

The Covenant of Creation
By: James R Hughes – Updated: 2020-08-24

The *Westminster Confession of Faith (WCoF)* [Chapter 7.2] states: “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.” There are a number of key ideas presented in this short statement, including:

- The existence of a covenant between God and Adam. This indicates that the authors believed that God’s dealings with men, from the beginning, have been structured in the form of covenant.
- This covenant was the *first* covenant God made with man. This indicates that the authors believed that God made a number of covenants with mankind.
- This covenant represented all mankind. This indicates that the authors understood that Adam’s covenantal headship was the basis for including Adam’s posterity under the obligations and punishments of the covenant.

In this paper I wish to address these ideas by answering the following two questions:

- Did God in fact make a covenant with Adam, when there is no explicit statement that he did?
- In what way is the “covenant of works” different from, or the same as, the other covenant administrations between God and man?

God Made a Covenant with Adam

For there to be a covenant between God and man, it is not necessary that it be explicitly named. Just as the Church has defined a term for the relationship between the persons in the Godhead—a trinity—so we can call a relationship between God and man a covenant if the constituent elements of a covenantal relationship are present. Even if the Bible does not call the relationship between God and Adam explicitly a covenant, it still may be one.

However, it is possible that the Bible does explicitly refer to the relationship between God and Adam as a covenant. In Isaiah 24.4-6 we read of the earth being cursed because the people had broken the everlasting covenant of God (v. 5). This statement of Isaiah may include an oblique reference to the covenant made with Noah (Gen 9.8-17). The curse mentioned in v. 6 may refer to curse that God promised (Gen 8.21-22) would never again fall on the ground. However, the reference to the curse on the earth appears to fit better as an allusion to the curse on the ground recorded in Genesis 3.17-19. If Isaiah is alluding to the curse made in the Garden of Eden, then it is reasonable to conclude that Adam broke the everlasting covenant and brought the curse on the earth. If Adam broke a covenant, then there was a covenant between God and Adam.

In Jeremiah 33.20, 25 God makes reference to a covenant that he established with the created order. It seems to refer to the week of creation, and it appears to indicate that a covenant has been in place from the time of creation. If this is the case, then it is possible that Psalm 8 provides us with information about the human representative in this covenant. Psalm 8 verses 3 and 4 tie the context of the Psalm to creation, and verses 5 and 6 identify man as a vassal with responsibilities over the creation on behalf of the Great King. Jeremiah 23 and Psalm 8 together appear to confirm that God made a Covenant of Creation and that man (Adam) was the recipient, or human (federal) representative, of that covenant.

In addition, in Hosea (6.7) we read: “Like Adam they have broken the covenant.” (NIV[1]) This passage has been translated differently in other translations of the Bible (e.g., “at Adam”, or “like men”). The reference to a geographic location is possible (i.e., the word “there” in the second part of the verse), but this introduces the problem of identifying the location of this place called Adam. Also, it is questionable if there is a warrant for rendering the preposition as “at” instead of “like.” The translation “like men” does not seem to make sense, since the effect of the comparison would be lost; for how can men do other than act like men, and the word *adam* is in the singular (even though it could be understood as a collective). If the translation of the NIV is accurate, there may be a reference here to the covenant made between God and Adam.

So it is possible that the Bible explicitly informs us that there was a covenant between God and Adam, and that this covenant is the Covenant of Creation.

The Elements of a Covenant are Present in Genesis 1 & 2

Even if the passages in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Psalm 8, and Hosea do not provide direct evidence for the existence of a covenant between God and Adam, this does not necessarily mean that such a covenant does not exist.

There are commands given to Adam in Genesis 1.28 and 2.16,17 which may in fact be the obligatory component of a covenant. It is true that they do not appear in the context of an expression such as: “Today I make a covenant with you ...” And it is true that a command alone is not a covenant. Nevertheless, the larger context (Genesis 1 and 2) in which these commands are placed does appear to provide all of the elements of a covenantal relationship.

Using one model of a covenant (adapted from the work of Meredith Kline[2]) we can find the following elements of a Covenant in Genesis 1 and 2:

