

THE ECONOMY OF THE COVENANTS

BETWEEN GOD AND MAN

VOLUME 1

Herman Witsius

with Introductions by
Joel R. Beeke
and
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THE LIFE AND THEOLOGY OF HERMAN WITSIUS (1636–1708)

by
Joel R. Beeke

Herman Wits (Latinized as Witsius) was born on February 12, 1636, at Enkhuizen, The Netherlands, to God-fearing parents who dedicated their first child to the Lord even before he was born. His father, Nicholas Wits (1599–1669), was a man of some renown, having been an elder for more than twenty years, a member of Enkhuizen’s city council, and an author of devotional poetry.¹ Witsius’s mother, Johanna, was a daughter of Herman Gerard, pastor for thirty years of the Reformed church in Enkhuizen. Herman was named after his grandfather with the prayer that he might emulate his godly example.²

Education

Witsius was an avid learner. He began Latin studies at age five. Three years later his uncle, Peter Gerard, noticing the boy’s gifts, began to tutor him. By the time Witsius took up theological studies in Utrecht at age fifteen, he could speak Latin fluently. He could read Greek and Hebrew and had memorized numerous scriptures in their original languages. At

1. B. Glasius, ed., *Godgeleerd Nederland: Biographisch Woordenboek van Nederlandsche Godgeleerden*, 3 vols. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1861), 3:611.

2. For biographical detail on Witsius, see especially the standard work on his life and thought, J. van Genderen, *Herman Witsius: Bijdrage tot de kennis der gereformeerde theologie* (’s-Gravenhage: Guido de Bres, 1953), 5–107, and its extended bibliography, 243–59. Also, J. van Genderen, “Herman Witsius (1636–1708),” in *De Nadere Reformatie: Beschrijving van haar voornaamste vertegenwoordigers*, ed. T. Brienen, et al. (’s-Gravenhage: Boekencentrum, 1986). This introduction aims to summarize much of van Genderen’s research and is an updated revision of D. Patrick Ramsey and Joel R. Beeke, *An Analysis of Herman Witsius’s The Economy of the Covenants* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books and Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2002), iii–xxiv, which is reprinted in Joel R. Beeke, *Puritan Reformed Spirituality* (Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 2006), 331–52.

Utrecht, he studied Syriac and Arabic under Johannes Leusden (1624–1699) and theology under Johannes Hoornbeeck (1617–1666), whom he called “my teacher of undying memory.” He also studied under Andreas Essenius (1618–1677), whom he honored as “my father in the Lord,” and Gisbertus Voetius (1589–1676), whom he called “the great Voetius.”³ From Voetius he learned how to wed precise Reformed orthodoxy to heartfelt, experiential piety.⁴ Though he never fully embraced Voetius’s high scholastic method, he did fully embrace Voetius’s commitment to the practice of piety (*praxis pietatis*)⁵.

After studying theology and homiletics with Samuel Maresius (1599–1673) at Groningen, Witsius returned to Utrecht in 1653, where he was profoundly influenced by the local devout pastor Justus van den Bogaard, who was a close friend of Jodocus van Lodenstein (1620–1677). According to Witsius’s later testimony, van den Bogaard’s preaching and fellowship brought him to understand the difference between theological knowledge gleaned from study and the heavenly wisdom taught by the Holy Spirit through communion with God, love, prayer, and meditation. Witsius wrote that he was born again in “the bosom of the Utrecht church by the living and eternal Word of God.” Through this godly pastor’s influence, Witsius said, he was preserved “from the pride of science, taught to receive the kingdom of heaven as a little child, led beyond the outer court in which he had previously been inclined to linger, and conducted to the sacred recesses of vital Christianity.”⁶

As a teenager, Witsius had already demonstrated his gifts in public debate. In 1655 he defeated some of the leading debaters at the University of Utrecht by showing that the doctrine of the Trinity could be proven from the writings of ancient Jews. When Witsius thanked the

3. Van Genderen, “Herman Witsius,” 193.

4. Joel R. Beeke, *Gisbertus Voetius: Toward a Reformed Marriage of Knowledge and Piety* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 1999).

5. Arie de Reuver, *Sweet Communion: Trajectories of Spirituality from the Middle Ages through the Further Reformation*, trans. James A. DeJong (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 263.

6. Donald Fraser, “Memoir of Witsius,” in *Sacred Dissertations, On What Is Commonly Called the Apostles’ Creed*, by Herman Witsius, trans. Donald Fraser (1823; repr., Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010), 1:xiv.

moderator for his assistance, the moderator replied, “You neither had, nor stood in need of, any assistance from me.”⁷

In 1656, Witsius passed his final examinations and was declared a candidate for the ministry. Due to the abundance of ministers, he had to wait a year before receiving a pastoral call. During that time he applied to the authorities of the French church in Dort for a license to preach in French-speaking Reformed churches. Witsius often preached in French at Utrecht, Amsterdam, and elsewhere.

Pastorates

On July 8, 1657, Witsius was ordained into the ministry at Westwoud, where his catechizing of young people bore special fruit. But he also encountered opposition because of the congregation’s ignorance of their Reformed heritage. Medieval customs such as praying for the dead were still evident. These problems convinced Witsius early in his ministry of the need for further reformation among the people. It also prompted him to publish his first book, *t Bedroefde Nederlant* (The Sad State of the Netherlands).⁸ In this book, as in all his writings, Witsius demonstrates the convictions of the *Nadere Reformatie* (Dutch Further Reformation). The Dutch Further Reformation was largely a seventeenth-century movement within the Dutch Reformed churches that zealously strove for the inner experience of Reformed doctrine and personal sanctification as well as the purification of all spheres of life.⁹ This movement was heavily influenced by and, for the most part, paralleled English Puritanism.

In 1660, Witsius married Aletta van Borchorn, daughter of a merchant who was an elder in Witsius’s church. They were blessed with twenty-four years of marriage. Aletta said she could not tell what was greater—her love or her respect for her husband. The couple had five children—two sons, who died young, and three daughters: Martina, Johanna, and Petronella.

7. Erasmus Middleton, *Biographica Evangelica* (London: R. Denham, 1786), 4:158.

8. The full title is *t Bedroefde Nederlant, ofte Betoeninge van den elendigen toestant onses Vaderlants* (Utrecht, 1659). For a study of this scarce work, see K. Slik, “Het oudste geschrift van Herman Witsius, in NAKG, Nieuwe serie, deel 41 (1956): 222–41.

9. For a summary of the *Nadere Reformatie*, see Joel R. Beeke, *The Quest for Full Assurance: The Legacy of Calvin and His Successors* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1999), 286–309.

In 1661, Witsius was installed in the church at Wormer—one of Holland’s largest churches—where he succeeded in uniting warring factions and training the people in Reformed theology. He and his colleague, Petrus Goddaeus, took turns teaching a doctrinal class on weekday evenings to “defend the truth of our teachings against false doctrines” and to inculcate “the sanctity of our teachings in terms of God-fearing conduct.” The class began in private homes, then outgrew that space and moved to the church. Eventually people had to stand outside the church due to lack of room.¹⁰

These class lectures were eventually published in 1665 as *Practycke des Christendoms* (The Practice of Christianity), to which Witsius appended *Geestelycke Printen van een Onwedergeborenen op syn beste en een Wedergeborenen op syn slechste* (Spiritual Portraits: Of an Unregenerate Person at His Best and of a Regenerate Person at His Worst).

Practycke des Christendoms explains the primary grounds of godliness by developing practical themes like faith, sanctification, and prayer, while the appended work applies those grounds by teaching what is laudable in the unregenerate and what is culpable in the regenerate. John Owen said he hoped he could be as consistent as Witsius’s unregenerate man at his best and that he would never fall so deeply as Witsius’s regenerate man at his worst!

Witsius accepted a call to Goes, in Zeeland, in 1666, where he labored for the two most peaceful years of his life. In the preface to *Twist des Heeren met zynen Wijngaert* (The Lord’s Controversy with His Vineyard), published in Leeuwarden in 1669, he said he had labored with much peace in this congregation together with three colleagues, “two of whom were venerated as fathers, and the third was loved as a brother.” Of these four ministers working together in one congregation, Witsius noted, “We walked together in fellowship to God’s house. We did not only attend each other’s services, but also each other’s catechism classes and other public services, so that what one servant of God might have taught yesterday, the others confirmed and recommended to the congregation the next day.” Under the influence of these four ministers,

10. J. van der Haar, “Hermannus Witsius,” in *Het blijvende Woord*, ed. J. van der Haar, A. Bergsma, L. M. P. Scholten (Dordrecht: Gereformeerde Bijbelstichting, 1985), 243.

“all sorts of devotional practices blossomed, piety grew, and the unity of God’s people was enhanced,” Witsius wrote.¹¹

After serving Goes, Witsius went to his fourth pastoral charge, Leeuwarden, where he served for seven years (1668–1675) that were more mixed. Despite Witsius’s peaceful nature and the good relationships he had with Wilhelmus à Brakel (1635–1711) and Johannes van der Waeijen (1639–1701), his ministerial colleagues at Leeuwarden, relationships in the consistory and classis were often divisive. Then, too, his new book, *Twist des Heeren*, which continued where his first publication left off, created some disturbance in various places, not just because Witsius failed to wait for ecclesiastical approval before publishing it, but especially because “it satirized Cartesian and Coccejian positions as damaging new ideas.”¹² In 1672, called the year of miracles because the Dutch Republic survived the onslaught of four enemies who had declared war on the Netherlands (France, England, and the German electorates of Cologne and Munster), Witsius became known for his faithful ministry in the midst of crisis.

Witsius proved to be a blessing wherever he pastored. Johannes à Marck, a future colleague, said of Witsius that he knew of no other minister whose labors were so owned of God.¹³

In 1673, Witsius again teamed up with a renowned colleague—this time, Wilhelmus à Brakel, with whom he served two years. At Leeuwarden, Witsius played a critical role mediating disputes between Voetius and Maresius.

Professorships

In 1675, Witsius was called to be a professor of theology. He served in this capacity for the rest of his life, first at Franeker (1675–1680), then at Utrecht (1680–1698), and finally at Leiden (1698–1707).

Shortly after his arrival at Franeker, the university there awarded Witsius a doctorate in theology. His inaugural address, “On the Character of a True Theologian” (1675), which was attended by scholars from all over the province, stressed the difference between a theologian who

11. Van der Haar, *Het blijvende Woord*, 244.

12. De Reuver, *Sweet Communion*, 265.

13. Fraser, “Memoir of Witsius,” 1:xvii.

knows his subject only scholastically and a theologian who knows his subject experientially.¹⁴

Under Witsius's leadership the university began to flourish as a place to study theology, especially after the appointment of the twenty-year-old professor, Johannes à Marck (1656–1731), in 1676. It soon attracted students from all over Europe.

During his professorship at Franeker, tension between the Voetians and the Cocceians escalated, particularly after the appointment of van der Waeijen, who meanwhile had moved from a Voetian to a Cocceian position. Gisbertus Voetius, a renowned Reformed scholastic theologian and professor at Utrecht, represents the mature fruit of the Dutch Further Reformation, much as John Owen does for English Puritanism. Voetius unceasingly opposed Johannes Cocceius (1603–1669), the Bremen-born theologian who taught at Franeker and Leiden and whose covenant theology, in Voetius's opinion, overemphasized the historical and contextual character of specific ages. Voetius believed that Cocceius's new approach to the Scriptures would undermine both Reformed dogmatics and practical Christianity. For Voetius, Cocceius's devaluing of practical Christianity culminated in his rejection of the Sabbath as a ceremonial yoke no longer binding on Christians.¹⁵ The Voetian-Cocceian controversy wracked the Dutch Reformed church until long after the death of both divines, splitting theological faculties into factions. Eventually both factions compromised, agreeing in many cities to rotate their pastors between Voetians and Cocceians.¹⁶

14. Herman Witsius, *On the Character of a True Theologian*, ed. J. Ligon Duncan, III (Greenville, SC: Reformed Academic Press, 1994).

15. H. B. Visser, *Geschiedenis van den Sabbatstrijd onder de Gereformeerden in de Zeventiende Eeuw* (Utrecht: Kemink en Zoon, 1939).

16. For further study, see Charles McCoy, "The Covenant Theology of Johannes Cocceius" (PhD diss., Yale University, 1957); Charles McCoy, "Johannes Cocceius: Federal Theologian," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 16 (1963): 352–70; Charles McCoy, *History, Humanity, and Federalism in the Theology and Ethics of Johannes Cocceius* (Philadelphia: Center for the Study of Federalism, Temple University, 1980); C. Steenblok, *Gisbertus Voetius: zijn leven en werken*, 2nd ed. (Gouda: Gereformeerde Pers, 1976); C. Steenblok, *Voetius en de Sabbat* (Hoorn, 1941); Willem van't Spijker, "Gisbertus Voetius (1589–1676)," in *De Nadere Reformatie: Beschrijving van haar voornaamste vertegenwoordigers* ('s-Gravenhage: Boekencentrum, 1986), 49–84; C. Graafland, "Structuurverschillen tussen voetiaanse en coccejannse geloofsleer," in F. G. M. Broeyer and E. G. E. van der Wall, ed., *Een richtingensrijd in de Gereformeerde Kerk: Voetianen en Coccejanen 1650–1750* (Zoetermeer,

Witsius's concern about this controversy moved him to publish his most important work, *De Oeconomia Foederum Dei cum Hominibus* (1677), first printed in English in 1736 as *The Oeconomy of the Covenants between God and Man, Comprehending a Complete Body of Divinity*. It was reprinted numerous times and has become a classic in the fields of covenant and systematic theology. In governing his systematic theology by the concept of covenant, Witsius uses Cocceian methods while maintaining essentially Voetian theology.¹⁷

In his work on the covenants, Witsius argued against Roman Catholicism, Arminianism, Socinianism, and those Dutch Protestant theologians, who, with Hugo Grotius, had exchanged a *sola scriptura* theology for an institutionalized, sacramental view of the church based on traditions that paved the way back to Rome. Witsius opposed Grotians “who spoke of a ‘law’ which was not the law of Moses, a ‘satisfaction’ which was not through punishment and a ‘substitution’ which was not of necessity and not vicarious.”¹⁸

Witsius next went to Utrecht, the cathedral city to which he said that he owed nearly everything, as he was deeply indebted both to the church and the academy there. His inaugural address, “The Excellence of Gospel Truth,” stressed that personal knowledge of the truth enables the believer to experience profound inward joy. God Himself invites His people into this experiential joy, Witsius said.¹⁹

Witsius labored in Utrecht for eighteen years as professor and pastor. Students from all over the Protestant world attended his lectures; magistrates attended his sermons. On two occasions, his colleagues, the most famous of which were Petrus van Mastricht (1630–1706) and Melchior Leydekker (1642–1721), honored him with the headship of the university (1686, 1697).

