, is a promissory covenant that is unconditional in character how is it consistent to maintain that there are certain conditions that need to be fulfilled by the Christian for him or her to receive “final salvation”? Perhaps if Horton were more careful in his use of the term “condition” when applying it to the stipulations of the new covenant this inconsistency may not be a point of contention.

\(^{46}\) Ibid., pp. 151-152.

\(^{47}\) We will discuss this subject in more detail in the next chapter.

\(^{48}\) Ibid., p. 180.
In this way, the believer’s obedience to the law (which is a summarization of the command to love God and neighbour) is the consequence of being justified in Christ, having given new life, and the Spirit’s work of renewal taking place in his or her heart.\(^{50}\)

### 4.2 The Implications for the Doctrine of Justification

Horton’s doctrine of justification is completely in accord with the confessional Reformed position—as outlined in the *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (chap. XI), *The Heidelberg Catechism* (qq. 59-64), and *The Belgic Confession* (arts. 22-23)—where believing sinners are declared righteous by God’s grace alone not due to any of their own works or merits but solely on the grounds of Christ’s meritorious righteousness which is imputed to them (cf. Rom 4:5).\(^{51}\)

The reception of this gift, in addition, is through faith *alone* in Christ and his work alone (in his

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\(^{49}\) Horton, *Covenant and Salvation*, p. 148. Some may object to this argumentation by insisting that making obedience under the new covenant a necessary stipulation for the believer to carry out as an expression of genuine faith is essentially no different from making it the *ground* for inheriting the salvific promises. However, this objection fails once it is recognized that there is a fundamental difference between the *fruit* of salvation and the *ground* of salvation. The believer’s salvation is grounded in Christ’s work alone, but his or her obedience to God is the necessary fruit that accompanies genuine faith and the new life already given (cf. Eph 2:10; Jas 2:14-26).


\(^{51}\) Some evangelical scholars in recent years have challenged the conventional post-Reformation Reformed interpretation of Romans 4:5 that what is reckoned righteous to the believer is Christ’s merited righteousness. Instead, they argue that what is counted as righteousness is the believer’s faith in Christ (cf. Robert H. Gundry, “The Nonimputation of Christ’s Righteousness,” *Justification: What’s at Stake in the Current Debates*, eds. Mark Husbands and Daniel J. Treier [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004], pp. 17-45). However, D. A. Carson is right to point out that to “think of the justification of the ungodly as mere declaration with respect to the believer, based upon the redemptive event but distinct from it, rather than seeing justification as the great event itself in which God simultaneously is vindicated while justifying the ungodly, thereby incorporating the declaration into the saving event, is a painful reductionism that fails to see how our being ‘in Christ’ ties us to the justifying event itself” (D. A. Carson, “The Vindication of Imputation: On Fields of Discourse and Semantic Fields,” *Justification: What’s at Stake in the Current Debates*, eds. Mark Husbands and Daniel J. Treier [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004], p. 77, emphases in original).
passive and active obedience).\textsuperscript{52} Horton bases his advocacy for the historic Reformed position not only on exegesis of relevant passages in Scripture but on the bi-covenantal structure of the whole biblical narrative. In other words, according to Horton, the traditional Reformed view of justification cannot be vindicated merely on isolated exegesis of certain verses in the Bible but must be viewed as a saving act of God that is thoroughly covenantal in character. However, the bi-covenantal approach he takes to defend the \textit{sola fide} and \textit{sola gratia} character of justification is ultimately rooted in the dichotomized law-gospel hermeneutic advanced by Calvin\textsuperscript{53} and other Reformation theologians. He views the various contemporary trends towards a “flattening” redemptive-historic hermeneutic where the Mosaic and Promissory covenants are conflated together (or viewed in strict continuity) as undermining the historic Reformed view of justification \textit{sola gratia} and \textit{sola fide} because it confuses law and gospel in God’s act of redemption for individuals throughout history. As a result of this hermeneutical manoeuvre, the strictness of the law becomes relaxed \textit{but} the gratuity of the gospel becomes reduced because it is turned into a “new law” (where the believer’s non-meritorious good works play some instrumental role in justifying him or her at the final judgment). The practical consequence of this is that believers cannot be entirely assured of their freedom from the guilt of sin and must still carry the burden themselves (even if assisted by grace) to be justified before God at the consummation.\textsuperscript{54}

Therefore, the challenges brought forth against the traditional covenant theology of post-Reformation orthodoxy in recent years by Barth, Torrance, Rolston, Miller, Bruggink, Placher,\textsuperscript{52,53,54}Michael S. Horton, “Traditional Reformed View,” \textit{Justification: Five Views}, eds. James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), pp. 91-105.\textsuperscript{53} For example, Calvin writes: “The law justifies him who fulfils all its precepts, while faith justifies those who are destitute of the merit of works, and who rely on Christ alone. To be justified by our own merit, and to be justified by the grace of another, are two schemes which cannot be reconciled: one of them must be overturned by the other” (Calvin, \textit{Comm. Gal} 3:11).\textsuperscript{54} Horton, “Which Covenant Theology?,” pp. 221-226.
and others that it virtually amounts to a type of works-righteousness system that degenerated from the views of Calvin and other Reformers are unfounded. In fact, their criticisms of post-Reformation federalism may be directed legitimately against recent monocovenantal (or covenantal nomistic) theologies propagated by a certain segment of scholarship within the contemporary evangelical Reformed tradition that confuses law and gospel not only in a redemptive-historical sense but also in a qualitative sense. Horton and the classic bi-covenantal theology of post-Reformation orthodoxy, on the other hand, avoid the snare of legalism by strongly positing the antithesis between law and gospel (and the distinctions between the Mosaic and Promissory covenants) when it involves a person’s judicial acceptance by God (justification). This, however, does not mean that the doctrine of justification espoused by Horton and post-Reformation Reformed orthodoxy is reduced to a mere legal fiction. In fact, the doctrine of justification by faith alone in Christ alone, as we will see in the following chapter, has considerable practical consequences for those united to Christ through faith and given new life by the Spirit.
5. The Application and Operation of the Covenant of Grace in the Life of the Elect

Despite the criticisms levelled by Barth and other neo-orthodox Reformed theologians of the last century against post-Reformation covenant theology for moving away from the theology of grace advanced by John Calvin and other Reformation theologians, post-Reformation covenant theology in recent years has also been criticized in some quarters of the evangelical Reformed movement for implicitly acquiescing to a form of antinomianism where law and gospel are sharply opposed to each other through the movement’s rigid bifurcation between the covenants of works and grace. In fact, recent revisionist Reformed theologians like Norman Shepherd, P. Andrew Sandlin, and Peter J. Leithart have criticized traditional covenant/federal theology for this specific reason. As a consequence of this rigid bifurcation of law and grace, they argue that classic federal theology inadvertently erodes the vital nerve that connects the juridical aspects of salvation like justification with the transformative aspects of salvation like regeneration, sanctification, and a life that is shaped through God’s law. In addition, they argue that by setting forth this sharp distinction classic federalism unintentionally deemphasizes the responsibility believers have within the covenant of grace.

