

Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary, Dogmatics 214

God's Covenant with Adam

Not a Covenant of Works, but a Covenant of Structured Fellowship

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Introduction

Beginning already in the early years of the Reformation, the doctrine of the covenant was so emphasized that “Reformed” theology became nearly synonymous with “covenant,” or “federal” (from *foedus*, “covenant” in the Latin Vulgate)¹ theology. It was a lens through which the Scriptures could be studied and all of God’s dealings with His people understood, from Noah (Gen. 9:9) to the New Covenant (Jer. 31:31-34, Heb. 9:15). When the Reformers turned to the opening chapters of the Bible and examined them through this theological lens, it became clear that God’s relationship with Adam was to be described in the same way. The Creator and the king of His creation were in a covenant.

According to the consensus, three elements belonged to this covenant: a *promise*, a *condition*, and a *threat*. From Heinrich Bullinger (1504-1575) to Zacharias Ursinus (1534-1583) and Kaspar Olievanus (1536-1587), the doctrine took shape under the name “covenant of nature.”² It spread from continental Europe to the British Isles, where it appeared in the Irish Articles of Religion (1615) as the “covenant of the law.”³ More significantly, a short time later it was written into the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF, 1647). Articles 7.2 and 19.1 read:

The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, (Gal. 3:12) wherein life was promised to Adam; and in him to his posterity, (Rom. 10:5, Rom. 5:12–20) upon condition of perfect and personal obedience. (Gen. 2:17, Gal. 3:10)

¹ Herman Hanko, *God’s Everlasting Covenant of Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1988), 13.

² Charles McCoy and J. Wayne Baker, *The Fountainhead of Federalism: Heinrich Bullinger and the Covenantal Tradition* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 25, 35-37, 39; see also, 20; Stephen Myers, *God to Us: Covenant Theology in Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2021), 26-28; Venema, *Christ and Covenant Theology: Essays on Election, Republication, and the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2017), 4.

³ See Irish Articles of Religion, Art. 21 in *The Creeds of Christendom with History and Critical Notes*, ed. Philip Schaff, rev. David Schaff, Sixth Edition, Reprinted (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983), 3:530.

God gave to Adam a law, as a covenant of works, by which He bound him and all his posterity, to personal, entire, exact, and perpetual obedience, promised life upon the fulfilling, and threatened death upon the breach of it, and endued him with power and ability to keep it. (Gen. 1:26–27, Gen. 2:17, Rom. 2:14–15, Rom. 10:5, Rom. 5:12, 19, Gal. 3:10,12, Eccl. 7:29, Job 28:28)⁴

In the following centuries, the doctrine enjoyed almost unquestioned acceptance; that is, until Herman Hoeksema, who, according to Engelsma, “corrected the tradition” in the doctrine of the covenant with Adam in paradise.⁵ In some of his earliest writing on the covenant, Hoeksema says, “a thoroughly unscriptural and unreformed view has already for a long time found acceptance among our people,” the “so-called covenant of works.”⁶ It is clear that Hoeksema’s contrarian stance came to characterize his fledgling denomination, so that Herman Veldman could declare in 1952 that “we have grave and serious objections against this view as Protestant Reformed Churches [PRC], inasmuch as we have set ourselves against this conception throughout our existence.”⁷

Joining Hoeksema, other dissenting voices have been raised in the last century, notably Karl Barth, John Murray, and N. T. Wright;⁸ G. C. Berkouwer;⁹ the men of the New Covenant

⁴ *The Creeds of Christendom*, 3:616-17, 640; see also, Westminster Larger Catechism, 30. The only other “confessional” Reformed statement on the covenant of works is the Helvetica Consensus Formula (1675), written by Johannes Heidegger and Francis Turretin; see canons 7-10, 23, here: <https://www.onthewing.org/user/Consensus%20Helvetic%20-%201675.pdf>.