In 1685, the Dutch Parliament appointed Witsius as a delegate to represent the Dutch government at the coronation of James II and to

1994); Willem J. van Asselt, “*Expromissio* or *Fideiussio*? A Seventeenth-Century Theological Debate between Voetians and Coccejans about the Nature of Christ’s Suretyship in Salvation History,” *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 14 (2003): 37–57.

17. Cf. Nicolaas Tjepko Bakker, *Miskende Gratie: Van Calvijn tot Witsius: Een vergelijkende lezing, balans van 150 jaar gereformeerde orthodoxie* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1991).

18. George M. Ella, *Mountain Movers* (Durham, England: Go Publications, 1999), 157.

19. Herman Witsius, *Miscellanorum Sacrorum*, 4 vols. (Utrecht, 1692), 2:680–705.

serve as chaplain to the Netherlands Embassy in London.²⁰ While there, he met the archbishop of Canterbury as well as several leading theologians. He studied Puritan theology and enhanced his stature in England as a peacemaker. Later, the English church called on him to serve as a mediating figure between antinomians and neonomians—the former accusing the latter of overemphasizing the law, the latter accusing the former of minimizing the law. Out of this came his *Conciliatory Animadversions*, a treatise on the antinomian controversy in England. In this treatise, Witsius argued that God’s starting point in His eternal decrees did not demean His activity in time. He also helped facilitate the translation into Dutch of some of the works of Thomas Goodwin, William Cave, and Thomas Gataker and wrote prefaces for them.²¹

Witsius’s years at Utrecht were not free from strife. Though he grew increasingly irenic as the years passed, Witsius felt obliged to oppose the theology of Professor Herman A. Röell (1653–1718), who advocated a unique mixture of the biblical theology of Cocceius and the rationalistic philosophy of René Descartes (1596–1650).²² Witsius felt that this combination threatened the authority of Scripture. He taught the superiority of faith over reason to protect the purity of Scripture. Reason lost its purity in the fall, he said. Though reason is a critical faculty, it remains imperfect, even in the regenerate. It is not an autonomous judge, but a servant of faith.

Clearly Witsius’s understanding of who God is affected his understanding of how we know what we know and that Scripture is the final standard of truth rather than our reason. His knowledge of God through the Scriptures shaped all his thinking, as is evident in his defense of the penal substitution of Christ against the rationalist Faustus Socinus (1539–1604).²³

Subsequently, Witsius opposed rationalism in the teachings of Balthasar Bekker (1634–1698) as well as the popular, separatistic ideas of Jean de

20. John Macleod, *Scottish Theology* (repr. London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 140.

21. Cornelis Pronk, “The Second Reformation in the Netherlands,” *The Messenger* 48 (Apr. 2001): 10.

22. See Thomas Arthur McGahagan, “Cartesianism in the Netherlands, 1639–1676: The New Science and the Calvinist Counter-Reformation” (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1976).

23. Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man* (1822; repr. Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010), 1.2.16; 2.5.8.

Labadie (1610-1674). He admitted that the Reformed churches were seriously flawed, but he strongly opposed separating from the church.

At Utrecht, Witsius published three volumes of *Exercitationes Sacrae* (*Sacred Dissertations*), two on the Apostles' Creed (1681) and one on the Lord's Prayer (1689). Second in importance only to his *Economy of the Covenants*, these books stress the truths of the gospel in a pure, clear manner. The three works birthed in a seminary setting are known as Witsius's trilogy.

In the midst of his busy years at Utrecht (1684), Witsius's wife died. His daughter Petronella, who never married, remained with her father, faithfully caring for him through twenty-four years as a widower.

When he was sixty-two years old, Witsius accepted a call to serve at Leiden University as professor. His inaugural address was on *De Theologo modesto* (*Concerning Modesty in Doing Theology*). At Leiden he trained men from Europe, Great Britain, and America, including several Native Americans who had been converted through the work of John Eliot (1604-1690).²⁴ He again worked with à Marck as well as with a Cocceian, Salomon van Til (1643-1713).

In the 1690s, Witsius again showed his skills of mediation by accepting an invitation to help resolve a debate that had arisen in and around London between Congregationalists and Presbyterians. Witsius responded in 1696 with a book titled, *Conciliatory, or Irenical Animadversions on the Controversies Agitated in Britain, under the Unhappy Names of Antinomians and Neonomians*.²⁵

In 1699, Holland and West Friesland appointed Witsius inspector of the university's theological college, a position he held until he retired in 1707 because of ill health. He published his last book in 1703 (*Meletemata Leidensia*), in which he provided a summary of his life's work: "I am at liberty to say that in my work I have above all kept in mind God's honor and the purity of the gospel, the promotion of godliness, without which all scientific fame is idolatry, and the harmony of the brethren."²⁶

24. Ella, *Mountain Movers*, 158.

25. Translated into English by a Scottish minister, Thomas Bell, and published in 1807; see Patrick Ramsey, "Meet Me in the Middle: Herman Witsius and the English Dissenters," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 19 (2008): 143-64.

26. Van Genderen, *Herman Witsius*, 96.

In his last six years, Witsius suffered painful bouts of gout, dizziness, and memory lapses.²⁷ After a serious attack in October 1708, he told friends that his homecoming was near. Four days later, he died at the age of seventy-two, after nearly fifty-two years of ministry. During his last hour, he told his close friend, à Marck, that he was persevering in the faith that he had long enjoyed in Christ. À Marck, together with another of Witsius's close friends, Guiljelmus Saldenus (1627–1694), gave the memorial addresses.

All his life Witsius was a humble biblical and systematic theologian, dependent on the Scriptures. He was also a faithful preacher. For him, Christ—in the university, on the pulpit, and in daily living—took pre-eminence. “Free and sovereign grace, reigning through the person and righteousness of the great Immanuel, he cordially regarded at once as the source of all our hope, and the grand incitement to a holy practice,” Fraser wrote of Witsius.²⁸

Despite all his learning, Witsius remained concerned about the soundness and piety of the church. All his writing and learning was employed to promote the church's well-being. After his death, his writings were collected in six volumes. We shall briefly look at Witsius's trilogy, now being reprinted.

Economy of the Covenants

Witsius wrote his *magnum opus* on the covenants to promote peace among Dutch theologians who were divided on covenant theology. Witsius sought to be a theologian of synthesis who strove to lessen tension between the Voetians and the Cocceians. He wrote in his introduction, “the enemies of our church...secretly rejoice that there are as many and as warm disputes amongst ourselves, as with them. And this, not very secretly neither: for they do not, nor will ever cease to cast this reproach upon us; which, I grieve to say is not so easily wiped away. O! how much better would it be to use our utmost endeavours, to lessen, make up, and, if it could be, put an end to all controversy!”²⁹

27. William Crookshank, biographical preface to Herman Witsius, *Economy of the Covenants*, 1:39.

28. Fraser, “Memoir of Witsius,” 1:xxvii.

29. Witsius, *Economy of the Covenants*, 1:22–23.

Economy of the Covenants is not a complete systematic theology, though its title claims that it comprehends “a complete body of divinity.” Several major doctrines not addressed here, such as the Trinity, creation, and providence, were dealt with later in Witsius’s exposition of the Apostles’ Creed.

For Witsius, the doctrine of the covenants is the best way of reading Scripture. The covenants are for him what J. I. Packer calls “a successful hermeneutic,” or a consistent interpretative procedure yielding a proper understanding of Scripture, both law and gospel.³⁰ Witsius’s work is divided into four books:

book 1: *The Covenant of Works* (120 pages)

book 2: *The Covenant of Redemption, or The Covenant of Grace from Eternity between the Father and the Son* (118 pages)

book 3: *The Covenant of Grace in Time* (295 pages)

book 4: *Covenant Ordinances throughout the Scriptures* (356 pages)

Throughout his exposition of covenant theology, Witsius corrected inadequacies of the Cocceians and infused Voetian content. He treated each topic analytically, drawing from other Reformed and Puritan systematians to move the reader to clarity of mind, warmth of heart, and godliness of life.

In book 1, Witsius discusses divine covenants in general, focusing on etymological and exegetical considerations related to them (ברית and διαθήκη). He notes promise, oath, pledge, and command as well as a mutual pact that combines promise and law. He concludes that covenant, in its proper sense, “signifies a mutual agreement between parties with respect to something.”³¹ Then he defined *covenant* as “an agreement between God and man, about the method of obtaining ultimate blessedness, with the addition of a threat of eternal destruction, against anyone contemptuous of this blessedness.”³² The essence of the covenant, then, is the relationship of love between God and man.

Covenants between God and man are essentially monopoleuric (one-sided) in the sense that they can be initiated only by God and are grounded in “the utmost majesty of the most high God.” Though initi-

30. J. I. Packer, “Introduction: On Covenant Theology,” in *Economy of the Covenants*, [27].

31. Witsius, *Economy of the Covenants*, book 1, chapter 1, paragraphs 3–5 [hereafter 1.1.3–5].

32. Witsius, *Economy of the Covenants*, 1.1.9.

ated by God, these covenants call for human consent to the covenant, to exercise the responsibility of obedience within it and to acquiesce in punishment in case of violation. In the covenant of works, that responsibility is partly gracious and partly meritorious, whereas in the covenant of grace, it is wholly gracious in response to God's election and Christ's fulfillment of all conditions of the covenant.³³

Nevertheless, all covenants between God and man are dipleuric (two-sided) in administration. Both aspects are important. Without the monopleuric emphasis on God's part, covenant initiation and fulfillment would not be by grace alone; without the dipleuric emphasis of divine initiation and human responsibility, man would be passive in covenant administration. The attempt made by contemporary scholars to force seventeenth-century federal theologians into either a monopleuric or dipleuric concept of the covenant misses the mark, as Richard Muller has shown, both with Witsius as well as his popular younger contemporary Wilhelmus à Brakel (1635–1711), whose *De Redelijke Godsdienst* (*The Christian's Reasonable Service*) was first printed in Dutch in 1700.³⁴ Muller concludes, "It is not the case, as some have argued that covenant language cuts against election and grace and that covenant doctrine either relaxes the strict doctrine of the decrees or is itself rigidified by contact with the doctrine of predestination during the scholastic era of Reformed theology."³⁵

According to Witsius, the covenant of works consists of the contracting parties (God and Adam), the law or condition (perfect obedience), the promises (eternal life in heaven for unqualified veneration to divine law), the penal sanction (death), and the sacraments (Paradise, the tree of life, the tree of knowledge of good and evil, the Sabbath).³⁶ Throughout, Witsius stressed the relationship of the covenant parties in terms

33. Witsius, *Economy of the Covenants*, 1.1.15; 1.4.

34. Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service*, trans. Bartel Elshout, ed. Joel R. Beeke, 4 vols. (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1992–95).

35. Richard A. Muller, "The Covenant of Works and the Stability of Divine Law in Seventeenth-Century Reformed Orthodoxy: A Study in the Theology of Herman Witsius and Wilhelmus à Brakel," *Calvin Theological Journal* 29 (1994): 86–87. Reprinted in Richard A. Muller, *After Calvin: Studies in the Development of a Theological Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 175–89.

36. Stephen Strehle, *Calvinism, Federalism, and Scholasticism: A Study of the Reformed Doctrine of Covenant* (New York: Peter Lang, 1988), 288.

of the Reformed concept of covenant. Denying the covenant of works causes serious christological and soteriological errors, he said.³⁷

For example, Adam and Eve’s violation of the covenant of works rendered the promises of the covenant inaccessible to their descendants. Those promises were abrogated by God, who cannot lower His standard of law by recasting the covenant of works to account for fallen man’s unrighteousness. Divine abrogation, however, does not annul God’s demand for perfect obedience. Rather, because of the stability of God’s promise and His law, the covenant of grace is made effective in Christ, the perfect Law Fulfiller. In fulfilling all the conditions of the covenant of grace, Christ fulfilled all the conditions of the covenant of works. Thus “the covenant of grace is not the abolition, but rather the confirmation of the covenant of works, inasmuch as the Mediator has fulfilled all the conditions of that covenant, so that all believers may be justified and saved according to the covenant of works, to which satisfaction was made by the Mediator,” Witsius wrote.³⁸

Witsius outlined the relationship of the covenant of works to the covenant of grace in his second book. He discussed the covenant of grace from eternity, or, the covenant of redemption as the *pactum salutis* between God the Father and God the Son.³⁹ In the eternal *pactum*, the Father solicited from the Son acts of obedience for the elect while pledging ownership of the elect to the Son. This “agreement between God and the Mediator” makes possible the covenant of grace between God and His elect. The covenant of grace “presupposes” the covenant of grace from eternity and “is founded upon it,” Witsius said.⁴⁰

The covenant of redemption established God’s remedy for the problem of sin. The covenant of redemption is the answer for the covenant of works abrogated by sin. The Son binds Himself to work out that answer by fulfilling the promises and conditions and bearing the penalties of the covenant on behalf of the elect. Ratified by the covenant of redemption, “conditions are offered to which eternal salvation is annexed; conditions not to be performed again by us, which might throw the mind into

37. Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants*, 1.2.13–15; 1.3.9–10; 1.4.4–7.