We will argue below, however, based on Horton’s understanding of how the covenant of grace is operational in the life of the elect, that this specific criticism levelled against classic covenant theology by recent revisionist Reformed theologians is unwarranted and based on a faulty understanding of traditional bi-covenantal federalism. In fact, we will argue that Horton (and classic federal theology in general) avoids the antinomian pitfall by maintaining that the
view of the covenant of grace set forth in his covenant theology includes a bilateral element that obligates believers to submit themselves under God’s law through the power of the Spirit. We will lay out this argument by discussing four issues pertinent to this subject that will aid us in giving substance to this argument more fully in the course of the chapter. These four issues are: 1) the necessity of repentance and faith for entrance into the covenant of grace; 2) the relationship between the covenant of grace and sanctification; 3) the relationship between the covenant of grace and the law; and 4) the role of the sacraments in the covenant of grace. At the end of the chapter we will also discuss how the believer’s union with Christ provides the basis for keeping both the juridical and transformative aspects of salvation within the covenant of grace intact.

5.1 The Necessity of Repentance and Faith for Entrance into the Covenant of Grace

In contrast to the view of J. B. Torrance, Horton argues that entrance into the covenant of grace (and the corollary of enjoying its salvific blessings) is not bestowed upon everyone but only upon those who exercise repentance and faith (repentance being the recognition of one’s sinfulness before God and turning away from it; faith being the passive receiving and resting on Christ and his merits for salvation). Horton, against some versions of modern Reformed neo-


\footnote{2}{Ibid., p. 581. Elsewhere, in regards to the relationship between faith and justification, he writes: “We are not justified by faith because of something intrinsic to faith itself. There is nothing magical about believing. It is faith in Christ, and not only faith in Christ but faith in the finished work of Christ, that constitutes saving faith. By faith, we take Christ’s righteousness as our own; his holiness for our unholliness” (Michael S. Horton, *Putting Amazing Back into Grace: Embracing the Heart of the Gospel*, 2nd ed. [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002], p. 149, emphasis.}
orthodoxy, clearly recognizes that the covenant of grace has a bilateral aspect to it. Against these neoorthodox viewpoints, Horton insists that the promissory covenant of grace not only gives but also makes demands from its beneficiaries—the demand for repentance and faith being crucial ones for participating in its blessings. He writes:

In conversion (unlike regeneration), we are told, “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Php 2:12-13). This does not mean that in conversion our salvation shifts from God’s sovereign grace in Christ to our activity and cooperation, but that the salvation that has been given is worked out by that same Spirit, through the same gospel, in a genuine relationship in which we become covenant partners who are now alive to God in Christ. Apart from our repentance and faith, there is no justification or union with Christ.

However, he is also quick to point out that the human response “is a gift of the Spirit through the gospel.” Therefore, the Spirit-given source of repentance and faith provides a solid defense against the popular but mistaken notion that if these two aspects of conversion are necessary to enjoy the salvific blessing of the covenant of grace they are thereby turned into a form of human works, and therefore lead to another type of works-righteousness salvation.

Despite the gift-character of repentance and faith (which are distinct yet two sides of the same coin), Horton believes that these two aspects of conversion must never be restricted to the initial moment of conversion when the blessings of forgiveness, justification, and adoption are received. In fact, Horton insists that repentance and faith must occur throughout the duration of

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4 Ibid.
5 Ibid., p. 577.
the believer’s life if they are to be deemed genuine. He writes: “[T]his is not a once-and-for-all transition from legal repentance to faith in Christ to evangelical repentance, but a perpetual cycle that defines the Christian life.”\(^6\) Additionally, those who fall away from faith, Horton maintains, will be revealed as those who \textit{never} received the full saving benefits of the covenant of grace and will be regarded as violators of the covenant of works who then, as a result, suffer the just penal sanctions at the last judgment.\(^7\) Furthermore, the faith that perseveres not only completely justifies but is “immediately active in love,”\(^8\) and is the “constant source of the believer’s renewal and service toward others.”\(^9\) To put it another way, even though this faith “does not encompass obedience,” it certainly “does produce it.”\(^10\) Horton, therefore, is able to maintain delicately the balance between the utter giftedness of repentance and faith (as a result of the Spirit’s work) and the believer’s responsibility within the covenant to exercise these aspects of conversion not only at the initial time of conversion but continually for the rest of his or her life.

\(^6\) Ibid., p. 579. Wayne Grudem provides a good summary of what Reformed theologians have traditionally believed on this matter: “[A]lthough it is true that initial saving faith and initial repentance occur only once in our lives, and when they occur they constitute true conversion, nonetheless, the heart attitudes of repentance and faith only begin at conversion. These same attitudes should continue throughout the course of our Christian lives. Each day there should be heartfelt repentance for sins that we have committed, and faith in Christ to provide for our needs and to empower us to live the Christian life” (Wayne Grudem, \textit{Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine} [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994], p. 717, emphases in original).


\(^8\) Horton, \textit{The Christian Faith}, p. 583.


\(^10\) Horton, \textit{Putting Amazing Back into Grace}, p. 152, emphases in original. In regards to Paul’s statement “the obedience of faith” mentioned in Romans 1:5 (cf. Gal 5:7; 2 Thess 3:14), Horton argues that the phrase is “equivalent to embracing the gospel, not to faithfulness,” and that this is “clearly not obedience in general, but the specific kind of obedience that paradoxically refuses to give place to our obedience, since Paul also regards faith itself as a gift of God (Eph. 2:8)” (Horton, \textit{Covenant and Salvation}, p. 35, n75). Calvin, in his exposition of the verse, stated something similar when he wrote: “We must...notice here what faith is; the name of obedience is given to it, and for this reason—because the Lord calls us by his gospel; we respond to his call by faith; as on the other hand, the chief act of disobedience to God is unbelief, I prefer rendering the sentence, ‘For the obedience of faith,’ rather than, ‘In order that they may obey the faith;’ for the last is not strictly correct, except taken figuratively, though it be found once in the Acts, vi. 7. Faith is properly that by which we obey the gospel” (John Calvin, \textit{Comm. Rom 1:5}).
In this way, Horton is able to uphold both the promissory character of the covenant of grace and the bilateral element within it.

5.2 The Relationship Between the Covenant of Grace and Sanctification

In his recently published, controversial book, the Reformed theologian and apologist John Frame takes Horton to task for not emphasizing enough the importance of progressive sanctification and the believer’s responsibility in it in his doctrine of salvation as depicted in his work *Christless Christianity*. He states: “Scripture refers over and over again to sanctification and the inner life. But Horton’s references to it are almost entirely negative. If the argument about Christless Christianity is an argument about focus or emphasis, it seems to me that Horton’s own focus needs rethinking.”¹¹ One of the chief problems of Frame’s criticism of Horton’s apparent “sanctification deficient” view of salvation is that he only looks to one of Horton’s sources to base this argumentation. In addition to his faulty methodology in understanding Horton’s views, he does not take into consideration that Horton insists, as he clearly makes known numerous times elsewhere, that law and gospel are not antithetical in an *absolute* sense and that the covenant of grace, despite its promissory character, does have a bilateral aspect to it. In fact, as stated above in the introduction to this chapter, this is a common criticism levelled against classic federal theology by the revisionist Reformed theologians today:

that its sharp law-gospel distinction undercuts the necessity of sanctification and obedience to God’s law in the Christian life.\textsuperscript{12}

Contrary to Frame’s assertion, Horton’s soteriology upholds the nature and necessity of sanctification and the place of the believer’s zeal in pursuing it. He bases this on the fact that the covenant of grace not only bestows salvific blessings to the elect as gifts but also claims them as God’s own people (with the accompanying evidences that attests to that reality). He writes: “The covenant that is unilaterally given and always remains unconditional in its basis as pure gift gives rise to a genuinely bilateral relationship of hearing and answering, passive receiving and an active return of thanksgiving to God and service to neighbor.”\textsuperscript{13} Some, however, may criticize this as a form of inconsistency in Horton’s covenant theology. If the covenant of grace (or the new covenant), as Horton claims, is unconditional in its basis and purely gratuitous in character, how can the language of obligations or mutuality be used in a consistent way when referring to the covenant? Horton answers this by maintaining that the unconditional and royal grant character of the promissory covenants provides the foundation for the progressive transformation of believers unto Christ’s image.\textsuperscript{14} To put it another way, it is because believers are justified freely in Christ based on the covenant of grace that they are now freed to move ahead in being

