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# ***Of Covenant and Creation: A Conversation between Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology***

### **1. Introduction**

W. J. 'Bill' Dumbrell is a pre-eminent contributor to Biblical Theology and a stimulating and challenging teacher. In his writing and in the classroom he demands that we return to the text of Scripture and understand it in its own terms. His own bold interpretive suggestions about the message of the whole of Scripture are based on close readings of the text. He is best known for publications in Old Testament studies, but has been equally interested in the New Testament. It is a pleasure to offer this essay in his honour. Bill has, in his good-natured way, expressed to me his suspicion of Systematic Theology. I hope this essay may go some way to show how Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology can work together as partner disciplines.

### **2. The Relationship between Biblical and Systematic Theology**

In recent years there has been a great deal of discussion

in Reformed and evangelical circles about the relationship between Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology.<sup>1</sup> This essay is a consideration of this relationship by way of a case study.

*i. What is Biblical Theology?*

Biblical Theology is committed to elucidating the themes of Scripture in the terms in which they are presented in the canon, and so it takes a very great interest in the historical development of themes in scripture. It is a 'whole of Bible' approach which seeks connections between the parts of the canon in quotation, allusion and concepts, and, more importantly, by following the storyline of the Bible with its focus on Christ.<sup>2</sup> Rosner explains that

Biblical Theology may be defined as theological interpretation of Scripture in and for the church. It proceeds with historical and literary sensitivity and seeks to analyse and synthesise the Bible's teaching about God and his relations to the world on its own terms, maintaining sight of the Bible's overarching

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<sup>1</sup> R. C. Gamble, 'The Relationships between Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology,' in *Always Reforming: Explorations in Systematic Theology* (ed. A. T. B. McGowan; Leicester: Apollos, 2006), 211-39; C. H. H. Scobie, *The Ways of Our God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 46-49; B. Rosner, 'Biblical Theology,' in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Leicester: IVP, 2000), 3-11; D. A. Carson, 'Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology,' in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Leicester: IVP, 2000), 89-104; R. Du Barry, 'The Relationship between Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology,' *Churchman*, 115.3 (Aut 2001): 211-26; G. F. Hasel, 'The Relationship between Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology,' *Trinity Journal*, ns 5.2 (Aut 1984): 113-27; R. B. Gaffin, 'Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology,' *WTJ* 38 (Spr 1976): 281-99; P. F. Jensen, 'Teaching Doctrine as Part of the Pastor's Role,' in *Interpreting God's Plan: Biblical Theology and the Pastor* (ed. R. J. Gibson; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1997), 75-90.

<sup>2</sup> Rosner, 'Biblical Theology,' 9-10.

narrative and Christocentric focus.<sup>3</sup>

Biblical Theology is always a post-critical discipline.<sup>4</sup> Even in contemporary evangelical versions Biblical Theology usually retains a certain distance from, and at times a suspicion of, dogmatic formulations.

This essay sometimes draws into the discussion studies which may not strictly be classed as 'Biblical Theology'. In these cases (in which I will refer to 'Biblical studies') I refer to scholars who offer theological readings of scripture and seek a coherent understanding of parts of the canon.<sup>5</sup> Because Biblical Theology is committed to exposition of scripture 'on its own terms', it will draw on such biblical studies and it turns out that there is no clear demarcation between the two. This essay will not consider scholars who take a more atomistic approach to biblical studies.

*ii. What is Systematic Theology?*

Systematic Theology has a concern to develop an account of Christian faith with conceptual coherence.<sup>6</sup> Sykes describes it as seeking 'a rational and orderly

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>4</sup> It arose through a reaction against the strictures of dogmatics in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. J. S. Semler (1725-1791) held that 'the Scriptures must be examined without dogmatic presuppositions' so that 'Systematic Theology had no place in biblical exegesis,' since there was no 'coherent system of theology in the Bible' and 'attempts to find one could result only in distortion of the text's true meaning,' G. Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past and Present* (Leicester: Apollos, 1996), 257-58; cf. C. H. H. Scobie, 'History of Biblical Theology,' in *NDBT*, 12-13.

<sup>5</sup> This is a narrower interest than the discussion of New Testament studies and Systematic Theology in *Between Two Horizons*.

<sup>6</sup> C. E. Gunton, 'Historical and Systematic Theology,' in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1997), 11-18, has a very similar description to that presented here.

account of the content of Christian belief.<sup>7</sup>

Systematic Theology usually has a strong awareness of its responsibilities to speak contextually.<sup>8</sup> It often considers questions about and challenges to Christian views whether from within Christian circles or from beyond. Some of these questions will be drawn from past discussions and controversies and some will be more contemporary. Systematic Theology often has a greater continuity with pre-critical theological works than does Biblical Theology. This is not to say that Biblical Theology is a-contextual, but simply that it does not usually take the contextualisation questions as central to its task.

This sketch of the two disciplines is a generalisation, and there are practitioners in either field who do not entirely fit these descriptions.<sup>9</sup> However, the sketch is

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<sup>7</sup> S. W. Sykes, 'Systematic Theology,' in *A New Dictionary of Christian Theology* (ed. A. Richardson and J. Bowden; London: SCM, 1983), 560; Sykes points out that the urge to be 'systematic' may produce simply 'a series of separations or distinctions in the assembly of Christian doctrines,' or an 'attempt to express the substance of Christian theology in consistent terminology' or an 'expression of Christian doctrine ... rooted to a theory of human rationality.'

<sup>8</sup> For example D. K. Clark, *To Know and Love God: Method for Theology* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003), 113-14, offers a model of doing theology in which two movements occur 'almost simultaneously': 'Scripture is read and obeyed' and 'the cultural context is open to analysis.' See his proposal for a theological method in which 'out of [an] initial attempt to relate biblical teaching to cultural issues ... Christians allow certain themes for a culturally relevant theology — a contextual theology — to emerge.'

<sup>9</sup> For example Walter Bruggemann works in Biblical Theology but with a great attention to contextual concerns, e.g. W. Bruggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1997); Graeme Goldsworthy is a biblical theologian who strives for a high level of conceptual coherence, e.g. G.

sufficient to be the basis for asking the central question of this essay, how can Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology relate?

*iii. The Tensions between the Two Disciplines*

It seems that these two disciplines should have a mutually enriching interchange. However, the relationship often becomes strained and even acrimonious. Biblical Theology warns that Systematics risks constraining theology to a preconceived system.<sup>10</sup> The systematician warns that Biblical Theology can lose sight of important implications of Scripture.<sup>11</sup>

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Goldsworthy, “Thus says the Lord!” — The Dogmatic Basis of Biblical Theology,’ in *God Who is Rich in Mercy: Essays Presented to D. B. Knox* (ed. P.T. O’Brien and D. G. Peterson; Sydney: Anzea Press; 1986), 25-40.

<sup>10</sup> A. Caneday, Professor of New Testament Studies and Biblical Theology at Northwestern College, Saint Paul, Minnesota, has commented on his blog ‘Biblia Theologica’ that the abstractions of Systematic Theology are reified with the result that ‘the multiform, multichromatic, and multi-textured teachings of the gospel ... takes [sic] on monoform, monochromatic, and mono-textured qualities when we unravel the strands from one another and present them isolated and separated from one another.’ See ‘Some Thoughts on the Relationship between Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology,’ March 3, 2006 at [bibliatheologica.blogspot.com/2006/03/some-thoughts-on-relationship-between.html](http://bibliatheologica.blogspot.com/2006/03/some-thoughts-on-relationship-between.html). Horton refers to those who ‘invite the end of systematic theology’ since ‘the *historia salutis* and the *ordo salutis* are in irresolvable conflict’; see M. S. Horton, ‘What God hath Joined: Biblical and Systematic Theology,’ in *The Pattern of Sound Doctrine* (ed. D. VanDrunen; Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2004), 68. Barth offers this kind of critique in terms drawn from his own view of scripture as a true witness to revelation, *CDI*/2: 483-85.