38. Witsius, *Economy of the Covenants*, 1.11.23.

39. Witsius, *Economy of the Covenants*, 2.2–4.

40. Witsius, *Economy of the Covenants*, 2.2.1.

despondency; but by him, who would not part with his life, before he had truly said, 'It is finished,'" Witsius explained.⁴¹

Richard Muller establishes several similarities in Witsius and Cocceius in their development of the *pactum salutis*.⁴² Witsius, like Cocceius, found support for the *pactum salutis* in Zechariah 6:13 as well as in various psalms that reflect the worship of the messianic ruler (2:8; 22:3; 40:7-9; 45:8; 80:17) and several passages in Isaiah that tie the servant of Jehovah together with the redemption of God's people (Isa. 4:2; 49:4-6; 53:10-12). In addition, Witsius finds New Testament support for the *pactum salutis* primarily in Luke 22:29, Galatians 3:17, Hebrews 7:22-28, and 1 Peter 1:20. Interestingly, as Muller notes, Witsius also "parallels his formulation of the *pactum* with a discussion of the relationship between the divine and human natures of Christ and the decree of election."⁴³

The covenant of grace worked out in time (book 3)⁴⁴ is the core of Witsius's work and covers the entire field of soteriology. By treating the *ordo salutis* within the framework of the covenant of grace, Witsius asserted that former presentations of covenant doctrine were superior to newer ones. He showed how covenant theology should bind theologians together rather than drive them apart.

Election is the backdrop of the covenant. Election, as the decree or counsel of God, is God's unilateral, unchangeable resolve that does not depend on human conditions. Here the covenant of grace parts ways

41. Witsius, *Economy of the Covenants*, 2.1.4; cf. Gerald Hamstra, "Membership in the Covenant of Grace," unpublished research paper for Calvin Theological Seminary (1986), 10.

42. Richard A. Muller, "Toward the *Pactum Salutis*: Locating the Origins of a Concept," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 18 (2007): 23-25. For more on Witsius's views on the *pactum salutis*, see J. Mark Beach, "The Doctrine of the *Pactum Salutis* in the Covenant Theology of Herman Witsius," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 13 (2002): 101-142; B. Loonstra, *Verkiezing-Verzoening-Verbond: Beschrijving en beoordeling van de leer van het pactum salutis in de gereformeerde theologie* ('s-Gravenhage: Boekencentrum, 1990), 193-218.

43. Muller, "Toward the *Pactum Salutis*," 23; cf. Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants*, 3.4.2.

44. For the debate between the three-covenant and two-covenant view, see Sebastian Rehnman, "Is the Narrative of Redemptive History Trichotomous or Dichotomous? A Problem for Federal Theology," *Nederlands archief voor kerkgeschiedenis* 80, 3 (2000): 296-308. For Witsius's treatment of the Mosaic covenant as a covenant marked primarily by grace rather than a works principle, see J. V. Fesko, "Calvin and Witsius on the Mosaic Covenant," in *The Law Is Not of Faith: Essays on Works and Grace in the Mosaic Covenant*, ed. Bryan D. Estelle, J. V. Fesko, and David VanDrunen (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2009), 25-43.

with the covenant of works. In the covenant of works, God promised man life on the condition of complete obedience without promising that He would work that obedience in man. In the covenant of grace, God promised to give everything to the elect—eternal life and the means to it: faith, repentance, sanctification, and perseverance. Every condition of salvation is included in God’s promises to His elect. Faith is not, properly speaking, a condition, but the way and means through which believers receive the promises of eternal life.⁴⁵

Though the “*internal, mystical, and spiritual communion*” of the covenant is established within the elect, there is also an external economy or administration of the covenant. Those who are baptized and raised with the means of grace are in the covenant externally, though many of them “are not in the testament of God” in terms of being saved.⁴⁶

Effectual calling is the first fruit of election, which in turn works regeneration. Regeneration is the infusion of new life in the spiritually dead person. Thus the incorruptible seed of the Word is made fruitful by the Spirit’s power. Witsius argued that so-called “preparations” to regeneration, such as breaking of the will, serious consideration of the law and conviction of sin, fear of hell and despairing of salvation, are fruits of regeneration rather than preparations when the Spirit uses them to lead sinners to Christ.⁴⁷

The first act of this new life is faith. Faith, in turn, produces various acts: (1) knowing Christ, (2) assenting to the gospel, (3) loving the truth, (4) hungering and thirsting after Christ, (5) receiving Christ for salvation, (6) reclining upon Christ, (7) receiving Christ as Lord, and (8) appropriating the promises of the gospel. The first three acts are called preceding acts; the next three, essential acts; the last two, following acts.⁴⁸

In the last two acts, the believer promises to live in the obedience of faith and obtains assurance through the reflective act of faith which reasons syllogistically like this: “[Major premise:] Christ offers himself as a full and complete Saviour to all who are weary, hungry, thirsty, to

45. Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants*, 3.1–4; 3.8.6.

46. Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants*, 3.1.5.

47. Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants*, 3.6.11–15.

48. Cornelis Graafland, *De Zekerheid van het Geloof: Een onderzoek naar de geloofsbe-schouwing van enige vertegenwoordigers van reformatie en nadere reformatie* (Wageningen: H. Veenman & Zonen, 1961), 162–63.

all who receive him, and are ready to give themselves up to him. [Minor premise:] But I am weary, hungry, etc. [Conclusion:] Therefore Christ has offered himself to me, is now become mine, and I his, nor shall any thing ever separate me from his love."⁴⁹

Witsius referred to this conclusion of faith, later called the practical syllogism, whenever he discussed assurance of faith. In this, he followed Puritan and Dutch Second Reformation thinking.⁵⁰ Aware of the dangers of relying upon personal sanctification for assurance—particularly the objections of the antinomians that syllogisms can provide no sure comfort and may lead to “free-will” thinking, Witsius took pains to keep the syllogism within the confines of the doctrines of grace. Like the Puritans, he taught that the syllogism is bound to the Scriptures, flows out of Jesus Christ, and is ratified by the Holy Spirit. The Spirit witnesses to the believer’s spirit, not only by direct testimony from the Word but also by stirring up the believer to observe scriptural marks of grace in his own soul and in the fruits of his life. Those marks of grace lead to Jesus Christ. The syllogism is always scriptural, christological, and pneumatological.

For Witsius, assurance by syllogism is more common than assurance by the direct testimony of the Spirit. Consequently, careful self-examination as to whether one is in the faith and Christ in him is critical (2 Cor. 13:5). If justification issues in sanctification, the believer ought to reason syllogistically from sanctification back to justification—i.e., from the effect to the cause. That is what the apostle John does in his First Epistle General (2:2, 3, 5; 3:14, 19; 5:2).⁵¹

Concerning the doctrine of justification, Witsius speaks of the elect being justified not only in Christ’s death and resurrection but already in the giving of the first gospel promise in Genesis 3:15. Applications of justification to the individual believer occur at his regeneration, in the court of his conscience, in daily communion with God, after death, and on the Judgment Day.⁵²

49. Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants*, 3.7.24.

50. Joel R. Beeke, *Assurance of Faith: Calvin, English Puritanism, and the Dutch Second Reformation* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991), 113–15, 124–26, 159–69, 247–48.

51. For the views of Calvin and the Puritans on the syllogisms in assurance, see Beeke, *Quest for Full Assurance*, 65–72, 130–42.

52. Witsius, *Economy of the Covenants*, 3.8.57–64.

Witsius went on to discuss the immediate results of justification: spiritual peace and the adoption of sonship. These chapters excel in showing the friendship and intimacy between the believer and the triune God. They place a large measure of responsibility on the believer to be active in preserving spiritual peace and the consciousness of his gracious adoption.⁵³

Typical of Puritan and Dutch Second Reformation divines, Witsius devoted the longest chapter in his *ordo salutis* to sanctification. Sanctification is the work of God by which the justified sinner is increasingly “transformed from the turpitude of sin, to the purity of the divine image.”⁵⁴ Mortification and vivification show the extensiveness of sanctification. Grace, faith, and love are motives for growing in holiness. The goals and means of sanctification are explained in detail. Nevertheless, because believers do not attain perfection in this life, Witsius concluded by examining the doctrine of perfectionism. God does not grant perfection to us in this life for four reasons: to display the difference between earth and heaven, warfare and triumph, toil and rest; to teach us patience, humility, and sympathy; to teach us that salvation is by grace alone; and to demonstrate the wisdom of God in gradually perfecting us.⁵⁵

After explaining the doctrine of perseverance, Witsius ended his third book with a detailed account of glorification. Glorification begins in this life with the firstfruits of grace: holiness, the vision of God apprehended by faith and an experimental sense of God’s goodness, the gracious enjoyment of God, full assurance of faith, and joy unspeakable. It is consummated in the life to come.

The focus of glorification is the enjoyment of God, Witsius said. For example, the joy in the intermediate state is the joy of being with God and Christ, the joy of loving God, and the joy of dwelling in glory.⁵⁶

Book 4 presents covenant theology from the perspective of biblical theology. Witsius offered some aspects of what would later be called progressive redemption, emphasizing the faith of Abraham, the nature

53. Witsius, *Economy of the Covenants*, 3.9–11.

54. Witsius, *Economy of the Covenants*, 3.12.11.

55. Witsius, *Economy of the Covenants*, 3.12.121–24.

56. Witsius, *Economy of the Covenants*, 3.14.

of the Mosaic covenant, the role of the law, the sacraments of the Old Testament, and the blessings and defects of the Old Testament. Some of his most fascinating sections deal with the Decalogue as a national covenant with Israel rather than as a formal covenant of works or covenant of grace;⁵⁷ his defense of the Old Testament against false charges; his explanation of the ceremonial law's abrogation and the relationship between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. He then explained the relationship between the testaments and the sacraments of the New Testament era. He was convinced by Romans 11:25–27 of the future restoration of Israel.⁵⁸ He set Christian liberty in the context of freedom from the tyranny of the devil, the reigning and condemning power of sin, the rigor of the law, the laws of men, things indifferent (*adiaphora*), and death itself. By including things indifferent, he dispelled the charge that the precisianism of the Puritans and Dutch Further Reformation divines allowed no room for the *adiaphora*.

In summary, Witsius was one of the first theologians among Dutch Further Reformation divines who drew close ties between the doctrines of election and covenant. He aimed for reconciliation between orthodoxy and federalism, while stressing biblical theology as a proper study in itself.

The Cocceians did not respond kindly to Witsius's efforts to reconcile them and the Voetians. They accused him of extending the covenant of grace back into eternity, thereby helping the Reformed orthodox negate the Cocceian principle of the historical development of redemption.⁵⁹

Witsius's work on covenant theology became a standard in the Netherlands, Scotland, England, and New England. Throughout this work, he stressed that the motto "the Reformed church needs to be ever reforming" (*ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*) should be applied to the church's life and not to doctrine since Reformation doctrine was foundational truth. His stress was on experiencing the reality of the covenant with God by faith and on the need for godly, precise living—often called

57. Here Witsius follows the minority of the seventeenth-century English Puritans, e.g. Samuel Bolton (*True Bounds of Christian Freedom* [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1994], 99) and John Owen (Sinclair Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life* [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987], 28).

58. Witsius, *Economy of the Covenants*, 4.15.7.

59. Charles Fred Lincoln, "The Development of the Covenant Theory," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, no. 397 (Jan. 1943): 161–62.

precisianism somewhat pejoratively by many historians. Few realize, however, that precisianism avoids both the medieval ideal of perfection and the pharisaical ideal of legalism. Witsius's emphasis on precise living is characterized by the following:

- Precisianism emphasizes what God's law emphasizes; the law serves as its standard of holiness.
- Precisianism is accompanied by spiritual liberty, rooted in the love of Christ.
- Precisianism treats others mildly but is strict toward one's self.
- Precisianism focuses primarily on heart motivations and only secondarily on outward actions.
- Precisianism humbles the godly, even as they increase in holiness.
- Precisianism's goal is God's glory.⁶⁰

For Witsius precisianism was essentially the practice of experiential piety, for its core was hidden, heartfelt communion with the faithful covenant-keeping God. In Witsius we have theology that is pious in itself rather than theology to which piety is added.⁶¹

Witsius emphasized Scripture, faith, experience, and the saving work of the Holy Spirit. Scripture was the norm for all belief. The true believer is a humble student of Scripture, reads Scriptures through the glasses of faith, and subjects all his experiences to the touchstone of Scripture for confirmation. True experience flows from the "star light" of Scripture and the "sunlight" of the Holy Spirit, both of which illumine the soul.⁶² These two are inseparable from each other and are both received by faith. Students of Scripture are also students of the Holy Spirit.⁶³ They experience in the Spirit's heavenly academy the forgiveness of sin, adoption as sons, intimate communion with God, love of God poured into the soul, hidden manna, the kisses of Jesus' mouth, and the assurance of blessedness in Christ. The Spirit leads His pupils to feast with God and to know in His banqueting house that His banner over them is love.⁶⁴

60. Adapted from van Genderen, *De Nadere Reformatie*, 206.

61. I. van Dijk, *Gezamenlijke Geschriften* (Groningen, 1972), 1:314.

62. Witsius, *Twist des Heeren*, 167.

63. Witsius, *On the Character of a True Theologian*, 35–38.

64. Herman Witsius, *Miscellanorum Sacrorum tomus alter* (Lugd. Bat., 1736), 671–72.

The Apostles' Creed and The Lord's Prayer

More than a century after Witsius's death, two of his most significant works were translated into English: *Sacred Dissertations on What Is Commonly Called the Apostles' Creed*, translated by Donald Fraser, 2 vols. (Glasgow, 1823), and *Sacred Dissertations on the Lord's Prayer*, translated by Rev. William Pringle (Edinburgh, 1839). Both of these works are judicious, practical, pointed, and edifying. They are meat for the soul.