\textsuperscript{12} For example, the revisionist Reformed theologian P. Andrew Sandlin blames classic federalism as being one of the culprits for the rampant antinomianism (or “cheap grace” soteriology) in much of contemporary evangelical teaching (cf. P. Andrew Sandlin, “The Gospel of Law and the Law of Gospel: An Assessment of the Antithetical Gospel-Law Paradigm,” \textit{A Faith that is Never Alone: A Response to Westminster Seminary California}, ed. P. Andrew Sandlin [La Grange, CA: Kerygma Press, 2007], pp. 245-246). The problem with Sandlin’s assessment is that he directs his criticism against the wrong targets (i.e., those who uphold classic covenant/federal theology). His criticism may be targeted legitimately towards certain thinkers within the modern dispensationalist movement (see below), but it cannot be justifiably directed towards those who embrace the classic form of Reformed covenant theology (as our analysis of Horton’s understanding of the relationship between the covenant of grace and a believer’s sanctification will soon show).

\textsuperscript{13} Horton, \textit{Covenant and Salvation}, p. 264.

\textsuperscript{14} Horton, \textit{The Christian Faith}, p. 615.
sanctified by the Spirit (as evidenced by their continual love for God and service to neighbours).

He writes:

[B]ecause Christ’s life and death are reckoned to us, the Spirit can now work in us that obedience which the law could never accomplish. “He abolishes the first”—the old covenant—“in order to establish the second”—the new covenant. No longer bleating sheep and goats, but a body—the body of our Lord himself—is prepared for this new covenant sacrifice: a sacrifice of obedience and death. But it is a sacrifice that, by forever settling our acceptance before God, goes on to bring about that renewal of human hearts and new obedience promised in Jeremiah 31. To be sure, our obedience is never complete. Inner renewal and renovation are always in process, falling short of that holiness of heart and life that we will enjoy in our glorification. Nevertheless, we have died with Christ and we have been raised with him in newness of life. These new covenant blessings cannot be reversed.¹⁵

Another way of putting this is that although the gift of justification is distinct from the gift of sanctification both cannot be separated from each other (because Christ cannot be divided).

Therefore, instead of undermining the necessity of progressive sanctification, the once-and-for-all justification of the believer by faith apart from any keeping of the law actually becomes the catalyst for the believer’s obedience to God and transformation of character. As Horton writes, “We are justified solely by knowledge of, assent to, and trust in the person and work of Jesus Christ. And yet, anyone who is justified has been regenerated, grafted into the life of Christ, and fruits of gratitude will inevitably follow.”¹⁶

One of the reasons why Horton is keen on emphasizing the necessity of sanctification within the confines of the covenant of grace is due to his disagreement with a particular movement within contemporary evangelicalism that divorces Christ’s saviourship from his

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lordship (or justification from sanctification).\textsuperscript{17} Those who advocate this position usually come from a distinct segment of the modern dispensationalist movement that has roots in the theology of Lewis Sperry Chafer (1871-1952) and Dallas Theological Seminary.\textsuperscript{18} Aside from Chafer, some other notable names who advocate this position include Zane C. Hodges,\textsuperscript{19} Charles C. Ryrie,\textsuperscript{20} Robert P. Lightner,\textsuperscript{21} and R. T. Kendall.\textsuperscript{22} In response to this evangelical form of the antinomian error, Horton argues that the covenant of grace/new covenant cannot but be made practically effectual in the lives of those who truly belong to it. Basing his argument on Herman Bavinck’s understanding of the relationship between the covenant of grace and sanctification, he writes:

The ungodly are declared righteous and are therefore called to walk in righteousness; the dead are made alive in Christ and are therefore to die to sin and live to God. Passive recipients of grace, the elect are made active by that same grace, so that they are able to respond as faithful covenant creatures for the first time. God’s covenantal faithfulness is not based on anything in us, but creates us for good works (Eph 2:8-10).\textsuperscript{23}

Horton is also careful to maintain that the works of love that believers do ultimately come from God alone. Even though the human covenant partner is not passive during the whole process of sanctification (it is not Christ who dies and rises daily, putting sin to death, but believers),\textsuperscript{24} nevertheless, the transformation that believers undergo to become more like Christ in attitude

\textsuperscript{17} Some who embrace an extreme form of this view argue that true believers can be spiritually barren throughout their lives and even die in a state of apostasy without having their salvation questioned or put in jeopardy.


\textsuperscript{22} R. T. Kendall, \textit{Once Saved, Always Saved} (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2005). What sets Kendall apart from the rest is that he is not a dispensationalist.

\textsuperscript{23} Horton, \textit{The Christian Faith}, p. 616.

\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., p. 654. Horton writes elsewhere: “We can avoid synergism and passivity at least in part by recognizing that the divine grace of sanctification does not render the subject immobile or passive, but definitively and progressively transforms the character of that agency” (Horton, \textit{Covenant and Salvation}, p. 253).
and life has its ultimate source in God (even though God works through means to accomplish this). That is why Horton, like many of the orthodox Reformed theologians of the past, emphatically insists that those who live in open rebellion against God, despite being a visible member of the new covenant community, have never truly experienced the salvific blessings of the covenant of grace in full measure. He writes:

So the good news is that if you are in Christ, you are a new creature. The indicative (i.e., the good news of what God has done—"the mercies of God") drives the imperatives (i.e., the law in its third use). You have not inherited forgiveness and justification by grace only to have your sanctification determined by a covenant of law. The irony is preserved: the law covenant leads to condemnation, while the promise covenant leads to the very obedience that the law requires but could never elicit. On the other hand, if you are living in open rebellion against the promises of God and do not delight in his law inwardly, then the inheritance does not belong to you even if you have been incorporated visibly into the covenant community.

A life that is characterized by unrepentant sin and rebellion reveals that a person has never truly received the salvific gifts of the covenant of grace, such as justification and new life, despite his or her profession of faith and membership in the church. This is due to the fact that it is impossible for anyone to enter God’s sacred precincts at the eschaton while still spiritually blind, under the dominion of death, and having a heart that despises God’s law. In this sense, progress in sanctification during the present age is necessary for (although never the basis of) the believer’s future glorification in the eschatological kingdom. However, this does not mean that

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26 Horton, God of Promise, pp. 192-193, emphasis added.
27 Ibid., p. 184. Despite Horton’s strong affirmation of the inseparability of justification and sanctification within the covenant of grace, he is also very critical of various forms of perfectionism where indwelling sin in the believer is downplayed. That is why he vigorously upholds the view espoused by Martin Luther and embraced by much of the Lutheran and Reformed traditions that all believers are simul iustus et peccator ("simultaneously justified and sinner") (Horton believes that Romans 7:7-24 is describing the daily struggles of a Christian with indwelling sin) (cf. Horton, The Christian Faith, pp. 658-661). In fact, in response to certain "legalistic" evangelical teachings on sanctification, he writes: "Any theory of the Christian life...which downplays the seriousness of sin even in the ongoing struggle of the Christian, is bound to result in unbiblical and unhealthy programs of sanctification" (Horton, Putting Amazing Back into Grace, p. 144).
believers fall back into a form of works-righteousness legalism. This is so because even “when responsibilities are laid down upon the covenant partner, they are never the conditions for inheriting life but the characteristics of the life that they have inherited from the Father, in the Son, by the Spirit’s effective operation.”