<sup>11</sup> For instance Carl Trueman has expressed the concern that Biblical Theology has ‘an overwhelming emphasis upon the economy of salvation’ and neglects the ‘ontological aspects

*iv. Proposals for the Relationship of Biblical and Systematic Theology*

How then can the relationship between Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology be envisaged? Seven types of proposals for the relationship can be identified.

a. Biblical Theology as preliminary sub-discipline

Biblical Theology may be seen to serve Systematics as a preliminary discipline. Packer describes theology as the queen of the sciences, dressed in all her finery, including the disciplines of Biblical and Systematic Theology. However, the metaphor of a nicely co-ordinated outfit in which each item complements the other is not sustained. Rather he describes Systematic Theology as the central discipline which draws on material provided by exegesis, Biblical Theology and Historical Theology to present Christian belief in a 'clear, coherent and orderly way' that can be used by the disciplines of 'practical Christianity'.<sup>12</sup>

of theology,' to its own ruin: C. R. Trueman, 'A Revolutionary Balancing Act,' *Themelios* 27.3 (2002): 3. He warns particularly that Trinitarianism, the theological unity of the Bible and Christian exclusivism are at risk, and concludes that Biblical Theology will 'prove ultimately self-defeating; a divine economy without a divine ontology is unstable and will collapse.' See also G. Goldsworthy, 'Ontology and Biblical Theology — A Response to Carl Trueman's Editorial: A Revolutionary Balancing Act,' *Themelios* 28.1 (2002): 37-45. Gaffin observes a 'fairly sharp difference of opinion' about the effects of Biblical Theology. He refers to the concerns that Biblical Theology undermines systematic theology and diminishes 'interest and confidence in the formulations of classic Reformed theology.' He describes the two views as 'clashing outlooks': R. B. Gaffin, 'Biblical Theology and the Westminster Standards,' *WTJ* 65/2 (Fall 2003): 165.

<sup>12</sup> J. I. Packer, 'The Preacher and Theologian,' in *When God's Voice is Heard: The Power of Preaching* (ed. C. Green and D. Jackman; Leicester: IVP, 1995), 80-82. He describes how

b. Biblical Theology as a critique of Systematics

Biblical Theology had its origin in a reaction against Systematic Theology. This approach continues. For instance, Goldingay offers a critique of Systematic Theology and comments ‘if systematic theology did not exist, it might seem unwise to invent it — at least, unwise to begin the devising of grand schemes that are bound to skew our reading of Scripture and from which postmodernity delivers us.’ Goldingay comments that ‘quite different assumptions about God feature prominently in biblical narrative’ than in traditional systematics.<sup>13</sup>

c. Biblical Theology as a distinct bridge discipline

There are proposals in which Biblical Theology leads to Systematic Theology, but in which the distinction between the two is maintained. Scobie describes Biblical Theology as an ‘intermediate’ or a ‘bridge discipline’.<sup>14</sup>

d. Biblical Theology re-integrated into Systematics

There are proposals for integration. Horton argues that Systematic and Biblical Theology can and should

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Systematic Theology ‘rethinks Biblical Theology with the help of historical theology in order to restate the faith, topic by topic and as a whole in relation to current interests, assumptions, questions, hopes and fears and uncertainties in today’s church and world’ (80). Similarly Gaffin, ‘Biblical Theology and the Westminster Standards,’ 165, refers to the ‘avowed intention’ of Biblical Theology ‘to serve systematic theology.’

<sup>13</sup> J. Goldingay, ‘Biblical Narrative and Systematic Theology,’ in *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and Systematic Theology* (ed. J. B. Green and M. Turner; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 138. His emphasis on biblical narrative is a version of Biblical Theology.

<sup>14</sup> C. H. H. Scobie, ‘The Challenge of Biblical Theology,’ *TB* 41.1 (1991): 49.

be ‘reintegrated’ and has developed an analogy of theatre and drama which offers a ‘comprehensive and textually defined paradigm’ for this integration.<sup>15</sup>

e. Biblical Theology reforms Systematic Theology

A further suggestion is that rather than seeking integration Biblical Theology should be allowed to reform Systematic Theology. In this version ‘systematics’ should look more like ‘Biblical’ theology.<sup>16</sup>

f. Biblical and Systematic Theology in mutual interaction

Jensen has argued that Systematic Theology needs Biblical Theology to guide exegesis and ‘enable the theologian to assess the relative place which individual texts play in the pattern of the whole of biblical truth.’<sup>17</sup> He also holds that Biblical Theology needs the systematic approach which allows a greater appreciation of ‘the wholeness of truth’ and provides basic assumptions for Biblical Theology (such as canon) and guides application of the truths of Scripture.

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<sup>15</sup> M. J. Horton, ‘What God hath Joined,’ 66. See M. S. Horton, *Covenant and Eschatology: The Divine Drama* (Louisville, KY.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 243.

<sup>16</sup> E.g. T. Dorman argues that Biblical Theologians should address ‘issues of historical and Systematic Theology’ and that this may question ‘some of our cherished [systematic] theological assumptions’; see T. Dorman, ‘The Future of Biblical Theology,’ in *Biblical Theology: Retrospect and Prospect* (ed. S. J. Hafemann; Downers Grove: IVP, 2002), 262-63. P. R. House, ‘Biblical Theology and the Wholeness of Scripture,’ in *Biblical Theology: Retrospect and Prospect* (ed. S. J. Hafemann; Downers Grove: IVP, 2002), 277, has called for a ‘Systematic Theology of the canonical Scriptures’ which would ‘follow the themes of the Bible as they appear in Scripture.’

<sup>17</sup> Jensen, ‘Teaching Doctrine,’ 81-83.



g. Systematics serve Biblical Theology

Finally it is possible to see Systematic Theology as the servant of Biblical Theology in that Biblical Theology is the main task of the church as it reads Scripture and more systematic formulations provide assistance for this.<sup>18</sup>

*v. A Case Study of the Relationship*

This essay is a contribution to the ongoing discussion of how Systematic and Biblical Theology relate. It examines the idea of a ‘creation covenant’ or ‘covenant of works’. Such a covenant has had an important place in Reformed Systematic Theologies and it has been discussed in contemporary Biblical Theology. In both disciplines there has been controversy about the concept and there have been some interesting inter-disciplinary discussions.<sup>19</sup> Dumbrell has made a noteworthy contribution to the discussion, so it is an appropriate topic to consider in this volume. I will outline the classical Reformed view of the covenant of works and then examine the reasons that it has held an important place in classic Reformed Theology. I will then consider the contributions of Biblical Theology

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<sup>18</sup> This is the implication of comments of John Webster that ‘[e]xegesis is of supremely critical importance, because the chief instrument through which Christ publishes the gospel is Holy Scripture. ... Dogmatics is complementary but strictly subordinate to the exegetical task ... dogmatics seeks simply to produce a set of flexible accounts of the essential content of the gospel as it is found in Holy Scripture, with the aim of informing, guiding and correcting the Church’s reading,’ J. Webster, *Holiness* (London: SCM, 2003), 3. What Webster calls ‘exegesis’ includes ‘Biblical Theology’ since it is the activity of reading the Scriptures, while dogmatics is distant from ‘the more immediate, urgent idioms of Scripture.’

<sup>19</sup> Horton has suggested that Covenant Theology more generally offers a way to reintegrate Biblical and Systematic Theology; M. J. Horton, ‘What God hath Joined,’ 66.

to the assessment of this theological position.

There are other traditions of Systematic Theology and Biblical Theology beyond those considered in this essay. The focus of this essay should not be taken to imply that other approaches are invalid. Those approaches have their own coherence and could also be brought into the conversation.

### **3. Covenant of Works**

The Westminster Confession gives a classical expression of the idea of a 'covenant of works' (CW) in contrast to the redemptive 'covenant of grace' (CG).

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

The statements of chapter 6 which deal with the breaking of this covenant by Adam and Eve should be read alongside this.

6.2 ... they fell from their original righteousness, and communion with God, and so became dead in sin, and wholly defiled in all the parts and faculties of soul and body.

6.3 They being the root of all mankind, the guilt of this sin was imputed, and the same death in sin and corrupted nature conveyed to all their posterity, descending from them by ordinary generation.

