

The Benefit of Having a Worthy Opponent

How the Theology of Seventeenth-Century Puritans Can Be Complemented by the Nineteenth-Century German Thought Known as the Mercersburg Theology

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CHAPTER FOUR (Cont.)

The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man

Herman Witsius (1636-1708) was born in Enkhuizen, The Netherlands, and was recognized as a gifted student, learning the Scriptures in Greek and Hebrew before entering college.¹ He was a part of a movement known as the Further Dutch Reformation which emphasized the inner experience of Reformed doctrine and personal sanctification. It was a movement influenced by English Puritanism, and the author personally studied in England for a time. He was known for elevating faith over reason, believing that reason lost its purity in the fall of Adam and that reason is not fully restored to a pure state in this lifetime, even in the regenerate.²

It is divine election that sets the stage for understanding covenant theology because the covenants are initiated solely by God and are not a response to human conditions.³ Witsius was among the first of those in the Further Dutch Reformation to connect so closely election and covenant.⁴

J. I. Packer describes covenant theology as a hermeneutic, “a way of reading the whole Bible that is itself part of the overall interpretation of the Bible that it undergirds.”⁵ To begin to grasp the covenants of Scripture is to begin to enter elements of the relationship that the members of the Trinity share. The covenant is a means that love, communion, fellowship and righteousness may be extended to us. Packer points out the practicality of understanding the covenants as they provide a framework for understanding God’s dealings with humans. Biblical

¹ Joel R. Beeke, “The Life and Theology of Herman Witsius” in *The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man* vol. 1, by Herman Witsius (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010, rpt.), p. 3.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 5, 10.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁵ J. I. Packer, “Introduction on Covenant Theology” in *The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man* vol. 1, by Herman Witsius (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010, rpt.), p. 27.

ethics then is living out a covenantal life and participating in joint covenantal relationships. He defines a covenant relationship as “a voluntary mutual commitment that binds each party to the other.”⁶ Some covenants are negotiated, while others are imposed unilaterally as all God’s covenants are. A God-given covenant, Packer says, carries obligations (faith and repentance), and the resulting obedience of faith leads God’s people to receive the fullness of God’s promised blessing.⁷

The text of *The Economy of the Covenants* begins with a description of Hebrew and Greek terms for covenant (*berith* and *diatheke* respectively). A survey of their usage throughout Scripture reveals that they may refer to an unchangeable ordinance (such as the pattern of night following day), a testament or will, a promise, a precept (e.g., the Ten Commandments), but most significantly for this present study they refer to a mutual agreement between two parties as between Jonathan and David (1 Samuel 18:3).⁸ The two parties were considered to have been united by covenant into one body. The ratification of ancient covenants could include a solemn feast and the cutting apart of animals with the participants passing between the animals as they pledged themselves to honor the terms of the covenant, submitting to the penalty of sharing death with the animals arranged around them if they should fail to honor their commitment.⁹ When God entered into covenant with Abraham, it meant the flesh of the Messiah would be torn apart in order to honor the promises made that day. In Christ all God’s promises to His people are yes and amen (2 Corinthians 1:20). His blood is the blood of the New Testament (Matthew 26:28).

The covenant promises of God focus on how humans may acquire true happiness, escaping eternal suffering and punishment. Thus such a covenant includes a promise of happiness, conditions that must be met in order to see those promises fulfilled, and threats of punishment for those who violate the conditions stipulated.¹⁰ Man is to value God as his greatest good, and God promises to prove Himself true and faithful. To reject what God promises is to deny His goodness, to rebel against His sovereignty and to reject His holiness. When He stated “I will be your God” (Deuteronomy 26:17), He gave any member of the covenant “full liberty to glory in [Him], as his God, and to expect from Him, that He will become to man, in covenant with Him, what He is to Himself, even a fountain of consummate happiness.”¹¹

Witsius identifies two covenants. One is legal and is called the covenant of works or nature. Its motto is “do this and live.” The law included in it flows directly from

⁶ Ibid., p. 29.

⁷ Ibid., p. 30.

⁸ Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man* vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010, rpt.), pp. 42-43.

⁹ Ibid., p. 44.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 45-46.

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 47-48.

the nature of God and is not a list of arbitrary rules He gives.¹² It includes love for neighbor since love for God leads us to love His image in our neighbor. This translates into a concern that our neighbor “be under God, in God, and for God, and all he has, be for His glory.”¹³ This law which is rooted in God is not only to govern our actions but our very nature as well.¹⁴ The covenant of works also included a symbolic law – that is, not eating the forbidden fruit. This symbolic law served to reinforce that God is the Lord over all things and must be obeyed in every detail.