Elements of a Covenant Found in the Genesis 1 and 2

- PREAMBLE
 - The Great King (Suzerain) named Gen 1.1

- Initiated by the Great King: “and God Gen 1.26-30; 2.3; etc. said”
- The Great King’s presence with vassal: “God with us” Gen 2.15, 16; with Gen 3.8
- The vassal named: man to rule under God Gen 1.26, 27
- Title, designation Gen 2.4; possibly Gen 1.1a Gen 1.1-2.14
- HISTORICAL BACKGROUND
- TREATY RESPONSIBILITIES
 - Duties, obligations: Not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil: perfect obedience required Gen 1.28; 2.15-17
 - Blessings: eternal life Gen 1.28, 29; 2.15, 22-25
 - Curses, penalty for transgression: Death Gen 2.17 with Gen 3.14-19
- RATIFICATION CEREMONY
 - Promise, oath: “when you eat of it you will surely die” Gen 2.17
 - Names given, changed Gen 2.7 ('man'); with 3.20 ('Eve')
 - Eating a 'meal' from the tree of life Gen 2.9,16,17; (compare Rev 22.2,19):
- WITNESS
 - Sacramental signs, seals:
 - The Sabbath[3] Gen 2.2, 3
 - The Tree of Life Gen 2.9,16,17; with 3.22-24[4]
 - Descendants, heirs Gen 1.28; (compare Gen 17.6)
 - Duration, time element Gen 2.17: by implication it is a perpetual covenant (compare Isa 24.5)

A review of the elements associated with typical ancient covenants in Scripture shows that most of them can be associated (at least to an extent) with the relationship between God and Adam described in Genesis 1 and 2. Based on this correspondence, it seems reasonable to conclude that God made a covenant with Adam.

The fact that Adam was not consulted in the matter of making the arrangement does not mean that there was no covenant enacted. The covenants which God makes with man are not equivalent to contracts made between two human parties. God and man are not equals. Even in the named covenants in the Bible we do not find God consulting with man before he enacts a covenant. For example, God announced to Noah (Gen 9.1-17) that he was making a Covenant with him, he did not confer with Noah to determine if he was willing to accept the terms of the covenant before he ratified it with the sign of the rainbow. In Abraham’s case (Gen 15), although there was dialogue between Abraham and God, it is God who takes the initiative and who lays out the conditions of the covenant. There is nothing in the transaction which indicates that God and Abraham were considered equal parties in a contract. In fact, Abraham was asleep when God ratified the covenant.

Jesus is the only mediator of the Covenant with whom God deals on equal terms. The covenants God makes with mere-human representatives are of the nature of sovereign dispositions imposed upon man. God simply announces the covenant and its terms,

and demands that man will agree. In the Covenant of Creation, God announced the terms and Adam immediately accepted them. He was in a perfect state, and his will was in complete conformity to the will of God.

In addition, we find in Romans 5.12-21 and 1 Corinthians 15.22 that all men represented by Adam are held accountable for the first sin of Adam. Without a covenant being in place between God and man, with Adam as the human representative, it is difficult to explain how we are held accountable for Adam's sin; why only for his first sin and not for his subsequent sins; and why we are not held accountable for the sins of our other progenitors. The existence of a covenant between God and Adam clarifies the responsibility of Adam and the applicability of his first sin to all mankind. Adam, in a covenant relationship with God, was designated as the federal representative of all mankind. When he ate the fruit, he broke the covenant and, as the federal representative, brought the consequences of the curse upon himself and upon all mankind.

A consideration of Adam's representative role seems to imply that a Covenant of Creation was made with all mankind through him. Jesus, as the second Adam, came to fulfill the obligations of the same covenant (and all the other covenants in the Bible). The Covenant of Creation, having been made with the first man, applies to all whom he represented—all mankind—just as Jesus' fulfillment of it applied to all whom he represented—all who believe (1 Cor 15.22; Jn 17.9).

Some conclusions that can be derived from the existence of a universal and perpetual Covenant of Creation made with Adam, are the following:

- Mankind's obligation of obedience to God is perpetual and the specific obligation of the covenant is still in force (compare Gen 1.28 with 8.17; 9.1; Isaiah 24.4-6). The covenant is not annulled anywhere in Scripture, which implies that it remains in force.
- The curses (Gen 3) as a result of the breach of the covenant still affect all mankind.
- The promises and blessings of the covenant have not been withdrawn (compare Gen 1.28,29 with Gen 8.21-9.3), but they are applied only to those who keep the covenant—either directly or through a mediator.
- Adam is designated as the federal representative of all mankind in a covenantal relationship with God. In Adam, all men became parties to the covenant, and in Adam all broke the covenant (Rom 5.12, 18; 1 Cor 15.22).
- Mankind's breaking the covenant did not annul it. Mankind continues to be held accountable to the obligations of the covenant. Only God, as the author of the covenant, could annul it.

- Christ came to fulfill the Law. He was placed under the Law. He came not only to fulfill the laws given through Moses but also to fulfill the Law as it is revealed by God's character and as it was communicated to Adam. What Adam did not do—obey perfectly—Christ did. He is our covenant-keeper (Rom 5.19; 1 Cor 15.22).
- The Sabbath, the seal of the Covenant of Creation, remains in force (Heb 4.9). It is the only seal of the Covenant that is consistent through all covenant administrations.
- The Tree of Life, a sign of the Covenant of Creation, will be in heaven; and those who, in Christ, are restored covenant keepers will partake of the sign of the covenant in eternity (Rev 22.2,19).