The CW is a formalised relationship between God and humanity which not only explicates the relationship established in creation itself, but offers a more intimate relationship and a greater blessing than does creation itself. It is a probationary covenant in which Adam's obedience could merit righteousness and bring the reward of eternal life. It also involves the idea that Adam stands as a covenant representative (or 'federal head') who acts on behalf of later generations and whose actions, according

to the terms of the covenant, may be counted as being the acts of later generations.<sup>20</sup> It must not be confused with the Mosaic covenant, which is in Reformed thought an administration of the CG (WCF 7.6).<sup>21</sup>

#### **4. The Classic Reasons for Holding to the Covenant of Works**

It is important to recognise the basis on which the classic view of the CW was held. Muller states that ‘the doctrine of the covenant of works ... is an example of a doctrinal construct, not explicitly stated in Scripture but drawn as a conclusion from the examination and comparison of a series of biblical loci, or *sedes doctrinae*’ and so ‘belongs ... to a secondary or derivative albeit still fundamental category of doctrine’.<sup>22</sup> A close examination of the grounds on which Reformed theology held to the doctrine shows the truth of Muller’s assertion. In examining the grounds for holding the doctrine I will look particularly at Herman

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<sup>20</sup> According to the Westminster Larger Catechism Q. 22, ‘The covenant being made with Adam as a public person, not for himself only, but for his posterity, all mankind descending from him by ordinary generation, sinned in him, and fell with him in that first transgression.’ WCF 6.3 takes Adam and Eve together as ‘the root’ of humanity and suggests that they both acted as federal heads.

<sup>21</sup> When Reformed writers speak of a reduplication of the CW in the Mosaic covenant they do not mean that it offers ‘justification by works.’ They mean that there are points at which Israel is reminded of the CW, or that the possession of the land depended on obedience or, more generally, that the content of the law under Moses is the same as that presented to Adam. See M. S. Horton, *God of Promise: Introducing Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006), 90f. and 100-104.

<sup>22</sup> R. 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,’ *CTJ* 29 (1994): 75.

Witsius (1636-1708) the Dutch scholar who was important in expressing what became ‘the fully developed continental Reformed orthodox concept of the covenant of works’.<sup>23</sup> I will also look at some more recent exposition of the CW.

*i. Explicit Biblical Reasons*

The Reformed tradition holds to the Scripture principle and so the development of any doctrine requires that what is ‘expressly set down in scripture’ must be considered before turning to what may be held on the basis of ‘good and necessary consequence’ (WCF 1.6).

a. The presence of the elements of a covenant

The immediate biblical basis for the claim that Adam was in a covenant with God is that the elements of a covenant are present in the opening chapters of Genesis.<sup>24</sup> In these chapters there is a sovereign, a vassal, a stipulation and a threat. Classical covenant theology also argues that there is a promise of blessing as part of the covenant. Witsius asserts that covenants established by God with his human creatures have ‘a promise of consummate happiness in eternal life’, ‘a designation and prescription of the condition, by the performance of which, man acquires a right to the promise’ and ‘a penal sanction against those, who do not come up to the prescribed condition’.<sup>25</sup> He then

<sup>23</sup> Muller, ‘Covenant of Works,’ 80. According to Packer, Witsius’ work, *De oeconomia foederum Dei cum hominibus* (Leeuwarden, 1677), ‘has landmark status as summing up a whole era’; J. I. Packer, ‘Introduction: On Covenant Theology,’ in H. Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants between God and Man: Comprehending a Complete Body of Divinity* (trans. W. Crookshank; Escondido: den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1990), 1:5.

<sup>24</sup> ‘If the actual word ‘covenant’ is missing, the reality of a first covenant appears in outline,’ H. Blocher, *In the Beginning* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1984), 111-12.

<sup>25</sup> Witsius, *Economy*, I.i.x Vol 1, 46. Muller defends this

argues that each of these is found in the biblical account of Adam.<sup>26</sup>

The presence of a promise in Genesis 1-2 is the most difficult claim to establish. Witsius argues that a promise of life ‘was the intent of the tree of life’, that a promise is implied in God’s words to Cain in Genesis 4:7 ‘If thou doest well, wilt thou not be accepted?’ and that the threatenings imply a contrasting promise. Murray points out that the claim that ‘the tree of life represented everlasting life’ is reinforced by the reappearance of the tree of life in Revelation 22:2 and 14.<sup>27</sup> Further arguments for the presence of a promise from implications of scripture will be examined below.

The defenders of the existence of the CW also point out that a biblical covenant can be present without being named as such, and give as an example the Davidic covenant in 2 Samuel 7 which is only called a covenant in the later text of Psalm 89:3, 28, 34 and in 2 Samuel 23.

b. Hosea 6:7

A further argument often used in support of the CW is an appeal to Hosea 6:7 which can be translated ‘like Adam, they have broken the covenant’ (though the KJV has ‘But they like men have transgressed the covenant’). Murray prefers the title ‘Adamic Administration’ partly because ‘Hosea 6:7 may be interpreted otherwise and

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definition as based on ‘an extensive etymological and exegetical discussion in which he recognizes the complexity of biblical covenantal language and the diversity of issues ... impinging on the interpretations of the biblical words for covenant’; Muller, ‘Covenant of Works,’ 81.

<sup>26</sup> Witsius outlines this in *Economy* 1.ii.1 Vol. 1:50; the argument extends through pp. 50-104.

<sup>27</sup> J. Murray, ‘The Adamic Administration,’ in *Collected Writings* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1982) 2:47-59.

does not provide the basis for such a construction of the Adamic economy’.

*ii. The Systematic Reasons*

Reformed Theology in its scholastic phase was highly systematic. Muller explains that ‘this formalisation of theology was an inevitable development, tied to the establishment of the church independent of Rome but bound to the catholic tradition.’<sup>28</sup> The development of the CW illustrates this. It seems probable that the major impetus for its elaboration came from the way in which it enabled a range of doctrines to be related to each other. Mastrich recognised this when he wrote that,

To very many heads of the Christian religion ... we can scarcely give suitable satisfaction, if the covenant of works be denied.<sup>29</sup>

What were these ‘heads’ and how was the CW important for them?

*a. Parallel between Adam and Christ*

The most important reason for Reformed Theology holding to a CW is the New Testament parallel between Adam and Christ, in which each acts on behalf of others whom he represents. The CW is an explanation of Adam’s representative function as explained in Rom 5:12-19. In this passage the act of the one man (Adam) brought ‘sin’ (vv. 12, 19), ‘death’ (vv. 12, 15, 17) and condemnation (vv. 16-17) to all. This reading is sometimes defended on

<sup>28</sup> R. A. Muller, *Christ and the Decree: Christology and Predestination in Reformed Theology from Calvin to Perkins* (Durham, N.Z.: Labyrinth Press, 1986), 13.

<sup>29</sup> P. Mastrich, *Theoretico-Practica Theologia* (1698) III, xii,23 in Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics Set out and Illustrated from the Sources*, ed. Ernst Bizer, trans. G. T. Thomson. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 290.

the basis of the aorist of Romans 5:12 (ἥμαρτον), but the aorist does not necessarily mean ‘one act of sinning’. More profoundly it is based on ‘the rather provocative thesis that inherited corruption *follows* upon the imputation of Adam’s sin as an integral part of the penalty.’<sup>30</sup>

Witsius has an extended discussion of how in Adam’s sin ‘all his posterity may be deemed to have fallen with him, and broken the covenant of God.’<sup>31</sup> This comes toward the end of the exposition of the CW, and so may seem to assume Witsius’ position, rather than be an argument for it. However, when he argues against Grotius’ rejection of the CW he says that to adopt Grotius’ view would make Paul’s position in Romans 5 ‘an insipid tautology’.<sup>32</sup> This reflects the fact that for Witsius one of the key reasons for holding his view on the CW was that it made sense of the parallel between Adam and Christ.

#### b. Promise of blessing

An important element in the CW is that Adam has a promise of blessing given to him. The explicit biblical support for this view has been mentioned. Witsius counters the Socinian claims that there are only ‘threatenings and terrors’ for disobedience.<sup>33</sup> He offers a ‘natural law’ argument that conscience teaches that ‘God desires not to be served in vain.’<sup>34</sup>

<sup>30</sup> H. Blocher, *Original Sin* (Leicester: Apollos, 1997), 73.

<sup>31</sup> Witsius, *Economy* 1.viii, xxx, 146.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.viii, xxxiv, 149.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 71 quoting Volkelius, *de vera religione*.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 71; he argues this from a general consideration of the teaching of conscience. In support of this he quotes Epictetus and Seneca and the ‘naturally known’ biblical principle that God ‘is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him’ (Heb 11:6). He also offers two arguments which directly rebut Socinian claims arguing that on their own views of God’s relation to creatures it is inconsistent to reject a CW.