Witsius's two-volume work on the Apostles' Creed, originally published in Latin at Franeker in 1681, grew out of lectures he gave to his students at the University of Franeker on what he called "the principal articles of our religion." These lectures affirmed Witsius's maxim: "He alone is a true theologian who adds the practical to the theoretical part of religion." Like all of Witsius's writings, these volumes combine profound intellect with spiritual passion.⁶⁵

Witsius's exposition begins with studies that discuss the title, authorship, and authority of the creed; the role of fundamental articles; and the nature of saving faith. The creed's authority is great but not supreme, Witsius said. It contains fundamental articles that are limited to those truths "without which neither faith nor repentance can exist" and "to the rejection of which God has annexed a threatening of destructions." It is scarcely possible to determine the number of fundamental articles. Some are not contained in the creed but are taken up in lengthier doctrinal standards.⁶⁶

Witsius again addressed the acts of saving faith, affirming that the "principal act" of faith is the "receiving of Christ for justification, sanctification, and complete salvation." He stressed that faith receives "a whole Christ," and that "he cannot be a Saviour, unless he be also a Lord."⁶⁷ He reasserted the validity of obtaining assurance of faith by syllogistic conclusions and distinguished temporary faith from saving faith. Because temporary faith can remain until the end of a person's life, Witsius preferred to call it presumptuous faith. These kinds of faith dif-

65. Sinclair Ferguson, "Foreword," in Herman Witsius's *Apostles' Creed*.

66. Witsius, *Apostles' Creed*, 1:16–33.

67. Witsius, *Apostles' Creed*, 1:49, 51.

fer in their knowledge of the truth, their application of the gospel, their joy, and their fruits.⁶⁸

The remainder of the work follows a phrase-by-phrase eight hundred-page exposition of the creed, accompanied by more than two hundred pages of notes added by the translator. Throughout, Witsius excels in exegesis, remains faithful to Reformed dogmatics without becoming overly scholastic, applies every article of the creed to the believer's soul, and, when occasion warrants, exposes various heresies. His closing chapter on life everlasting is perhaps the most sublime. His concluding applications summarize his approach:

- From this sublime doctrine, let us learn the divine origin of the gospel.
- Let us carefully inquire whether we ourselves have a solid hope of this glorious felicity.
- Let us labor diligently, lest we come short of it.
- Let us comfort ourselves with the hope of it amidst all our adversities.
- Let us walk worthy of it by leading a heavenly life in this world.⁶⁹

Like Witsius's work on the Apostles' Creed, *Sacred Dissertations on the Lord's Prayer* was based on lectures delivered to his theological students. As such, it is a bit heavy with Hebrew and Greek words; however, Pringle's translation includes a rendering of most words of the original languages into English.

The Lord's Prayer contains more than its title reveals. In his preface to a 230-page exposition of the Lord's Prayer, Witsius devoted 150 pages to the subject of prayer: "First, to explain what is prayer; next, in what our obligation to it consists; and lastly, in what manner it ought to be performed."⁷⁰ Though parts of this introduction seem a bit dated (especially chapter 4), most of it is practical and insightful. For example, Witsius's "On the Preparation of the Mind for Right Prayer" contains valuable guidance on a subject seldom addressed today.

68. Witsius, *Apostles' Creed*, 1:56–60.

69. Witsius, *Apostles' Creed*, 2:xvi, 470–83.

70. Herman Witsius, *The Lord's Prayer* (1839; repr. Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010), 1. The following summary is adapted from my preface in this reprint.

Throughout this introduction, Witsius established that genuine prayer is the pulse of the renewed soul. The constancy of its beat is the test of spiritual life. For Witsius, prayer is rightly deemed, in the words of John Bunyan, “a shield to the soul, a sacrifice to God, and a scourge for Satan.”⁷¹

Witsius stressed the two-part channel of prayer: those who would have God hear them when they pray must hear Him when He speaks. Prayer and work must both be engaged in. To pray without working is to mock God; to work without praying is to rob Him of His glory.

Witsius’s exposition of the individual petitions of the Lord’s Prayer is a masterpiece. In many instances, the questions receive greater instruction from Witsius’s pen than anyone else to date. For example, where else can such insight be found on whether the infant believer and the unregenerate should use the name Father in addressing God?⁷²

Gifts and Influence

Witsius had many gifts. As an exegete, he exhibited scriptural simplicity and precision, though at times he leaned toward questionable typological and mystical interpretations.⁷³ As a historian, he measured movements against the ideal, apostolic church, bringing history and theology from numerous sources to bear upon his reasoning. As a theologian, he grounded spiritual life in regeneration and covenantally applied the entire *ordo salutis* to practical, experiential living. As an ethicist, he set forth Christ as the perfect example in probing the heart and guiding the believer in his walk of life. As a polemicist, he opposed Cartesianism, Labadism, antinomianism, neonomianism, and the excesses of Cocce-

71 Cited in John Blanchard, *Complete Gathered Gold* (Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 2006), 458.

72. Witsius, *The Lord’s Prayer*, 168–70.

73. J. van Genderen shows how Witsius revealed some mystical tendencies in his enthusiasm for speaking about contemplation, ecstasy, and mystical marriage with Christ, which surfaces especially in his exegesis of the Song of Solomon and some of the psalms (*Herman Witsius*, 119–23, 173–76, 262; cf. I. Boot, *De Allegorische Uitlegging van het Hooglied Voornamelijk in Nederland* [Woerden, The Netherlands: Zuijderduijn, 1971], 192–203); De Reuver, *Sweet Communion*, 266–80. See also Witsius’s discussion of the “mystery” of the manna (*Economy of the Covenants*, 4.10.48).

ianism. As a homiletician, he, like William Perkins, stressed the marks of grace to encourage believers and convict nominal Christians.⁷⁴

Throughout his life as pastor and professor, Witsius mediated disputes. Formally a Cocceian and materially a Voetian, he managed to remain friends with both sides. His motto was “In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, prudence and charity.” He was noted for meekness and patience and stressed that, despite the church’s condition, a believer had no right to separate from the church. One biographer wrote of Witsius: “With him it was a fundamental maxim, that Christ ‘in all things must have the preeminence’; and free and sovereign grace, reigning through the person and righteousness of the great Immanuel, he cordially regarded as at once the source of all our hope, and the grand incitement to a holy practice.”⁷⁵

Witsius influenced many theologians in his lifetime: Campegius Vitringa and Bernardus Smytegelt in the Netherlands; Friedrich Lampe in Germany; Thomas Boston and the Erskine brothers (Ralph and Ebenezer) in Scotland. James Herve commended him as “a most excellent author, all of whose works have such a delicacy of composition, and such a sweet savour of holiness, [like] the golden pot which had manna, and was outwardly bright with burnished gold, inwardly rich with heavenly food.” John Gill described Witsius as “a writer not only eminent for his great talents and particularly solid judgment, rich imagination, and elegance of composition, but for a deep, powerful, and evangelical spirituality, and savour of godliness.”⁷⁶

In the nineteenth century, the Free Church of Scotland translated, published, and distributed a thousand copies of Witsius’s *On the Character of a True Theologian*, free of charge to its divinity students.⁷⁷ William Cunningham said in a prefatory note to that work, “He [Witsius] has long been regarded by all competent judges as presenting a very fine and remarkable combination of the highest qualities that constitute a ‘true’ and consummate theologian—talent, sound judgment, learning, orthodoxy, piety and unction.”⁷⁸ Witsius’s translator, William Pringle, asserted

74. van Genderen, *Herman Witsius*, 261–63.

75. Fraser, “Memoir of Witsius,” 1:xxvii.

76. Fraser, “Translator’s Preface,” in *Apostles’ Creed*, ii.

77. Michael W. Honeycutt, “Introduction” in *On the Character of a True Theologian*, 7.

78. Honeycutt, “Introduction,” 19.

that his writings “are destined to hold an enduring place among the stores of Christian theology.... In extensive and profound acquaintance with the doctrines of scripture, powerful defence of the truth against attacks of adversaries, and earnest exhortations to a holy and devout life, he has few equals.”⁷⁹

Rabbi John Duncan described Witsius as “perhaps the most tender, spiritually minded and richly evangelical as well as one of the most learned of the Dutch divines of the old school.” He said Witsius had special influence upon him. Duncan’s biographers stated “that the attraction proved so strong that for some time he could hardly theologize or preach out of that man’s groove.”⁸⁰

Witsius’s influence continues today. We trust that the influence of Witsius’s writings, facilitated by this analysis, will have a God-glorifying influence upon each of us who “take up and read.”

Witsius’s trilogy is the cream of Reformed theology. Sound biblical exegesis and practical doctrinal substance abound. May God bless their reprints in the lives of many, so that Reformed covenant theology, the Apostles’ Creed, and the Lord’s Prayer acquire a new depth of meaning. Oh, to be more centered upon our covenant LORD Himself—confessing His truth, hallowing His name, longing for the coming of His kingdom, doing His will!

79. William Pringle, “Translator’s Preface,” in *The Lord’s Prayer*, xiii.

80. Pronk, “The Second Reformation in the Netherlands,” 10.

INTRODUCTION

ON COVENANT THEOLOGY

by
J. I. Packer

I

The name of Herman Wits (Witsius, 1636–1708) has been unjustly forgotten. He was a masterful Dutch Reformed theologian, learned, wise, mighty in the Scriptures, practical and “experimental” (to use the Puritan label for that which furthers heart religion). On paper he was calm, judicious, systematic, clear, and free from personal oddities and animosities. He was a man whose work stands comparison for substance and thrust with that of his younger British contemporary John Owen, and this writer, for one, knows no praise higher than that! To Witsius it was given, in the treatise here reprinted, to integrate and adjudicate explorations of covenant theology carried out by a long line of theological giants stretching back over more than a century and a half to the earliest days of the Reformation. On this major matter Witsius’s work has landmark status as summing up a whole era, which is why it is appropriate to reprint it today. However, in modern Christendom, covenant theology has been unjustly forgotten, just as Witsius himself has, and it will not therefore be amiss to spend a little time reintroducing it in order to prepare readers’ minds for what is to come.

II

What is covenant theology? The straightforward, if provocative, answer to that question is that it is what is nowadays called a hermeneutic—that is, a way of reading the whole Bible that is itself part of the overall interpretation of the Bible that it undergirds. A successful hermeneutic is a consistent interpretative procedure yielding a consistent understanding of Scripture that in turn confirms the propriety of the procedure itself.

Covenant theology is a case in point. It is a hermeneutic that forces itself upon every thoughtful Bible reader who gets to the place, *first*, of reading, hearing, and digesting Holy Scripture as didactic instruction given through human agents by God Himself, in person; *second*, of recognizing that what the God who speaks the Scriptures tells us about in their pages is His own sustained sovereign action in creation, providence, and grace; *third*, of discerning that in our salvation by grace God stands revealed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, executing in tri-personal unity a single cooperative enterprise of raising sinners from the gutter of spiritual destitution to share Christ's glory forever; and, *fourth*, of seeing that God-centered thought and life, springing responsively from a God-wrought change of heart that expresses itself spontaneously in grateful praise, is the essence of true knowledge of God. Once Christians have got this far, the covenant theology of the Scriptures is something that they can hardly miss.

Yet in one sense they can miss it: that is, by failing to focus on it, even when in general terms they are aware of its reality. God's covenant of grace in Scripture is one of those things that are too big to be easily seen, particularly when one's mind is programmed to look at something smaller. If you are hunting on a map of the Pacific for a particular Polynesian island, your eye will catch dozens of island names, however small they are printed, but the chances are you will never notice the large letters spelling PACIFIC OCEAN that straddle the map completely. Similarly, we may, and I think often do, study such realities as God's promises; faith; the plan of salvation; Jesus Christ the God-man, our prophet, priest, and king; the church in both testaments, along with circumcision, Passover, baptism, the Lord's Supper, the intricacies of Old Testament worship, and the simplicities of its New Testament counterpart; the work of the Holy Spirit in believers; the nature and standards of Christian obedience in holiness and neighbor love; prayer and communion with God; and many more such themes, without noticing that these relational realities are all covenantal in their very essence. As each Polynesian island is anchored in the Pacific, so each of the matters just mentioned is anchored in God's resolve to relate to His human creatures and have us relate to Him in covenant—which means, in the final analysis, a way for man to relate to God that reflects facets of the fellowship

of the Son and the Spirit with the Father in the unity of the Godhead. From this, perhaps, we can begin to see how big and significant a thing the covenantal category is both in biblical teaching and in real life.

“The distance between God and the creature is so great,” says the Westminster Confession (7.1), “that although reasonable creatures do owe obedience unto him as their Creator, yet they could never have any fruition of him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God’s part, which he hath been pleased to express by way of covenant.” Exactly! So biblical doctrine, first to last, has to do with covenantal relationships between God and man; biblical ethics has to do with expressing God’s covenantal relationship to us in covenantal relationships between ourselves and others; and Christian religion has the nature of covenant life, in which God is the direct object of our faith, hope, love, worship, and service, all animated by gratitude for grace.