5.3 The Relationship Between the Covenant of Grace and the Law

Although Horton strongly rejects the view that believers are still under the yoke of the covenant of law, he does not set aside the law entirely when it comes to the believer’s spiritual duties within the covenant of grace. Contrary to modern dispensationalism, Horton upholds the continuing validity of God’s law (apart from the ceremonial and civil aspects found in the Mosaic covenant) for the life of the believer in the new covenant. In accordance with the traditional Lutheran and Reformed teachings on the law, he argues that the so-called “third use of the law” (the law as a directive for Christian conduct) within the covenant of grace is exegetically and theologically valid. Even though Christ personally and perfectly fulfilled the

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28 Horton, Covenant and Salvation, p. 150. Some may object to Horton’s reasoning here and argue that his position undermines the believer’s assurance of salvation. However, Horton rejects the notion that assurance is based on how much progress a believer is making in sanctification or the quality of his or her faith (which certain forms of Puritanism taught). Assurance, for Horton, is always based on the object of faith—which is Christ and his saving work. Having said that, assurance may be encouraged by the signs of faith and its fruit (Horton, The Christian Faith, p. 586).

29 For instance, Henry Clarence Thiessen sets forth the typical dispensationalist view of the relationship between the believer and the law when he writes: “The Scriptures teach that in the death of Christ the believer is delivered not only from the curse of the law (Gal. 3:13), that is, the penalty imposed upon him by the law, but from the law itself (Rom. 7:4; Eph. 2:14f.; Col. 2:14). It was at Calvary that Christ became the end of the law for righteousness (Rom. 10:4). That this includes the moral law as well as the ceremonial law is evident from 2 Cor. 3:7-11” (Henry Clarence Thiessen, Lectures in Systematic Theology, revised by Vernon D. Doerksen [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979], p. 170, emphasis added).

30 Horton, The Christian Faith, p. 673; idem, God of Promise, p. 181. Horton basis his argument on Paul’s statement in Galatians 5:13-14 where the Apostle proclaims: “For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do
law on behalf of believers so that they would not be condemned but declared righteous before God for all time, this does not absolve believers of their obligations to the law in their new way of life within the covenant. In fact, Horton writes:

Under the law, in Adam, one is trapped in the cycle of sin and death, resentment and despair, self-righteousness and self-condemnation. Yet under grace, in Christ, one is not only justified apart from the law but is able for the first time to respond to that law of love that calls from the deepest recesses of our being as covenantally constituted creatures. It is not the law itself that changes, but our relation to it, and that makes all the difference.\footnote{Michael S. Horton, “Obedience Is Better than Sacrifice,” The Law is not of Faith: Essays on Works and Grace in the Mosaic Covenant, eds. Bryan D. Estelle, J. V. Fesko, and David VanDrunen (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2009), p. 334.}

The law of God remains good and holy but sin uses the law as an instrument of death, yet in Christ the believer’s relationship to the law changes and he or she begins to delight in following it. In other words, although never freed from the law as a directive in the new life of faith, believers are made free by the regenerating work of the Spirit to love the law and truly submit to it. As Horton writes, “The new covenant promises not only forgiveness, but also a true circumcision (regeneration) that will result not only in genuine trust but a love for the law that is now inscribed on hearts of flesh rather than tablets of stone (Ezek. 11:19; Jer. 31:32-34, with its New Testament gloss in 2 Cor. 3).”\footnote{Horton, Covenant and Salvation, pp. 133-134.} However, Horton is careful to maintain that this Spirit-empowered obedience to the law is never the means or the grounds to a later second justification before God at the final judgment. In fact, it is because believers are already adopted into God’s family and no longer stand under the condemnation of the law that they can now truly obey God’s commandments. He writes:

Christians still hear the law and are called to obey it, but as “the reasonable service” of their adoption as royal heirs, not as the condition of their

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not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”
receiving it. One becomes a beneficiary of the estate on the basis of another family member’s achievements, received through faith, and then follows the “house rules” not as a way of gaining or keeping the inheritance but as a proper way of responding to our new surroundings in a new family.  

In recent years, some evangelical Christians have contended that the law is no longer necessary for believers after it has exposed their failure to meet God’s righteousness and pointed them to Christ for salvation. They argue that the law has no exhortative or regulative purpose for believers since it is the sanctifying work of the Spirit that progressively changes them to become more like Christ. However, contrary to this “antinomianistic” view of the Christian’s relationship to the law, Horton insists, drawing from Calvin, that God’s law is necessary for believers because it provides them with a clear revelation of the duties that God requires of them in order to shake them out of their constant spiritual laziness. He writes:

Obedience flows from faith, but there is not always an automatic answer of mind, heart, and body to the master’s command. Faith must generate the gratitude necessary for good works, but the law disturbs our believer’s laziness by reminding him of his duty. When we are seeking righteousness, duty is a legal preoccupation, but once the law’s thunder is silenced, God often uses the law to discipline his children and to recall them to their former course.

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34 For instance, the dispensationalist theologian Wayne G. Strickland writes: “The law is properly understood to reveal the problem of sin and the necessity of grace in redemption, but the law is not seen as binding for the church saint. Rather, the law prefigures the redemption wrapped up in the person of Jesus Christ. The regulatory aspect of the law, binding on the Mosaic believer, dealt with sanctification and not justification, and it has been terminated with regard to the regulatory aspect. As with Paul, the church-age believer may rejoice that ‘now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law’ (Gal. 3:25)” (Wayne G. Strickland, “The Inauguration of the Law of Christ with the Gospel of Christ: A Dispensational View,” *Five Views on Law and Gospel*, ed. Wayne G. Strickland [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999], p. 279). However, it should be granted that Strickland believes that Christians are now under the “law of Christ” (Ibid., p. 277).

Thus, the clear revelation of God’s will is needed, as elaborated in the law, to give believers knowledge of what God demands of them within the covenant of grace. In addition, the reason for the continuing validity of the law for believers under the new covenant era is due to the fact that God’s moral law remains perpetual and unchanging regardless of the period of redemptive history—which is grounded in God’s unchanging character. Horton states:

In terms of the moral law, God’s expectations have not changed at all from the Old to the New Testament, since God himself cannot change his own moral dispositions. Paul’s marvelous description of life in the Spirit and the fruit of the Spirit is simply an elaboration of the inner significance of the moral law: loving God and neighbor.\(^{36}\)

In fact, the law during the new covenant period is not relaxed or made less demanding—it is in actuality intensified by emphasizing its internal significance (cf. Matt 5:21-30).\(^{37}\) The reason for this, according to Horton, is so that it will “show us our hypocrisy in thinking that we have kept the law merely by conforming outwardly and to guide those upon whose hearts the Spirit has written it as part of his new covenant blessing.”\(^{38}\) Therefore, Horton (and classic covenant theology) argues that the law still plays a regulative role in the lives of believers and eschews any notion, in contrast to modern dispensationalism, that believers are no longer obligated to obey the law because they are under the covenant of grace.

### 5.4 The Sacraments in the Covenant of Grace

Traditionally, Reformed theology has maintained, in contrast to the teachings of Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy, that believers are only required to observe two sacraments

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\(^{36}\) Horton, *God of Promise*, p. 178.

\(^{37}\) Ibid.