The first two chapters of Genesis document a covenant relationship between God and man. Man's existence on earth begins in a covenantal context. Life before God is portrayed throughout Scripture as being rooted in a covenant. From the very first moment of his existence Adam stood in a covenantal relationship with God. He is portrayed as the vassal of God. As an office bearer, and a representative of God he is given dominion over God's creation under God's sovereign rule. Man (all men, women, and children throughout the earth and through all time) is either a covenant keeper or a covenant breaker. The Covenant of Creation is not incidental to the history of redemption, it is an essential element in God's dealings with mankind.

The Covenant of Creation is a Covenant of Grace

That fact that God made a covenant with Adam seems to be established. But there remains the second question: In what way is this covenant different from, or the same as, the other covenant administrations between God and man?

There are many views of how the various covenants in the Bible relate to one another. Some views about the relationship among the covenants include the following:

- Each covenant in the Bible is to be understood as a distinctly different administration, and there is no essential connection among the covenants and as such, God's dealings with men from one age to the next are distinctly different.
- The OT covenants are in one class and the New Covenant is in a separate class. Under this view, God dealt with men according to Law in the OT and now deals with men according to Grace. The older covenants failed and had to be replaced with a new covenant.

- Most of the covenants (e.g., Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, and New) are re-statements of a common covenant. Each re-statement adds elements unfolding God’s redemptive plan through history.

There are variations on these basic conceptions of the covenants, but for our purposes it is not necessary to consider them.

I will however go beyond the three alternatives above and propose that God has dealt with man in the same way throughout all of history under only **one** covenant. As such, **all** of the Biblical covenants are re-statements, or administrations, of one common covenant – an overriding Covenant of Grace.

This view does present some difficulties since by using the word ‘all’ I include the Noahic and the Adamic covenants in the same class as the other covenants. In this paper, we will not consider the covenant made with Noah. But there still remains a big question: Is the covenant made with Adam in the same class as the other covenants in the Bible? The immediate response of many will be that it is not, since the covenant made with Adam is a covenant of *works* and the other covenants are covenants of *grace*. They may also argue that the Covenant of Grace became necessary only because of the sin of Adam whereas the covenant made with Adam, if it existed at all, was made with Adam in the sinless state.

We should note first that nowhere in Scripture is the covenant made with Adam called a ‘covenant of works’. This term is used by theologians to make a distinction among the various administrations of the Covenant. The use of theological terms has been very helpful and important during the history of the Church for clarifying relationships described in Scripture and for settling doctrinal controversy (e.g., ‘trinity’, ‘person’ and ‘nature’ of Christ, procession *vs* generation, etc.). So it is not wrong, and in fact it is a good thing, to use a theological term when it proves useful for making clear the distinctions between truth and error. However, it is important that that the terms clearly communicate the distinctions that are necessary and do not make distinctions which are unnecessary.

It appears that the authors of the *WCofF* define the term ‘covenant of works’ with the remainder of their statement: “wherein life was promised to Adam, and in him his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience.” It was probably felt that the use of the term ‘works’ helped to distinguish, and to classify, this particular covenant administration by what appears to be its primary attribute—obedience.

The emphasis of the covenant administration in the Garden seems to be on Adam’s required obedience rather than on God’s grace. The covenant required that Adam walk before God in perfect obedience. Therefore, the use of the word “works” in

the *WCofF* certainly is not incorrect. However, the term ‘covenant of works’ could be misleading, because it emphasizes one aspect of the covenant—and possibly over emphasizes it so that people might think that Adam could have obeyed God without the power of God’s sustaining grace

The covenant made with Adam has similar attributes as the other covenants enacted in the Bible . The following considerations demonstrate that the covenant made with Adam is essentially no different from the other covenants with respect to obedience (works) and grace:

- The covenant was made with Adam to remind him that he was a servant of the Great King (Gen 1.26), and also to confirm that he was a son in God’s household (Lk 3.38). Like Adam, Moses and Israel were in the same relationship with God (Ex 6.7; Num 12.7). David also was a servant of the LORD, in the same relationship to God as was Adam (e.g., Ps 2.2, 7[5]), and so are all of God’s people (2 Cor 6.18). The Covenant teaches all mankind (the people in the OT, and those under the New Covenant) through Adam that he is under God’s Divine Providence and that he must rely on God, and not himself, for all things. The covenant made with Adam demonstrated that man could not of himself obtain (or retain) the promised reward. Ultimately man is dependent on God for all things.
- The condition of obedience in the covenant made with Adam is the same condition that we find in all later covenant administrations. It is the overriding condition of the Covenant. For example, in the covenants made with Abraham and Moses it is clear that obedience is a key component of each covenant administration. In the covenant made with Abraham obedience is required (e.g., Gen 17.9ff), and so also in the covenant made with Moses (e.g., Dt 4.1). In the Covenant mediated by Christ, obedience is also required (e.g., Mt 5.17-48; Jn 14.15). Jesus had to obey every condition of the covenant perfectly (Heb 10.7).