As Witsius deals with the content of the promise he refers repeatedly to the biblical promises of eternal life as a reward for obedience. Similarly the WCF text for the promise of the covenant of works is Romans 10:5 which quotes Moses' teaching that 'the person who does these things will live by them.' This argument rests on the assumption of the consistency of God in his dealings with people and the conceptual coherence of Scripture.<sup>35</sup>

Bavinck offers further evidence for the promise of blessing. He points out that in 1 Corinthians 15:45-49 the contrast between Adam and Christ is 'in terms of their nature and persons'. The first man is described as 'a living being', 'physical' and 'a man of dust', while Christ is 'a life-giving spirit', 'spiritual' and 'from heaven'. Bavinck concludes that 'there is a very great difference between the natural and the pneumatic, between the state of integrity and the state of glory' and so 'Adam ... stood at the beginning of his 'career' not at the end.'<sup>36</sup> This argument supports the claim that in Genesis 1-2 Adam has before him the prospect of 'glorification'.

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<sup>35</sup> Hodge argues for a promissory element on the basis that the threat of death implies a promise of life, which is the general pattern of scripture and that natural justice demands those who do not break the covenant 'thereby continue in favor and fellowship of him whose favor is life, and whose loving kindness is better than life'. Further, he argues that in Scripture life is 'holiness' or being 'spiritually minded' (Rom 8:5) and so the life offered to Adam is that secured in redemption by Christ: 'spiritual and eternal life, the exaltation of and complete blessedness of his [man's] whole nature, both soul and body'; C. Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946), 2:118-19.

<sup>36</sup> H. Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics 2. God and Creation* (ed. J. Bolt; trans. J. Vriend; Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004), 564.



c. Relating divine transcendence and intimate relationship

An important conviction in Reformed Theology is that God is sovereign and transcendent and yet enters into relationship with his creatures. WCF chapter 7 expresses the conviction that ‘the distance between God and the creature is so great’ that creature *qua* creature can not expect to find ‘fruition of him as their blessedness and reward.’ The word ‘fruition’ here retains its meaning as a derivation from *fruitio* (‘enjoyment’).<sup>37</sup> The thought is close to the famous opening words of the Shorter Catechism. Both expressions refer to the possibility of an intimate relationship with God and the blessing of ‘knowing’ him. The Confession states that this blessing can only come on the basis of ‘some voluntary condescension on God’s part’ and that this is expressed by God in ‘covenant’. So the concept of a covenant allows Reformed Theology to hold two truths in tension. On the one hand God is utterly transcendent, on the other he offers intimate fellowship to his elect creatures.

Witsius affirms the ‘voluntary condescension on God’s part’, though with more subtlety than the WCF. He concludes that a consideration of ‘the divine perfections’ leads to the conclusion that God would set before humans a law offering reward and punishment and that it is inconceivable that God would annihilate a creature who must know God to be its supreme good and long for enjoyment of him.<sup>38</sup> That is, Witsius holds that by making

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<sup>37</sup> This is derived from the verb *fruor* which ‘in the Augustinian vocabulary ... means specifically to love something for its own sake’ and in Protestant scholasticism ‘applies only to the love of creatures for God’; R. A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1985), 125.

<sup>38</sup> The argument from God’s perfections concludes: ‘who can conceive that it would be worthy of God, that he should thus say to man, I am willing that thou seekest me only; but on condition

rational creatures God's character made it necessary for a relationship of reward to exist. Still the CW has the same role in Witsius' thought as in the WCF, since the implication of this argument is that without the covenant God would remain the proper end of human life, but would be unattainable.<sup>39</sup>

#### d. Humanity in the image of God

The doctrine of humanity made in the image of God was well established as a focal point for theological anthropology by the time Witsius was writing.<sup>40</sup> Bavinck points out that the medieval Western church had adopted two ideas which shaped its anthropology: 'the mystical view of man's final destiny and the meritoriousness of good works'.<sup>41</sup> These assumptions led the Western church to assert that Adam in creation did not possess the image of God in the full sense but required 'superadded grace'. On this view humanity has 'natural religion and virtue'

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of never finding me'; Witsius, *Economy*, 46. For the discussion of whether God would annihilate a holy rational creature, see Witsius, *Economy*, 80ff.

<sup>39</sup> See further the comments of J. H. Stek "Covenant" Overload in Reformed Theology.' *CTJ* 29 (1994): 14-15, in which he observes that 'covenant had become a theological concept utilised to construe the nature of the God-humanity relationship, and was necessitated by the ontic distance between Creator and creature.'

<sup>40</sup> For surveys of the treatment of the image of God up to and including the Reformation, see Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* 2:530-54; A. A. Hoekema, *Created in God's Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 33-49; and F. L. Shults, *Reforming Theological Anthropology: After the Philosophical Turn to Relationality* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 217-30.

<sup>41</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* 2:539. The former is the view that 'the state of glory' transcends the 'state of nature' corporeally in that it consisted of a beatific vision which implied a 'deification' or 'melting union' with God.

and a natural destiny ‘on earth’ rather than in a ‘heavenly’ communion with God. This implies that an ontological distinction between ‘flesh and spirit is natural’.<sup>42</sup> This way of understanding the image of God meant that the effect of sin was conceived of as the absence of supernatural endowments, so that the natural person remains ‘a complete and perfect human person in his kind’.<sup>43</sup>

Bavinck points out that the CW was the key to Reformed theology developing a different position. He shows that the introduction of the CW allowed the affirmation that the ‘state of glory’ was always the proper end of humanity. Thus the whole of Adam, not one aspect of him, could be described as created in the image of God but it could also be held that this image ‘had to be fully developed ... and glitter in imperishable glory’.<sup>44</sup>

Witsius offers two affirmations which concord with Bavinck’s thesis. Witsius makes it very clear that Adam as a creature in the image of God had communion with God as his proper end.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, when Witsius discusses the effects of sin due to the abrogation of the CW he gives an exposition of ‘total depravity’ with no nature-grace

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 541.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 545; see pp. 542-48 for a full critique of the medieval and Roman Catholic view.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 573 and 554-62; Shults, *Reforming Theological Anthropology*, 227-30, argues that Reformed thought did not affirm that the whole Adam was the image of God, however Bavinck’s analysis is far more thorough and deals with the structure of Reformed thought more fully.

<sup>45</sup> He writes that Adam ‘was not only perfectly master of the nature of created things, but was delighted with the contemplation of the supreme and increated truth’; Witsius, *Economy*, 51. His more careful analysis of the image of God leads Witsius to conclude that one part of the image is ‘the immortality of the whole man, and his dominion over the creatures’ in that glorification of ‘the whole man, even his body’; *ibid.*, 57.

dialectic.<sup>46</sup>

e. Justification by faith

In Reformed thought the parallel between Adam and Christ relates to an understanding of justification by faith. The Reformed position insists that justification by faith depends on the imputation of the righteousness of Christ, and that the CW is the foundation for this. Witsius writes that Christ ‘fully performed for his people all that the law required, in order to obtain a right to eternal life’ and ‘had the elect themselves ... performed what Christ did for them there is no doubt they would have obtained that for which they might have been justified by God, nay, and ought to have been so, at least according to the covenant’.<sup>47</sup> The final concessive phrase indicates that the obligation would arise from the covenant.

Reformed theologians often argue that if the obedience-justice-reward nexus is broken with respect to Adam, then it will also be broken with respect to Christ, which undermines the sufficiency of the work of Christ. Any apparent discrepancy between the obedience and the reward is removed by the recognition that ‘God’s justice must be defined and judged in terms of what he stipulates in his covenant’.<sup>48</sup>

f. Imputation of Christ’s ‘active righteousness’

A further common element in the classic Reformed

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> See Witsius, *Economy*, 3.viii.

<sup>48</sup> M. Kline, ‘Covenant Theology under Attack’ (1994). Cited 12 July 2010. Online: [www.opc.org/new\\_horizons/Kline\\_cov\\_theo.html](http://www.opc.org/new_horizons/Kline_cov_theo.html)

M. K. Kline, ‘Covenant Theology under Attack,’ (1994), 4 quoted in Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Nelson, 1998), 433.

doctrine of justification is the imputation of the active righteousness of Christ (or better the ‘preceptive’ obedience of Christ).<sup>49</sup> This teaches that Christ in his death (his ‘penal’ obedience) took the penalty for sin, and in his life kept the law, fulfilling the CW. God imputes the whole of Christ’s righteousness to believers, so that they not only have their sin remitted, but also receive the reward of eternal life offered to Adam.<sup>50</sup>

Witsius follows the pattern of classic Reformed theology. He states that ‘the law ... admits none to glory, but on condition of perfect obedience, which none was ever possessed of but Christ, who bestows it freely on his own people’. He makes no explicit reference to the CW, though he does refer to the Adam-Christ parallel and argues that Christ’s obedience fulfilled for the elect ‘a condition of acquiring eternal life’.<sup>51</sup> These ideas both depend on the CW.