Our theme is the life-embracing bedrock reality of the covenant relationship between the Creator and Christians, and it is high time we defined exactly what we are talking about. A covenant relationship is a voluntary mutual commitment that binds each party to the other. Whether it is negotiated, like a modern business deal or a marriage contract, or unilaterally imposed, as all God’s covenants are, is irrelevant to the commitment itself; the reality of the relationship depends simply on the fact that mutual obligations have been accepted and pledged on both sides. Luther is held to have said that Christianity is a matter of personal pronouns, in the sense that everything depends on knowing that Jesus died for *me*, to be *my* Savior, and that His Father is *my* God and Father, personally committed to love, nurture, uphold, and glorify *me*. This already is covenant thinking, for this is the essential substance of the covenant relationship: God’s covenant is precisely a matter of these personal pronouns, used in this way, as a basis for a life with God of friendship, peace, and communicated love.

Thus, when God tells Abraham, “I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee...to be a God unto thee... I will be their God” (Gen. 17:6-8), the personal pronouns are the key words: God is committing Himself to Abraham and Abraham’s seed in a way in which He does not commit Himself to others. God’s covenant commitment expresses eternal election; His covenant love to individual

sinners flows from His choice of them to be His forever in the peace of justification and the joy of glorification. The verbal commitment in which electing sovereignty thus shows itself has the nature of a promise, the fulfillment of which is guaranteed by God's absolute fidelity and trustworthiness—the quality that David Livingstone the explorer celebrated by describing God as “an honorable gentleman who never breaks his word.” The covenant promise itself, “I will be your God,” is an unconditional undertaking on God's part to be “for us” (Rom. 8:31), “on our side” (Ps. 124:1-5), using all His resources for the furthering of the ultimate good of those (“us”) to whom He thus pledges Himself. “I will take you to me for a people, and I will be to you a God” (Ex. 6:7), the covenant promise constantly repeated throughout both testaments (Gen. 17:6-8; Ex. 20:2; 29:45-46.; Lev. 11:45; Jer. 32:38; Ezek. 11:20; 34:30-31; 36:28; 2 Cor. 6:16-18; Rev. 21:2-7), may fairly be called the pantechon promise, inasmuch as every particular promise that God makes is packed into it—fellowship and communion first (“I will be with you,” “I will dwell among them,” “I will live among you”), and then the supply of every real need, here and hereafter. Sovereignty and salvation, love and largesse, election and enjoyment, affirmation and assurance, fidelity and fullness thus appear as the spectrum of themes (the second of each pair being the fruit of the first as its root) that combine to form the white light, glowing and glorious, of the gracious self-giving of God to sinners that covenant theology proclaims.

The God-given covenant carries, of course, obligations. The life of faith and repentance and the obedience to which faith leads constitute the covenant-keeping through which God's people receive the fullness of God's covenant blessing. “I bare you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto myself. Now therefore, *if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant*, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people” (Ex. 19:4-5, emphasis added). Covenant faithfulness is the condition and means of receiving covenant benefits, and there is nothing arbitrary in that; for the blessings flow from the relationship, and human rebelliousness and unfaithfulness stop the flow by disrupting the relationship. Israel's infidelity was constantly doing this throughout the Old Testament story, and the New Testament makes it plain that churches

and Christians will lose blessings that would otherwise be theirs, should covenant fidelity be lacking in their lives.

III

From what has been said so far, three things become apparent. First, the gospel of God is not properly *understood till it is viewed within a covenantal frame*.

Jesus Christ, whose saving ministry is the sum and substance of the gospel, is announced in Hebrews the mediator and guarantor of the covenant relationship (Heb. 7:22; 8:6). The gospel promises, offering Christ and His benefits to sinners, are therefore invitations to enter and enjoy a covenant relationship with God. Faith in Jesus Christ is accordingly the embracing of the covenant, and the Christian life of glorifying God by one's words and works for the greatness of His goodness and grace has at its heart covenant communion between the Savior and the sinner. The church, the fellowship of believers that the gospel creates, is the community of the covenant, and the preaching of the Word, the practice of pastoral care and discipline, the manifold exercises of worship together, and the administration of baptism and the Lord's Supper (corresponding to circumcision and Passover in former days) are all signs, tokens, expressions, and instruments of the covenant, through which covenantal enrichments from God constantly flow to those who believe. The hope of glory, as promised in the gospel, is the goal of the covenant relationship (Rev. 21:2-27), and Christian assurance is the knowledge of the content and stability of that relationship as it applies to oneself (Rom. 5:1-11; 8:1-39). The whole Bible is, as it were, presented by Jesus Christ to the whole church and to each Christian as the book of the covenant, and the whole record of the wars of the Word with the church as well as the world in the post-biblical Christian centuries, the record that is ordinarily called church history, is precisely the story of the covenant going on in space and time. As artists and decorators know, the frame is important for setting off the picture, and you do in fact see the picture better when it is appropriately framed. So with the riches of the gospel; the covenant is their proper frame, and you only see them in their full glory when this frame surrounds them, as in Scripture it actually does and as in theology it always should.

Second, *the Word of God is not properly understood till it is viewed within a covenantal frame.*

Covenant theology, as was said above, is a biblical hermeneutic as well as a formulation of biblical teaching. Not only does it spring from reading the Scriptures as a unity, it includes in itself specific claims as to how this should be done. Covenant theology offers a total view, which it is ready to validate from Scripture itself if challenged, as to how the various parts of the Bible stand related to each other. The essence of the view is as follows. The biblical revelation, which is the written Word of God, centers upon a God-given narrative of how successive and cumulative revelations of God's covenant purpose and provision were given and responded to at key points in history. The backbone of the Bible, to which all the expository, homiletical, moral, liturgical, and devotional material relates, is the unfolding in space and time of God's unchanging intention of having a people on earth to whom He would relate covenantally for His and their joy. The contents of Scripture cohere into a single consistent body of truth about God and mankind, by which every Christian—indeed, every human being—in every generation is called to live. The Bible in one sense, like Jesus Christ in another, is God's Word to the world.

The story that forms this backbone of the Bible has to do with man's covenant relationship with God first ruined and then restored. The original covenantal arrangement, usually called the covenant of works, was one whereby God undertook to prolong and augment for all subsequent humanity the happy state in which He had made the first human pair—provided that the man observed, as part of the humble obedience that was then natural to him, one prohibition, specified in the narrative as not eating a forbidden fruit. The devil, presented as a serpent, seduced Adam and Eve into disobeying, so that they fell under the penal sanctions of the covenant of works (loss of good and corruption of nature). But God at once revealed to them in embryo a redemptive economy that had in it both the covering of sin and a prospective victory for the woman's seed (a human Savior) over the serpent and his malice. The redemptive purpose of this new arrangement became clearer as God called Abraham, made a nation from his descendants, saved them from slavery, named Himself not only their God but also their King and

Father, taught them His law (the family code), drilled them in sacrificial liturgies, disciplined their disobedience, and sent messengers to hold up before them His holiness and His promise of a Savior-King and a saving kingdom, which in due course became reality. The Westminster Confession summarizes what was going on in and through all this.

Man, by his fall, having made himself incapable of life by [the first] covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the covenant of grace: wherein he freely offereth 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....

This covenant was differently administered in the time of the law, and in the time of the gospel: under the law, it was administered by promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the paschal lamb, and other types and ordinances delivered to the people of the Jews, all foreshadowing Christ to come; which were, for that time, sufficient and efficacious, through the operation of the Spirit, to instruct and build up the elect in faith in the promised Messiah, by whom they had full remission of sins, and eternal salvation; and is called the old testament.

Under the gospel, when Christ, the substance, was exhibited, the ordinances in which this covenant is dispensed are the preaching of the Word, and the administration of the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper.... In them, it is held forth in more fulness, evidence and spiritual efficacy, to all nations, both Jews and Gentiles; and is called the new testament. There are not therefore two covenants of grace, differing in substance, but one and the same, under various dispensations (7.3, 5, 6).

So the unifying strands that bind together the books of the Bible are, *first*, the one covenant promise, sloganized as "I will be your God, and you shall be my people," which God was fulfilling to His elect all through His successive orderings of covenant faith and life; *second*, the one messenger and mediator of the covenant, Jesus Christ the God-man, prophet and king, priest and sacrifice, the Messiah of Old Testament prophecy and New Testament proclamation; *third*, the one people of God, the covenant community, the company of the elect, whom God

brings to faith and keeps in faith, from Abel, Noah, and Abraham through the remnant of Israel to the worldwide New Testament church of believing Jews and Gentiles; and *fourth*, the one pattern of covenant piety, consisting of faith, repentance, love, joy, praise, hope, hatred of sin, desire for sanctity, a spirit of prayer, and readiness to battle the world, the flesh, and the devil in order to glorify God, a pattern displayed most fully, perhaps, in Luther's "little Bible," the Psalter, but seen also in the lives of God's servants in both testaments and reflected more or less fully in each single one of the Old and New Testament books. Covenant theologians insist that every book of the Bible in effect asks to be read in terms of these unities and as contributing to the exposition of them, and is actually misunderstood if it is not so read.

Third, the reality of God is not properly understood till it is viewed within a covenantal frame.

Who is God? God is the triune Creator, who purposes to have a covenant people whom in love He will exalt for his glory. (*Glory* there means both God's demonstration of His praiseworthiness and the actual praising that results.) Why does God so purpose—why, that is, does He desire covenantal fellowship with rational beings? The most we can say (for the question is not one to which God has given us a direct answer) is that the nature of such fellowship observably corresponds to the relationships of mutual honor and love between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit within the unity of the divine being, so that the divine purpose appears to be, so to speak, an enlarging of this circle of eternal love and joy. In highlighting the thought that covenantal communion is the inner life of God, covenant theology makes the truth of the Trinity more meaningful than it can otherwise be.

Nor is this all. Scripture is explicit on the fact that from eternity, a specific agreement existed between the Father and the Son that they would exalt each other in the following way: the Father would honor the Son by sending Him to save lost sinners through a penal self-sacrifice leading to a cosmic reign in which the central activity would be the imparting to sinners through the Holy Spirit of the redemption He won for them; and the Son would honor the Father by becoming the Father's love-gift to sinners and by leading them through the Spirit to

trust, love, and glorify the Father on the model of His own obedience to the Father's will. This covenant of redemption, as it is commonly called, which underlies the covenant of grace, clarifies these three truths at least:

1. The love of the Father and the Son, with the Holy Spirit, to lost sinners is shared, unanimous love. The tri-theistic fantasy of a loving Son placating an unloving Father and commandeering an apathetic Holy Spirit in order to save us is a distressing nonsense.

2. As our salvation derives from God's free and gracious initiative and is carried through, first to last, according to God's eternal plan by God's own sovereign power, so its ultimate purpose is to exalt and glorify the Father and the Son together. The man-centered distortion that pictures God as saving us more for our sake than for His is also a distressing nonsense.

3. Jesus Christ is the focal figure, the proper center of our faithful attention, throughout the redemptive economy. He, as mediator of the covenant of grace and of the grace of that covenant, is as truly an object of divine predestination as are we whom He saves. With Him as our sponsor and representative, the last Adam, the second "public person" through whom the Father deals with our race, the covenant of grace is archetypally and fundamentally made, in order that it may now be established and ratified with us in Him. ("With whom was the covenant of grace made?" asks question 31 of the Westminster Larger Catechism, and the prescribed answer is: "The covenant of grace was made with Christ as the second Adam, and in him with all the elect as his seed.") From the vital union that we have with Christ through the Holy Spirit's action flows all the aliveness to God, all the faith, hope, and love Godward, all the desire for Him and urges to worship Him and willingness to work for Him, of which we ever were, are, or will be conscious; apart from Christ we should still be spiritually dead (objectively, lifeless; subjectively, unresponsive) in our trespasses and sins. Christ is therefore to be acknowledged, now and forever, as our all in all, our Alpha and Omega, so far as our salvation is concerned—and that goes for salvation subjectively brought home to us, no less than for salvation objectively

obtained for us. The legalistic, sub-spiritual Roman Catholic theology of Mass and merit, whereby Christians are required by the Father, and enabled by the Son, to take part in the achieving of their own salvation, is a further distressing nonsense.

These three truths together shape the authentic biblical and Reformed mentality, whereby God the Father through Christ, and Christ Himself in His saving ministry, are given all the glory and all the praise for having quickened us the dead, helped us the helpless, and saved us the lost. Writes Geerhardus Vos:

Only when the believer understands how he has to receive and has received everything from the Mediator and how God in no way whatever deals with him except through Christ, only then does a picture of the glorious work that God wrought through Christ emerge in his consciousness and the magnificent idea of grace begin to dominate and form in his life. For the Reformed, therefore, the entire *ordo salutis* [order of salvation], beginning with regeneration as its first stage, is bound to the mystical union with Christ. There is no gift that has not been earned by him. Neither is there a gift that is not bestowed by him and that does not elevate God's glory through his bestowal. *Now the basis for this order lies in none other than in the covenant of salvation with Christ.* In this covenant those chosen by the Father are given to Christ. In it he became the guarantor so that they would be planted into his body in the thought-world of grace through faith. As the application of salvation by Christ and by Christ's initiative is a fundamental principle of Reformed theology, this theology has correctly viewed this application as a covenantal requirement which fell to the Mediator and for the fulfilling of which he became the guarantor" (*Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin, Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980, 248).

The full reality of God and God's work is not adequately grasped till the covenant of redemption—the specific covenantal agreement between Father and Son on which the covenant of grace rests—occupies its proper place in our minds.