This first covenant situated Adam in a “state of acquiring a right” which he could have accomplished had he persisted in obedience. Adam’s failure to acquire the right to happiness meant that if the goal of happiness was to be granted, it would have to be the result of mercy produced by a new covenant apart from good works.¹⁵

The second covenant is the covenant of grace which calls fallen sinners to trust in Christ alone to provide the happiness referenced above.¹⁶ Romans 8:3 assures us that God sent His Son in the flesh to do what the law could not do. Jesus procured for the elect eternal life and happiness. The condition of both covenants is the same – perfect obedience to God’s Law. However, in the second covenant, it is Jesus who performs obedience in behalf of those corrupted by original sin. The aim of both covenants is the same – the glory of God. In the covenant of works, God acts as Lawgiver and presents Himself as the chief good calling His creatures to partake of His own happiness. There is no mediator in this covenant. It is its reliance on a substitute that chiefly distinguishes the covenant of grace from the covenant of works. In the covenant of works, man earns his reward. In the covenant of grace, the mediator merits eternal life and rewards for God’s elect.

In the covenant of grace God acts as merciful, granting life to elect sinners, and Jesus is the mediator. In recalling the details above about Dr. Taylor’s desire to protect and promote the glory of God by denying the doctrine of original sin, it seems that covenant theology actually accomplishes what Dr. Taylor desired. It glorifies God. God owes His creatures nothing, and if we produce anything that is proper, it is because of His goodness He supplies to us. But in making covenants God voluntarily indebts Himself to His people.¹⁷ God loves Himself above all else as the chief good. So He loves His image in us. Love opens the door to union/communion in which men and women can partake of God’s own happiness.¹⁸

¹² Ibid., p. 65.

¹³ Ibid., p. 66.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 68.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 71.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 49.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 77.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 77-79.

The covenant of works was a pact God initiated with Adam who served as the representative for the entire human race. He served in two roles – as a man and as the root of the human race. If he obeyed God’s law the reward would have been communion with God for in Him alone is happiness to be found. Death was the punishment for disobedience. The later theologian, Edwards, agreed with Witsius that man was created just and able to delight in supreme truth and in the perfections of God. Adam was created with a holy will, daily revering and loving God as his chief good (Ecclesiastes 7:29).¹⁹ Looking to the New Testament, to Paul’s letter to the church of Ephesus (4:24) where he refers to the condition of regenerate man, Witsius concludes that Adam was created in God’s image in regard to knowledge and righteousness and holiness. While in his original state, Adam had no need of redemption. Salvation was available to him through the tree of life.²⁰ Yet the quality of the righteousness Adam possessed in his pristine state was not the quality of righteousness required for eternal life because it was as yet unproven. The type of righteousness he possessed was able to provide virtue and the basis for acting properly (Ephesians 5:9).²¹ Had it not been for the introduction of sin, the law would have conducted Adam to eternal life.²² Paul says numerous times that a sinner cannot be justified by the works of the Law. Witsius reads backwards from this and interprets this to mean that at one time it would have been possible to receive eternal life through keeping the law. He asserts further that Adam would have been privy to more information than Moses records – both regarding the content of the law and the rewards promised for obedience.²³

To be entrusted with God’s image was to be granted a precious treasure that should be guarded. Yet this calling was not an entirely independent enterprise. A creature cannot function without reference to or dependence on its Creator. So God actively preserved and supplied and sustained Adam’s ability to honor the divine image within him.²⁴ In other words, Adam was lacking nothing required for sustaining obedience. The rule regarding good and evil was written on his conscience. This Witsius names the law of nature. The ruins of the law of nature are evident in humanity today (Romans 2:14-15).²⁵ In the new creation, the law is once again inscribed on the hearts of God’s people as was foretold by Old Testament prophecy. All creation is dependent on its Creator, so if man is properly rational, it would only be because of being in communion with God who is supreme reason.²⁶ Recalling Dr. Taylor’s reliance on reason and common sense which was antithetical to what is plain in divine revelation, it seems his

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 50-51.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 54.

²¹ Ibid., p. 55.

²² Ibid., p. 73.

²³ Ibid., p. 75.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 57.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 60.

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 62-63.

major error may have been a failure to acknowledge dependence on divine providence or that God is supreme.

Again remembering Dr. Taylor, his argument that the commands given to Adam were not meant to involve the entirety of Adam's descendants, we note that Witsius points out that all would agree God's commands to Adam regarding marriage and procreation extend to the entire human race and not just to Adam. So when one considers that plus the evident fact that all humans share in Adam's penalty, it makes the most sense to conclude that Adam was the federal representative of the entire race just as Christ represented the elect in the covenant of grace. Witsius anticipates the arguments of those who may argue that God is unjust for including us in Adam by predicting that given the same situation as Adam faced, we would have done what he did.²⁷