⁵ David Engelsma, “The Reformer of 1924: ‘Doctor of the Covenant’” in *Always Reforming: Continuation of the Sixteenth-Century Reformation*, ed. David Engelsma (Jenison, MI: RFPA, 2009), 203; see also, Herman Hanko, “A Comparison of the Westminster and the Reformed Confessions,” *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*, 20, 1 (November, 1986): 11.

⁶ Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed: Children in the Covenant*, Revised Edition (Grandville, MI: RFPA, 1997), 74. The book was originally a series of articles published in the *Standard Bearer* in 1927.

⁷ Herman Veldman, “The Hexaemeron or Creation Week (12): The Creation of Man (5),” *Standard Bearer*, 28, 13 (4/1/1952): 300; see also, Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed*, xxiv-xxv.

⁸ J. V. Fesko, *Adam and the Covenant of Works* (Fearn, Great Britain: Mentor, 2021), xviii-xx, xxiii-xxiv; see also, Myers, *God to Us*, 37-41.

⁹ David Engelsma, *Trinity and Covenant: God as Holy Family* (Jenison, MI: RFPA, 2006), 115; see G. C. Berkouwer, *Sin*, trans. Philip Holtrop (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), 207-09.

Theology (NCT) movement;¹⁰ and the men of the Federal Vision (FV) movement.¹¹ But the PRC position is outside the tradition of the Reformed, the Presbyterians, and the Particular or “Reformed” Baptists (whose confession, the Second London Baptist Confession of 1689, is derived from a revision of the WCF). And some of the company—particularly the men of the FV movement—is concerning.¹² Venema writes:

It is especially important that critics of the WCF[‘s doctrine of the covenant of works], especially those who write from within the framework of a commitment to historic Reformed orthodoxy, not unwittingly join their voices to those who do not share this commitment and whose criticisms arise out of a radically unbiblical framework.¹³

This paper will demonstrate that, although it must be admitted that the PRC stands—virtually alone—outside the broadly Reformed tradition in its position on the doctrine of a covenant of works with Adam, the objections that Hoeksema and those who followed him raise against the doctrine are sufficiently weighty that the PRC ought to keep its distance, despite the present theological proximity in this area to the FV. Nevertheless, the PRC can benefit from a modified formulation of Hoeksema’s definition for covenant—fellowship—by emphasizing that Adam’s pre-fall relationship with God was *structured* fellowship.

The paper will do so by examining first a representative outline of the traditional covenant of works formulation as held by Charles Hodge and summarized by Herman Hoeksema. The name, establishment, essence, elements, probationary character, end, and extent

¹⁰ Dennis Swanson, “Introduction to New Covenant Theology,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal*, 18, 1 (Fall, 2007): 149-163.

¹¹ “Report of the Synodical Study Committee on the Federal Vision and Justification”: https://www.urchna.org/urchna/StudyCommittees/FederalVision/Federal_Vision_Study_Committee_Report.pdf, 17-19.

¹² Although, Engelsma says that no “theologian possessed of acuity and honesty [will] ever appeal to [an] apparent similarity [in a denial of the covenant of works] in order to suggest to the public that there is basic agreement between the theology of the federal vision and the theology of the Protestant Reformed Churches”; see David Engelsma, *Federal Vision: Heresy at the Root* (Jenison, MI: RFPA, 2012), 140-41; see also, 195-97.

¹³ Venema, *Christ and Covenant Theology*, 36.

of the covenant with Adam will be considered, giving voice to Reformed theologians throughout. Secondly, the five main Protestant Reformed (PR) objections to the traditional covenant of works formulation will be presented as stated by Hoeksema and supported by subsequent PR writers. Finally, the paper will apply the definition of covenant as *structured* fellowship to give a positive statement and explanation of God's pre-fall relationship with Adam as recorded in Genesis 1:26-27, 2:7 and Genesis 2:16-17.