\(^{38}\) Ibid.
as the means of grace: baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Although evangelical Protestants have disagreed throughout history on the meaning and significance of these two sacraments, they have generally agreed that these are the only ones instituted by Christ. Horton’s theology of the sacraments follows the view not only of historic Protestantism but also of mainstream Reformed orthodoxy.\(^{39}\) Like many of the mainstream orthodox Reformed thinkers of the past, Horton believes that baptism and the Lord’s Supper are not ordinances that merely confirm faith and remind believers of Christ’s atoning sacrifice, respectively, but genuine means of grace (and signs and seals of that grace) that convey God’s salvific blessings of the new covenant to his covenantally-bound people. As he states, “Not only do baptism and the Lord’s Supper remind us of Christ and his death; these sacraments are actually channels of God’s grace, linked to faith.”\(^{40}\)

In this section of the chapter, we will discuss how Horton defends the mainstream Reformed position of the meaning and significance of the sacraments when he discusses the role of baptism and the Lord’s Supper in God’s economy of salvation.

### 5.4.1 Baptism

Horton, like previous paedobaptist Reformed theologians, argues for the parallel between Old Testament circumcision and New Testament baptism. This is due to the fact that Horton, like other classic federal theologians, believes that the covenant of grace is symmetrically operative

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\(^{39}\) When we say “mainstream Reformed orthodoxy” we mean the Reformed tradition that rejects “believers-only” baptism and the memorialist view of the Lord’s Supper; in other words, the branch of the Reformed tradition that gave rise to Presbyterianism.

\(^{40}\) Horton, *Putting Amazing Back into Grace*, p. 184.
in the administrations of both the Old and New Testaments. Like New Testament baptism, circumcision in the Old Testament was instituted by God as a sign and seal of the covenant of grace and identified the recipient with the Mediator of that promissory covenant. Although there are certainly discontinuities between both, circumcision, like baptism in the present age, was given to God’s people in the Old Testament so that their children (and adult converts to the Abrahamic faith) would be separated from unbelievers and placed within the “protective wings” of the covenant. In addition, both ordinances conveyed no saving benefits apart from faith in the Mediator which the ordinances pointed to. As Horton states, although “baptism (like circumcision) signifies and seals our participation in the visible covenant of grace, the reality that it communicates must be embraced by faith.” In other words, circumcision and baptism are of no salvific efficacy for the children of believers under both covenant administrations if they do not at one point in their lives embrace the Saviour through faith which the ordinances signify. In fact, both sacraments lead to the final cutting off at the last judgment for those children who enter adulthood and persist in unbelief. Therefore, Horton’s theological rationale for infant

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43 For example, while only male Israelite infants were circumcised (for obvious reasons) in the old covenant administration, in the new covenant era male and female children of believers participate in the baptismal ordinance. Also, under the new covenant, baptism is the “fuller sign and seal” which provides a greater reality of the blessings of the covenant of grace. As Horton writes, “In baptism...the new covenant finds a fuller sign and seal for a fuller reality. Not only is a part of the body consecrated to God, but the whole person is baptized into Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection....Those who are identified with Christ in baptism, then, are those over whom sin, death, and the curse of the law no longer reign” (Horton, *A Better Way*, p. 99).


46 Horton, *The Christian Faith*, p. 791. A criticism that can be levelled against Horton’s (and the Reformed paedobaptist) view is that the position falls into inconsistency when relating the practice of infant baptism with the Spirit’s work of regeneration. If some of those baptized as infants grow up denying the faith were their baptisms ineffectual to begin with? The only way out of this conundrum is to say that the infants of believers were regenerated in some way at the moment of their baptisms (i.e., “presumptive” salvation) but later demonstrated otherwise by their apparent apostasy. Or to put it another way, the grace given to the infant at baptism is only made “effectual” when he or she later receives Christ by faith. However, if this is the case, it goes against the view of Scripture that the new life comes about as a result of conscious faith in the Saviour via the spoken Word (John
baptism, in contrast to the view of credobaptist evangelicals (i.e., those who only practise believer’s baptism), is based on the fact that there is a covenantal parallelism (with the covenant of grace being the unifying bond) between circumcision in the Old Testament and baptism in the New.\footnote{As he maintains: “If Old Testament covenant children received the sign of the covenant, known then as circumcision, then New Testament covenant children are equally entitled to the sign of the covenant” (Horton, Putting Amazing Back into Grace, p. 187). Richard L. Pratt provides a good summary of why Reformed evangelicals baptize infants: “[The] covenantal outlook on infant baptism distinguishes Reformed theology from many other traditions. Reformed churches do not baptize children to regenerate them or to remove the curse of original sin. Nor do Reformed churches baptize children simply to indicate the parents’ dedication of the child to God. We baptize children to initiate them into covenant with God and to incorporate them into the visible church. As circumcision brought infant boys into the visible nation of Israel, baptism brings children into the visible church” (Richard L. Pratt, “Reformed View: Baptism as the Sacrament of the Covenant,” Understanding Four Views on Baptism, ed. John H. Armstrong [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007], p. 70). However, Pratt, like Horton, does not resolve the inconsistency that exists between his advocacy of infant baptism and the timing of the Spirit’s work of grace in the hearts of believers via the Word.} In his theology of baptism, Horton, following in the footsteps of his Reformed forebearers, attempts to walk the delicate path between the \textit{ex opere operato} view of baptism as taught by the Roman Catholic Church and the view of baptism embraced by Baptists and many free church denominations where the ordinance is viewed merely as an act of faith and testimony that one has been united to Christ in his death and resurrection.\footnote{Cf. Millard J. Erickson, Christian Theology, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), p. 1110.} In the former case, the sign and the thing signified are collapsed into one, as if submitting to the baptismal ritual in and of itself “mechanistically” conferred salvation even if faith in the Mediator is absent; in the latter, the sign and the thing signified are separated in which case baptism merely becomes a public demonstration of one’s faith in the Mediator in his death and resurrection.\footnote{Horton, God of Promise, pp. 152-153.} Despite both views being diametrically opposite of each other, they both fall into the same theological fallacy: turning baptism into a human-centred ritual rather than seeing it as a gracious sacrament where

\begin{itemize}
\item \textit{Rom 10:8-17} and the Reformed emphasis that the Spirit’s effectual work of grace necessarily results in faith, justification, and other blessings of the covenant. In fact, the Reformed paedobaptist view not only breaks apart the bind that holds baptism and the Word together but comes perilously close to the \textit{ex opere operato} view of Roman Catholicism.
\end{itemize}
God’s grace is vouchsafed to his covenant people. As Horton puts it, “Both trade on the mistaken assumption that the sacraments themselves do (or don’t do) anything.” Therefore, both the Roman Catholic and Baptistic views of baptism err, in their own ways, by putting more emphasis on how the ordinance works for the human beneficiary than on God’s act of grace through the sacrament.

As a way of avoiding both extremes, Horton insists that the sacrament of baptism is truly a means of grace (against the Baptistic view) without being the cause of grace (against the ex opere operato view of Rome). Like his Reformed forebearers, Horton maintains that baptism “remains a sign and seal of the covenant of grace—even if that very baptism and covenant are spurned….Baptism into Christ, the mediator of the covenant of grace, confers eternal life, even if its efficacy is not tied to the moment that it is administered.”

It confers this eternal life not in a mechanistic ex opere operato way but by consecrating believers unto God through Christ, washing their consciences of their sins, and confirming their salvation here on earth (without viewing the outward washing by the water as being identical with the inward washing by the Spirit).

