

Covenant Theology Illustrated:

Romans 5 on the Federal Headship of Adam and Christ

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Understanding Covenant Theology

Let me make a bold assertion about Covenant theology: It is not incidental to Reformed theology — it is Reformed theology. In the United States, the debate with Dispensationalism in the twentieth century led many to define Covenant theology more narrowly as "Not-Dispensationalism." Consequently, Covenant theology's scope for many was narrowed to the relation of Old Testament Israel with the New Testament church. But it is much more extensive and, frankly, more interesting than this.

Covenant theology is as vast as any systematic theology, touching on all the standard theological loci (topics), because it is simply systematic theology focused on the Bible's own organizing principle of covenant. Nineteenth century Reformed theologian and Princeton professor, Charles Hodge, points out the benefits of this approach:

“As this [covenant] is the Scriptural mode of representation, it is of great importance that it should be retained in theology. Our only security for retaining the truths of the Bible, is to adhere to the Scriptures as closely as possible in our mode of presenting the doctrines therein revealed.”

Notice that covenant is a "mode of presenting ... doctrines" for Hodge, not just one doctrine among many. Other theologies display the structure of more parochial interests — for example, liberation theology or feminist theologies — but Covenant theology is an attempt to capture the theology of the whole of Scripture.

Covenant, then, is not itself a locus (topic) of our theology like the Trinity, Christology, or justification. Rather, covenant is a main organizing principle of our theology and correlates with all — or nearly all — the loci. While covenant's most direct impact is in soteriology (the doctrine of salvation), it extends far beyond this. For example, the economical doctrine of the Trinity is described in classic Covenant theology in terms of an eternal, intra-Trinitarian covenant, commonly called the *pactum salutis* (or, covenant of redemption). The Scriptures

themselves can be seen as having the form of binding covenant documents (e.g., Rev. 22:18-19). This does not even speak of the doctrines of the person and work of Christ (i.e., Emmanuel, "God with Us" — a covenant formula), the Church, and the Sacraments, which are all addressed within the biblical rubric of covenant.

Hence, Covenant theologians see the concept of covenant operating in scriptural passages where there are no explicit references to the word "covenant." Fundamental theological principles often give shape to biblical material without being explicitly stated. For instance, there are no explicit references to Trinity in the Bible, but every orthodox Christian affirms that the biblical material is shaped by — and thereby attests to — a Trinitarian concept of God.³ We could also point to the Davidic covenant. The word "covenant" does not occur when God makes his covenant with David in 2 Samuel 7:8-16 (parallel in 1 Chron. 17:1-14), but Scripture explicitly calls this a covenant later (Ps. 89:30-36; Jer. 33: 21). In such cases, it is sufficient to show that the concepts that define covenant are necessarily operating in a passage to see covenant at work much as we all do with many other doctrines of Scripture.

The Two-Covenant Schema

Integral to all Covenant theology is the two-covenant schema of the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. These two overarching covenants are classically expressed in the Westminster Larger Catechism of 1648 (WLC), which is still used today as an expression of faith and instruction by Reformed communions worldwide.

Q. 20. What was the providence of God toward man in the estate in which he was created?

A. The providence of God toward man in the estate in which he was created, was the placing him in paradise, appointing him to dress it, giving him liberty to eat of the fruit of the earth; putting the creatures under his dominion, and ordaining marriage for his help; affording him communion with himself; instituting the sabbath; entering into a covenant of life with him, upon condition of personal, perfect, and perpetual obedience, of which the tree of life was a pledge; and forbidding to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, upon the pain of death [emphasis added].

Q. 30. Doth God leave all mankind to perish in the estate of sin and misery?

A. God doth not leave all men to perish in the estate of sin and misery, into which they fell by the breach of the first covenant, commonly called the covenant of works; but of his mere love and mercy delivereth his elect

out of it, and bringeth them into an estate of salvation by the second covenant, commonly called the covenant of grace.

Q. 32. How is the grace of God manifested in the second covenant [emphasis added]?

A. The grace of God is manifested in the second covenant, in that he freely provideth and offereth to sinners a mediator, and life and salvation by him; and requiring faith as the condition to interest them in him, promiseth and giveth his Holy Spirit to all his elect, to work in them that faith, with all other saving graces; and to enable them unto all holy obedience, as the evidence of the truth of their faith and thankfulness to God, and as the way which he hath appointed them to salvation [emphasis added].

Q. 33. Was the covenant of grace always administered after one and the same manner [emphasis added]?

A. The covenant of grace was not always administered after the same manner, but the administrations of it under the Old Testament were different from those under the New [emphasis added].