Immediately after sinning Adam began to experience the beginnings of both spiritual and physical death. Witsius explains death as a bad disposition of the body which makes it unfit to host the soul any longer, causing the soul to depart. But the state of dying also includes sorrow, misery and hard labor which culminate in death and prevent life from being a true experience of living. True life includes happiness. Spiritual death is separation of the soul from God or when the Holy Spirit no longer resides there.²⁸ Thus the Apostle Paul referred to being alienated from the life of God (Ephesians 4:18). The Spirit of God illuminates, sanctifies and exhilarates the soul, producing wisdom, pure love and rejoicing out of a good conscience. Death in the soul then is characterized by folly, unholy affections and the torment of a guilty conscience. Witsius clarifies that both living and dead bodies have activity. The living body takes in nourishment and finds delight. The other rots and becomes foul. Likewise, living souls are nourished by God and delight in Him. Man's soul was made to contemplate God, to regard Him as truth and to set its affections on Him as the supreme good. A dead soul decomposes through impure and detestable affections and desires and thought.²⁹ This means spiritual death encompasses both sin and its effects. A consequence of sin is to be given over to sin because being given over to sin is death. The deadness in sin of this life is a prelude to eternal death. Throughout eternity the soul will be conscious of being deprived of supreme good. Such torment is worse suffering than the body being consumed by flames.³⁰ The death threatened as punishment for sin then can be summarized as lack of union with God. God's holiness means He must hate both sin and the sinner, for if He did not punish sin He would resemble the sinner because of His collaboration with it.³¹ This does not mean that God takes delight in inflicting death. He does not because death destroys His creation (Ezekiel

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 58-59.

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 83, 86.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 86-87, 89.

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 89-90.

³¹ Ibid., pp. 96-97.

33:11). God must choose the destruction of the sinner over the option of the destruction of His own glory.³²

One might wonder why sin is such a serious offense, meriting such horrific judgment. Witsius explains that sin is high treason against divine majesty. It is an attempt to pull God down and destroy both Him and His attributes. As mentioned previously, God loves Himself and both His majesty and glory and will punish any attempt by a sinner to injure either. This is referred to in Scripture as God being a jealous God.³³ Sin is so powerfully malignant because it is committed against an infinite good.³⁴

Included in his consideration of the Covenant of Works, Witsius identifies sacraments that belonged to that era. Sacraments are symbols which confirm promises and call man to his duty. They appeal to the eyes and also to the senses of touch and taste to supplement the Word of God which enters the ears. Sacraments reveal to us a foretaste of what is to come. Our author names four sacraments that he believes existed for Adam before the fall – paradise, the tree of life, the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and the Sabbath.³⁵ These sacraments are different from those instituted later because they do not point to justifying faith in Christ or to His ability to purify those corrupted by sin.³⁶

Paradise represented “the most profuse bounty of the Deity” and pointed to a grander residence in God’s presence where one could enjoy God more directly than through His creation. It was calling man to pursue God as his great reward.³⁷ The rivers in Eden pointed to the river of water flowing from God’s throne in heaven which signifies the Holy Spirit. The special place God created for man and the special delight God took in man should have led Adam to seek fulfilment in the Creator only and not in the creation. The food and water and rest in the Garden anticipate an even grander union with God who will satisfy His people forever. Adam was to keep his soul for God as he kept the garden.³⁸

The tree of life signified the Son of God, not in His role as Savior and Mediator because that role did not belong to the covenant of works, but more generally as the Source of life for all. The Son of God has life in Himself and is life.³⁹

The presence of fruit on the tree of the knowledge of good and evil should have caused Adam to consider its mystical significance. It was beautiful, but why was it there? Adam was to refrain from eating it to acknowledge God’s dominion over

³² Ibid., pp. 100-101.

³³ Ibid., p. 93.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 103.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 105.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 106.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 107.

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 108-110.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 112.

him and that he in faith reserved himself for something greater God had promised. There is a greater good to be had and a deeper beauty to be discovered than merely what appeals to physical senses as the forbidden fruit did.⁴⁰

On the first Sabbath God delighted in His own attributes which were demonstrated in creation. Man, likewise, would be expected to do the same.⁴¹ To sanctify the Sabbath would be to reserve it for the special purpose of honoring the Creator. The Sabbath also had a forward-looking aspect in that it pointed ahead to eternal rest and intimate communion with God when labor on earth is done.⁴²

The tragedy regarding the sacraments is that Adam valued a piece of fruit and personal freedom of choice above the promises of the covenant (not unlike the love of free choice that Dr. Taylor represented at his time in history). This leads one to question whether the nomenclature “covenant of works” is most appropriate to describe the first covenant since it seems to some that the failure was one of faith.

