

Views of the Mosaic Covenant Within the Reformed Tradition

by Greg Loren Durand



Preface

Within historic Covenant theology there has existed a tension between two basic positions regarding the Mosaic covenant. Some Reformed theologians have viewed the Mosaic covenant as an administration of the Covenant of Grace bearing characteristics of the Covenant of Works, while others have viewed it as a republication of the Covenant of Works distinct from and subordinate to the Covenant of Grace. Even within these two categories there have been different nuances of thought.¹ Hence, because there is a somewhat wide spectrum of opinion on this subject, there is no position that may accurately be referred to as “the Reformed position.” Below is a sampling of these differing views.

1. Samuel Bolton outlined the different views in the third chapter of his book, *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Banner of Truth Trust, 2001).

John Calvin (1509-1564)

In his commentary on Hebrews, John Calvin described the Mosaic law as containing both “the rule of life [the moral law], and the gratuitous covenant of life [Abrahamic covenant of grace].”² He taught that “the Law,” or “the whole system of religion delivered by the hand of Moses,” was not intended “to do away with the blessing promised to the race of Abraham” – in other words, “that it might lead the chosen people away from Christ” – but rather “to keep them in suspense until his advent.”³ He acknowledged that in a “restricted sense,” Paul spoke of the law “merely as law” in his epistle to the Galatians, while elsewhere teaching that “the covenant of free adoption is comprehended under it.”⁴ Expanding the scope of the Mosaic law beyond national Israel, he went on to note that “complete observance” of the “perfect righteousness . . . set before us in the Law,” would necessarily merit the “reward of eternal salvation.”⁵ This promise was no mere trifle to Calvin; though genuine, it is rendered unattainable due to mankind’s fall and subsequent inability to perform the obedience required. The law therefore serves as “a kind of mirror” to display “first, our impotence; then, in consequence of it, our iniquity; and, finally, the

2. John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1993), page 167.

3. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), Book II, Chapter 7:1.

4. Calvin, *ibid.*, Section 3.

5. Calvin, *ibid.* See also Calvin, *Commentaries on Galatians and Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1993), pages 67-68.

curse, as the consequence of both.”⁶

Thus, while not expressly referring to the Mosaic covenant as a restatement of the Covenant of Works, Calvin clearly taught such by implication: “. . . [T]he law was the ministry of condemnation and of death; for when men are instructed as to their duty, and hear it declared, that all who do not render satisfaction to the justice of God are cursed (Deut. 27:26), they are convicted, as under the sentence of sin and death. From the law, therefore, they derive nothing but a condemnation of this nature, because God there demands what is due to him, and at the same time confers no power to perform it.”⁷ However, Calvin cautioned that the law should not be viewed in this legal capacity only, for to do so would result in “despondency, confusion, and despair, seeing that by it we are all cursed and condemned.”⁸ He quoted Augustine on how then the law should be used: “The utility of the Law is, that it convicts man of his weakness, and compels him to apply for the medicine of grace, which is in Christ.”⁹ This grace was typified for the Israelites in the ceremonies. Thus, the law in Calvin’s view contained a covenant of works, the end of which was the fulfillment of the Covenant of Grace in Christ.

John Owen (1560-1622)

After outlining the reasons why most theologians of his day had taught that the Mosaic covenant was an administration of

6. Calvin, *ibid.*, Section 4.

7. Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1993), Volume II, page 177.

8. Calvin, *ibid.*

9. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book II, Chapter 7:9.

the Covenant of Grace, English Non-Conformist theologian John Owen noted that it “was so different from that which is established in the gospel after the coming of Christ, that it hath the appearance and name of another covenant.”¹⁰ Elaborating on this point, he wrote that “we may consider that the Scripture doth plainly and expressly make mention of two testaments, or covenants, and distinguish between them in such a way, as what is spoken can hardly be accommodated unto a twofold administration of the same covenant. . . . Wherefore we must grant two distinct covenants, rather than a twofold administration of the same covenant merely, to be intended.”¹¹

The Mosaic covenant was subservient to the Abrahamic covenant, and “in the giving of the law, and the curse wherewith it was accompanied, which were immixed with that administration of the covenant, there was a solemn revival and representation of the first covenant [made with Adam], and its sanction, whereby it had life and power given to it to keep the people in bondage all their days.”¹² In this capacity, it was “a particular, temporary covenant” which, being applicable to Israel alone, was “typical, shadowy, and removable.”¹³ This bondage apparently only applied to the unbelievers within the nation, for Owen was quick to qualify his remarks by noting:

The church of Israel was never absolutely under the

10. John Owen, *An Exposition of Hebrews* (Evansville, Indiana: Sovereign Grace Publishers, 1960), Volume VI, page 71.

11. Owen, *ibid.*, page 76.

12. John Owen, *The Works of John Owen* (London: Richard Baines, 1826), Volume XIV, page 183.

13. John Owen, *An Exposition of Hebrews* (Evansville, Indiana: Sovereign Grace Publishers, 1960), Volume VI, pages 81, 86.

power of that covenant as a covenant of life [works]; for, from the days of Abraham, the promise was given unto them and their seed. And the apostle proves that no law could afterwards be given, or covenant made, that should disannul that promise, Gal. 3:17. But had they been brought under the old covenant of works, it would have disannulled the promise, for that covenant and the promise are diametrically opposite. And moreover, if they were under that covenant, they were all under the curse, and so perished eternally: which is openly false, for it is testified of them that they pleased God by faith, and so were saved. But it is evident that the covenant intended was a covenant wherein the church of Israel walked with God, until such time as this better covenant was solemnly introduced. This is plainly declared in the ensuing context, especially in the close of the chapter, where, speaking of this former covenant, he says, it was “become old,” and so “ready to disappear.” Wherefore it is not the covenant of works made with Adam that is intended, when this other is said to be a “better covenant.”¹⁴

In this capacity as a representative covenant of works, Owen saw the law as having been fulfilled by Christ and therefore abrogated, not just in its ceremonial aspect, but in its entirety: “Wherefore the whole law of Moses, as given unto the Jews, whether as used or abused by them, was repugnant unto and inconsistent with the gospel, and the mediation of Christ, especially his priestly office, therein declared; neither did God either design, appoint, or direct that they should be co-existent.”¹⁵ In light of this, he understood Christ’s words in Matthew 5:17 as follows: “I came to bring in and accomplish the whole end

14. Owen, *ibid.*, page 662.

15. Owen, *ibid.*, Volume V, pages 428-429.

which it [the law] aimed at, and directed unto,' whereon it would cease to oblige unto a further practice."¹⁶ For Owen, the Christian's ethical standard was not to be found in the Mosaic covenant, but in Christ alone.¹⁷

Samuel Petto (1624-1711)

The views of Non-Conformist clergyman Samuel Petto on the Mosaic covenant were very similar to Owen's. Based on his understanding of 2 Corinthians 3:6ff and Hebrews 8:6ff, he denied that the Old and New Covenants are but "two administrations or dispensations of the same covenant," insisting instead that "they are not merely one and the same covenant, diversely administered, but they are two covenants."¹⁸ However, while the Mosaic covenant was not part of the Covenant of Grace, he nevertheless taught that it "had a special relation to the covenant of grace" in that its precepts created a wall of separation between Israel and the pagan nations, and it "promised temporal mercies to Israel, upon the condition of their obedience."¹⁹ Moreover, the law also served a fivefold function: firstly, it acted pedagogically to bring the Israelites to Christ; secondly, it restrained them from sin; thirdly, it acted as a directory for the pure worship of God; fourthly, it was a model for Israel's civil and ecclesiastical government; and fifthly, it typified the "glorious mysteries

16. Owen, *ibid.*, page 461.

17. Owen, *ibid.*, page 464.

18. Samuel Petto, *The Mystery of the Covenant of Grace: The Difference Between the Old and New Covenant Stated and Explained* (Aberdeen, Scotland: D. Chalmers and Company, 1820), page 83.