In this way, water baptism can truly be considered as the “laver of regeneration and forgiveness because the sign does truly participate in the thing signified.” However, Horton is also careful to maintain that water baptism does not bestow any additional blessings of salvation (as if baptism were necessary to obtain a greater degree of salvation for the believer). He writes: “Baptism does not confer any additional degree of salvation or blessing than that which is conferred through the preached gospel. In both, the substance is the same: Christ and all his

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50 Ibid., p. 153.
52 Ibid., pp. 99, 102, 104.
53 Ibid., p. 104.
benefits.”\textsuperscript{54} In addition to this, baptism can never be seen as the \textit{cause} of election, regeneration, and justification.\textsuperscript{55} Therefore, according to Horton, baptism is necessary because it is one of the gracious means that God uses to confer his salvific blessings on his covenant people. However, this ordinance can only confer these blessings to the recipient if he or she embraces what is being signified in it through faith.

\textit{5.4.2 The Lord’s Supper}

As with the parallel between circumcision and baptism, Horton understands that a parallelism exists between the Jewish Passover and the Lord’s Supper established by Christ (cf. 1 Cor 5:7-8).\textsuperscript{56} As baptism is the new covenant sacrament that replaces circumcision, the Lord’s Supper replaces the Passover and is now the covenantal meal for believers in the present economy of salvation. In fact, the language and imagery Christ uses when he institutes the Lord’s Supper in Matthew 26:26-29 during Passover is carried over from the Old Testament (cf. Ps 116:13).\textsuperscript{57} Thus, there is a covenantal link between the Passover and the Lord’s Supper in that both, in their respective redemptive-historical phases, attest God’s unilateral grace to his people (as long as they participate in it through faith) based on the perfect Sacrificial Lamb to come (or who has already arrived).\textsuperscript{58}

Based on the covenantal understanding of the Lord’s Supper, Horton, like Calvin before him, seeks to avoid both the extremes of an overrealized eschatology of the Lord’s Supper (as

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., p. 106.
\textsuperscript{55} Horton, \textit{God of Promise}, p. 153.
\textsuperscript{56} Horton, \textit{A Better Way}, p. 114.
\textsuperscript{57} Horton, \textit{Putting Amazing Back into Grace}, p. 192.
\textsuperscript{58} Horton, \textit{A Better Way}, p. 115.
found in Lutheranism and Roman Catholicism) and an underrealized eschatology of the Lord’s Supper (as embraced by Baptists and many “low church” evangelicals). In the Lutheran and Roman Catholic views both fail to distinguish the sign and the thing signified by collapsing the distinctions between both (i.e., what is being signified is “swallowed” up by the sign).  

Although the Lutherans escaped the charge by the Reformed that their view of the Eucharist re-sacrificed Christ on the altar, the view of Rome was charged with turning the sacrament into a repeated atoning sacrifice—undermining the once-and-for-all character of Christ’s atoning death on the cross. On the other hand, the Baptistic (or memorialist) view results in the sacrament not really becoming a sacrament at all because it eviscerates the ordinance of “God’s powerful witness and work” (i.e., a means of grace) even though it can be occasions for a “spiritual event” by encouraging participants of their “powers of reflection, self-examination, and pious memory.” Despite their radical differences in understanding the purpose of the Lord’s Supper, both the Roman Catholic and memorialist views, however, end up characterizing the Eucharist as chiefly a human work—either by offering up Christ again as a sacrifice or by viewing it merely as a remembering and pledging.

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59 Horton, God of Promise, p. 157.
60 However, the Reformed typically charge the Lutherans that their view of consubstantiation (that Christ’s body is present “in,” “with,” and “under” the bread and wine at every Eucharistic celebration) is inconsistent with the reality that Christ is now bodily present in heaven beside the Father. The Lutherans, however, respond by stating that Christ is omnipresent in his flesh (the so-called ubiquity of Christ) due to his humanity being penetrated by his divine attributes (cf. Horton, The Christian Faith, pp. 806-807). The Reformed view, however, appears to have better support in light of Scripture (cf. Acts 1:11).
61 The contemporary Reformed theologian Morton H. Smith makes this charge against the Roman Catholic view: “Rome in its re-sacrificing of Christ denies the sufficiency of the death of Christ for our salvation. This is an attack upon the heart of the Gospel, and changes it from a Gospel of grace to a Gospel of works, which as Paul says is no Gospel at all” (Morton H. Smith, Systematic Theology, vol. 2 [Greenville, SC: Greenville Seminary Press, 1994], p. 693).
62 Horton, God of Promise, p. 157.
63 Horton, People and Place, p. 138.
In contrast to both the overrealized and underrealized eschatological views of the Lord’s Supper, Horton, reaffirming the Reformed orthodox view, seeks to avoid both confusing the sign and the signified and completely separating them. Instead, like baptism, the Lord’s Supper truly is a means of grace (and not a mere memorial ordinance) to those who have true faith even though it is never the cause of grace for them. Horton writes:

Even more fully than those who ate the Passover lamb, feeding on the substitute whose death was their life, those who receive the Supper in faith do not just receive the bread and the wine; in receiving them they feed on Christ in heaven by faith....It is therefore not a mere memorial or a pledge of our fidelity but is first and foremost a means of grace and a pledge of God’s faithfulness. But just as the unbelieving generation in the wilderness received circumcision and Passover but were barred from entering God’s rest because of unbelief, only believers receive that which is promised (the thing signified) in the sacrament.  

In this way, the sacrament becomes a means of grace by strengthening the faith and repentance of believers and by cheering them up by reminding them that Christ has been crucified for them and raised to the Father’s right hand to intercede on their behalf. Thus, the Lord’s Supper, like the preached Word that is heard, is good news that is visibly presented to the rest of the believers’ senses. Additionally, the sacrament not only spiritually benefits individual believers but also, by the work of the Spirit through it, identifies the true church and creates a communion for the Father in the Son. These are the reasons why Horton argues for its frequent celebration within the covenant community. However, Horton also makes the point that the Lord’s Supper cannot confer the same benefit to those who partake of it in the absence of faith. Rather, those who take the sacrament without faith (i.e., partaking of it in an “unworthy manner”) not only

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64 Horton, A Better Way, p. 118.
65 Horton, God of Promise, p. 162.
miss out on the thing signified\textsuperscript{68} but bring down God’s judgment on their heads (cf. 1 Cor 11:27-29).\textsuperscript{69} As a result, God’s judgment on “unworthy participants” reveals that the bread and wine are not mere visible reminders of Christ’s atoning sacrifice but that they are truly bound by Word and Spirit (so that any partaking of the sacrament in an unworthy manner is a real sin against the body and blood).\textsuperscript{70}

5.5 The Believer’s Union with Christ as the Bind that Holds Together the Objective and Subjective Aspects of the Covenant of Grace

Like Calvin and other Reformation theologians, Horton argues that the believer’s union with Christ is what binds together the forensic and transformative aspects of salvation. He writes: “Taking root in the forensic soil of justification, from which it derives its effective power as well as its legal basis, union with Christ produces the life of Christ within believers, which bears the fruit of righteousness. This life is not simply like Christ’s life (imitatio Christi); it is Christ’s life into which we are baptized.”\textsuperscript{71} As a result, this unio mystica provides the proper response to the common accusation made against the Reformation view of salvation that it divorces justification from sanctification or the objective from the subjective. In addition, not only does this union between believers and Christ provide the answer to how justification and sanctification are integrally connected while remaining distinct, it also offers the solution to bringing together the

\textsuperscript{68} Horton writes: “[T]he unbeliever receives only the sign, refusing the thing signified. After all, they possess neither the Spirit nor union with Christ” (Ibid., p. 157).