The serpent likely struck Eve as miraculous when he spoke. After procuring her attention he presented himself as an extraordinary teacher who at first seemed to be in agreement with God’s ways but subtly challenged her as to whether or not she really understood God and His commands properly. Then he more boldly took the step of undermining the threat of death and promised a greater happiness if she would follow him rather than God. If one agrees with Witsius’ assessment of what Adam had been promised, then Satan’s deception played on God’s promises by using terms of truth but assigning them new meaning. God had promised a future greater knowledge when Adam and Eve would see and know God more fully. Satan’s way of attaining that promise was false.⁴³

After Adam and Eve committed their sin and the covenant of works was broken, were there parts of the covenant which were brought forward into even the present? Witsius says yes. The obligation to obey God perfectly still is in effect. The offering of eternal life on condition of obedience still stands. The threat of death as the punishment for sin is still in force.⁴⁴ But the first covenant makes no provision for a surety who can fulfil those conditions in place of helpless sinners. Regarding the continuing force of the covenant of works Witsius employs an analogy. He asks if an employer whose employee drinks too much and makes himself helplessly unfit to work would waive his requirements for duty because the employee is unable to work. Neither will God diminish the law even though

⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 113-114.

⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 119-120.

⁴² Ibid., pp. 122-124.

⁴³ Ibid., pp. 137-138.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 151.

Adam robbed the entire human race of any hope of meeting its demands.⁴⁵ Witsius makes a significant distinction, though, when he states that the law is in place because God remains our greatest good, and so it is always correct to love and obey Him. But the federal nature of the law is abrogated. It is no longer useful as a means to attain eternal life.⁴⁶

The covenant of grace actually did not dissolve the covenant of works but confirmed it because the Mediator of the covenant of grace fulfilled the requirements of that first covenant.⁴⁷ Witsius introduces the covenant of grace this way:

The covenant of grace is a compact or agreement between God and the elect sinner; God on his part declaring his free good-will concerning eternal salvation, and everything relative thereto, freely to be given to those in covenant, by, and for the mediator Christ; and man on his part consenting to that goodwill by a sincere faith.⁴⁸

Witsius broaches the subject of a covenant behind the covenant of grace – a covenant between God the Father and God the Son. The Father gave the Son to be the Head and Redeemer of the elect, and the Son willingly presented Himself as Sponsor or Surety for believers. The Father required obedience of the Son even to the point of death in return for which the Son would receive a name above all names.⁴⁹ Among other verses, Hebrews 7:22; Galatians 3:17; John 17:4-5 and Luke 22:29 allude to this pre-creation arrangement. Witsius then references numerous Scriptures that employ covenantal terminology when speaking of the relationship between Christ and the Father. In speaking of the Father Jesus employs the phrase “my God” and in speaking of the Mediator the Father refers to Him as a Servant. The account of Christ’s baptism also provides information about the covenantal relationship between Father and Son. When submitting Himself to baptism Jesus declared Himself to have come in order to fulfill all righteousness. In turn, the Father declared His Son’s position as Surety in the covenant to be acceptable.⁵⁰ God would grant salvation, and the Son would yield obedience and gratitude. It is of great comfort to us to realize that Christ’s merit which earned for Himself the position of Head over all the elect in glory is inseparable from His meriting glory for us as well. His glory is the beginning and cause of ours.⁵¹ It is an expression of love that He linked His glorification to ours.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 154.

⁴⁶ Ibid., pp. 155, 159.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 160.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 165.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 172.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 191.

In chapter IV of Book II, the author describes the two natures of the Surety with the fact that He had to possess both body and soul, and be perfectly righteous. The virgin birth insured that He was a true representative of Adam's race and able to fulfill the terms of the covenant of works, yet that He did not exist in Adam when Adam sinned and so avoided having Adam's sin imputed to Him. Neither did He share in the pollution passed on from Adam to the human race.⁵² It was none other than God the Son who personally restored His image to the human nature He assumed.⁵³ While Adam's sin constituted the human race guilty before God, Christ's obedience constituted the elect righteous before God, earning for us eternal life as if we had performed such obedience ourselves.⁵⁴

Death as punishment for sin included with it all misery that is characteristic of those deprived of happiness. Witsius likens Christ's body to the veil in the temple (Matthew 27:51). As long as He was in His body sin and the curse were not yet removed, but once it was torn and subsequently raised again from the dead, a new way was consecrated for us, a way of access to heaven.⁵⁵ For the elect Christ secured immunity from misery and a right to eternal life (justification) which we begin to experience now as effectual calling, regeneration, sanctification, conservation and glorification.⁵⁶ The infinite dignity of Christ gave His sacrifice such a quality and value that it is powerful enough to save all the elect, and had God willed to save the entire world, there would have been more than enough effectiveness to accomplish it.⁵⁷ As a man Christ was subject to the law of love, and so He wept over the lost, yet He did not go beyond His commission from the Father to redeem the elect. Since the sacrifice of Christ effected every part of our salvation, even faith as the instrument of union with Christ, had Christ died for all, then all would eventually come to salvation.⁵⁸

During his discussion of the salvation our Surety provided for us, Witsius demonstrates the benefit of a covenantal understanding of Holy Scripture by employing it to mine explanations for the reader which may otherwise be overlooked. He raises the issue of what benefit Christ might have gained from participating in sacraments, including circumcision, baptism, the Holy Supper, etc. Even though the Scriptures do not specifically record a sentence which says Christ ate the bread at the Holy Supper, it is perfectly reasonable to assume that He did so since it was customary for the head of a family to eat first of the Passover bread after blessing it.⁵⁹ Luke 22:18 and Matthew 26:29 lead one to believe Jesus did partake of the cup. For Christ to partake would have been for Him to consecrate the sacrament in person. Witsius cites Chrysostom who said

⁵² Ibid., p. 196.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 200.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 209.