19. Petto, *ibid.*, pages 83, 119.

appertaining to the covenant of grace.”²⁰

Arguing that the Mosaic covenant was strictly a covenant of works “to be fulfilled by Jesus Christ, but not so to Israel,”²¹ Petto denounced the “sinful mixing” of the Old and New Covenants so that the believer’s own works are joined with Christ’s in procuring salvation.²² He affirmed that the moral law, contained within the Decalogue, “is still obligatory” because it is a “perfect rule of righteousness” and is therefore perpetual. However, if understood in its former covenantal context, the law has been abolished since Christ perfectly fulfilled its demands, and in dying on the cross, satisfied the penalty inherent in the Old Covenant.²³ Therefore, “obedience, though evangelical, is no such condition of the new covenant, as there was of the old unto Israel.”²⁴

Walter Marshall (1628-1680)

English Puritan Walter Marshall devoted a lengthy volume to the distinction between law and gospel, focusing specifically on the erroneous teaching of the moralists of his day that holiness (sanctification) is to be attained through obedience to the law. According to Marshall, the Israelites were never saved nor made holy by attempting to keep the Sinaitic arrangement, for it was a secondary covenant added to the covenant of grace made previously with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob for the purpose of

20. Petto, *ibid.*, pages 146-148.

21. Petto, *ibid.*, page 93.

22. Petto, *ibid.*, pages 90-91.

23. Petto, *ibid.*, pages 133-138.

24. Petto, *ibid.*, page 163.

showing them “their sinfulness and subjection to death and wrath, and the impossibility of attaining to life or holiness by their works,” thereby forcing them “to trust on the free promise only for all their salvation.”²⁵ Marshall spoke of the Covenant of Works as “the legal covenant, wherein God promiseth us no life, comfort, or happiness, until we have thoroughly performed His law,” and he believed that this “may be seen in the mount Sinai promulgation, explicated Lev. xxvi throughout.”²⁶

Herman Witsius (1636-1708)

Dutch theologian Herman Witsius taught:

... [I]n the ministry of Moses, there was a repetition of the doctrine concerning the law of the covenant of works. For both the very same precepts are inculcated, on which the covenant of works was founded, and which constituted the condition of that covenant; and that sentence is repeated, “which if a man do he shall live in them,” Lev. xviii.5. Ezek. xx.11,13 by which formula, the righteousness, which is of the law, is described, Romans x.5. And the terror of the covenant of works is increased by repeated comminations; and that voice heard, “cursed be he that confirmeth not all the words of this law to do them,” Deut. xxvii.26. . . .

The Israelites were, therefore, thus put in mind of the covenant of works, in order to convince them of their sin and misery, to drive them out of themselves, to show them the necessity of a satisfaction, and to compel them to Christ. And

25. Walter Marshall, *The Gospel-Mystery of Sanctification* (Edinburgh: James Taylor, 1887), page 135.

26. Marshall, *ibid.*, page 161.

so their being thus brought to a remembrance of the covenant of works tended to promote the covenant of grace.²⁷

Witsius went on to argue that the Mosaic covenant was “not formally the covenant of works,” because to reinstitute that covenant with the promise of blessing for future obedience would imply the pardon of all former sins, which “the covenant of works excludes.”²⁸ However, neither was it “formally a covenant of grace,” because the promise of the New Covenant to not only require obedience, but also give the strength to obey, “appears not in the covenant made at mount Sinai.”²⁹ Therefore, he concluded that it was a “national covenant” which pictured both the Covenant of Grace, in that sincere though imperfect obedience proceeding from faith would be acceptable to God, and the Covenant of Works, in that terror was instilled in the hearts of the Israelites as a warning against disobedience, but that it “was formally neither the one nor the other.”³⁰

Thomas Boston (1676-1732)

Scottish divine Thomas Boston discovered in the giving of the law at Mount Sinai two distinct covenants: “First, The

27. Herman Witsius, *The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man* (London: R. Haynes, 1822), Book IV, Chapter 4:47, 49. See also Herman Witsius, *Conciliatory, or Irenical Animadversions on the Controversies Agitated in Britain on the Unhappy Names of Antinomians and Neonomians* (Glasgow, Scotland: W. Lang, 1807), pages 86-87.