\textsuperscript{69} Horton, Putting Amazing Back into Grace, p. 193.

\textsuperscript{70} Horton, A Better Way, p. 120.

\textsuperscript{71} Horton, The Christian Faith, p. 597, emphases in original.
various *temporal* tenses of salvation (the so-called *ordo salutis*) (cf. Rom 8:29-30) and joining together the individual and corporate aspects of redemption (cf. 1 Cor 12:12-13) within the covenant of grace. As Horton maintains:

> The theme of union with Christ brings together the temporal tenses of our salvation—past, present, and future, as well as the objective and subjective, historical and existential, corporate and individual, forensic and transformative, and a unilateral gift that establishes a reciprocal relationship of faithful speaking and answering within the covenant as the nucleus of cosmic renewal. Although each element of the so-called *ordo salutis* must be allowed its own distinct role in what William Perkins called “a golden chain” of Romans 8:30, the chain itself is greater than the sum of its parts.  

In this way, the believer’s union with Christ can be seen as the *matrix* of the whole redemptive act of God since it brings in these various aspects of salvation together without confusing them.

As another Reformed theologian Robert L. Reymond writes:

> Union with Christ is the fountainhead from which flows the Christian’s every spiritual blessing—repentance and faith, pardon, justification, adoption, sanctification, perseverance, and glorification. Chosen in Christ before the creation of the world, and *in the divine mind* united with Christ in his death and resurrection, the elect, in response to God’s effectual call, are through God’s gift of faith *actually* united to Christ. Their union with Christ is in no sense the effect of human causation.

Therefore, the *unio mystica* between Christ and his elect provides the bond that joins together the objective and subjective aspects of salvation and the individual and corporate sides of redemption found in the covenant of grace.

Although Horton maintains that the union of believers with Christ is pivotal in tying the forensic and transformative aspects of their salvation, he is also careful to maintain the clear

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distinction between Christ and his elect in this union. This *unio mystica* does not obliterate the identity of believers who are joined to Christ by faith even though it is the source of their transformation and renewal so that they become more like him. In other words, a proper understanding of this union rules out any type of “fusion” between Christ and his elect—an understanding that has roots in Platonism and Neoplatonism (with their scheme of an ontic union of the human soul with divinity) rather than in Scripture.\(^{75}\) As Horton writes:

> [U]nion with God-in-Christ is not the goal to which the soul aspires in its striving ascent, but the freely-given communion that every believer enjoys from the very beginning. Believers live *from* this union, not *toward* it, and it is a forensic and relational reality: a communion of persons and their gifts rather than an exchange (much less fusion) of essences.\(^{76}\)

Furthermore, he states: “Christ indwells us not immediately or essentially, as if our natures were somehow transfused or mingled, but by his Spirit (Eph. 2:18, 22). This is the sense in which, through God’s ‘precious and very great promises,’ we have now become ‘partakers of the divine nature’ (2Pe 1:4).”\(^{77}\) Therefore, on the basis of a biblical and covenantal understanding of the *unio mystica*, not only are the juridical aspects (i.e., forgiveness and justification) of the believer’s union with Christ kept distinct from the transformative but believers (whether individually or corporately) are not seen as an extension of Christ’s incarnation and, thus, safeguarding the distinction between the Creator and creature.\(^{78}\)

\(^{76}\) Ibid., p. 603, emphases in original.
\(^{77}\) Ibid.
\(^{78}\) Ibid., p. 612.
6. Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to argue that the covenant theology set forth by Michael Horton is a faithful reaffirmation of the covenant theology of the post-Reformation Reformed orthodoxy of the seventeenth century and after. In addition, the study argued, using primary and secondary sources, that Horton’s and Reformed orthodoxy’s covenant theology steers clear of any type of works-righteousness legalism (contra the arguments of Karl Barth, J. B. Torrance, Perry Miller, Holmes Rolston III, D. J. Bruggink, William Placher, and others) on the one hand by positing a clear dichotomy between the covenants of works and grace (and, thus, maintaining the clear distinction between law and gospel), while at the same time avoiding the pitfalls of antinomianism (contra the arguments of Daniel P. Fuller, Norman Shepherd, P. Andrew Sandlin, Peter J. Leithart, and others) by arguing that the covenant of grace (and the promissory covenants of history [i.e., the Abrahamic and new]) is bilateral in character despite being monergistic in origin and nature. In this way, the study attempted to demonstrate that the covenant theology of Horton and Reformed orthodoxy was an elaborate and systematic formulation of the Reformers’ law-gospel distinction in regards to a believer’s justification before God (in response to the error of works-salvation legalism) while at the same time preserving the Reformers’ argument for the necessity of good works and obedience to God’s law within the Christian life as an expression of the new birth and genuine faith (as a guard against the spectre of antinomianism). As Thomas Kennedy Ascol astutely maintains, “Federalism successfully integrates into soteriology two theological tenets which are endemic to Reformed thought: the sovereignty of God and the
responsibility of man. The covenant serves as the means whereby this integration is accomplished."

In order to aid the defense of the thesis above, the study first conducted a historical survey and analysis of covenant theology from John Calvin to Louis Berkhof. Although all the post-Reformation Reformed theologians surveyed in chapter two did not agree on every detail in regards to the nature of the covenants of works and grace and their relationship to each other, all of them did hold to the clear dichotomy between the covenants of works and grace—which, in fact, was an elaborate systematization of the Reformation’s law-gospel antithesis in regards to justification. However, they also recognized that the covenant of grace between God and the elect was bilateral in character even though the covenant itself was sovereignly administered and gracious in nature. In this way, the post-Reformation covenant theologians staunchly maintained the inseparability between justification and sanctification (or the “objective” and “subjective” aspects of the covenant of grace) even though both were never confused with each other. In regards to Calvin’s covenant theology, however, the subject becomes more complicated since the Genevan Reformer never explicitly spoke about a foedus operum doctrine in any of his works (although he did designate the old covenant in a way as a foedus legale) nor did he consistently set forth a “covenantal dichotomy” in his own understanding of the covenant that was prevalent among the post-Reformation Reformed Scholastics. Scholars like Miller, Torrance, Rolston, Bruggink, and Placher have argued vociferously that there is a sharp discontinuity between Calvin and post-Reformation Reformed orthodoxy when it comes to the doctrine of the covenant (which they view the latter as being heavily encumbered by the scholastic method). However, as

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discussed in chapter two, this common view among religious historians and contemporary neoorthodox theologians has been challenged in recent years by evangelical scholars like Peter Lillback, Richard Muller, and Peter Golding. They argue that even though Calvin never explicitly taught a covenant of works doctrine, the seeds of the *foedus operum* of later Reformed orthodoxy can be detected in various parts in Calvin’s writings (especially when he discusses the key differences between law and gospel when it comes to the individual’s justification before God). In agreement with Lillback, Muller, and Golding, we argued that Calvin’s understanding of the relationship between the Old and New Testaments (or law and gospel) provided the foundation for which later Reformed theologians drew from when they formulated the bicovenantal structure in their federal theology (even though Calvin himself never systematically framed an elaborate covenant theology in his own works).