⁵⁵ Ibid., pp. 213, 216.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 235.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 256.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 270.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 271.

that Christ ate and drank to demonstrate that the elements were not literally His flesh and blood.⁶⁰

Jesus was baptized to fulfill all righteousness as He obeyed God's command. His participation was also a sign and seal of the covenant. In covenant ceremonies both parties partake and so bind themselves in their respective roles. Christ's actions confirmed the promises of Father to Son and Son to Father. The promises to Christ refer in part back to the covenant of works whereby happiness would be granted for obedience, as well as referring to the New Covenant, signifying that He would be supremely glorified as the Surety for His people and that the elect would be saved. Our participation in the sacrament seals to us regeneration, the death of the old man and the coming alive of the new, as well as the remission of sins – all of which is built upon the glorification of Christ.⁶¹

In partaking of the sacraments Jesus was committing to His duty before God and the church. His own faith was strengthened by meditating on Scripture, praying and participating in instituted worship including the sacraments.⁶² Christ's circumcision signified and sealed to Him that He is the promised seed of Abraham through whom all nations would be blessed.⁶³ In the Passover the Father acknowledged Jesus as the Lamb by whose blood His people would be delivered from the destroying angel. The Lord's Supper sealed to Him that He would be food for the elect to nourish us for eternal life. Further, it assured Him of a coming heavenly feast.⁶⁴

Book III begins with descriptions of the Trinitarian roles in the covenant God made with the elect. The Father appointed us joint-heirs with His Son. The Son is the Mediator by whose blood the covenant is ratified with us who were helpless to convert ourselves. The Spirit brings the elect to Christ and makes us partake of His benefits. He is the seal and guarantee of our complete happiness.⁶⁵ What Adam lost under the terms of the first covenant God restores in Christ. His law is written on our hearts. God promises to be our God and to own us as His people (Jeremiah 31:33; 32:38-40). The covenant of works promised life for obedience. The covenant of grace promises life as well as repentance and faith as the means to receive life.⁶⁶

Witsius discusses whether or not the covenant of grace has conditions. He realizes there is significant disagreement in the debate. His answer is no. He defines a condition as "that action, which, being performed, gives a man a right to

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 272.

⁶¹ Ibid., pp. 273-274.

⁶² Ibid., p. 277.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 278.

⁶⁴ Ibid., pp. 279-280.

⁶⁵ Ibid., pp. 281-283.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 284.

the reward.”⁶⁷ None of us can earn life for ourselves. Only Jesus could do that for us. Faith is not to be regarded as a condition for salvation but a gift that is a part of the overall gift of salvation.⁶⁸ He further elaborates on his position by stating that God presents the testament (covenant) as if it were a promise of reward for faith/obedience because He condescends to our level to show us we should seek and expect what He promises.⁶⁹

A helpful delineation is made in this work between the covenants, stipulating that the first covenant, the covenant of works ended in Eden. Confusion comes in referencing the covenant of grace because it was administered differently between the Old Testament and the New Testament. In that context it was referred to as the old covenant and new covenant, but actually both titles were naming two different economies of the same covenant which unfolded progressively.⁷⁰ In the Old Testament the land of Canaan served as a pledge of heaven, and the activity of the Spirit of grace was not demonstrated as abundantly as in the New when the Gentiles received a distinct share in the inheritance God extends to His people. The Mosaic Law contained types of spiritual realities, shadows that were later replaced by Christ. Later Witsius would plainly state that the Old Testament is the covenant of grace dispensed before the incarnation and includes eternal life, regeneration, faith, justification, etc., just as the New Testament does.⁷¹

Witsius divides the Old Testament into periods as follows: From Adam to Noah the Gospel promise recorded in Genesis 3:15 was handed down through family instruction. Faith was expressed through sacrifices which were a seal of the Gospel of promise. Secondly, from Noah to Abraham, Noah was a preacher through whom Christ preached (1 Peter 3:19). Hebrews 11:7 regarded him as an heir of righteousness received by faith which was evidenced by his constructing the ark. This period included the covenant sealed with a rainbow. Thirdly, from Abraham to Moses, promises were made to Abraham and the covenantal sign of circumcision was initiated. Fourthly, beginning with Moses Christ demonstrated Himself as King by a display of royal glory when the Law was given at Sinai. The tabernacle and ark were constructed, and Israel’s captors and enemies were defeated. This period ended with the tearing of the veil in the Temple at Christ’s death.⁷² The New Testament did not bring a new way of effecting propitiation/salvation, but brought a fulfillment of all the Old Testament expectations.⁷³

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 286.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 288.