28. Witsius, *Economy of the Covenants.*, Book IV, Chapter 4: 51.

29. Witsius, *ibid.*, Chapter IV:53.

30. Witsius, *ibid.*, Chapter IV:54.

covenant of grace made with Abraham, contained in the preface, repeated and promulgated there unto Israel, to be believed and embraced by faith, that they might be saved; to which were annexed the ten commandments, given by the Mediator Christ, the head of the covenant, as a rule of life to his covenant people. Secondly, the covenant of works made with Adam, contained in the same ten commands, delivered with thunderings and lightnings. . . ." Because he insisted that there could be "no confounding of the two covenants of grace and works," Boston taught that "the latter was added to the former as subservient unto it, to turn their eyes towards the promise, or covenant of grace." He saw this twofold nature of the Sinaitic covenant illustrated in the first and second giving of the Decalogue, but was quick to add, "I do not say, God made the covenant of works with them, that they might obtain life and salvation thereby. . . but he repeated, or gave a new edition of the law, and that as a covenant of works, for their humbling and conviction."³¹

Thomas Bell (1733-1803)

Scottish divine Thomas Bell argued that God established two distinct covenants with Israel, the former "being the same with the Abrahamic" in containing only blessing and life, and therefore a covenant of grace, and the latter, containing cursings and death, and therefore a covenant of works. Drawing on Galatians 3:9-10, he wrote, "They who are of faith, are blessed with faithful Abraham: but as many as are of the works of the

31. Thomas Boston, note in Edward Fisher, *The Marrow of Modern Divinity* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1850), page 55.

law, are under the curse. . . . But the covenant at Horeb was that law. It was not the covenant made with the fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Deut. v.2, 3, and therefore it was not the covenant of grace. But if not the covenant of grace, then it was certainly the covenant of works: for any other covenant than these two, God never revealed to man."³²

Bell went further than most other Covenant theologians in insisting that the penalty for violation of the law "was not a ceremonial, or a temporal curse, but a curse affecting the transgressor's everlasting state: a curse standing in direct opposition to the blessing promised in the Abrahamic covenant, Gal. iii. 8, 9, and therefore consisting in suffering the loss, and feeling the wrath of Abraham's God for ever."³³ He believed that "the covenant of works was delivered at mount Sinai, not in opposition, but in subserviency, to that of grace,"³⁴ and that this relationship between the two covenants was pictured in the relationship between Hagar and Sarah.³⁵ Rejecting the assumption of some commentators, such as Dutch theologian Johannes Cocceius in the Seventeenth Century and Bell's contemporary, John Brown of Edinburgh, that Galatians 3:19 had reference to the transgression of the golden calf, he instead interpreted Paul's words to mean that the Sinaitic covenant of works was delivered "to shew the Israelites their sins, to restrain from them, and to punish for them. It entered that the offence might abound," and

32. Thomas Bell, *A View of the Covenants of Works and Grace* (Glasgow, Scotland: Edward Khull and Company, 1814), pages 255-256.

33. Bell, *ibid.*, page 257.

34. Bell, *ibid.*, page 262.

35. Bell, *ibid.*, page 264.

thus manifesting “the necessity of a suffering Surety.”³⁶

Bell taught that Moses was the mediator of only the legal covenant made with unbelieving Israel while Christ was the Mediator of the spiritual covenant made with “all the seed” of Abraham: believing Jews and Gentiles.³⁷ He saw the error of the Judaizers to consist in the “confounding of the two covenants, and of mistaking the end of the Sinaitic,” and went on to explain:

Such as are not in Christ, are under that covenant: Such as are in him are not under it, and therefore their obedience is not obedience to it. There is but a step between the boundaries of the two covenants, and faith is nothing else but a stepping out of the one covenant into the other. Therefore, though the first act of faith may be considered as an act of obedience to the law as a covenant of works, binding sinners on their hearing of that [covenant] of grace to take hold of it; yet all the subsequent acts of faith, and the holy obedience flowing therefrom, are not obedience to it as a covenant, but as a rule of life, as the law of Christ.³⁸

Thomas Scott (1747-1821)

Anglican Calvinist Thomas Scott saw a picture of both the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace displayed in the Mosaic covenant:

The national covenant with Israel was here meant [Exodus 19:5]; the charter upon which they were incorpo-

36. Bell, *ibid.*, page 271.

37. Bell, *ibid.*, page 269.

38. Bell, *ibid.*, pages 273-274.

rated, as a people, under the government of Jehovah. It was an engagement of God, to give Israel possession of Canaan, and to protect them in it; to render the land fruitful, and the nation victorious and prosperous, and to perpetuate his oracles and ordinances among them; so long as they did not, as a people, reject his authority, apostatize to idolatry, and tolerate open wickedness. These things constitute a forfeiture of the covenant, as their national rejection of Christ did afterwards. True believers among them were *personally* dealt with according to the covenant of grace, even as true Christians now are; and unbelievers were under the covenant of works, and liable to condemnation by it, as at present: yet, the national covenant was not strictly either the one or the other, but had something in it of the nature of each (emphasis in original).³⁹