Thus it appears that, confessionally and doxologically, covenant theology brings needed enrichment of insight to our hearts; and devotionally the same is true. Older evangelicals wrote hymns celebrating the covenant of grace in which they voiced fortissimos of the triumphant

assurance of a kind that we rarely hear today—so it will be worth our while to quote some of them. They merit memorizing, and meditating on, and making one's own; ceaseless strength flows to those saints who allow these sentiments to take root in their souls. Here, first, is the eighteenth-century leader, Philip Doddridge:

'Tis mine, *the covenant of his grace*,
 And every promise mine;
 All sprung from everlasting love,
 And sealed by blood divine.
 On my unworthy favored head
 Its blessings all unite;
 Blessings more numerous than the stars,
 More lasting, and more bright.

And again:

My God! *the covenant of thy love*
 Abides for ever sure;
 And in its matchless grace I feel
 My happiness secure.
 Since thou, the everlasting God,
 My Father art become,
 Jesus, my Guardian and my Friend,
 And heaven my final home;
 I welcome all thy sovereign will,
 For all that will is love;
 And, when I know not what thou dost,
 I wait the light above.

Also in the eighteenth century, Augustus Toplady wrote this:

A debtor to mercy alone,
 Of *covenant mercy* I sing;
 Nor fear, with thy righteousness on,
 My person and offering to bring.
 The terrors of law and of God,
 With me can have nothing to do:
 My Savior's obedience and blood
 Hide all my transgressions from view.
 The work which his goodness began,

The arm of his strength will complete;
 His promise is Yea and Amen,
 And never was forfeited yet.
 Things future, nor things that are now,
 Nor all things below or above,
 Can make him his purpose forego,
 Or sever my soul from his love.

Then, a hundred years later, Frances Ridley Havergal gave us the following:

*Jehovah's covenant shall endure,
 All ordered, everlasting, sure!
 O child of God, rejoice to trace
 Thy portion in its glorious grace.*

'Tis thine, for Christ is given to be
The covenant of God to thee;
 In him, God's golden scroll of light,
 The darkest truths are clear and bright.

O sorrowing sinner, well he knew,
 Ere time began, what he would do!
 Then rest thy hope within the veil;
His covenant mercies shall not fail.

O doubting one, the Eternal Three
 is pledged in faithfulness for thee;
 Claim every promise, sweet and sure,
by covenant oath of God secure.

O feeble one, look up and see
 Strong consolation sworn for thee:
 Jehovah's glorious arm is shown,
His covenant strength is all thine own.

O mourning one, each stroke of love
 A *covenant blessing* yet shall prove;
 His *covenant love* shall be thy stay;
 His *covenant grace* be as thy day.

O Love that chose, O Love that died,
O Love that sealed and sanctified!
All glory, glory, glory be,
O *covenant Triune God*, to thee!

One way of judging the quality of theologies is to see what sort of devotion they produce. The devotional perspective that covenant theology generates is accurately reflected in these lyrics. Readers will make up their own minds as to whether such devotion could significantly enrich the church today and form their judgment on covenant theology accordingly.

IV

Earlier it was said that the Bible “forces” covenant theology on all who receive it as what, in effect, it claims to be—God’s witness to God’s work of saving sinners for God’s glory. *Forces* is a strong word; how does Scripture “force” covenant theology upon us? By the following four features, at least.

First, *by the story that it tells*. The books of the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, are, as was said earlier, God’s own record of the progressive unfolding of His purpose to have a people in covenant with Himself here on earth. The covenantal character of God’s relationships with human beings, first to last, has already been underlined and is in fact reflected one way and another on just about every page of the Bible. The transition in Eden from the covenant of works to the covenant of grace and the further transition from all that was involved in the preliminary (old) form of that covenant to its final (new) form, brought in through the death of Jesus Christ and now administered by Him from His throne, are the key events in the covenant story. The significance of the fact that God caused His book of instruction to mankind to be put together with the history of His covenant as its backbone can hardly be overestimated. Covenant relationships between God and men, established by God’s initiative, bringing temporal and eternal blessings to individuals and creating community among them so that they have a corporate identity as God’s people, are in fact the pervasive themes of the whole Bible; and it

compels thoughtful readers to take note of the covenant as being central to God's concern.

Second, Scripture forces covenant theology upon us by the *place it gives to Jesus Christ* in the covenant story. That all Scripture, one way and another, is pointing its readers to Christ, teaching us truths and showing us patterns of divine action that help us understand Him properly, is a principle that no reverent and enlightened Bible student will doubt. This being so, it is momentarily significant that when Jesus explained the memorial rite for Himself that He instituted as His people's regular form of worship, He spoke of the wine that they were to drink as symbolizing His blood, shed to ratify the new covenant—a clear announcement of the fulfilling of the pattern of Exodus 24 (Jesus echoes directly the words of verse 8) and the promise of Jeremiah 31:31-34. It is also momentarily significant that when the writer to the Hebrews explains the uniqueness and finality of Jesus Christ as the only source of salvation for sinners, he does so by focusing on Jesus as the mediator of the new covenant and depicts Him as establishing this prophesied relationship between God and His people by superseding (transcending and thereby cancelling) the inadequate old covenant institutions for dealing with sins and giving access to God. It is also momentarily significant that when in Galatians Paul tells Gentiles that their faith in Christ, as such, has already made them inheritors of all that was promised to Abraham, he makes the point by declaring that in union with Christ, as those who by baptism have “put on” the Christ in whom they have trusted so as to become His own people, they are now the seed of Abraham with whom God has made His covenant for all time (Gal. 3), the covenant that brings liberty from law as a supposed system of salvation and full fellowship forever with God above (Gal. 4:24-31). Such Scriptures require us to interpret Christ in terms of God's covenant, just as they require us to interpret God's covenant in terms of Christ, and this fact also alerts thoughtful readers to the centrality of the covenant theme.

The third way in which Scripture directs us to covenantal thinking is by the *specific parallel between Christ and Adam* that Paul draws in Romans 5:12-18 and in 1 Corinthians 15:21-28, 45-49. The solidarity of one per-

son standing for a group, involving the whole group in the consequences of his action and receiving promises that apply to the whole group as well as to himself, is a familiar facet of biblical covenant thought, usually instanced in the case of family and national groups (Noah, Gen. 6:18, 9:9; Abraham, Gen. 17:7; the Israelites, Ex. 20:4-6, 8-12; 31:12-17; Aaron, Lev. 24:8f.; Phinehas, Num. 25:13; David, 2 Chron. 13:5, 21:7; Jer. 33:19-22). In Romans 5:12-18 Paul proclaims a solidarity between Christ and His people (believers, Rom. 3:22-5:2; the elect, God's chosen ones, 8:33), whereby the law-keeping, sin-bearing obedience of "the one man" brings righteousness with God, justification, and life to "the many," the "all"; and he sets this within the frame of a prior solidarity, namely that between Adam and his descendants, whereby our entire race was involved in the penal consequences of Adam's transgression. The 1 Corinthians passages confirm that these are indeed covenantal solidarities; God deals with mankind through two representative men, Adam and Christ; all that are in Adam die, all that are in Christ are made alive. This far-reaching parallel is clearly foundational to Paul's understanding of God's ways with our race, and it is a covenantal way of thinking, showing from a third angle that covenant theology is indeed biblically basic.

The fourth way in which Scripture forces covenant theology upon us is by *the explicit declaring of the covenant of redemption*, most notably (though by no means exclusively) in the words of Jesus recorded in the gospel of John. All Jesus' references to His purpose in the world as the doing of His Father's will, and to His actual words and works as obedience to His Father's command (John 4:32-34; 5:30; 6:38-40; 7:16-18; 8:28f.; 12:49f.; 14:31; 15:10; 17:4; 19:30); all His further references to His being sent by the Father into the world to perform a specific task (John 3:17, 34; 5:23, 30, 36, 38; 6:29, 57; 7:28, 29, 33; 8:16, 18, 26; 9:4; 10:36; 11:42; 12:44; 13:20; 14:24; 15:21; 16:5; 17:3, 8, 18, 21, 23, 25; 20:21; cf. 18:37); and all His references to the Father "giving" Him particular persons to save, and to His acceptance of the task of rescuing them from perishing both by dying for them and by calling and shepherding them to glory (John 6:37-44; 10:14-16, 27-30; 17:2, 6, 9, 19, 22, 24) are so many testimonies to the reality of the covenant of redemption. The

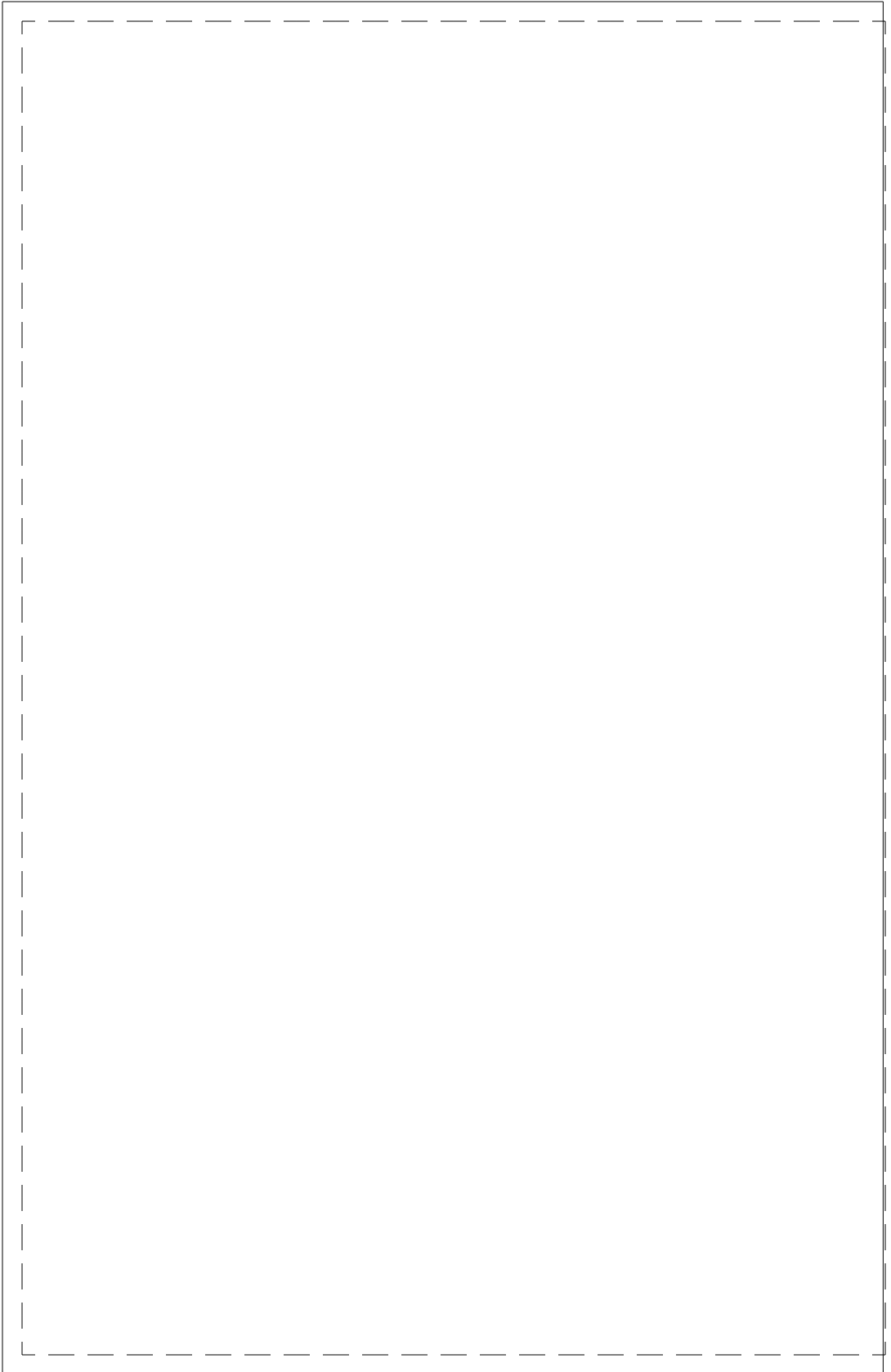
emphasis is pervasive, arresting, and inescapable: Jesus' own words force on thoughtful readers recognition of the covenant economy as foundational to all thought about the reality of God's saving grace.

V

Historically, covenant theology is a Reformed development: Huldreich Zwingli, Henry Bullinger, John Calvin, Zacharias Ursinus, Caspar Olevianus, Robert Rollock, John Preston, and John Ball were among the contributors to its growth, and the Westminster Confession and Catechisms gave it confessional status. Johann Koch (Cocceius) was a Dutch stormy petrel who, in a Latin work, *Summa doctrinae de foedere et testamento dei* (1648; *The Doctrine of the Covenant and Testament of God*), not only worked out in detail what we would call a biblical-theological, redemptive-historical perspective for presenting covenant theology (three periods—the covenant of works, made with Adam; the covenant of grace, made with and through Moses; the new covenant, made through Christ), but muddied his exegesis by allegorical fancies and marginalized himself by needless attacks on the analytical doctrine-by-doctrine approach to theological exposition that was practiced by his leading contemporaries in Holland: Maccovius, Maresius, and Voetius. It seems clear with hindsight that his method and theirs were complementary to each other and that both were necessary then, as they are now. (Today we name the Cocceian procedure biblical theology and that which he opposed systematic theology, and in well-ordered teaching institutions students are required to study both.) But for more than half a century following the appearance of Cocceius's book, clouds of controversy hung over Holland as Cocceians and Voetians grappled with each other, each side trying to prove the illegitimacy and wrongheadedness of what the other was attempting.

