

## What “Covenant of Works”?

The cardinal points of traditional Protestantism’s soteriology stand or fall on the concept of a “covenant of works” established between God and Adam in the Garden. As the Westminster Confession has it: “God gave to Adam a law, as a covenant of works, by which he bound him and all his posterity to personal, entire, exact, and perpetual obedience.”<sup>1</sup>

It was Adam’s failure to keep this covenant which flung mankind into a state of total depravity, it is taught. The “covenant of works” which found expression in the Mosaic Covenant reflects God’s legalistic expectations: Salvation is to be earned by perfect, perpetual obedience. Thus, as Gordon Clark wrote, “for Christ the Covenant of Redemption was a covenant of works . . . Christ *earned* salvation.”<sup>2</sup>

But how much scriptural support can be adduced to vindicate this doctrine? We search the Genesis account in vain for the covenant described in the Westminster Confession. Nowhere do we read that God expected “entire, exact, and perpetual obedience” from Adam. It is true that Adam sinned, incurring the curse of death (Gen. 3:17-19; Rom. 5:12ff); but this sin was total rebellion, not an infraction of a demanding law. Man did alienate himself from God through sin, and cannot receive the gift of eternal life apart from redemption and atonement; but nowhere do we read that eternal life is a commodity to be purchased through legalistic obedience. If salvation is truly a *free gift*, there can be no “covenant of works” which requires that it be *earned*.

According to Oswald T. Allis, this “covenant of works” may be found in Deuteronomy 6:5, 10-12ff; 30:15-20; Psalm 1; and Romans 2:7-9.<sup>3</sup> Ironically, the reason Allis wrote that these verses reflect this imaginary covenant is simply because they require man to do God’s will. This common circular argument assumes what is yet to be proved: That God grants eternal life as an obligatory payment for fulfillment of a perfectionistic covenant.

<sup>1</sup> Westminster Confession, 19.1.

<sup>2</sup> Gordon H. Clark, *The Atonement*, Jefferson, Maryland: The Jefferson Foundation, 1987, 16.

<sup>3</sup> Carl F. Henry, ed., *Basic Christian Doctrines*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker

In his book *Paul, the Law, and the Jewish People*,<sup>4</sup> E. P. Sanders challenged the traditional Protestant interpretation of the nature and function of the law in Paul’s letters. If we take as our starting-point Philippians 3:4-11 rather than (for example) the difficult and highly figurative Romans 7:7-25, a different picture of Paul’s thought emerges. Paul’s criticism of the law and of the Judaizers did not revolve around the idea that the law cannot be obeyed (we cannot fulfill the law, therefore we must rest on the imputed merits of the one who did); on the contrary, Paul affirmed that “as to righteousness under the law,” he was “blameless” (Phil. 3:6, NRSV). In fact Deuteronomy 30:11 explicitly states that the law could be obeyed. According to Luke, Zechariah and Elizabeth “were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord” (1:6, NRSV). And even under the old covenant, God made abundant allowance for sin and human error through the sacrificial system.

Paul’s problem with the law was not that it could not be kept, or that its purpose was to prove human inability to respond to God. His point was rather that the law is inferior to the new covenant which has superseded it, and the Judaizers who were trying to impose circumcision and other distinctively Jewish rituals on Gentile Christians were in effect denying that Jesus is Lord of the Gentiles as well as the Jews. As such, the Galatian Judaizers had “fallen away from grace” (Gal. 5:4, NRSV). In other words, the controversy in which Paul was engaged was not that of “faith” versus “works” generally, as it has been interpreted; the controversy was in fact much more narrow than that. As Sanders wrote:

The dispute in Galatians is not about “doing” as such. Neither of the opposing factions saw the requirement of “doing” to be a denial of faith. When Paul makes requirements of his converts, he does not think that he has denied faith, and there is no reason to think that Jewish Christians who specified different requirements denied faith. The supposed conflict between “doing” as such and “faith” as such is simply not present in Galatians. What was at stake was not a way of life summarized by the word “trust” versus a mode of life summarized by “requirements,” but whether or not the requirement of membership in the Israel of God would result in there being “neither Jew nor Greek.” . . . There was no dispute over the necessity to trust God and have faith in Christ. The dispute was about whether one had to be Jewish.

Once the flat opposition in Paul’s letters between “faith” and “law” is seen to have to do with the central membership requirement,

Book House, 1962, p. 97.

<sup>4</sup> Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1983.

rather than with a whole way of life, there will be less embarrassment about giving full weight to the positive statements which Paul makes about the law, about being blameless, and about punishment for transgression and reward for obedience. Perhaps, too, when faith is seen as not being the opposite of “good works” in and of themselves, there will be less pressure to think that Paul accused Judaism *of* good works — of legalism and reliance on self-achievement.<sup>5</sup>

Once we extricate ourselves from the Protestant tendency to turn the (outmoded) old covenant law into the expression of an immutable “covenant of works” we will not wince when we read passages like Romans 2:6-10, or any of the other clear scriptural affirmations that our obedience is a condition of salvation.<sup>6</sup> We will be comfortable, as was Justin Martyr, exhorting unbelievers to “repent of your sins, and recognize Him to be Christ, and observe His commandments” (*Dialogue with Trypho*, 95).<sup>7</sup>

This type of teaching makes perfect sense in theological milieus not governed by the presuppositions bound up with the “covenant of works.” It was not the opinion of the earliest “church fathers” that Adam was created morally perfect, or that human free will was sacrificed to total depravity as a result of the fall (cf. Theophilus, *Autol.* 2.24-27; Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 4.37-41).<sup>8</sup> According to Irenaeus, all people are “able both to hold fast and to do what is good; and, on the other hand, having also the power to cast it from them and not to do it” (*ibid.*, 4.37.2).<sup>9</sup> “Man is possessed of free will from the beginning” (*ibid.*, 4.37.4).<sup>10</sup>

This affirmation of free will and denial of total depravity does not undermine the clear scriptural teaching of the universality and seriousness of sin, nor does it lead to legalism. It is not legalistic because it does not recognize the validity of the legalistic “covenant of works” or the Latin legal principles of penance and merit on which the traditional doctrines are based. In other words, God does not have legalistic expectations to begin with. The scriptures present rather a forgiving God who has promised to grant eternal life to those who seek Him through the cross of Christ.

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 159.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. e.g. Matt. 5-7; 10:32, 33, 37ff; 16:27; 25:31-46; Luke 6:20-49; 9:23-26; John 5:28; 15:1-10; Acts 5:32; 10:34,35; Rom. 8:13; 1 Cor. 6:9, 10; Gal. 5:19-21; Eph. 5:5, 6; Heb. 5:9; 6:4-12; 10:26-39; 12:14; Jas. 2:18-26; Rev. 22:12, 15.

<sup>7</sup> *Dialogue With Trypho the Jew*, p.95.

<sup>8</sup> cf. Theophilus, *Autol.* 2.24-27; Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 4.37-41.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.37.2.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.37.4.