Thus, Scott viewed the covenant from two perspectives: "The outward covenant was made with the nation, entitling them to outward advantages, upon the condition of outward national obedience; and the covenant of grace was ratified personally with true believers, and sealed and secured spiritual blessings to them, by producing a holy disposition of heart, and spiritual obedience to the divine law."⁴⁰ Outwardly (typologically), it was a covenant of works which was corporately broken and through which the nation was judged and eventually destroyed; inwardly (antitypologically), however, it was a covenant of grace made with God's elect within the nation which later would be expanded to all the nations through the

39. Thomas Scott, *The Holy Bible With Explanatory Notes, Practical Observations, and Copious Marginal References* (Boston, Massachusetts: Crocker and Brewster, 1851), pages 249-250.

40. Scott, *ibid.*, page 250.

Gospel in the New Covenant era.

John Colquhoun (1748-1827)

John Colquhoun, a minister in the Church of Scotland, was very explicit in his teaching that the Sinaitic covenant was a republication of the Covenant of Works:

That the law of the Ten Commandments as a covenant of works was repeated and displayed on Mount Sinai in subservience to the covenant of grace appears evident from the thunderings and lightnings, the noise of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the thick darkness and the voice of the living God, speaking out of the midst of the fire on that awful occasion (Exodus 20:18; Deuteronomy 5:22-26). These terrible emblems signified the vindictive and tremendous wrath of God which is due to all the race of Adam for their breach of the covenant of works, by transgressing the law of that covenant (Galatians 3:10). They represented also the extreme danger to which every sinner who continues under the law in its covenant form is exposed as being liable, every moment, to the eternal execution of its dreadful curse. This awful display of the law as a covenant of works, though it was not the principal part, yet it was the most conspicuous part of the Sinaic transaction; for “the people saw the thunderings and the lightnings, and the noise of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking.” And so terrible was the sight that Moses said, “I exceedingly fear and quake” (Hebrews 12:21).⁴¹

In the preface to the Decalogue, he saw “the promise made

41. John Colquhoun, *A Treatise on the Law and the Gospel* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, [1816] 2009), pages 56-57.

to Abraham and his seed,” and “to this promise or covenant of grace . . . was the law or subservient covenant of works added” which “formed no part of the covenant of grace, which had been a covenant entirely to the Patriarchs before that was added to it at Sinai. . . .”⁴² To Colquhoun, “the Sinaic transaction was a mixed dispensation”;⁴³ it was a typical display of both the Covenant of Grace and the Covenant of Works as separate, not blended, covenants: “the former was and still is a covenant to be believed or embraced by faith; the latter was a covenant to be done or fulfilled.”⁴⁴ The law was added for the purpose of demonstrating to Israel “what kind and degree of righteousness it was by which they could be justified before God, and that, finding themselves wholly destitute of that righteousness, they might be excited to take hold of the covenant of grace in which a perfect righteousness for justification is graciously provided” by the promised Surety.⁴⁵ He concluded his discussion of the law in its covenant form by cautioning against the supposition that the Israelites were under both the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace simultaneously: “They could not be under both at the same time and in the same respects. The believers among them . . . were internally and really under the covenant of grace, and only externally under that terrible display of the covenant of works as it was subservient to that of grace (Galatians 3:24); whereas the unbelievers were externally, and by profession only, under that dispensation of the covenant of grace (Romans 9:24), but were internally and really under the

42. Colquhoun, *ibid.*, page 62.

43. Colquhoun, *ibid.*, page 61.

44. Colquhoun, *ibid.*, page 62.

45. Colquhoun, *ibid.*, page 63.

covenant of works (Romans 4:14).”⁴⁶

Robert Lewis Dabney (1820-1898)

Southern Presbyterian theologian Robert Lewis Dabney held to the “one covenant, two administrations” formula and therefore viewed the Mosaic covenant as a pure covenant of grace on both the typological and antitypological levels. Nevertheless, he also saw in it the imposing of “more burdensome and exacting” legal conditions which served as “a perpetual reminder of the law which was to Adam, the condition of life, now broken, and its wrath already incurred, thus to hedge up the awakened conscience to Christ.”⁴⁷