The catechism teaches that there was a covenant of works (or covenant of life) with Adam, which required of him, particularly personal obedience sanctioned by the curse of death (Gen. 2:17; 3:23-24).⁵ When Adam broke this covenant, God immediately instituted a promissory covenant, which the WLC calls the "second covenant," and the "covenant of grace" (Gen. 3:15; cf. Eph. 2:12). This covenant of grace was administered differently under the different dispensations (e.g., "from Adam until Moses"; Rom. 5:14), but its substance was the same in every epoch after Adam's fall in that it focused on a covenant mediator.

The essential difference between the covenant of works and covenant of grace is well expressed by Herman Witsius, a prominent seventeenth century Dutch theologian:

In the covenant of works there was no mediator: in that of grace, there is the mediator Christ Jesus.... In the covenant of works, the condition of perfect obedience was required, to be performed by man himself, who had consented to it. In that of grace, the same condition is proposed, as to be, or as already performed, by a mediator. And this substitution of the person, consists the principal and essential difference of the covenants.

Keep in mind that the covenant of works was a covenant imposing personal obligation upon Adam. He was bound to its stipulations and its curses fell on him for breaking it. Under the covenant of grace, however — whether in its administration before the coming of Christ or after Christ, for its effects are

eternal and benefit both the Old Testament and New Testament household of God together (e.g., Heb. 3:5-6; 9:15; 11:39-40; 13:20) — the essential character is the substitution of the Mediator and Guarantor who himself fulfills its terms exactly and takes upon himself the curses of the broken covenant on behalf of others.

Furthermore, in the covenant of works, Adam was a "public person." The more modern term is that Adam was the "federal head" of the human race. As covenantal or federal head, Adam acted on behalf of his whole race in the covenant of works. This is not entirely without analogies today. For example, when the president of the United States signs a treaty, it binds all the citizens he represents to uphold that treaty. Should the president break the treaty through his official actions, the whole country may be accountable. The covenant of grace has as its head, the "second man," and the "Last Adam" (1 Cor. 15:47, 45), the Lord Jesus Christ.

Federal Headship in Romans 5

Let's see how Covenant theology illumines a particular passage, Romans 5:12-21, one of the more profound passages in a book full of profundities. This is the centerpiece for Paul's exposition of the federal headship of Christ. It is rightly regarded by confessional Lutherans as a clear exposition of forensic justification, but what Covenant theology contributes to this essential Protestant viewpoint is that imputation works within the biblical structure of covenant. Justification is not forensic in an abstract sort of way. Neither is Paul appropriating principles from Greco-Roman jurisprudence, which are foreign to the biblical conceptions. What is working here is covenant jurisprudence and goes back to the beginnings of God's revelation, indeed, to Adam himself and the Adamic covenant of works.

The passage opens referring to what precedes it: "*Therefore*, just as sin entered the world." Some commentators take this Greek conjunctive phrase (*dia touto*), rendered "therefore" or "for this reason," as relating what Paul says in Romans 5:12-21 to all of what he has said from Romans 1:18 up to this point, particularly to his indictment of both Jews and Greeks (a comprehensive division of mankind) under the divine condemnation (e.g., Rom. 3:9-20). The basis of this view is that the "therefore" normally identifies the preceding thoughts as forming the rationale for something that follows:

"For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him.... *Therefore* God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity...." (Rom. 1:21, 24). The connection here answers the question, "Why did God give them over? The rationale: because they refused to glorify him."

Although the preceding view on the "therefore" in Romans 5:12 has some merit, I

believe that Paul, in his own inimitable way, is actually connecting Romans 5:12-21 more narrowly to one point that he had been stressing in the immediately preceding passage. It is a fundamental point of the Pauline Gospel: that Christ died on our behalf while we were weak and helpless (5:6), guilty sinners (5:8), and God's rebellious enemies (5:10). Christ hardly died because we were personally righteous and, therefore, deserving of acquittal at his judgment seat (cf. 5:7), nor did he die only after our renovation. The question should arise in our minds from this "on our behalf" — as it does in Paul's — how can there be this kind of exchange? How can Christ die in the place of someone else? "No man can redeem the life of another or give to God a ransom for him — the ransom for a life is costly, no payment is ever enough" (Ps. 49:7-8).

How is it then that Christ *could* give his life in exchange for ours when no one else can do this for another? How can Jesus Christ act as our Substitute? This is the thread in Romans 5:6-11, which Romans 5:12-21 picks up and answers, and the "therefore" in verse 12 makes the connection: Christ died *on our behalf*, therefore, we must see that the workings of this exchange is just as in Adam ... so also in Christ. In biblical theology, this substitution is the act of a federal representative, or using biblical terms, a "Mediator" or "Guarantor of the new covenant" (Heb. 7:22; 8:6; 9:15; 12:24; cf. 1 Tim. 2:5).

