

## The Covenant with Adam

### A Brief Historical Analysis

By [Rev. Angus Stewart](#)

(slightly modified from an article first published in the Standard Bearer)

Reformed churches teach a covenant relationship between pre-fall Adam and the Triune God. In this article, we shall analyze the views of various theologians, especially John Calvin, culminating in the work of Herman Hoeksema who identified the covenant, including the covenant with Adam, as fellowship between the living God and His son whom He created in His own image.

#### 1. Is There a Covenant With Adam?

The Christian church has spoken of the relationship between God and Adam before the fall in terms of the covenant from at least as far back as Augustine (354-430).<sup>1</sup> Reformed theology has developed this truth. Scholars have debated, however, if Calvin (1509-1564) held to a pre-fall covenant with Adam.

Luther (1483-1546) and many Reformed theologians rightly see a reference to God's covenant with Adam in Hosea 6:7.<sup>2</sup> From his commentary on Hosea 6:7, it is clear that Calvin was aware that some in his day understood the verse this way: "Others explain the words thus, 'They have transgressed as *Adam* the covenant.'" However, Calvin calls this interpretation "frigid," "diluted" and "vapid;" and so does "not stop to refute" it.

Calvin scholars have found only one passage in which the Genevan Reformer

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<sup>1</sup> Peter A. Lillback cites Augustine's *City of God* 16.27 and *On Marriage and Concupiscence* 2.11.24 (*The Binding of God: Calvin's Role in the Development of Covenant Theology* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001], pp. 41-45).

<sup>2</sup> Cf. B. B. Warfield, "Hosea VI.7: Adam or Man?" in *Selected Shorter Writings*, vol. 1 (USA: P & R, 1970), pp. 116-129. Similarly, Herman Bavinck notes that "the translation of the words *ke'adam* [in Hosea 6:7] by 'like Adam' led many to a similar view [to that of Augustine who believed that God established a covenant relation with pre-Fall Adam]" and cites in this connection J. Marck (*Reformed Dogmatics*, John Bolt [ed.], John Vriend [trans.] [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2004], vol. 2, p. 567 and n. 13).

speaks explicitly of God's covenant with pre-fall Adam. In his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Calvin writes of the "covenants" (plural) with Adam and with Noah and their respective sacraments or signs:

One is when [God] gave Adam and Eve the tree of life as a guarantee of immortality, that they might assure themselves of it as long as they should eat of its fruit [Gen. 2:9; 3:22]. Another, when he set the rainbow for Noah and his descendants, as a token that he would not destroy the earth with a flood [Gen. 9:13-16]. These, Adam and Noah regarded as sacraments. Not that the tree provided them with an immortality which it could not give to itself; nor that the rainbow (which is but a reflection of the sun's rays opposite) could be effective in holding back the waters; but because they had a mark engraved upon them by God's Word, so that they were proofs and seals of his covenants (*Institutes* 4.14.18).<sup>3</sup>

Calvin does not call this pre-fall covenant a "covenant of works" or a "covenant of creation" or a "covenant of nature," terms used by Zacharias Ursinus (1534-1583) and others.<sup>4</sup> The phrase "covenant with Adam" would fit well with the above quotation from the French reformer.

## 2. Could Unfallen Adam Have Attained Eternal, Heavenly Life?

Calvin believed that "the first man would have passed to a better life had he remained upright" (Comm. on Gen. 3:19). By a "better" life, he means, more specifically, "eternal life" (*Institutes* 2.1.4) and *heavenly* life, for "he would have passed into heaven without death" (Comm. on Gen. 2:16-17).

Calvin opines, "In this integrity man by free will had the power, if he so willed, to attain eternal life." A few lines later he writes, "Adam could have stood if he had wished, seeing that he fell solely by his own will" (*Institutes* 1.15.8). We have no quarrel with the statement that Adam would have "stood" in the way of obedience. But neither Calvin nor anyone since has proved that Scripture teaches that Adam would have received "eternal, heavenly life."

Commenting on "man became a living soul," Calvin writes,

Paul makes an antithesis between this living soul and the quickening spirit which Christ confers upon the faithful (I Cor. 15:45) for no other purpose than to teach us that the state of man was not perfected in the person of

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<sup>3</sup> "The term 'sacrament'" in this context, Calvin explains, "embraces generally all those signs which God has ever enjoined upon men to render them more certain and confident of the truth of his promises." In this broad category, Calvin includes Gideon's fleece and Hezekiah's sundial going back ten degrees. Thus Calvin is not referring to the tree of life as if it were the equivalent of baptism or the Lord's Supper.