To single out obedience through works in the covenant made with Adam may lead to the identification of a distinction where there is no difference. The covenant made with Adam had no more to do with works than did any of the other covenants.

- The condition of obedience demonstrates an organic connection between the covenant made with Adam and later covenant administrations. But the offer of life also demonstrates this connection. Compare Genesis 2.16,17 with Deuteronomy 30.15-20 and note that in both covenant administrations God offers man life or death. Life is obtained through continual obedience to the Covenant. “Thus that covenant of works into which God entered with man was a *gracious thing* [emphasis added]. It contained, indeed, a possibility of death,

but it contained also the promise of assured and eternal life. If the temptation was yielded to, there would be death; but if the temptation was resisted, even the possibility of death would be removed.”[6]

- Obedience was required, but this obedience could not be accomplished through man’s efforts. In this respect, the covenant made with Adam has the same characteristics as the other covenant administrations. It came from God and its fulfillment rested ultimately with God’s gracious dealings with man.

Adam, along with Noah, Abraham, and the Israelites, was able to continue walking before God in the way of obedience only as long as God continued to offer his preserving strength. Adam was created with the law of God written in his heart and had the power to fulfill it. Yet, for a time, it was possible for him (as with the angels) to transgress. While Adam had liberty to obey or disobey, his continued obedience was dependent on God’s providential restraint.

It is difficult for us to align God’s sovereignty with man’s supposed moral liberty. We must be very careful not to make God the author of sin, but it is clear that ultimately it is only as God restrains man from sin that men and women are able to obey. Even Jesus said that he could do only what the Father willed (Jn 5.19; 6.57; 12.50; 14.31). The obedience of Jesus, in his human nature, was dependent on the Divine will. So, with Adam, the provision of providential protection from sin was dependent on a gracious action on the part of God. In this respect, the covenant made with Adam is a covenant based on grace.

The administration of grace was applied differently to Adam than it is to those whom Christ represents. Adam was created with a personal righteousness whereas those represented by Christ have an imputed righteousness. Also the grace given to believers is perpetually sustaining (a believer cannot lose his salvation, Romans 8.35-39) whereas the grace given to Adam in the garden was not. Because of the difference in the status of man, with respect to obedience, before and after the fall, the application of grace is different. Nevertheless the covenant made with Adam is as much an administration of grace as are any of the other covenant administrations found in the Bible.

- Christ came into the world as the Last Adam (1 Cor 15.45) to fulfill the obligations of the covenant made with Adam—perfect obedience. Christ fulfilled not only the Davidic and Mosaic covenants, and all the other explicit OT covenants, but he also fulfilled the covenant made with Adam. This demonstrates that God had planned from eternity that Christ would keep all the covenants on man’s behalf. All the covenant administrations in the Bible are earthly manifestations of the Eternal Covenant made between Christ and the

Father. All the covenants are administrations of God's grace through Christ. The covenant made with Adam is just one of the many instances of the Covenant of Grace provided by God for the provision of perfect obedience, through Christ, on man's behalf.

- There is evidence within the documents produced by the authors of the *WCofF* that they included the 'covenant of works' in same class with all the other covenants.
 - They give chapter 7 the following title: "Of God's Covenant with Man." For this chapter they use the word 'covenant' in the singular. This seems to imply that they believed that there was only one overriding covenant between God and Man, of which the 'covenant of works' was one administration.
 - They open chapter 7 with the following words: "The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works ..." By using the word 'first' they seem to indicate that this was the first in a sequence of many covenantal administrations. By using 'first' they imply that there was at least a 'second' in the same class. This may show that, in their view, there is only one Covenant and that the covenant made with Adam was the first administration of that Covenant.
 - In the *Shorter Catechism* (Q 12) they call the covenant made with Adam a 'covenant of Life' rather than a 'covenant of works': "What special act of providence did God exercise toward man in the estate wherein he was created? When God had created man, he entered into a covenant of life with him, upon condition of perfect obedience; forbidding him to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, upon the pain of death."

If these considerations are correct, there has been, and is, only one covenant between God and man. Christ is the ultimate mediator of this covenant. There have been a number of administrations of this covenant and a number of earthly typical human representatives including Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David. Adam was the first human (federal) representative of the first enactment of the Covenant.

Based on the above, it would seem that:

1. Man is perpetually under a covenant obligation to God (from creation to consummation),
2. God made a covenant with Adam, who represented all mankind,
3. The obligations of the covenant made with Adam continue to apply to all mankind, and
4. Christ, as the Last Adam, has fulfilled the obligations of the covenant made with Adam on our behalf.