What then is the precise basis for this great exchange of Christ for us? Paul answers in Romans 5:12-21 by introducing Christ as the Last Adam (1 Cor. 15:45), summarized briefly in other letters: "One died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again" (2 Cor. 5:14-15). But how can one die for all? Paul's answer: "For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive" (1 Cor. 15:21-22). His answer then is that Christ functions as covenant representative in a way analogous with Adam (granting certain ways in which the analogy breaks down, which he mentions in Romans 5:15-17). This is the substance of the issue and the answer that Paul provides in a little more detail in Romans 5:12-21 than elsewhere in his writings.

The Adam — Christ Comparison

When you read through Romans 5:12-21, it is clear that Paul's main topic is the Adam-Christ comparison. He introduces the comparison in verse 12, "just as through one man," but then breaks off in mid-comparison to make some important qualifying statements about the workings of covenant law and imputation in redemptive history (vv. 13-14). Some interpreters do not believe that Paul breaks off his comparison of Adam with Christ in verse 12 and instead mistakenly think that Paul is comparing Adam with us, the "all" and "the many" descendants of Adam. In its pure form, this is a Pelagian teaching: "As long as people sin as Adam sinned, they likewise die." In other words, just as Adam

sinned, so also we all sin. Adam stands in this schema as merely a symbol for Everyman and death comes to us all only because we all personally sin.

The Pelagian reading of Romans 5:12 fails for several reasons, most importantly, because of what Paul says in the passage. Paul does not say "just as Adam ... so *also* everyone ..." in verse 12, which would indicate the second half of a comparison (as in Rom. 5:18-19, 21; 6:4; 1 Cor. 11:12; Gal. 4:29; Eph. 5:29; Col. 3:13; etc.). Instead, the words rendered "and in this way" (NIV) in verse 12 introduce the result of Adam's sin for "all men" not part of a comparison. Paul is not comparing the "one man" with "all men," but asserting that Adam's sin was itself the sin of all people.

Furthermore, the Pelagian interpretation of verse 12 must ignore other verses in the passage. Paul repeatedly shows in verses 15-21 that he is not comparing us with Adam, but *Christ* with Adam and that the cause of our death was not our trespass, but Adam's. Paul is not ambiguous if you read the whole passage. For instance: "Sin entered the world through one man ... in this way death came to all men ... the many died by the trespass of the one man ... judgment followed one sin and brought condemnation ... by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man ... the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men ... through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners" (vv. 12, 15-19; NIV).

And finally, Paul explicitly denies the comparison of Adam's sin with our sin (I paraphrase): "death reigned ... even over those who did not sin in the same way that Adam did, by breaking a curse-sanctioned commandment" (v. 14). All sin is law-breaking (1 John 3:4), but our sin is not comparable with Adam's because he was the federal representative of the whole race in whom all fell, and we are not.

Adam as Federal Representative

Paul carefully distinguishes between "sin" and "transgression" in Romans 5:14, which directly relates to a covenantal reading. Those who died from Adam until Moses did sin (v. 14; cf. e.g., Gen. 6:5, 11-12), but it was not like the *transgression* of Adam, because Adam was under a covenant of works sanctioned by a curse for disobedience: "In the day you eat of that tree you will die." That is the distinction between the pre-Fall Adamic period and afterward — the covenantal arrangement was different.

This covenant with Adam demanded of him *personal* obedience and personally obligated him to keep all of God's holy law written on his heart as a creature made in the divine image (cf. Rom 2:14-15) and the special probationary commandment not to eat of the one tree. Adam was already the natural head of the race by the creation order (1 Cor. 11:8-9; 1 Tim. 2:13), but by issuing the commandment sanctioned by a curse for disobedience, God was displaying

Adam as a special federal representative of the whole race. To a Jewish audience, the issuing of a death-sanctioned commandment was tantamount to the issuing of a covenant: "For the covenant from of old is 'You will surely die'" (Wisdom of Ben Sirach 14:17; II cent. b.c.; emphasis added).

Adam as Type of Christ

Paul profoundly shows the interrelationship of Christ with Adam in Romans 5:14 when he says that Adam "was a pattern [Greek *typos*] of the one to come." Paul could have said that Adam was a "pattern of *Christ*," since this is what he means. Instead, he reveals in a subtle way that Christ was already in view when Adam was set up as federal representative of his race: Adam was a "pattern for the [Last] Adam to come" who was destined to serve as the head over all things in the future. In other words, though Adam was first in time, Christ's headship in the new covenant was already in view in God's counsel. This is the link that validates Paul's comparing Adam's transgression with Christ's act of obedience and their respective outcomes.