Presentation of the Traditional Covenant of Works Formulation

It has been noted that the covenant with Adam, as conceived by early Reformed theologians, was composed of three things: a *promise*, a *condition*, and a *threat*.¹⁴ On the foundation of these elements, successive generations of Reformers built a doctrinal framework to answer the questions that arose out of a study of Genesis 1-3: When was the covenant established? What exactly was promised to Adam? How long was it necessary for Adam to meet the condition of obedience? To whom did the promise (and the threat) pertain?

The breadth of writing about the covenant of works is staggering, and there is surprising diversity in the presentations of individual writers. Differences notwithstanding, certain features do emerge which may together be considered the traditional formulation. For the treatment in his *Reformed Dogmatics*, Hoeksema allows Charles Hodge, an influential American Presbyterian, to speak at length for the Reformed in favor of the doctrine.¹⁵ This paper will follow Hoeksema's

¹⁴ See, for example, Ursinus's Major Catechism (composed 1561 or 1562), Question and Answer 10, here: http://links.christreformed.org/doctrinevision/ursinus_project.pdf; see also, Question and Answer 36. Notably, the Heidelberg Catechism (HC, 1563) contains no reference to the "covenant of works." Considering Ursinus's role in the development of the doctrine, its absence there is more significant than its absence from the Canons of Dort, to which Hanks draw attention; see Hanks, "A Comparison of the Westminster and the Reformed Confessions," *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*, 20, 1 (November, 1986): 10-11.

¹⁵ Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, Second Edition (Grandville, MI: RFP, 2004), 1:304-07.

summary of Hodge, adding distinguishing features and points of explanation from other writers of interest (primarily contemporary theologians).

Establishment

Summarizing Hodge, Hoeksema lists the first feature of the traditional covenant of works formulation:

The covenant of works was an arrangement or agreement between God and Adam entered into by God and established by him after man's creation. It was not given with creation, but was an additional arrangement.¹⁶

In answer to the question "When?" the prevailing opinion is that God established the covenant of works with Adam at the moment recorded in Genesis 2:16-17, which reads,

And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.

At the moment of his creation, it is said, Adam existed outside of a covenant with God. When the "contracting parties" came together and set the terms (promise, condition, and threat/penalty) for a shared life, a covenantal agreement was reached.¹⁷ That is, Adam was not created *in* a covenant with God, but rather *for* a covenant with God. Venema refers to the Westminster Shorter and Larger Catechisms (WSC and WLC) for proof:

The parallels between the language used to describe the terms of man's original created state and calling, and that used to describe the reestablishment of man in communion with God in the covenant of grace, suggest that, biblically, man is [to] be understood as from the beginning a creature created for *covenant* with God. However, the prefall covenant must not be identified with creation *simpliciter*, since WSC 12 and WLC 20 do place the 'covenant of life,' as a work of God's providence, subsequent to creation.¹⁸

¹⁶ Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:307.

¹⁷ Pink, *The Divine Covenants* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1973), 41; see also, 49.

¹⁸ Venema, *Christ and Covenant Theology*, 28, footnote 37; see also, 135, where he calls this "nearly the unanimous opinion of the covenant theologians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries."

Beeke and Jones demonstrate, however, that the Puritans were not entirely unified on this question, meaning that several proponents of the covenant of works did not make it an addition to man's creation, rather believing that "Adam was created in a covenant, by virtue of the law being written on his heart."¹⁹ Moreover, contemporary theologians Brown and Keele write,

*God is the one who made the covenant, and he did so at creation. For Adam and Eve to be made in the image of God is for them to be in covenant with God.... [The prohibition of Gen. 2:16-17] focuses the covenant relationship on a specific test, but the covenant is bigger than this one command.*²⁰

To Fesko, the difference between "created *in* covenant" and "created *for* covenant" is not so stark that it is either one or the other. He applies the scholastic distinction between "formal" and "material" to bring them together:

We can designate Adam's image-bearing nature as the material cause of the covenant of works and the administration of the divine commands [Gen. 1:28, 2:16-17] as its formal cause ... To force a choice between Adam created *in* versus *for* covenant imposes a false dilemma upon the biblical text—choosing between the two attempts to rend the seamless garment of creation and covenant.²¹