In chapter three, we discussed the structural features of Horton’s own covenant theology. The study attempted to show that Horton’s covenant theology is a contemporary expression of the covenant theology of post-Reformation Reformed orthodoxy. We argued this by showing that Horton embraces the strict dichotomy between the covenant of works (or what he calls the covenant of creation) and the covenant of grace. We also argued that Horton, through an analysis of his writings, follows the majority opinion among his Reformed forbearers by arguing for the strictly conditional and meritorious character of the covenant of creation/works. Horton maintains this position by arguing that the covenant of creation is a suzerain-vassal type covenant characteristic of many ancient Near Eastern covenants. In this type of covenant the suzerain lays down certain stipulations to the vassal and the vassal pledges complete loyalty and obedience to the suzerain. According to Horton, the covenant of creation, like the ancient Near Eastern suzerain-vassal covenants, did not contain any element of grace but was a strictly
conditional covenant that called upon the human creatures to maintain perfect obedience in order to obtain the eternal inheritance (in this case, Adam the vassal under Yahweh the Suzerain). On the other hand, Horton argues that the covenant of grace is an unconditional and gracious covenant. The foundation of this covenant, he argues, is the pretemporal covenant of redemption (the pactum salutis) established among the members of the Godhead. As part of the covenantal agreement among the persons of the Trinity, the Son assumes human flesh, meritoriously fulfills the covenant of creation (which the first Adam failed to do), and bestows the blessings of the covenant of grace (i.e., new birth, justification, adoption, sanctification, perseverance, etc.) to the elect. In return, the Son receives a people for himself. Therefore, this dichotomy between the covenants of creation and grace, for Horton, is crucial in maintaining the sharp distinction between law and gospel when it involves the justification of the sinner before God. Although law and gospel are not absolutely antithetical in God’s overall purpose in human redemption, it is absolutely antithetical in regards to a person’s judicial acceptance by God (in contrast to the views of Roman Catholicism, certain varieties of Arminianism, the modern New Perspective on Paul advocates, and contemporary revisionist Reformed theologians). In this way, the Adam-Christ antithesis—as respective covenant/federal heads of the unredeemed and elect (as described by Paul in Romans 5:12-21)—finds coherency within the overall federalist framework. However, one criticism that can be levelled against Horton’s view (and much of the orthodox Reformed tradition), is whether he can coherently dichotomize law and gospel without tearing asunder God’s nature or character. If God, according to the entire biblical narrative, gives both law and gospel to his people, is it theologically justifiable to dichotomize God’s ways with his human creatures throughout redemptive history in this manner? The danger that Horton’s and much of Reformed orthodoxy’s covenantal theology faces is that it risks falling into a type of
dualism. Horton could have addressed this possible objection to his law-gospel understanding more profoundly to strengthen his argument. Another criticism, as mentioned in chapter three, that can be raised validly is in regards to the exegetical feasibility of the *pactum salutis* doctrine. However, as we have argued, the exegetical support that Horton gives for this doctrine is tenuous at best and appears to be a device that was logically deduced by the post-Reformation Reformed Scholastics to give support for the doctrine of unconditional election.

In chapter four, we discussed Horton’s understanding of the relationships between the various historical covenants of biblical history (Abrahamic, Mosaic, and new). Horton views the biblical covenants of history as either belonging to the promissory or legal type. He concludes that the Abrahamic and new covenants are promissory covenants, while the Mosaic (Sinaitic) covenant is a legal one. Basing his argumentation from the research of the late evangelical Old Testament scholar Meredith G. Kline, Horton maintains that the Mosaic covenant is in some sense a *republication* of the prelapsarian covenant of creation. In this way, the covenants of creation and Sinai are sharply set in opposition to the covenant of grace and the promissory covenants given to Abraham and the one established by Christ through his death and resurrection. Horton finds this hermeneutical move crucial because it keeps law and gospel separate when it comes to God’s free act of justification for sinners on the grounds of Christ’s perfect obedience and sacrifice. In addition, Horton finds recent understandings in biblical scholarship (i.e., the New Perspective) and revisionist Reformed circles (i.e., the Federal Vision movement) on the subject of law and gospel as being problematic as they, in one way or another, undermine the Reformation principles of justification *sola fide* and salvation *sola gratia* by conflating the promissory and Mosaic covenants (and, in essence, law and gospel).
In chapter five, we discussed Horton’s understanding of how the covenant of grace is applied and rendered operative in the lives of the elect. In response to recent Reformed critics of classic federalism (Norman Shepherd, P. Andrew Sandlin, Peter J. Leithart, and others), Horton argues that the covenant of grace, despite its unconditional and gracious character, contains a bilateral element. The bilateral aspect of the covenant of grace is evinced by the fact that inner transformation (progressive sanctification) is a necessary blessing that all believers receive as being part of the covenant. In addition, although believers within the covenant of grace are freed from the curse of the law and its strict stipulations in order to obtain divine acceptance they are not freed from the law as a guide to regulate their new lives in Christ (i.e., the so-called third use of the law). According to Horton, the lack of progressive sanctification and a refusal to submit to God’s law are evidences that a professing believer has never truly received the gift of salvation and the full blessings of the covenant of grace. As a consequence, Horton is able to thwart the charges levelled against classic covenant theology by recent revisionist Reformed theologians that it inadvertently promotes a type of antinomianism due to its sharp distinction between the covenants of works and grace (or law and gospel). Additionally, Horton’s understanding of the two sacraments—baptism and the Lord’s Supper—reveals that the classic federalism that is followed by the Presbyterian branch of the Reformed tradition keeps divine grace and human responsibility integrated when it comes to these means of grace. This is so because although the sacraments are the means God uses to bestow his grace to his elect, the elect are still required to participate in these gracious means to strengthen their faith and repentance. Finally, Horton views the believer’s union with Christ as the basis for the joining together of both the objective and subjective and the individual and corporate aspects of the covenant of grace. As a result of
this union with Christ, believers are progressively transformed to conform to Christ’s image and are enabled to walk in true obedience to God.

In conclusion, we believe that overall, despite some questionable features, Horton’s (and Reformed orthodoxy’s) covenant theology provides a theologically sound defense against the twin errors of legalism and antinomianism that are rampant in evangelical preaching and teaching today. By positing a sharp dichotomy between the covenants of works and grace (or law and gospel) when it comes to the believer’s justification before God, covenant theology sets forth a well-established guard against the temptation towards any type of works-righteousness legalism. On the other hand, covenant theology also maintains its fortification against the error of antinomianism by positing that the covenant of grace, despite its promissory character, has a bilateral element within it (that believers not only receive the promises of the covenant by God’s sovereign grace but that within the covenant they pledge to follow and obey God for the rest of their lives).

In an age where it is too common for evangelical preaching to fall either into a “Do-it-yourself” legalism or “You are accepted no matter what” type antinomianism, much of the evangelical tradition today will do well to listen to the voices of the past to regain a proper understanding of the relationship between the law and gospel for preaching, evangelism, and spiritual formation. Although not adhering to the classic covenant theology of Reformed orthodoxy, the evangelical Old Testament scholar Walter C. Kaiser expresses the importance of this matter well when he writes:

The classic theme of all truly evangelical theology is the relationship of Law and Gospel. In fact, so critical is a proper statement of this relationship that depicts both a believer’s standing in Christ and his or her acting and living,
that it can become one of the best ways to test both the greatness and the
effectiveness of a truly biblical or evangelical theology.

The covenant theology of Horton and Reformed orthodoxy (with its particular law-gospel
hermeneutic), we argue, may provide the answer to many of the pastoral and theological
problems existing today in significant segments of evangelicalism—an evangelicalism that has
largely forgotten its Reformation heritage for the sake of accommodating itself to the trends of
the post-modern age.

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**B. Other Primary Sources**


The Lord’s Prayer. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1890 [first published 1692].


C. Secondary Sources