⁷⁰ Ibid., pp. 307-308.

⁷¹ Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man* vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2010, rpt.), p. 316. See also pp. 328-329, 335.

⁷² Witsius, vol. 1, pp. 313-317.

⁷³ Ibid., pp. 322ff.

In describing the Holy Spirit's work, the Puritan writer defined effectual calling as "that act by which those, who are chosen by God, and redeemed by Christ, are sweetly invited, and effectually brought from a state of sin to a state of communion with God in Christ, both externally and internally."⁷⁴ The external call comes through hearing the Word, and the internal call is the work of the Holy Spirit. Not all sinners should be told that Christ died for them – only the ones who repent and believe.⁷⁵ For such persons God grants understanding, an open heart, a readiness to receive the Gospel, and He writes His law on our hearts as He puts reverence there for Himself. It is not that God drags along the unwilling but that He makes us willing.⁷⁶

Regeneration is here defined as "the supernatural act of God, whereby a new and divine life is infused into the elect person spiritually dead, and that from the incorruptible seed of the word of God, made fruitful by the infinite power of the Spirit."⁷⁷ There is no other solution for those who became dead in Adam. Regeneration constitutes the soul so that it can now act in a way acceptable to God. Without regeneration there is no repentance or love for God. No one can produce regeneration in herself.⁷⁸ Regeneration may be implanted in a person and slowly manifest itself. In this section Witsius speaks of elect infants who die at a very early age and young children who at an early age demonstrate "holy longings" such as are exhibited in a tender conscience or a devotion to prayer.⁷⁹

Faith is the principle act of regeneration. It produces a "holy energy and activity of the whole soul towards God in Christ."⁸⁰ It includes a multi-step progression of activity in a believer's heart. First it embraces knowledge of the truth. Secondly it assents to the truth and confesses that God is true. Thirdly, it spawns love of truth, followed by (fourthly) hunger and thirst after Christ. The final culminating phase is receiving Christ for justification and sanctification.⁸¹

In his discussion of justification we read that justification destroys the power of sin to condemn while sanctification destroys the dominion of sin. Even though the works of justified believers are imperfect here on this earth they will be recognized on judgment day as the products of grace and union with Christ.⁸²

Reconciliation is understood as "a mutual concord between God and the sinner, who is justified by faith; so that the heart of God is carried out towards man, and in like manner, the heart of man towards God, by a delightful inclination of

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 344.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 353.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 354.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 357.

⁷⁸ Ibid., pp. 358-361.

⁷⁹ Ibid., pp. 366-367.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 373.

⁸¹ Ibid., pp. 375-382.

⁸² Ibid., pp. 396, 424.

friendship.”⁸³ Adam’s sin turned humanity into haters of God. God alone is the Author of peace and alone can restore it to our souls by reconstituting our relationship with Him and teaching us the reality of His love for us.⁸⁴

Regarding adoption and becoming sons of God, Witsius notes that angels are called sons of God because they resemble His holiness. Adam was a true son because created in God’s own image and was loved and granted dominion over all creation. However, Adam forfeited that dignity, but the elect regain it in Christ by means of a new, spiritual generation from above. No normal descendant of Adam can produce this adoption himself. Since we are adopted we have been granted rights and privileges as children of God who are guaranteed an inheritance. Here we learn of the meaning of a testament which is a will made effective at death. The immutable will of God was recorded in Scripture and ratified by Christ’s shed blood.⁸⁵

Sanctification is “that real work of God, by which they, who are chosen, regenerated, and justified, are continually more and more transformed from the turpitude of sin, to the purity of the divine image.”⁸⁶ A sanctified person begins to do what Adam failed to do. He recognizes purity in God, equity in His law and holiness in Jesus. He recognizes his highest goal as resembling God’s purity and holiness. He does not attempt to correct God or improve on His Word. Sanctification is a progressive activity whereby sin is driven out as the new life enters. The old nature is not merely rehabilitated, but brand new habits are conferred.⁸⁷

God provides means to be employed on the path of sanctification. “The use of these means is required of man, yet their efficacy depends on the blessing of God alone. Nor indeed is it without the interposition of God, that man can and will savingly use those means.”⁸⁸ These means include meditation on the Holy Scriptures with its promises and threats and examples of the saints and explanation of Christ’s life and sacrifice, devout prayer, sincere examination of our own consciences evaluating our words and thoughts and actions regularly, etc.⁸⁹ The flesh hampers this process but does not reign over us. Witsius points out that under the Old Testament law when an earthen vessel was declared ceremonially unclean it remained so until it was broken and destroyed (Leviticus 11:33). Second Corinthians 4:7 refers to us as earthen vessels. Therefore, these bodies will be unclean until destroyed by death. As new habits are graciously

⁸³ Ibid., p. 428.