CW and the imputation of the preceptive obedience of

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<sup>49</sup> See Reymond, *New Systematic Theology*, 631.

<sup>50</sup> This is not explicit in the WCF, and the Savoy Declaration (1658) amends the WCF by adding an explicit reference to the imputation of Christ’s prescriptive obedience. McGowan concludes that ‘imputation is at the very heart and centre of the Reformed understanding of justification’ but that the imputation of preceptive righteousness is not an essential element of that doctrine; A. T. B. McGowan, ‘Justification and the Ordo Salutis,’ in *Justification in Perspective: Historical Developments and Contemporary Challenges*, ed. Bruce McCormack (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006) 154. He records the view of Cunningham that such a view is ‘to be traced ... to the more minute and subtle speculations, to which the doctrine of justification was afterwards subjected’ [i.e. after Calvin]. For a careful defence of the importance of the preceptive obedience of Christ, see M. S. Horton, *Lord and Servant: A Covenant Christology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 230-32, although here he does not deal directly with the question of imputation.

<sup>51</sup> Witsius, *Economy*, 208.

Christ are intimately interconnected in Reformed thought. It does not seem possible to posit a logical priority for one; instead each concept provides support for the other.

g. Works and justification by faith

The CW plays a significant hermeneutical role in Reformed thought. The commitment of Reformed theology to the scripture principle demands that it deals with passages, such as Galatians 3:11 or Romans 4:4, which speak of a possible justification by works. Covenant theology holds that the promise of blessing on the basis of obedience and condemnation for sinfulness which the NT writers recognise in the OT law, is a reflection of the CW.

Witsius does not allow that the repetition of the doctrine means that Israel is given a CW. Rather they were 'put in mind of the covenant of works, in order to convince them of their sin and misery, to drive them out of themselves, to show them the necessity of a satisfaction, and to compel them to Christ. And so their being thus brought to a remembrance of the covenant of works tended to promote the covenant of grace.'<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> '[I]n the Ministry of Moses, there was a repetition of the doctrine concerning the law of the covenant of works. For both the very same precepts are inculcated, on which the covenant of works was founded, and which constituted the condition of that covenant; and that sentence is repeated, 'which if a man do he shall live in them,' Lev. xviii. 5; Ezek. xx. 11, 13, by which formula, the righteousness, which is of the law, is described, Rom. x. 5. ... the apostle in this matter, Heb. xii. 18-22, sets Mount Sinai in opposition to Mount Zion, the terrors of the law to the sweetness of the gospel.' Witsius, *Economy*, 1:182. There is a further complication in Witsius' thought in that he holds that the Mosaic dispensation was not strictly a covenant of grace, for it did not have promises, nor the power to obey the demands. Rather it was 'a national covenant' in which Israel promised sincere obedience to God and he promised this obedience would

This is a demonstration of the way in which the CW had its place in a hermeneutical framework and contributed to the conceptual coherence of Reformed thought.

h. The significance of natural law

The further reason for an affirmation of the existence of a CW is that it asserts the claims of natural law on all people. It became common in the 20<sup>th</sup> century to assume that natural law had a limited place in Reformed theology, and that where it appears (e.g. WCF 19.1, 2) it does so as an unusual and unintegrated feature. Grabill has shown that ‘natural law’ has been an important part of classic Reformed thought.<sup>53</sup> The classic Reformed view is that natural law has its claims on people as creatures, without reference to a covenant. So Witsius argues that the law of the CW is both the prior ‘law of nature’ and the ‘symbolic law’ not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.<sup>54</sup> However, Reformed thought was concerned to show the continuity of God’s work and character through history and so it asserted that the CW affirmed natural law. It was for this reason that the CW was sometimes termed the Covenant of nature.<sup>55</sup> Although not establishing natural law, the CW affirms the continuity of the content of God’s

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be rewarded ‘both in this life, and in that which is to come.’ Witsius states that such a covenant ‘supposed a covenant of grace’ for ‘that an imperfect observance should be acceptable to God is wholly owing to the covenant of grace.’

<sup>53</sup> See S. J. Grabill, *Rediscovering the Natural Law in Reformed Theological Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006). He concludes that ‘orthodox, Reformed theologians after Calvin begin to develop the doctrinal foundation for circumscribed uses of natural theology and natural law ... [and] provide increasing sophisticated and comprehensive formulations of natural law’ (190).

<sup>54</sup> Witsius, *Economy*, I.iii.2, 60.

<sup>55</sup> See Cocceius in Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 284.

law between the ‘natural’ state of humanity and the moral law in the CG (see WCF 19.1-2).<sup>56</sup>

It is possible to identify eight theological themes which are integrated into Reformed theology by the CW. This supports the contention that the CW is mainly a second order doctrine, held because of the role it plays in the structure of Reformed thought. The validity of the CW must be assessed in these terms. If it is treated as an isolated doctrine it will seem arcane and speculative. Its role in the articulation of a Systematic Theology does not validate it, but does underline that a proper assessment must give attention to this role.

## **5. Biblical Theology and Support for the Covenant of Works**

It is now time to invite Biblical Theology to join the conversation about the CW. Reformed Systematic Theology has, from its reading of Scripture, proposed this concept. What does Biblical Theology make of it? Biblical Theology

<sup>56</sup> In a recent defence of his view of a covenant with creation Dumbrell has made an appeal to ‘God’s order for human moral development ... provided for by creation itself,’ a point which he notes is ‘increasingly recognised.’ He refers to his own Romans commentary, but the point can also be seen in the work of C. J. H. Wright. So, from a different perspective O. O’Donovan asserts: ‘Any attempt to think about morality must make a decision early in its course, overt or covert, about these forms of order which we seem to discern in the world. Either they are there, or they are not. ... Secular man ... may interpret these relations of order as part of a universal world-order, a network of interrelationships forming a totality of which mankind himself is a part. If he does so, he steps, despite himself, on to theological ground and will find himself required to specify rather carefully how he conceives the relation of cosmic order to the presence of mind and reason within it.’ Oliver O’Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Leicester: Apollos, 1994), 35.



has offered some support for the notion of a CW. This can be seen in Dumbrell's work.

*i. A Creation Covenant*

Biblical studies in the 20<sup>th</sup> century brought a new emphasis on the idea of 'covenant', starting from the work of Eichrodt and Mendenhall.<sup>57</sup> It is at this point that Dumbrell has made his own distinctive contribution, arguing that Gen 6:17-18 presupposes a relationship between Noah and God and that the term often translated 'establish' (*qûm*) means 'to perpetuate' rather than 'to initiate'.<sup>58</sup> He argues that when the covenant with Noah is spelled out in Genesis 9:8-17 it involves the maintenance of the creation arrangements with God's human creatures.<sup>59</sup>

Thus Dumbrell supports the claim that there is a covenant in creation, though as will be discussed below, he challenges the view that it is a CW which is different from the covenant of grace.

*ii. Eschatology and Creation*

Dumbrell has strongly affirmed the claim that the biblical picture of creation implies an eschatology. He argues that humanity is 'the agent through whom the aims of creation will be realised', and that the Sabbath of Genesis 2:1-4a is the goal of creation.<sup>60</sup> He makes the

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<sup>57</sup> W. Eichrodt, *Theologie des Alten Testaments* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1933); G. E. Mendenhall, 'Covenant Forms in Israelite Tradition,' *BA* 17 (1954): 50-76. See Stek, "Covenant" Overload', 17-25, for a review of the scholarship and how it has been adopted in Reformed thought.

<sup>58</sup> W. J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: An Old Testament Covenant Theology* (Sydney: Lancer, 1984), 26.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 30-31.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 34; on the role of humanity, cf. R. Watts, 'The New Exodus/New Creational Restoration of the Image of God,' in

point that the description of elements of creation as ‘good’ and the final assessment of all things as ‘very good’ are not statements about ‘perfection’ but that the creation corresponds to ‘divine intention’.<sup>61</sup>

The idea that humanity has a task, and that the fulfilment of the task will finally bring creation to its goal of Sabbath rest supports the traditional view of the CW, that Adam’s obedience would lead to a glorious reward. Biblical Theology reminds us that this should not be separated from the fulfilment of the created order.