<sup>4</sup> *Westminster Larger Catechism*, Q. & A. 20, also speaks of a "covenant of life" with Adam.

Adam; but it is a peculiar benefit conferred by Christ, that we may be renewed to a life which is *celestial*, whereas before the fall of Adam, man's life was only *earthly*, seeing it had no firm and settled constancy (Comm. on Gen. 2:7).

To say the least, I Corinthians 15:45 (and Calvin's remarks on it above) do not sit easy with the notion that pre-fall Adam could have attained to eternal, heavenly life in the way of obedience, both for himself and, by implication, his descendants.

I Corinthians 15:45-49 draws a contrast between the first Adam and the "last" or "second" Adam, Jesus Christ. First, Christ is "the Lord from heaven," while Adam is merely "of the earth, earthy" (I Cor. 15:47), a "clayey figure," as Calvin puts it (Comm. on Gen. 2:7). Second, Adam is "natural;" Christ is "spiritual" (I Cor. 15:46). Third, whereas "Adam was made a living soul; the last Adam was made a quickening spirit" (I Cor. 15:45). The latter happened through the incarnation, death, resurrection and session of Christ. Thus if it took the incarnation, cross and ascension of the "spiritual" "Lord from heaven"—"a quickening spirit!"—to convey eternal, heavenly life to the elect, how could the "earthy," "natural" Adam, who was merely "a living soul," ever gain eternal, heavenly life and communicate it to his posterity?

Though many Presbyterian and Reformed men reckon that Adam could have gained *eternal, heavenly* life, the *Westminster Standards* do not actually specify this: "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" (*Westminster Confession* 7:2). Nor do the *Westminster Standards* mention a period of probation, Adam's receiving heavenly life *for all his descendants* (had he remained faithful) or the possibility of Adam's *meriting* with God (never mind meriting eternal and heavenly life *for all his descendants!*). The phrase "covenant of *works*"—also called the "covenant of life" (*Westminster Larger Catechism*, Q. & A. 20)—does not at all require the idea of merit. Works out of gratitude to his gracious creator were the way in which Adam continued in covenant fellowship with God. The *Westminster Standards* simply state that Adam and "his posterity" would receive "life" in the way of "perfect and personal obedience" (*Westminster Confession* 7:2). However, Adam, our representative head, sinned and died—and so we died too (Gen. 2:17; Rom. 5:12; 6:23).

Thomas Goodwin (1600-1680), an English Puritan and prominent Westminster Assembly delegate, makes a sustained attack on the idea of Adam gaining eternal, heavenly life by his perseverance in part 2 of his *Of the Creatures, and the Condition of their State by Creation*. He appeals to I Corinthians 15:45 and its context many times.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas Goodwin, *The Works of Thomas Goodwin* (USA: Tanski Publications, 1996), vol. 7, pp. 36, 37, 48, 49-50, 62, 70, 73, 76-91, etc.

In his work, *Of Christ the Mediator*, Goodwin writes,

Adam could not earn a condition of a higher rank, nor by all his works have brought any greater preferment than what he was created in. To compass it was *ultra suam sphaerum*, above his sphere; he could never have done it. As, for instance, he could not have attained that state in heaven which the angels enjoy. What says Christ? "When you have done all you can, say, You are unprofitable servants" (Luke 17:10). This he could no more do than other creatures by keeping those their ordinances can merit to be "translated into the glorious liberty" which they wait for, and shall have at the latter day. The moon, though she keep all her motions set her by God never so regularly, yet she cannot thereby attain to the light of the sun as a new reward thereof. And thus no more can any pure creature of itself, by all its righteousness, obtain in justice a higher condition to itself. And therefore the angels, by all their own grace, have not to this day earned a better condition than they were created in.<sup>6</sup>

Nor is the idea that unfallen Adam could have gained eternal, heavenly life distinctively Reformed, for, as Goodwin points out, the Roman Catholics also hold this.<sup>7</sup>

Though Calvin (wrongly) held that Adam could have attained to heaven, he (rightly) rejects all notion of Adam meriting with God. Peter Lillback writes, "Calvin's theology permits no merit in the prelapsarian context."<sup>8</sup> He explains,

Calvin's rejection of merit in the pre-fall context is partly motivated by a desire to refute the Roman Catholic theologians' connection of merit and the justification of the sinner. But his antipathy to merit is deeper than this. For Calvin, no creature of God [including pre-fall Adam and the elect angels], even though perfect, could merit anything from God the Creator.<sup>9</sup>

Lillback cites Calvin's commentary on Romans 11:35:

Paul not only concludes that God owes us nothing, on account of our corrupt and sinful nature; but he denies, that if man were perfect, he could bring anything before God, by which he could gain his favour; for as soon as he begins to exist, he is already by the right of creation so much indebted to his Maker, that he has nothing of his own.