Geerhardus Vos (1862-1949)

According to Dutch theologian Geerhardus Vos, the Mosaic law was “a subordinate means to a higher and spiritual end, subservient and adapted to the peculiar position which the nation occupied, and to its unique calling in the history of God’s Church.”⁴⁸ It was meant to “regulate simply the Covenant-relation between Jehovah and his people,”⁴⁹ particularly in light of the fact that “the Israelites were to enter upon the possession of a land, for centuries defiled by a heathen cultus so that almost

46. Colquhoun, *ibid.*, pages 63-64.

47. Robert Lewis Dabney, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (Saint Louis, Missouri: Presbyterian Publishing Company, 1878),, pages 452ff.

48. Geerhardus Vos, *The Mosaic Origin of the Pentetuchal Codes* (New York: A.C. Armstrong and Son, 1886), page 52.

49. Vos, *ibid.*, page 89.

every high place would by its associations expose them to the utmost danger of relapsing into idolatry and nature-worship.”⁵⁰ As such, it served the primary purpose of separating Israel from the surrounding pagan nations “that it might be holy unto God.”⁵¹

In addition to this theocratic purpose of the law, Vos wrote that the Mosaic covenant was “a reflection of the covenant of works revived, as it were, in the interests of the covenant of grace continued at Sinai”: i.e., that its prominent legal element served the greater, though less prominent, gracious element.⁵² In it was held up “constantly the ideal of eternal life to be obtained by keeping the law, a lost ideal though it be.” This lost ideal is regained through faith in Christ, who perfectly kept the law and therefore received in behalf of the elect the eternal life which was promised: “When the work of the Spirit by means of the law and the gospel leads to true conversion, in this conversion the longing for this lost ideal of the covenant appears as an essential part.”⁵³

Louis Berkhof (1873-1957)

Reformed systematic theologian Louis Berkhof taught that the Mosaic covenant was “a truly national covenant” which “included a service that contained a positive reminder of the strict demands of the covenant of works.” The law “was placed very

50. Vos, *ibid.*, page 91.

51. Vos, *ibid.*, page 54.

52. Geerhardus Vos, *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos* (ed. R. B. Gaffin, Jr.; Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), pages 254-255.

53. Vos, *ibid.*, page 256.

much in the foreground, giving prominence once more to the earlier legal element." Berkhof denied that the covenant of Sinai was "a renewal of the covenant of works," for "in it the law was made subservient to the covenant of grace." While there was a "conditional element" to the covenant, this had reference to the Israelites' "theocratic standing in the nation, and the enjoyment of external blessings that was made dependent on the keeping of the law," and not their eternal salvation. The law, therefore, served the dual purpose of increasing the consciousness of sin and acting as a tutor unto Christ.⁵⁴

Meredith Kline (1922-2007)

According to Westminster Theological Seminary professor and theologian Meredith Kline (1922-2007), the theocratic kingdom of Israel was "a redemptive renewal of the paradise-sanctuary of Eden and a prototypal preview of the eternal theocratic sanctuary" of the consummated New Heavens and New Earth. He taught that the Mosaic covenant, while not rendering the Abrahamic covenant inoperative, must not be viewed merely as a continuation of the latter, but rather in light of its "distinct identity . . . as a particular administration with its own historical beginning in a concrete occasion of covenant making."⁵⁵ Kline acknowledged "the massive Biblical evidence for a peculiar discontinuity present in the old covenant in the form of a principle of meritorious works," in sharp contrast to

54. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans and Company, 1941), page 298.

55. Meredith Kline, *By Oath Consigned: A Reinterpretation of the Covenant Signs* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1968), pages 17-18.