## **6. Biblical Theology and the Critique of the Covenant of Works**

Biblical theology has offered some strong criticism of the idea of a CW. Dumbrell has warned that the traditional proposal has ‘inadequate grounding in the covenant concept itself’ and relies on ‘general biblical inference’ and reads ‘the total flow of biblical revelation back into Genesis 1-3’ while not noting ‘what is precisely being said’ in these chapters.<sup>62</sup> Despite these comments it turns out that there is no clear material conflict between his view of the creation covenant and the traditional CW. He argues that Genesis 1-2 presents a covenant relationship and that this covenant sets before humanity a goal and makes demands and brings punishment when it is breached.<sup>63</sup> He asserts his difference with the traditional view (and Barth) by stressing that he takes the covenant as being given with creation, rather than creation being the grounds for a covenant added as a ‘means to an end’.<sup>64</sup> Yet this is not

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*What Does it Mean to be Saved* (ed. J. G. Stackhouse; Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2002), 18-22.

<sup>61</sup> W. J. Dumbrell, *The Search for Order: Biblical Eschatology in Focus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 21.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 34-39.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 41-42.

a real point of difference. For Dumbrell holds that biblical covenants ‘presupposed a set of existing relationships’ which were given binding expression by a formal ceremony.<sup>65</sup> This is parallel with the traditional view that the CW is conceptually differentiated from creation.<sup>66</sup> Both views make a conceptual distinction between covenant and creation, yet seek to coordinate them closely.

What are the biblical theological criticisms of the CW proposal?

*i. Lack of Biblical Evidence*

It has become quite common for biblical scholars to reject any idea of a covenant in Genesis 1-2 as lacking evidence.

Stek finds Dumbrell guilty of “covenant” overload’. According to Stek covenants were not necessary for serious relationships in the ANE, nor are they needed for commitments. Indeed covenants were typically not used for ‘natural’ relationships but were only used ‘when circumstances occasioned doubts concerning desired or promised courses of action’.<sup>67</sup> Stek holds that Dumbrell’s case is implausible in the light of this evidence.<sup>68</sup>

Williamson has been critical of both Dumbrell’s view

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>66</sup> Stek, “Covenant” Overload’, 23, notes the apparent inconsistency of Dumbrell’s view that covenants formalise relationships and his view that the creation covenant could not be added to creation.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 22-25.

<sup>68</sup> Bartholomew has argued that Stek’s own view is too limited, and that there is a range of evidence in the opening chapters of Genesis which suggests that creation is viewed covenantally, both as reflected in the Noahic covenant and in parallels with Israel. Craig G. Bartholomew, ‘Covenant and Creation: Covenant Overload or Covenantal Deconstruction’, *Calvin Theological Journal* 30 (1995): 29.

and the traditional Reformed account. His primary objection is the 'insufficient warrant for such an idea in Scripture'.<sup>69</sup> He rebuts Dumbrell's claim that Genesis 6 implies a previous covenant. He argues that the absence of covenantal terminology before Genesis 6 'must surely be significant'. He points out that in Exodus 19:5 the Lord refers to a covenant yet to be established as 'my covenant', so that phrase cannot be proof of an existing covenant. He also argues *kārat* is not the only verb used for initiation of covenants and that even *qūm* is used in a clear reference to initiating a covenant (Exod 6:4). He concludes that 'the context alone must determine the meaning attached to *hēqīm* in any given text'.<sup>70</sup>

Dumbrell has responded comprehensively to Williamson. He insists that *kārat b<sup>e</sup>rīt* is 'maintained throughout the Old Testament as a traditional inception formula'.<sup>71</sup> He carefully examines the claim that *hēqīm b<sup>e</sup>rīt* can refer to the initiation of a covenant. He shows that Exodus 6:4 is far more likely to affirm that God continued to keep his covenant established in Genesis 15:18.

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<sup>69</sup> P. R. Williamson, 'Covenant: The Beginning of a Biblical Idea,' *RTR* 65 (2006): 3; see parallel material in P. R. Williamson, *Abraham, Israel and the Nations: The Patriarchal Promise and its Covenantal Development in Genesis* (Sheffield, JSOT Press, 2000), 190-207.

<sup>70</sup> Williamson, 'Covenant,' 10-11. He mentions Num 25:12; Deut 29:11; Ezek 16:8; 17:13; 2 Chron 15:12.

<sup>71</sup> W. J. Dumbrell, 'A Covenant with Creation (Genesis 6:18) and Jesus and the New Covenant (Luke 22:20),' in W. J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Kingdom: A Collection of Old Testament Essays* (ed. G. R. Goswell and A. M. Harman; Doncaster: Reformed Theological Review, 2007), 157. Dumbrell points out that one element in Williamson's argument is the assumption (shared with T. D. Alexander) that *nātan b<sup>e</sup>rīt* in Genesis 17:1 means a covenant of circumcision is initiated. This view is more idiosyncratic than Dumbrell's view of a covenant related to creation.

Dumbrell does not mention Williamson's claim that 'in Jeremiah 34:18 a strong case can be made in support of a covenant being instituted and not just renewed',<sup>72</sup> a claim which seems to be in error. The verse does refer to the institution of a covenant, but for that it uses the verb *kārat*. When *hēqîm* is used it refers to the failure to 'keep' that covenant.<sup>73</sup> Jeremiah 34:18 does not support Williamson's claim.

Dumbrell's case may be stated as follows. The verb *hēqîm* is most often associated with maintaining a covenant relationship (indeed there is no clear counter-example), thus when it occurs in Genesis 6:18 we should consider the possibility that it refers to a pre-existing covenant. When the context is considered we note the covenantal elements in Genesis 1-2 and the flow of the narrative from creation to the flood to Abraham as a story about God maintaining his commitment to creation, and it seems very likely that Genesis 6:18 refers to a covenant in creation. This is an argument that Williamson has not successfully rebutted.

It seems that Biblical Theology, after closely examining the opening chapters of Genesis, should come to the conclusion that, in its own terms, the Bible does present a creation covenant. On this ground the systematic proposal is given further credibility.

*ii. 'Life' in the Garden*

CW can give the impression that Adam was set in an intermediate position, between blessing and curse (ironically, this is closer to the medieval view). Biblical Theology has stressed that Eden was the place of God's blessing. The most obvious evidence is God's action of blessing (Gen 1:22, 28; 2:3) and the converse curse

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<sup>72</sup> Williamson, 'Covenant,' 11.

<sup>73</sup> Williamson in *Abraham* makes only three references to Jer 34:18, none of which explains his comment in the *RTR* article.

pronounced after the fall (Gen 3:14, 17). Dumbrell argues that Genesis does not present 'life' as a future prospect for Adam, but as a present reality.<sup>74</sup> The richness of blessing is highlighted by the depiction of Eden as a divine sanctuary. Beale reviews a series of parallels between Eden and Israel's tabernacle and temple and concludes that the cumulative effect of the parallels 'indicates that Eden was the first archetypal temple' and 'the unique place of God's presence'.<sup>75</sup>

This rich blessing of living in God's presence in Eden does not contradict the view that there was an eschaton given for Eden. Indeed one way of understanding Adam's task as priest-king is that he was to extend the garden sanctuary.<sup>76</sup>

These observations about blessing in Eden cast light on recent debates about whether a principle of 'grace' should be recognised in the CW. John Murray preferred the title 'Adamic Administration', in part because 'the elements of grace entering into the administration are not properly provided for by the term "works"'.<sup>77</sup> Murray's proposal has been rejected by others who claim that the term 'grace' should be preserved for 'redemptive' contexts, and that Murray's approach risks blurring the distinction between 'law and grace'.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Smith takes a similar view arguing that the CW needs to be tied far more carefully into creation itself to make clear that Adam stands in the same position as Israel: granted a place as God's people and called on to live this out: Ralph A. Smith, *The Eternal Covenant: How the Trinity Reshapes Covenant Theology* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2003), 66-68.

<sup>75</sup> G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* (Leicester: IVP, 2004), 66.

<sup>76</sup> Beale, *Temple*, 81-87.

<sup>77</sup> Murray, 'Adamic Administration,' 49.

<sup>78</sup> M. Karlberg, 'Reformed Interpretation of the Mosaic Covenant,' *WTJ* 43 (1980): 1-57.