Within this embattled situation, Witsius tries to have the best of both worlds—and largely succeeds. His full title (*The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man: Comprehending a Complete Body of Divinity*) might seem to claim too much; but it is clearly a friendly wave to the Cocceians, who were insisting that the only way to organize theology and set out Christian truths was in terms of the historical unfolding of God's covenant dealings. His four books, the first on the covenant of works, the second on the covenant of redemption, the third on the covenant of

grace, and the fourth on covenant ordinances at different times and on the knowledge and experience of God's grace that these conveyed, are a journey over Cocceian ground, in the course of which Witsius, excellent exegete that he is, manages to correct some inadequacies and errors that poor exegesis in the Cocceian camp had fathered. But he treats each topic analytically and draws with evident happiness on the expository resources produced by systematicians during the previous 150 years, including, be it said, much deep wisdom from the Puritan-Pietist tradition, which is particularly evident in the third book. This is a head-clearing, mind-forming, heart-warming treatise of very great value; we possess nothing like it today, and to have it available once more is a real boon. I commend it enthusiastically to God's people everywhere.



THE
ECONOMY OF THE COVENANTS

BETWEEN

GOD AND MAN :

COMPREHENDING

A Complete Body of Divinity.

BY HERMAN WITSIUS, D. D.

PROFESSOR OF DIVINITY IN THE UNIVERSITIES OF FRANEKER, UTRECHT, AND LEYDEN ;
AND ALSO REGENT OF THE DIVINITY COLLEGE OF THE STATES
OF HOLLAND AND WEST FRIESLAND.

FAITHFULLY TRANSLATED FROM THE LATIN, AND CAREFULLY REVISED,

BY WILLIAM CROOKSHANK, D. D.

TO WHICH IS PREFIXED,

THE LIFE OF THE AUTHOR.

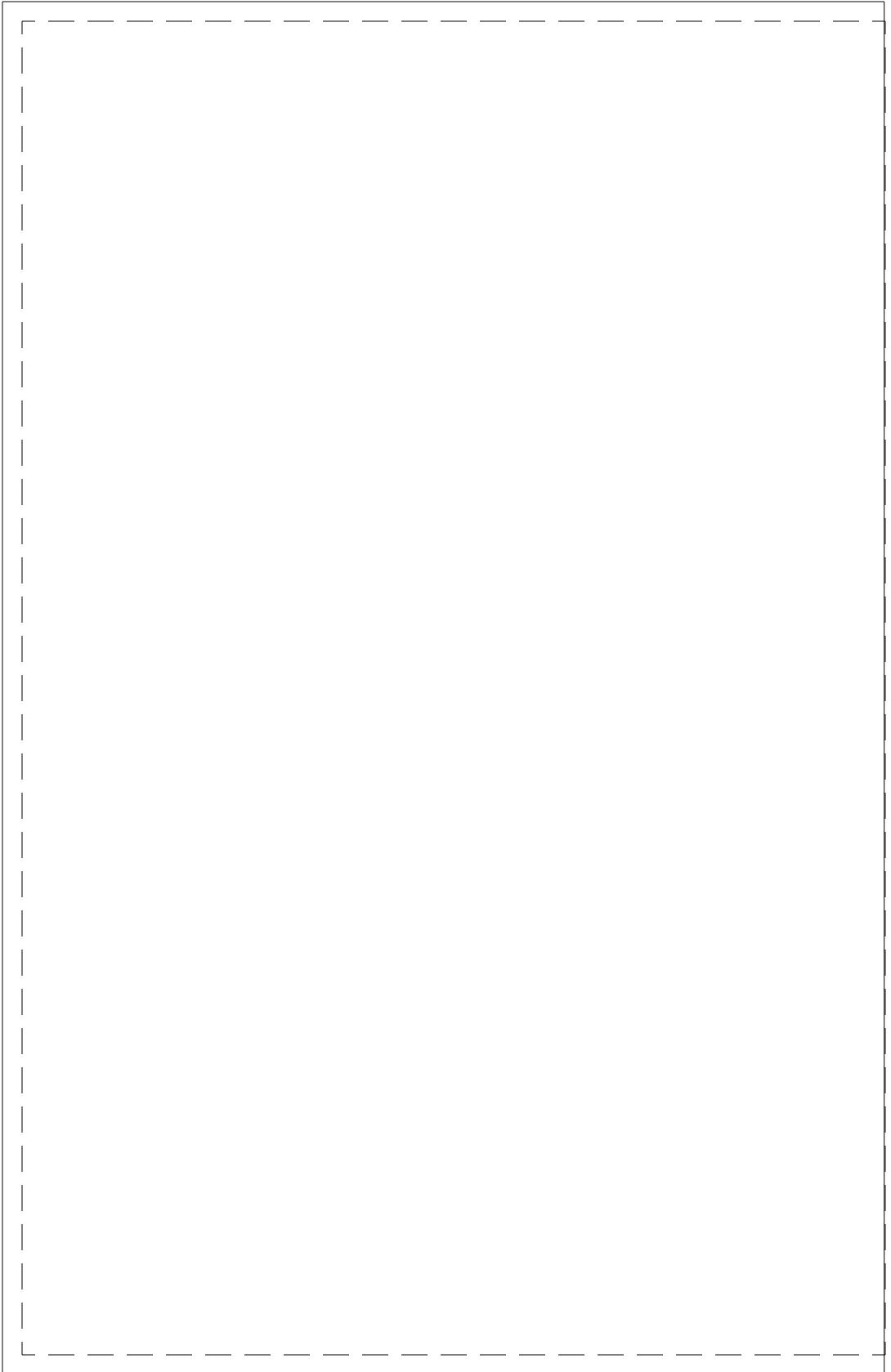
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RECOMMENDATIONS.

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THE famous HERMAN WITSIUS, Professor of Divinity at Utrecht, in Holland, and the Author of a treatise entitled, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man*, and various other learned and theological tracts, was a writer, not only eminent for his great talents, and particularly solid judgment, rich imagination, and elegancy of composition; but for a deep, powerful, and evangelical spirituality and savour of godliness: And we most heartily concur in the Recommendation of his works to serious Christians of all denominations, and especially to ministers and candidates for that sacred office.

JOHN GILL, D. D.

JOHN BRINE,

JOHN WALKER, L. L. D.

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The late Reverend, learned, and pious Mr. JAMES HERVEY, in his *Theron and Aspasio*, Vol. II. p. 366. having mentioned a work of the above WITSIUS, adds, “*The Economy of the Covenants*, written by the same hand, is a body of divinity, in its method so well digested; in its doctrines so truly evangelical; and (what is not very usual with our systematic writers) in its language so refined and elegant; in its manner so affectionate and animating; that I would recommend it to every student in Divinity. I would not scruple to *risk all my reputation* upon the merits of this performance: and I cannot but lament it, as one of my greatest losses, that I was *no sooner* acquainted with this most excellent author, all whose works have such a delicacy of composition, and such a sweet savour of holiness, that I know not any comparison more proper to represent their true character, than *the golden pot which had manna*; and was outwardly *bright* with burnished gold; inwardly *rich* with heavenly food.”

EXTRACT OF A LETTER FROM A CLERGYMAN IN THE COUNTRY
TO THE PUBLISHER.

THE sale of WITSIUS' *Economy of the Covenants*, increases among my friends. The translation is very just, and the excellency of the work merits a place in every Christian's library; I shall do my utmost to recommend it at all times, and on all proper occasions. No pious person on earth can forbear reading the 3d Book without wonder, rapture, and devotion. It exceeds all commendation: Hervey might well say, “*I would not scruple to risk all my reputation upon the merits of this performance.*” For my own part, I am not ashamed, nor afraid of any scorn and ridicule, that may be poured on me from any quarter, whilst I constantly aver, that the work has not its equal in the world, &c.

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THE
ECONOMY
OF THE
DIVINE COVENANTS.

BOOK I.

CHAP. I.

Of the Divine Covenants in general.

I. WHOEVER attempts to discourse on the subject and design of the Divine Covenants, by which eternal salvation is adjudged to man, on certain conditions equally worthy of God and the rational creature, ought, above all things, to have a sacred and inviolable regard to the heavenly oracles, and neither through prejudice nor passion, intermix any thing which he is not firmly persuaded is contained in the records which hold forth these covenants to the world. For, if Zaleucus made it a condition to be observed by the contentious interpreters of his laws, That “each party should explain the meaning of the lawgiver, in the assembly of the thousand, with halts about their necks: and that what party soever should appear to wrest the sense of the law, should, in the presence of the thousand, end their lives by the halter they wore:” as Polybius, a very grave author, relates in his history, Book xii. c. 7. And if the Jews and Samaritans in Egypt, each disputing about their temple, were admitted to plead before the king and his courtiers on this condition only, That “the advocates of either party, foiled in the dispute, should be punished with death,” according to Josephus, in

his Antiquities, Book xiii. c. 6. Certainly he must be in greater peril, and liable to sorer destruction, who shall dare to pervert, by rashly wresting the sacred mysteries of the Divine Covenants; our Lord himself openly declaring, that "whosoever shall break one of these least commandments, and thall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven," Matt. v. 19. It is therefore, with a kind of sacred awe I undertake this work; praying God, that, laying aside every prejudice, I may demean myself a tractable disciple of the holy scriptures, and, with modesty, impart to my brethren, what I think I have learned from them: if happily this my poor performance may serve to lessen the number of disputes, and help to clear up the truth; than which nothing should be accounted more valuable.

II. As it is by words, especially the words of those languages, in which God was pleased to reveal his sacred mysteries to men, that we can, with hopes of success, come to the knowledge of things; it will be worth while, more accurately to enquire into the import both of the Hebrew word, **בריה**, and the Greek *διαθεκη*, which the holy Spirit makes use of on this subject. And first, we are to give the true etymology, and then the different significations of the Hebrew word. With respect to the former, the learned are not agreed: some derive it from **ברא**, which, in Piel, signifies to *cut down*: because, as we shall presently observe, covenants were solemnly ratified by cutting or dividing animals asunder. It may also be derived from the same root in a very different signification: for, as **ברא** properly signifies to *create*; so, metaphorically, to *ordain*, or *dispose*, which is the meaning of *διατιθεσθαι*. And hence it is, that the Hellenist Jews make use of *το καταζεν*. Certainly it is in this sense that Peter, 1 Pet. ii. 13. calls *ἐξουσια*, *power appointed by men*, and for human purposes, *αυτοθεστωσιν ανθρωπου*, *the ordinance of man*; to which, I think, Grotius has learnedly observed on the title of the New Testament. Others had rather derive it from **ברוה**, as **שבירה** from **שבה**, signifying, besides other things, to *choose*. And in covenants, especially of friendship, there is a choice of persons between whom, of things about which, and of condition upon which, a covenant is entered into: nor is this improperly observed.

III. But **בריה** is variously taken in scripture: sometimes *improperly*, and sometimes *properly*. *Improperly*, it denotes the following things. 1st. An immutable ordinance made about a thing: In this sense God mentions his "covenant of the day, and his covenant of the night," Jer. xxxiii. 20. That

is, that fixed ordinance made about the uninterrupted vicissitude of day and night; which, chap. xxxi. 36. is called חק, that is, *statute, limited, or fixed*, which nothing is to be added to, or taken from. In this sense is included the notion of a *testament*, or of a last irrevocable will. Thus God said, Numb. xviii. 19. "I have given thee, and thy sons, and thy daughters with thee, עילם חיא לחם עילם בדיח מלה, by a statute for ever: it is a covenant of salt for ever." This observation is of use, more fully to explain the nature of the covenant of grace, which the apostle proposes under the similitude of a *testament*, the execution of which depends upon the death of the testator, Heb. ix. 15, 16, 17. To which notion both the Hebrew בדיח, and the Greek διαθηκη may lead us. 2dly. A sure and stable *promise*, though not mutual, Exod. xxxiv. 10. "Behold I make a covenant; before all thy people I will do marvels." Isa. lix. 21. "This is my covenant with them, my Spirit shall not depart from them." 3dly. It signifies a *precept*, and to cut or make a covenant, is to give a precept, Jer. xxxiv. 13, 14. "I made a covenant with your fathers—Saying, at the end of seven years, let ye go every man his brother." Hence appears in what sense the decalogue is called God's covenant. But *properly*, it signifies a mutual agreement between parties, with respect to something. Such a covenant passed between Abraham, Mamre, Eshcol, and Aner, who are called, *confederates with Abraham*, Gen. xiv. 13. Such also was that between Isaac and Abimelech, Gen. xxvi. 28, 29.: between Jonathan and David, 1 Sam. xviii. 3. And of this kind is likewise that which we are now to treat of between God and Man.

IV. No less equivocal is the διαθηκη of the Greeks: which, both singularly and plurally, very often denotes a testament: as Budæus shews, in his *Comment. Ling. Græc.* from Isocrates, Oeschines, Demosthenes, and others. In this sense, we hinted, it was used by the apostle, Heb. ix. 15. Sometimes also it denotes a *law*, which is a rule of life. For, the Orphici and Pythagoreans denominated the rules of living, prescribed to their pupils, according to Grotius. It also often signifies an *engagement* or *agreement*; wherefore Hesychius explains it by συναμοσσια, *confederacy*. There is none of these significations but will be of future use in the progress of this work.