⁸⁴ Ibid., pp, 430, 441.

⁸⁵ Ibid., pp. 442-456.

⁸⁶ Witsius, vol. 2, p. 6.

⁸⁷ Ibid., pp. 13, 17-18.

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 39.

⁸⁹ Ibid., pp. 39-44.

given by the sanctifying Spirit of God, there remains within us vestiges of the old man which oppose the divine work.⁹⁰

At this point in his teaching Witsius includes some similar elements as Dr. Taylor's dynamic of benefits from hardship, although used in a very different way. Dr. Taylor believed that death was a blessing from God which gave a person a desire for heaven and produced positive character qualities. Rev. Witsius credited these benefits not to death and misery but to the life brought into the soul by God's Spirit's presence. Witsius says that the spiritual struggle in us drives us on toward heaven and develops patience, humility and sympathy for others. It proves that salvation is by grace alone and that human effort cannot begin to deliver someone dead in sin.⁹¹ A point of clarification is offered concerning whether or not a person can achieve perfection in this lifetime. Witsius held that perfection will only be a reality in heaven, but what is one to make of references in Scripture to a person who is noted to be perfect? The perfection of characters such as Job (Job 1:1) refers to a depth of sincerity in devotion to God, notably lacking hypocrisy, the whole self being given in commitment to God and His law.⁹²

Next comes a discussion of conservation which is

a gracious work of God, whereby he so keeps the elect, the redeemed, the regenerated, the faithful and the sanctified, though in themselves weak, and apt to fall away, internally by the most powerful efficacy of his Spirit, externally by the means which he has wisely appointed for that purpose, that they shall never quite lose the habits of those graces once infused into them, but be certainly brought, by a steadfast perseverance, to eternal salvation.⁹³

Here he draws a distinction between those who are elected to eternal glory and Israel whose election was to the communion of an external covenant (Romans 11:7).⁹⁴ While unproductive branches are broken off and discarded (John 15:6) true believers were given to Christ by the Father as a fruit of His labor (John 17:6) and therefore cannot be lost (John 10:29).⁹⁵ God authors and guarantees the salvation of the elect (Jeremiah 32:38-40). Christ will preserve His bride to present to Himself without any parts missing.⁹⁶

Last in this section of the text is glorification, or "the gracious act of God, whereby he actually translates his chosen and redeemed people, from an unhappy and

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 46.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 47.

⁹² Ibid., p. 48.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 55.

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 56. See also pp. 318-319.

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 61.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 68.

base, to a happy and glorified state.”⁹⁷ Glorification is begun in this life and completed in the next. Already in this life rays of divine light break into the soul. Witsius says that nothing more excites our love for God than “the knowledge, sense and taste of the divine love” we begin here and now to experience.⁹⁸ We grasp this vision of God both by faith and by our experiences, especially through practicing spiritual disciplines.⁹⁹ For some as death approaches and the soul begins to ascend to heaven, heaven begins to descend into the soul, and while still present with the body they are able to relate what they see. A part of glorification also is receiving assurance of salvation. Referring by analogy to Joseph who spent time in prison before entering Pharaoh’s court to rule, Witsius asks, “If God does so great things for his people in the prison, what will he do in the palace?”¹⁰⁰

In the fourth and final book of which the two volumes under consideration are composed, Witsius starts off with a consideration of the doctrine of salvation during the first age of the world. He continues to demonstrate how the covenant paradigm makes portion after portion of the Scriptures clear. The beginning discussion ties the condemnation of the devil (Genesis 3:14-15) to the absolution of Adam and Eve. The serpent which led humans astray is cursed. Satan’s power is curtailed, and Witsius believes he is no longer permitted to approach men in the same direct way. His influence is restricted to earthly-minded men destined for hell. He cannot stop the church or God’s plans for it. His realm is dust, and so he can only harm the body of dust but cannot dislodge the soul from God’s possession. When the body is destroyed, Satan will have no more access to the believer. Licking the dust is a sign of defeat, and so the sentence passed on the serpent foretells Satan’s complete demise. In a serpent’s head are contained craftiness and poisonous venom. Thus it was foretold that his head would be bruised. Destroying his head would destroy his power over men (Romans 16:20). Placing enmity between the serpent and the woman’s offspring refers to sanctification as we learn to hate and detest the devil’s work. Satan would be defeated by One who is man, but in order to be more powerful than Satan must also be God. Thus it was Jesus who bruised Satan’s head by paying a ransom for the elect. Satan bruised the Messiah’s heel by affecting him for a short time, but Satan’s wounds were eternally fatal. The woman whom Satan deceived would become the instrument for his overthrow. The reference to the seed of the woman refers not merely to seed according to the law of nature but according to the promise of grace. Therefore it refers to the body of Christ. Adam demonstrated his faith in God’s promises by naming his wife Eve, mother of the living, after the fall occurred.¹⁰¹ The following chapters continue to unfold the covenant understanding of God’s dealings with Noah and Abraham and their descendants.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 82.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 78

⁹⁹ Ibid., pp. 83-84.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 86.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., pp. 110-126.