So far we've focused on the covenant of works and the Adamic connection with the race and how Paul interrelates Adam and Christ, but it should be emphasized that Paul's overriding purpose here — as always! — is the overwhelming glory of grace (i.e., the point of vv. 15-17). The comparison between Adam and Christ underscores the fact that if Adam's *covenant disobedience* (v. 19) had real consequences leading to condemnation (v. 18) because all were judicially constituted sinners by the transgression of Adam (v. 19), then in an analogous fashion Christ's *covenant obedience* (v. 19) had real consequences, too. In Christ, the newly recreated covenant people (Eph. 2:14-18) are judicially constituted righteous (v. 19) — even though they are not righteous in themselves (Rom. 5:7; cf. 1 Pet. 3:18) — and, therefore, they are justified by the covenant obedience of their Surety and Mediator. All who reject Christ, must themselves bear the full obligation to keep the whole law personally (especially Gal. 5:2-3). Yet in Adam they are already condemned by the "eternal covenant" (Isa. 24:5-6).

Given that this threatened curse of God's law is ever in the background (e.g., Deut. 27:15-26; Gal. 3:10-14), the Old Testament prophets looked ahead to forgiveness of sins and eternal communion with God in the new covenant (e.g., Jer. 31:31ff.; Ezek. 16:61-63; Zech. 9:11). With the coming of Christ, God has now displayed the judicial basis for the fulfillment of the new covenant promises: the exchange of his incarnate Son's life for the life of his people who would otherwise fall under the inexorable curse of his covenant law for the transgression of Adam as well as for their own sins (Rom. 3:25-26; Gal. 3:13; 2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 9:14-15). And all of the preliminary manifestations of the covenant of grace under the Old Testament displayed this primary fact: that by the one the many receive the promised inheritance. The covenant with Noah brought deliverance from the flood-judgment to his whole household (Gen. 6:18;

Heb. 11:7); the Israelites received the typological inheritance of Palestine because of God's covenant with Abraham (e.g., Exod. 3:6-7; Lev. 26:42); when Phinehas received God's "covenant of peace" his descendants benefited with a perpetual priesthood (Num. 25:12-13) and the heirs of the Davidic covenant inherited special treatment as sons of God (2 Sam. 7:8-16; cf. Rev. 21:7).

The "covenant of peace" extended to Phinehas is particularly interesting because it is later interpreted in Psalm 106 as being tantamount to receiving imputed righteousness: "This was *credited to him as righteousness* for endless generations to come" (Ps. 106:31; emphasis added). These are the same terms used of Abraham who was credited as righteous by faith (Gen. 15:6) and shows the organic connection of thought between imputation and covenant in the Bible that Paul is developing in Romans 5:12-21.

The Importance of Covenant

Covenant is the fabric of the whole Bible. Once this fundamental schema of covenant in the Scriptures comes clear, all the patterns of God's relations with the sons and daughters of Adam unfolds into a rich tapestry unifying the Scriptures.

We have seen that Adam in Romans 5:12-21 was the federal representative of his race under the covenant of works. Some theologians reject this understanding of Paul's teaching outright, because it "violates all sense of justice."

But if we are to use our "sense of justice" as an ultimate criterion for judging the truths of Scripture, then shouldn't we deny all covenant imputation as well? If sin cannot be imputed from one to many, conversely it cannot be imputed from many to one. Under this method, how can we maintain that "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree" "the righteous for the unrighteous" (1 Pet. 2:24; 3:18; cf. Isa. 53)? Shouldn't this violate our sense of justice, too? And if our sins were not imputed to Christ, neither can his righteousness become ours (e.g., 1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Cor. 5:21). Then we would all be cut off from Christ and *personally* obligated (as was Adam), to keep all of God's holy law ourselves (Gal. 5:2-3 again).

In contrast to this grim prospect, Covenant theology offers a fresh restatement of classic Protestant insights into the essential truths of justification as the imputed righteousness of Christ by grace alone and received by faith alone. What makes imputation work is covenant, for covenant is the forensic instrument by which God faithfully extends his blessings to the heirs of the covenant of grace. The curse on Adam was not the last word on covenant in the Bible. This is what excites Paul in Romans 5:12-21 and what excites covenant theologians as well:

God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many (v. 15) ... the gift followed many trespasses and brought justification (v. 16) ... those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ (v. 17) ... the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men (v. 18) ... through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous (v. 19) ... grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord (v. 21; NIV).

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