It needs to be remembered that Murray wished to use the title 'Adamic Administration' because divine covenants are bound to redemption and are the 'oath-bound confirmation of promise', while the so-called covenant of works does not offer the security of 'covenants'.<sup>79</sup> Thus Murray stressed a difference between pre-lapsarian 'grace' and redemptive grace. Adam was not given the blessing of 'perseverance'.

It has been consistently held by Reformed thought that the first covenant is given from God's freely bestowed love, and that it would only be kept in dependence on God.<sup>80</sup> Muller notes that the contrast between the CW and the CG should not be overstressed, especially when grace is thought of as a divine attribute rather than a soteriological phenomenon.<sup>81</sup> We find in Witsius' work an expansive discussion of the blessings bestowed on Adam in creation:

[M]an ... just from the hands of his Maker, had a soul shining with rays of a divine light, and adorned with the brightest wisdom; whereby he was ... delighted with the contemplations of the supreme and increated truth, the eyes of his understanding being constantly fixed on the perfections of his God ... he also had the purest holiness of will ... whatever contributed to the acquiring an intimate and immediate union with [God].<sup>82</sup>

After this excited exposition of Adam's original state,

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<sup>79</sup> Murray, 'Adamic Administration,' 49.

<sup>80</sup> Peter Golding, *Covenant Theology: The Key of Theology in Reformed Thought and Tradition* (Ross-shire: Mentor, 2004), 106-107.

<sup>81</sup> Classic Reformed thought made 'a consistent identification of grace as fundamental to all of God's relationships with the world ... to the point of the consistent assertion that the covenant of nature or works is itself gracious,' R. Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy*, 3. *The Divine Essence and Attributes* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 570.

<sup>82</sup> Witsius, *Economy*, 51.

there seems little that could be added at the end of a probationary period. However, Witsius asserts that the CW offers ‘another and far greater thing ... a farther degree of happiness, consisting of full and immediate enjoyment of God, and in a more spiritual state to last forever.’<sup>83</sup> He does not make a strong contrast between Edenic life and eternal life, rather the latter is an ‘exalted’ form of the former.<sup>84</sup>

The concern suggested by Biblical Theology, that the CW under-emphasises the blessings of life in the original state is an important concern. However, it turns out that this is already accounted for in many expositions of the CW. Biblical Theology helps to show why these accounts are preferable.

### *iii. One Covenant*

There is a difference between Dumbrell and the traditional view on one important point. According to Dumbrell there is one covenant which embraces all of creation and redemption. He argues that the creational relationship is ‘divine kingship’ and so ‘there can be only one divine covenant’.<sup>85</sup> Presumably he means that because God is always king and the creation covenant is the instrument of kingship then it can never be revoked without also negating God’s kingship. Even when Dumbrell differentiates the new covenant from earlier arrangements he stresses that the creation covenant means that ‘the world; and man are part of one total divine construct and

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<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>84</sup> Witsius has two suggestions about how eternal life may be more exalted. One is the ‘probable conjecture’ that ‘the happiness of all the elect ... will be complete; when Christ’s whole body shall appear glorious, and God be glorified and admired in all his saints.’ His other tentative suggestion is that eternal life is heavenly life; *ibid.*, 76.

<sup>85</sup> Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation*, 33-34, 42.



we cannot entertain the salvation of man in isolation from the world' and so he concludes the promised new creation and new covenant are in fact 'a return within history to the beginning of history'.<sup>86</sup> In classic Reformed theology the CG is distinct, embracing justification by faith rather than by works. In this view the CG fulfils the intention of the CW, but is distinct from it.

This difference raises the most important point of exploration in Dumbrell's interaction with the CW view. Where would the discussion between Dumbrell and traditional Reformed thought move in order to explore and perhaps resolve this question? It would have to raise the question of how 'new' redemption is. Both agree that redemption brings creation to its given goal. The remaining question could be phrased, 'is the movement from creation to new creation one movement, or does human sin bring such a rupture that redemption must be considered as a different movement?' I would argue for the latter view, and I suspect that when the question is formulated thus Dumbrell may agree. More specifically the discussion could focus on how fully the methods of achieving this goal need to be differentiated between the creation arrangement and in redemption.

#### *iv. The Imputation of Adam's Sin*

Biblical studies have questioned the traditional Reformed interpretation of Romans 5:12-21.<sup>87</sup> Jewett's comment is that the discussion of Romans 5:12ff has been

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<sup>86</sup> 'In Jeremiah [and the discussion of the New Covenant] we are looking beyond the New Testament to the community of the end-time, to a situation when the kingdom of God is all in all,' Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation*, 183; cf. 206.

<sup>87</sup> H. Blocher, *Original Sin* (Leicester: Apollos, 1997), 121, comments that the 'imputation of alien guilt strains the sense of justice in most readers' and argues that this produces 'hidden tensions' in most versions of the federalist view.

‘a debate dominated by complicated theories of original and imputed sin that arose long after Paul’s time’.<sup>88</sup> Jewett suggests that certainty about Paul’s theory of how Adam’s sin affects all is not possible, but favours a suggestion that Paul holds that there is a ‘social poison of sin’ which makes the choice of evil deeds inevitable, but does not vitiate free will.<sup>89</sup>

Blocher, who seeks to draw Systematic and Biblical Theology together, offers his own interpretation. He observes that there are two general views: either all humans follow Adam (as in Jewett’s version) or all are condemned through Adam’s action (the classic Reformed view). He argues that both views assume that ‘*either* we are condemned for our own sins ... *or* we are condemned for his sin’. He suggests as a third possibility, that Adam’s role ‘is to make possible the imputation, the judicial treatment, of human sins’.<sup>90</sup> That is, in Adam all are placed in a ‘covenant of creation’ and so are culpable. The question that must be asked of Blocher’s view is whether it really accounts for the claim that ‘one trespass led to the condemnation of all’ (Rom 5:18). Whatever we make of Blocher’s view we can conclude that the Bible makes inherited corruption clear but is not explicit about inherited guilt. On this matter Systematic Theology will have to consider how strongly it will argue that inherited guilt must be an implication of inherited corruption.

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<sup>88</sup> R. Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2007), 375.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 376.

<sup>90</sup> Blocher, *Original Sin*, 77. This explains the significance of Rom 5:13-14, where Paul considers the case of those who faced punishment without law, and shows that this is possible since, though without ‘law’, they were not outside the covenant with Adam. This, Blocher says, fits well with Paul’s intention to show that God’s justifying grace in Christ will overcome death.

*v. Imputation and Justification*

Biblical studies have in recent years raised the question of whether ‘imputation’ is a proper term to use in an exposition of justification.<sup>91</sup> If this conclusion were to be accepted, then the theological significance of CW would be greatly reduced. CW is an explanation of how the guilt of Adam is imputed to humanity, if there is no imputation of righteousness to those who are saved, then the Adam-Christ parallel cannot support the concept of the imputation of Adam’s guilt.

The question of whether imputation should be retained in the construction of the doctrine of justification is highly contested and I will not pretend to finally resolve the question here. The complexity of the issue is testified to by the density of Carson’s treatment.<sup>92</sup> Gathercole defends

<sup>91</sup> For an overview of the debates, see C. Venema, ‘The Nonimputation of Christ’s Righteousness,’ in *Always Reforming: Explorations in Systematic Theology* (ed. A. T. B. McGowan; Leicester: Apollos, 2006), 289-327. For views which are critical of traditional Reformed formulations (though in different ways) see R. H. Gundry, ‘Justification: The Ecumenical, Biblical and Theological Dimensions of Current Debates,’ in *Justification: What’s at Stake in the Current Debates* (ed. M. Husbands and D. J. Treier; Leicester: IVP, 2004), 17-45; N. T. Wright, ‘New Perspective on Paul,’ in *Justification in Perspective: Historical Developments and Contemporary Challenges* (ed. B. L. McCormack; Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2006), 243-64. For responses see D. A. Carson, ‘The Vindication of Imputation,’ in *Justification: What’s at Stake*; S. Gathercole, ‘The Doctrine of Justification in Paul and Beyond: Some Proposals,’ in *Justification in Perspective*, 219-41. For a very helpful biblical theological treatment of justification by faith, see E. P. Clowney ‘The Biblical Doctrine of Justification by Faith,’ in *Right with God: Justification in the Bible and the World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1992), 17-50.