the Abrahamic covenant and its fulfillment in the New Covenant.⁵⁶ However, contrary to classic Dispensationalism, which teaches that individual justification itself was held forth as the goal of the Mosaic covenant, Kline limited the application of the principle of works therein to “Israel’s retention of its provisional, typological inheritance,” while maintaining the “promise faith-grace principle of the gospel” for individual Israelite believers under the continuing and overarching Abrahamic covenant.⁵⁷ The “blessings of the typological kingdom community” were therefore not guaranteed by the principle of grace, but were “merited by the Israelites’ obedience to the law.”⁵⁸ Thus, according to Kline, there is both continuity and discontinuity between the Old and New Covenants; on the level of individual salvation, there is a continuity of the principle of redemptive grace, but the principle of works on the typological level created a sharp discontinuity: “. . . while grace was the principle of kingdom blessing in the Abrahamic covenant (and new covenant), in the covenant of creation [Covenant of Works] and in the old covenant (at that typological level in terms of which Paul . . . identifies it) the operating principle was works.”⁵⁹ Therefore, “by reason of the presence of this different principle of works, the old covenant was breakable – and in that respect stood in contrast to the new covenant, not in continuum with

56. Meredith Kline, “Gospel Until the Law: Romans 5:13-14 and the Old Covenant,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 34 (1991), page 434.

57. Kline, *ibid.*

58. Meredith Kline, *Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundations For a Covenantal Worldview* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2006), pages 214-215.

59. Kline, “Gospel Until the Law,” pages 436-438.

it.”⁶⁰ However, though it was broken by the Israelites, rendering their destruction as a nation and the ending of its typological purpose a necessity, Christ, as the second Adam born under the Mosaic economy, nevertheless did fulfill the covenantal terms thereof, and thus merited the antitypological blessings of eternal life in behalf of the elect. Thus, Kline saw the identification of the Mosaic covenant with the works principle as absolutely essential to the Gospel itself:

The principle of works forms the foundation of the gospel of grace. If meritorious works could not be predicated of Jesus Christ as the second Adam, then obviously there would be no meritorious achievement to be imputed to his people as the ground of their justification. The gospel invitation would turn out to be a mirage. We who have believed on Christ would still be under condemnation. The gospel truth, however, is that Christ has performed the one act of righteousness and by this obedience of the one the many are made righteous (Rom. 5:18-19). In his probationary obedience [to the Mosaic law] the Redeemer gained the merit which is transferred to the account of the elect. Underlying Christ's mediatorship of a covenant of grace to the salvation of believers is his earthly fulfillment, through meritorious obedience, of his heavenly covenant of works with the Father.⁶¹

Michael Scott Horton (1964 -)

More recently, Westminster Seminary Professor of Theology and Apologetics Michael Scott Horton wrote:

60. Meredith Kline, "Of Works and Grace," *Presbyterion*, 9:1-2 (1983), pages 86-87.

61. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue*, page 68.

As a theocracy typological of the eschatological paradise of God, Israel's national existence was a repetition of the covenant of creation; hence the comparisons drawn by the biblical writers to Adam and the original creation. Israel was called to see itself as a new theocratic garden of God's presence and as a new creation in the sense of representing humanity before God – all of this is typological of the true Israel, the faithful Adam, who is also the true heavenly temple and everlasting Son of God. As with the Adamic covenant, the Sinaitic covenant is conditional. If Israel is faithful, the people "may dwell long in the land the LORD your God is giving you." Thus Israel's tenure in the land, like Adam's, is conditional – although, in the former case God's goodness was presupposed, while in the latter, God's grace (Deut. 7:7-11). Precisely the same terms and sanctions apply: Do this and you will live long in the land and enter into my Sabbath rest. As with his appeal to the two Adams for double imputation, Paul draws on the analogy of the two mountains and two mothers to contrast the covenant of works (law) and the covenant of grace (promise) (Galatians 3 and 4).⁶²

Conclusion

In light of the above information, it is evident that the debate within historic Covenant theology has focused on the importance of the legal element of the Mosaic covenant: i.e., whether this element constituted the actual covenant or merely existed within the covenant. This debate has roots which extend as far back in Christian history as the writings of Ireneaus and Justin Martyr

62. Michael Scott Horton, *Lord and Servant: A Covenant Christology* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), page 130.

in the Second Century and the *Didascalia Apostolorum* in the Third Century. However, all Reformed theologians are nevertheless agreed that it was subservient to, and therefore did not abrogate, the Abrahamic covenant. This legal element stands at the forefront of the covenant and has reference primarily to possession of the land of Canaan and to temporal blessings and cursings, but, according to the New Testament writers, it was merely typological in nature and found its spiritual fulfillment in Christ and the eternal blessings which He merited in behalf of and bestowed upon His people, the Church.

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Toccoa, Georgia 30577
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