Essence

Again summarizing Hodge, Hoeksema lists the second feature of the traditional covenant of works formulation:

It was a means to an end. Adam had life, but did not possess the highest, that is, eternal life. He was free, but his state was not that of highest freedom. He was lapsible. The covenant of works was arranged as a means for Adam to attain to that highest state of freedom in eternal life.²²

¹⁹ Joel Beeke and Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: RHB, 2012), 223-24. Francis Roberts is given as an example; Thomas Goodwin is suggested as another "because of how he understands the relationship between the image of God and the nature of the covenant"; see 222.

²⁰ Michael Brown and Zach Keele, *Sacred Bond: Covenant Theology Explored* (Grandville, MI: Reformed Fellowship, Inc., 2012), 43; see also, 56, 68.

²¹ Fesko, *Adam and the Covenant of Works*, 325-26; see also, 184-85.

²² Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:307.

Because proponents of the doctrine see the covenant of God with Adam fundamentally as an agreement, established at the moment recorded in Genesis 2:16-17, they do not speak of the essence of the covenant as the life that Adam enjoyed with God in the garden. It is acknowledged that of course he did share a relationship with God, but the emphasis falls on the legal character of the covenant as the vehicle by which Adam could one day reach a *better* life. The covenant is the setting of the terms for life together, not the shared life itself.²³

There is some mixing of terms by covenant of works theologians on this point. For example, Brown and Keele, who equate the establishment of the covenant with the creation of man, say:

God's covenants embody that relationship: what God has done for us, as well as our obligations to him. Hence, covenant is not a means to an end, but it is the end itself—the communion between God and his people.²⁴

Elements

Third, in his summary of Hodge's presentation of the traditional covenant of works formulation, Hoeksema says, "the specific elements of this covenant were a promise (eternal life), a penalty (eternal death), and a condition (perfect obedience)."²⁵ Indeed, it is argued, these elements characterize all biblical covenants (some say, all Ancient Near Eastern covenants). In Genesis 2:17a, God says to Adam, "But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it." This is the condition, the stipulation. The penalty is added (Gen. 2:17b): "for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die."²⁶ The lack of a promise in the covenantal

²³ Brown and Keele, *Sacred Bond*, 11-12, 19.

²⁴ Brown and Keele, *Sacred Bond*, 18.

²⁵ Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:307.

²⁶ Fesko says, "First and foremost, the threatened curse was exile from the garden – Adam would be cast out of paradise and forced to live East of Eden in a state of exilic death.... To be sure, Adam's death also entailed his spiritual and physical death"; see Fesko, *Adam and the Covenant of Works*, 332.

agreement is not problematic for proponents of the covenant of works; they say it is implied by the presence of the threat. Jonty Rhodes explains,

In Genesis 2, we may only read of the conditions and the curse, but it's of the very nature of a covenant that there be a blessing involved too: curse and blessing are two sides of the same covenant coin.²⁷

Probation

Fourth, Hoeksema says, summarizing Hodge's presentation of the traditional covenant of works formulation, "in this covenant Adam was placed on probation. There would have come a time when the period of probation would have ended and when the promise would have been fulfilled."²⁸ The concept of probation is introduced to further explain the conditional element of the covenant of works. If the promise is said to consist of anything other than continued, temporal, earthly existence, it becomes necessary to ask: When would Adam have gotten the reward? That is, when would his obedience be deemed sufficient for the receipt of his reward? A. W. Pink thinks of this as a sort of test:

In the case of Adam his character was not yet confirmed, and therefore, like the angels, he must be placed on probation, subjected to trial, to see whether or no he would render allegiance to the Lord his maker.²⁹

Later, he writes,

It is true that Adam was in the enjoyment of spiritual life, being completely holy and happy; but he was on probation, and his response to the test God gave him—his obedience or disobedience to His command—would determine whether that spiritual life would be continued or whether it would be forfeited.³⁰

²⁷ Jonty Rhodes, *Covenants Made Simple: Understanding God's Unfolding Promises to His People*, North American edition (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2014), 23; see also, Fesko, *Adam and the Covenant of Works*, 188-89, 198.