Regarding the Ten Commandments, Witsius does not believe that these laws were previously unknown but that they had been handed down by word of mouth. Through Moses the Law was combined and expanded with greater detail, then recorded for permanent use. As he lists the three types of law given to Israel – moral, ceremonial and political/forensic, he explains that these correspond to Israel's existing as rational creature bound by the law of nature, as the church of the Old Testament which looked forward to the coming of the Messiah, and as a peculiar people who lived as God's people in Canaan under a theocracy.¹⁰² God wrote the Ten Commandments on stone Himself. The only other known time that God writes law Himself is on the hearts of believers.¹⁰³ Only God has power to override the innate sin in the human heart present from birth and instead write new operating principles there.

Witsius states that the law God provided for Adam was the rule of nature and that it was stamped on his heart. It was the condition of the covenant of works which if performed would lead to happiness. Thus he believed that the Mosaic Law is a repetition of the terms of the covenant of works, but not given for the same purpose because that covenant had been abrogated, and in it there was no provision for pardon.¹⁰⁴ Israel, however, embraced it as a covenant of works and attempted to use it to justify themselves.¹⁰⁵ He states that God was not expecting fallen Israel to live perfect lives but to practice a sincerity of heart and have faith in His love and commit themselves to Him to save them, practicing constant repentance.¹⁰⁶

After the fall the law mainly condemns but also can serve as a restraint in fallen man to enable civil government to exist so humanity can be preserved.¹⁰⁷ Under the covenant of grace, the law is used by the Spirit of God to strip away all self-confidence and delusions of self-sufficiency in man. The Israelites witnessed Moses, the Law-giver, glowing after having been with God, and should have been taught by that how far they were from reflecting divine glory.¹⁰⁸ Man's only hope is to rely on Christ and His redeeming work.

After conversion the law serves as a guide for our gratitude and love for God. It confirms election as it enables us to interpret our own actions as God's gracious working in us (sanctification).¹⁰⁹ Therefore Witsius saw the Law as useful to both the covenant of works and the covenant of grace.¹¹⁰ He calls the law the Sinaitic

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 162.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 179-180.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

Covenant, intending covenant here to mean precept, and says that the Sinaitic Covenant is neither to be confused with nor separated from the Covenant of Grace.¹¹¹

Following this discussion is a portion dedicated to types and other foreshadowings of Christ in the Old Testament. For example, the sacrifice of animals in the Old Testament under the covenant of grace called the man offering the sacrifice to offer his whole self as a living sacrifice in faith and love as the sacrifice itself pointed to God's promise to remove sins through the coming Christ.¹¹²

Among the Old Testament sacraments explained is circumcision. Circumcision was never meant to lead anyone to believe it could save, otherwise one might assume God would have prescribed it to be administered on the first day of life and not on the eighth.¹¹³ Circumcision was both a sign and a seal of God's promise to send a Messiah by whom would come earthly, spiritual and heavenly blessings. A seal is a solemn declaration that the recipient is a partaker of the promises made to Abraham and which should draw one into a lifestyle of faith and anticipating blessing through the coming Messiah. It is a seal of righteousness acquired by faith. It signifies misery in that the part affected is used in reproduction, indicating that humans are sinful from the time of conception. The painful cutting brings to mind the separation and death sinners deserve.¹¹⁴

Later chapters describe the covenantal significance of the Passover, the passage through the Red Sea, manna from heaven, water from the rock and the brazen serpent. Looking to the New Testament, the sacrament of baptism by its use of water signifies the drowning of the old nature and the new life found in Christ. Thus the old self is no longer liable to stand judgment and no longer able to exercise dominion over the body (justification and sanctification). Being washed, we should not subject ourselves to pollution once again.¹¹⁵

Baptism is a sacrament representing regeneration and ingrafting into the body of Christ. The subject is passive. However, the Lord's Supper is a sacrament indicating nutrition, and so one is called to examine himself before participating. Just as the bread and wine are converted into the substance of the one eating and drinking, so Christ comes to live in us. This particular sacrament seals to us our mystical, intimate union/communion with Christ.¹¹⁶

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 336.

¹¹² Ibid., p. 239.

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 251.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 252-253.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 433-434, 438.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 458, 462.

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