V. Making a covenant, the Hebrews call, בדיח בדיח, *to strike a covenant*, in the same manner as the Greeks and Latins, *ferire, icere, percutere fœdus*. Which doubtless took its rise from the ancient ceremony of slaying animals, by

which covenants were ratified. Of which rite we observe very ancient traces, Gen. xv. 9, 10. This was either then first commanded by God, or borrowed from some extant custom. Emphatical is what Polybius, Book iv. page 398. relates of the Cynæthenses, "over the slaughtered victims they took a solemn oath, and plighted faith to each other:" a phrase plainly similar to what God uses, Psalm l. 5. "those that have made a covenant with me by sacrifice." They also used to *pass in the middle* between the divided parts of the victim cut asunder, Jer. xxxiv. 18. Whoever wants to know more about this rite, may consult Grotius on Matt. xxvi. 28. and Bochart in his Hierozoicon, Book ii. c. xxxiii. p. 325. and Ouwen's Theologum, Book iii. c. i. It was likewise a custom, that agreements and compacts were ratified by solemn feasts. Examples of which are obvious in scripture. Thus Isaac, having made a covenant with Abimelech, is said to have made a great feast, and to have eat with them, Gen. xxvi. 30. In like manner acted his son Jacob, after having made a covenant with Laban, Gen. xxxi. 54. We read of a like federal feast, 2 Sam. iii. 20. where a relation is given of the feast which David made for Abner and his attendants, who came to make a covenant with him in the name of the people. It was also customary among the heathen, as the learned Stuckius shews in his Antiquitates Convivales, lib. I. c. xl.

VI. Nor were these rites without their significancy: the cutting the animals asunder, denoted, that, in the same manner, the perjured and covenant-breakers should be cut asunder, by the vengeance of God. And to this purpose is what God says, Jer. xxxiv. 18, 19, 20. "And I will give the men that have transgressed my covenant, which have not performed the words of the covenant, which they had made before me, when they cut the calf in twain, and passed between the parts thereof. I will even give them into the hands of their enemies, and their dead bodies shall be for meat unto the fowls of the heaven, and to the beasts of the earth." See I Sam. xi. 7. An ancient form of these execrations is extant in Livy, Book i. "The Roman people do not among the first break these conditions; but if they should avowedly, and through treachery, break them, do thou, O Jupiter, on that day, thus strike the Roman people, as I do now this hog; and be the stroke the heavier, as thy power is the greater." By the ceremony of the confederates passing between the parts cut asunder, was signified, that being now united by the strictest ties of religion, and by a solemn oath, they formed but one body, as Vatablus

has remarked on Gen. xv. 10. These feasts were tokens of a sincere and lasting friendship.

VII. But when God in the solemnities of his covenants with men, thought proper to use these, or the like rites, the significancy was still more noble and divine. They who made covenant with God by sacrifice, not only submitted to punishment, if impiously revolting from God, they slighted his covenant; but God likewise signified to them, that all the stability of the covenant of grace was founded on the sacrifice of Christ, and that the soul and body of Christ were one day to be violently separated asunder. All the promises of God in him are yea, and in him amen, 2 Cor. i. 20. His blood is the blood of the New Testament, Matt. xxvi. 28. in a far more excellent manner than that, with which Moses sprinkled both the altar and the people entered into covenant, Exod. xxiv. 8. Those sacred banquets, to which the covenantants were admitted before the Lord, especially that instituted by the Lord Jesus, under the New Testament, do most effectually seal or ratify that intimate communion and fellowship there is between Christ and believers.

VIII. There are learned men, who from this rite would explain that phrase, which we have, Numb. xviii. 19. and 2 Chron. xiv. 5. of "a covenant of salt," that is, of a covenant of friendship, of a stable and perpetual nature. Which seems to be so denominated, because salt was usually made use of in sacrifices to signify that the covenant was made sure upon observing the customary rites, says Rivet on Genesis, Exercit. 136. Unless we would rather suppose, a regard to be here had to the firmness of salt, by which it resists putrefaction and corruption, and therefore prolongs the duration of things, and in a manner renders them everlasting. For that reason, Lot's wife is thought to have been turned to a pillar of salt: not so much, as Augustin remarks, to be for a seasoning to us, as a lasting and perpetual monument of the divine judgment. For all salt is not subject to melting: Pliny says, that some Arabs build walls and houses of blocks of salt, and cement them with water, Nat. Hist. L. xxxi. c. 7.

IX. Having premised these things in general about terms of art, let us now enquire into the thing itself, *viz.* the nature of the covenant of God with man; which I thus define: A covenant of God with man, is an agreement between God and man, about the way of obtaining consummate happiness; including a commination of eternal destruction, with which the contemner of the happiness, offered in that way, is to be punished.

X. The covenant does, on the part of God, comprize three things in general. 1st. *A promise* of consummate happiness in eternal life. 2dly. *A designation* and *prescription* of the condition, by the performance of which, man acquires a right to the promise. 3dly. *A penal sanction* against those, who do not come up to the prescribed condition. All these things regard the whole man, or *ολοκληρος*, in Paul's phrase, as consisting of soul and body. God's promise of happiness is to each part, he requires the sanctification of each, and threatens each with destruction. And so this covenant makes God appear glorious in the whole man.

XI. To engage in such a covenant with the rational creature, formed after the divine image, is entirely worthy of, and by no means unbecoming of God. For it was impossible but God should propose himself to the rational creature, as a pattern of holiness, in conformity to which he ought to frame himself and all his actions, carefully keeping, and always exerting the activity of that original righteousness, which he was, from his very origin, endowed with. God 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 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. Who can conceive it to be worthy of God, that he should thus say to man, I am willing that thou seekest me only; but on condition of never finding me: to be ardently longed for above every thing else, with the greatest hunger and thirst; but yet, never to be satisfied. 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 now said, that the whole of the covenant consisted. But of each of these we shall have fuller scope to speak hereafter.

XII. Thus far, we have considered the one party of the covenant of God: man becomes the other, when he consents thereto, embracing the good promised by God, engaging to an exact observance of the condition required; and upon the violation thereof, voluntarily owning himself obnoxious to

the threatened curse. This the scripture calls, עֲבוֹר כְּבוֹדֵי יְהוָה, “to enter into covenant with the Lord,” Deut. xxix. 12. “and to enter into a curse and an oath,” Neh. x. 29. In this curse (Paul calls it, 2 Cor. ix. 13. ὁμολογία, professed subjection) conscience presents itself a witness, that God’s stipulation or covenant is just, and that this method of coming to the enjoyment of God is highly becoming; and that there is no other way of obtaining the promise. And hence the evils which God threatens to the transgressors of the covenant, are called “the curses of the covenant,” Deut. xxix. 21. which man on consenting to the covenant, voluntarily makes himself obnoxious to. The effect of this curse on the man who stands not to the covenant, is called “the vengeance of the covenant,” Lev. xxvi. 25. The form of a stipulation, or acceptance, we have, Psal. xxvii. 8. “When thou saidest, Seek ye my face, my heart said unto thee, Thy face, Lord, will I seek.” Where the voluntary stipulation or acceptance, answers to the stipulation or covenant, made in the name of God by conscience, his minister.

XIII. Man, upon the proposal of this covenant, could not without guilt, refuse giving this stipulation or acceptance. 1st. In virtue of the law, which universally binds him, humbly to accept every thing proposed by God: to whom it is the essential duty of every rational creature to be subject in every respect. 2dly. On account of the high sovereignty of God, who may dispose of his own benefits, and appoint the condition of enjoying them with a supreme authority, and without being accountable to any: and at the same time enjoin man, to strive for the attainment of the blessings offered, on the condition prescribed. And hence this covenant, as subsisting between parties infinitely unequal, assumes the nature of those, which the Greeks called *Injunctions*, or *covenants from commands*; of which Grotius speaks in his Jus. Bell. and Pacis, lib. ii. c. 15. § 6. Hence it is, that Paul translates the words of Moses, Exod. xxiv. 8. “behold the blood of the covenant which the Lord hath made with you,” thus, Heb. ix. 20.: “this is the blood of the testament which God hath enjoined unto you.” It is not left to man to accept or reject at pleasure God’s covenant. Man is commanded to accept it, and to press after the attainment of the promises in the way pointed out by the covenant. Not to desire the promises, is to refuse the goodness of God. To reject the precepts is to refuse the sovereignty and holiness of God; and not to submit to the sanction, is to deny God’s justice. And therefore the apostle affirms of the covenant of

God, that it is *νενομωθενηται* reduced to the form of a law, Heb. viii. 6. by which man is obliged to an acceptance. 3dly. It follows from that love, which man naturally owes to himself, and by which he is carried to the chief good; for enjoying which there remains no method beside the condition prescribed by God. 4thly. Man's very conscience dictates, that this covenant is in all its parts highly equitable. What can be framed even by thought itself more equitable, than that man, esteeming God as his chief good, should seek his happiness in him, and rejoice at the offer of that goodness? Should cheerfully receive the law, which is a transcript of the divine holiness, as the rule of his nature and actions? In fine, should submit his guilty head to the most just vengeance of heaven, should he happen to make light of this promise, and violate the law? From which it follows, that man was not at liberty to reject God's covenant.

XIV. God, by this covenant, acquires no new right over man; which, if we duly consider the matter, neither is, nor can be founded on any benefit of God, or misdemeanor of man, as Arminius argues: nor in any thing without God; the principal or alone foundation of it being the sovereign majesty of the most high God. Because God is the blessed, and self-sufficient Being, therefore he is the only potentate, these two being joined together by Paul, 1 Tim. vi. 15. Nor can God's power and right over the creatures, be diminished or increased by any thing extrinsic to God. A thing which ought to be deemed unworthy of his sovereignty and independence: of which we shall soon treat more fully. Only God, in this covenant, shews what right he has over man. But man, upon his accepting the covenant, and performing the condition, does acquire some right to demand of God the promise; for God has, by his promises, made himself a debtor to man. Or, to speak in a manner more becoming God, he was pleased to make his performing his promises, a debt due to himself, to his goodness, justice, and veracity. And to man in covenant, and continuing stedfast to it, he granted the right of expecting and requiring, that God should satisfy the demands of his goodness, justice, and truth, by the performance of the promises. And thus to man as stipulating, or consenting to the covenant, God says, that "he will be his God," Deut. xxvi. 17. That is, he will give him full liberty to glory in God, as his God, and to expect from him, that he will become to man, in covenant with him, what he is to himself, even a fountain of consummate happiness.

XV. In scripture, we find two covenants of God with man:

The Covenant of Works, otherwise called the Covenant of Nature, or the Legal; and the Covenant of Grace. The apostle teacheth us this distinction, Rom. iii. ~~8.~~ where he mentions the law of works, and the law of faith; by the law of works, understanding that doctrine which points out the way in which, by means of works, salvation is obtained; and by the law of faith, that doctrine which directs by faith to obtain salvation. The form of the covenant of works is, "the man which doth those things shall live by them," Rom. x. 5. That of the covenant of grace is, "whosoever believeth in him, shall not be ashamed," ib. ver. 11. These covenants agree, 1st. That in both, the contracting parties are the same, God and man. 2dly. In both, the same promise of eternal life, consisting in the immediate fruition of God. 3dly. The condition of both is the same, viz. perfect obedience to the law. Nor would it have been worthy of God to admit man to a blessed communion with him, but in the way of unspotted holiness. 4thly. In both, *the same end*, the glory of the most unspotted goodness of God. But in these following particulars they differ. 1st. The character or relation of God and man, in the covenant of works, is different from what it is in the covenant of grace. In the former God treats as the supreme law-giver, and the chief good, rejoicing to make his innocent creature a partaker of his happiness. In the latter, as infinitely merciful, adjudging life to the elect sinner consistent with his wisdom and justice. 2dly. In the covenant of works there was no mediator: in that of grace, there is the mediator Christ Jesus. 3dly. In the covenant of works, the condition of perfect obedience was required, to be performed by man himself, who had consented to it. In that of grace, the same condition is proposed, as to be, or as already performed, by a mediator. And in this substitution of the person, consists the principal and essential difference of the covenants. 4thly. In the covenant of works, man is considered as working, and the reward to be given as of debt; and therefore man's glorying is not excluded, but he may glory as a faithful servant may do upon the right discharge of his duty, and may claim the reward promised to his working. In the covenant of grace, man in himself ungodly is considered in the covenant, as believing; and eternal life is considered as the merit of the mediator, and as given to man out of free grace, which excludes all boasting, besides the glorying of the believing sinner in God, as his merciful Saviour. 5thly. In the covenant of works, something is required of man as a condition, which performed entitles him to the reward. The covenant

of grace, with respect to us, consists of the absolute promises of God, in which the mediator, the life to be obtained by him, the faith by which we may be made partakers of him, and of the benefits purchased by him, and the perseverance in that faith ; in a word, the whole of salvation, and all the requisites to it, are absolutely promised. 6thly. 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. The special end of the covenant of grace is, the praise of the glory of his grace, Eph. i. 6. and the revelation of his unsearchable and manifold wisdom : which divine perfections shine forth with lustre in the gift of a mediator, by whom the sinner is admitted to complete salvation, without any dishonour to the holiness, justice, and truth of God. There is also a demonstration of the all-sufficiency of God, by which not only man, but even a sinner, which is more surprising, may be restored to union and communion with God. But all this will be more fully explained in what follows.

CHAP. II.

Of the Contracting Parties in the Covenant of Works.

I. **W**E begin with the consideration of *the covenant of works*, otherwise called, *of the law* and *of nature* ; because prescribed *by the law*, requiring *works* as the condition, and founded upon, and coeval with *nature*. This covenant is an agreement between God and Adam, formed after the image of God, as the head and root, or representative of the whole human race ; by which God promised eternal life and happiness to him, if he yielded obedience to all his commands ; threatening him with death if he failed but in the least point : and Adam accepted this condition. To this purpose are these two sentences, afterwards inculcated, on the repetition of the law, Lev. xviii. 5. and Deut. xxvii. 26.

II. The better to understand this subject, these four things are to be explained. 1st. The contracting parties. 2dly. The condition prescribed. 3dly. The promises. 4thly. The threatening.

III. The contracting parties here, are God and Adam. God, as sovereign and supreme Lord, prescribing with absolute power, what he judges equitable : as goodness itself, or