<sup>92</sup> Carson’s justification of the phrase is based on the intimate connection in the NT between the work of Christ and union with Christ with ‘justification’ and on NT passages such as ‘Christ

the use of imputation and says that he would not deny the ‘traditional understanding of imputation’ but that he recognises why some hesitate to speak of Christ’s righteousness being imputed.<sup>93</sup> In my view the notion of imputation is essential to make sense of the NT view of God’s salvation of sinners. However, this discussion should give Systematicians reason to think carefully about how they describe the Adam-Christ parallel.

*vi. Imputation of the Active Righteousness of Christ*

The imputation of the ‘preceptive’ obedience of Christ has been challenged by biblical studies. Kirk has argued that the concept misunderstands the role of the law and downplays the place of the resurrection and the eschatological setting of justification. He examines Romans 3:21-26 and argues that this presents a law court setting in which a verdict must be declared, either ‘guilty’ or ‘not guilty’, and that this is declared on the basis of Christ’s penal death for sinners. He points out that Paul’s argument in Romans 3 claims that there is a righteousness ‘apart from law’ (vv. 19-21). He argues that Paul’s discussions of justification always refer to Christ’s death on the cross. Kirk rejects the idea of a CW in Romans 5.<sup>94</sup>

Kirk’s challenge warns Systematic Theology that there is a danger of deriving invalid implications from the CW. The doctrine of the imputation of the active righteousness of Christ is supported more fully by the CW than by direct biblical evidence. Kirk correctly argues that the NT

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Jesus has become for us wisdom from God — that is, our righteousness’ (1 Cor 1:30).

<sup>93</sup> Gathercole, ‘Doctrine of Justification,’ 223.

<sup>94</sup> See J. R. Daniel Kirk, ‘The Sufficiency of the Cross (II): The Law, the Cross, and Justification,’ *SBET* 24.2 (2006): 133-54; for a popular summary, see ‘Nothing but the Blood: The Cruciform Matrix of Justification’ *ACT3* 15.3 (2006), see [www.act3online.com/act3reviewArticlesDetail.asp?id=288](http://www.act3online.com/act3reviewArticlesDetail.asp?id=288).

presentation of justification focuses on the 'penal' aspect achieved in Jesus' death and resurrection. This should not, of course be separated from the whole obedient life of Christ, but the NT does not treat the 'preceptive' and 'penal' obedience of Christ as two balanced elements in our justification. If that is the case then the imputation of the active righteousness of Christ depends on a doctrine which is itself a second order doctrine.<sup>95</sup> This at least puts the onus on Reformed Systematics to demonstrate that this doctrine is grounded in scripture.

It may be that the doctrine may be better grounded through the resurrection of Christ. That is, Christ was raised because of his whole life of obedience (so Phil 2:9; cf. Heb 5:8-9; 10:5-10), and believers share in reward and so in the obedience. As far as I am aware this approach has not been explored extensively, but calls for greater work.

### *vii. Compacts and Relationships*

Williamson offers a 'conceptual' critique of Dumbrell. He argues that in the Bible relationship precedes covenant and that 'the Biblical order is relationship, then covenant, rather than covenant, hence relationship'.<sup>96</sup> He suspects that Dumbrell and others have sought to find a covenant in creation where finding a 'relationship' is all that is required.

This invites several responses. First, it should be noted

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<sup>95</sup> According to Calvin, 'him whom he receives into union with himself the Lord is said to justify ... this is done through forgiveness of sins ... those whom God embraces are made righteous solely by the fact that they are purified when their spots are washed away by the forgiveness of sins. Consequently, such righteousness can be called, in a word, remission of sin'; Calvin, *Inst* III.xi.21, 751.

<sup>96</sup> Williamson, 'Covenant,' 13.

that the standard view in Reformed theology is that the CW is added to the prior Creator-creature relationship, that is, a 'relationship' does indeed come first. Secondly, in the classic view the introduction of the CW determines precisely the nature of the relationship in a way which is not given in creation. The CW specifies the demands of the relationship, and it makes possible the promised blessing. The question for Williamson is to what extent he views covenant as specifying relationships. Thirdly it should be observed that Williamson's term 'relationship' does not denote a precise concept. Since theology views all things in relation to God (*sub ratione Dei*) to state that humanity has a 'relationship' with God is not very informative. Williamson's proposal requires far greater articulation as to the nature of the 'relationship'. Fourthly, Williamson's criticism is similar to that of J. B. Torrance who has argued that the implicit mercantilism in seventeenth century theology means that covenant theology subverts grace. So Williamson's 'relationship' is probably something like that which Torrance denotes as 'filial', that is devoted, intimate and affectionate, in contrast to a 'covenant'. It is important to note that in the 17<sup>th</sup> century this is not how the term 'covenant' was understood.<sup>97</sup>

On this question we notice that Systematic Theology raises important questions for Biblical Theology. Biblical

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<sup>97</sup> A graphic illustration of this is found in the moving words of the Scottish National Covenant of 1638-1639. Here the people of Scotland (from Nobles to Commons) declare that 'with our whole heart we agree, and resolve all the days of our life constantly to adhere unto and to defend ... true religion, and ... to labour, by all means lawful, to recover the purity and liberty of the Gospel.' This is not a mercantile arrangement but one in which people commit themselves heart and soul to a matter of life and death. Whether covenant-making arose from theological discussion or vice-versa does not matter; the point is that 17<sup>th</sup> century Reformed thinkers did not perceive covenants as making relationships dry and formal.

Theology is not required to answer these in systematic terms, but it does need to develop its treatment to deal with them adequately.

## **7. The Covenant of Works: Systematic and Biblical Theology**

Is the CW sustainable in the light of Biblical Theology? I believe that it is. There are several ways in which Biblical Theology supports the idea. In areas in which Biblical Theology raises questions the systematic proposal can be developed in a way that retains its important features and functions, but answers more fully to the biblical material. Often these modifications are already present in at least some presentations of the material and simply need to be highlighted. So the idea of a covenant of works can easily include an 'eschatology' for the whole of creation, which in turn more fully relates creation and redemption than is sometimes done. Contemporary covenant theology will wish to stress that a covenant relationship is not opposed to having an intimate relationship, and so the position of Adam in a covenant of works does not mean that he does not enjoy the blessing of knowing God.

While the engagement with Biblical Theology develops and enriches the systematic presentation of the CW, Systematic Theology raises some important questions for Biblical Theology. The major reasons Reformed Theology had for speaking of a CW came from a concern to demonstrate the coherence of the Bible. Biblical Theology seeks this coherence primarily in a historical development of themes (so through a promise-fulfilment or typological pattern), but it cannot ignore the question of conceptual coherence. How does Biblical Theology account for the Adam-Christ parallel and the effects of Adam's sin on all humanity? We would not necessarily expect Biblical Theology to make use of a second order concept such as

CW to explain this, but I am not aware of any alternative convincing biblical theological proposals.

The discussion of the CW shows the important contributions made by both Biblical Theology and Systematic Theology. Biblical Theology alone tends to have a reduced awareness of conceptual questions, while Systematic Theology risks resting too fully on concepts which are secondary derivations from Scripture. It is neither practical nor productive to seek to integrate the two disciplines.<sup>98</sup> Neither should we expect each to look (or sound) like the other. Each makes its own important contribution, and should be encouraged to do so. However, they should remain in close dialogue. The discussion of the CW shows the value of such dialogue. I would affirm Jensen's view that each discipline needs the other.

I would propose a two-level model for the relationship of the two disciplines. The 'lower' level is that of interdisciplinary engagement. In this each discipline seeks to understand the concerns, methods and proposals of the other, and to interact with those, though without needing to abandon its own distinctive approach. At a higher level there is an attempt to bring the two together in the church's ongoing work of reading and applying the scriptures in its own life and worship. That is the dual tasks of theological interpretation of Scripture and theological ethics must draw on both Biblical and Systematic Theology.<sup>99</sup> These

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<sup>98</sup> Contra Gaffin, 'Biblical Theology and the Westminster Standards,' 175, who concludes that 'there is no good reason why biblical theology cannot work compatibly within the theological framework of the Standards, to enrich that framework and at points perhaps improve its formulations without fear of undermining it'.

<sup>99</sup> This is a development of a proposal by Joel Green for the interaction of theology and biblical studies. See J. B. Green, 'Scripture and Theology: Uniting the Two So Long Divided,' *Between Two Horizons: Spanning New Testament Studies and*



two levels of engagement are the challenging and exciting work to which Bill Dumbrell has contributed so much, and to which this essay has aimed to make a small contribution.

*John McClean*