Luther's deadly hatred of creaturely merit in all its forms is well-known. Other Reformed theologians, such as Thomas Goodwin and the Swiss Daniel Wyttenbach (1706-1779), also rejected the idea of Adam meriting

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<sup>6</sup> Goodwin, *Works*, vol. 5, pp. 82-83.

<sup>7</sup> Goodwin, *Works*, vol. 7, p. 57.

<sup>8</sup> Lillback, *Binding of God*, p. 299.

<sup>9</sup> Lillback, *Binding of God*, p. 298.

with God, even if it was *ex pacto* (out of the covenant).<sup>10</sup>

### 3. Was the Covenant With Adam a Contract or a Bond?

Peter Mastricht (1630-1706) speaks for many Reformed and Presbyterian theologians: "all the essentials of the covenant of works are contained in the first publication of it [in Genesis 2:17]."<sup>11</sup> This covenant of works includes a "condition" (not eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil), a "penalty" for eating (death) and a "promise" (eternal and heavenly life). In his commentary on Genesis 2:16-17 and in his *Institutes* (2.1.4), Calvin uses words such as "test," "threat" and "promise," though he does not present the schematised theology of many later theologians.

However, not only is there no promise of eternal life in Genesis 2:17, this system also presents the pre-fall covenant as merely a means to an end. But the Bible teaches that the covenant is eternal and the goal or end of God's dealings with His people (Rev. 21:3), not merely a means. Moreover, if "all the essentials of the covenant of works" are contained in Genesis 2:17, then there was a time, after Adam's creation and before God issued the prohibitory command, in which he was not in covenant with God. A "covenantless" existence for pre-fall Adam, even for a short time, is unthinkable!

The covenant with Adam was a bond of fellowship between the Almighty Triune God and Adam His covenant friend-servant whom He created in His own image. Thus, as Calvin notes, "In the very order of the creation the eternal solicitude of God for man is conspicuous, because he furnished the world with all things needful" for man (Comm. on Gen. 1:26). God gave Adam a "home" in "Paradise," which Calvin further describes as "a place which he had especially embellished with every variety of delights, with abounding fruits, and with all other most excellent gifts ... from the enjoyment of which he might infer the paternal benevolence of God" (Comm. on Gen. 2:8). Thus Adam was "in every respect, happy" for He lived as a recipient of the divine "liberality" (Comm. on Gen. 2:16). In His goodness, God gave Adam a wife with whom he lived in "sweetest harmony" and with whom he enjoyed "a holy, as well as friendly and peaceful, intercourse" as "the inseparable associate of his life" (Comm. on Gen. 2:18).

Herman Hoeksema developed the truth of covenant fellowship between the Creator God and His creation, man. He worked with the biblical data of the covenant as walking with God, dwelling with God and friendship with God, and built on ideas found in the Reformed tradition, especially in its treatment of the blissful communion Adam enjoyed with God in the Garden of Eden. Hoeksema writes,

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Heinrich Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1978), p. 296; Goodwin, *Works*, vol. 7, pp. 23, 29, 49.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, p. 290.

From the very first moment of his existence ... and by virtue of his being created after the image of God, Adam stood in [a] covenant relation to God and was conscious of that living fellowship and friendship ... He knew God and loved Him and was conscious of God's love to him. He enjoyed the favour of God. He received the Word of God, walked with God and talked with Him; and he dwelled in the house of God in paradise the first.<sup>12</sup>

Hoeksema's formulation of the covenant (both before and after the fall) as a gracious bond of friendship explains the biblical data, excludes all human merit and preserves the absolute sovereignty of the Triune God.

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<sup>12</sup> Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids, MI: RFP, 1966), p. 222. For more on God's covenant with Adam, see David J. Engelsma, "The Covenant of Creation with Adam," *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*, vol. 40, no. 1 (November, 2006), pp. 3-42; Dennis Lee, "A Brief Study of the Doctrine of the Covenant of Works in the Reformed and Presbyterian Tradition," *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*, vol. 37, no. 1 (November, 2003), pp. 55-81; Nathan J. Langerak, "A Critique of the Covenant of Works in Contemporary Controversy" *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*, vol. 44, no. 2 (April, 2011), pp. 3-53.