²⁸ Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:307.

²⁹ Pink, *The Divine Covenants*, 35; see also, 39.

³⁰ Pink, *The Divine Covenants*, 45.

Various suggestions are offered as to the timing of the probationary period, though generally it is left unspecified. Fesko says Adam's tasks to subdue the earth and fill it (Gen. 1:28) "imply a necessary terminus," meaning the probation would last as long as it took to accomplish those goals.³¹ Myers points to G. K. Beale, who "hints that the end point of this probation may have been Adam's ability to resist Satan's direct testing at the tree."³² Musing on the congruity and analogy, and yet qualitative difference between Christ and Adam, Myers himself explores different options before concluding: "These matters, of course, are left to speculation."³³

End—Reward

The fifth feature which Hoeksema lists in his summary of Hodge's traditional covenant of works formulation is:

At the end of the period of probation, Adam would have been translated into a state of glory analogous to the change of believers who will be living at the time of Christ's second advent.³⁴

In answer to the question "What?" it is stated here that on condition of perfect obedience for a period of probation, Adam's reward was to be eternal, heavenly life.³⁵ While this may represent the majority, the subject is a contested one. In fact, Beeke and Jones say,

On the Continent, Reformed theologians in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries generally favored the view that Adam's reward for obedience would have been heaven. However, those in Britain lacked such unanimity, and a good number of them preferred to remain agnostic on the question.³⁶

³¹ Fesko, *Adam and the Covenant of Works*, 186; see also, Daniel McManigal, *Encountering Christ in the Covenants: An Introduction to Covenant Theology* (West Linn, OR: Monergism Books, 2013), 23.

³² Myers, *God to Us*, 70.

³³ Myers, *God to Us*, 71.

³⁴ Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:307.

³⁵ See also, David Engelsma, "The Covenant of Creation with Adam," *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*, 40, 1 (November, 2006): 10.

³⁶ Beeke and Jones, *A Puritan Theology*, 228. Peter Bulkeley and John Ball are listed as examples of the latter.

Because the promise is not explicitly stated in the covenantal agreement of Genesis 2:16-17, proponents of the doctrine need to look elsewhere in the Scriptures to define it.³⁷ Differences in exegetical conclusions on passages well outside the narrative of Genesis 1-3 result in three different explanations of the contents of the covenantal blessing.

First, some theologians think that in the implied promise of the covenant, *heavenly, eternal life* was at stake. Barcellos refers to Romans 3:23, which reads, “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.” Then, on its basis, he writes,

In other words, Adam was created in a state that could have been improved, with God being the ultimate cause and Adam’s obedience the instrumental cause of the improvement ... Adam was not created with eternal life.³⁸

Fesko, for his part, introduces Leviticus 18:5, the text that lies behind two of the proofs in the WCF for the covenant of works (Rom. 10:5, Gal. 3:12): “Ye shall therefore keep my statutes, and my judgments: which if a man do, he shall live in them: I am the Lord.” He points out that John Calvin and others interpret the passage to be referring to eternal, not temporal, life.³⁹ Turretin likewise appeals to Leviticus 18:5 in support of heavenly, eternal life.⁴⁰

Second, Thomas Goodwin uses the same passage in support of the idea that the reward was to be *continued, earthly existence*.⁴¹ In addition to Leviticus 18:5, Fesko says that

³⁷ Fesko, *Adam and the Covenant of Works*, 184.

³⁸ Barcellos, *Getting the Garden Right: Adam’s Work and God’s Rest in Light of Christ* (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2017), 70-74. He calls this Adam’s “eschatological potential”; see 9; see also, Fesko, *Adam and the Covenant of Works*, 186.

³⁹ Fesko, *Adam and the Covenant of Works*, 21, 23-25; see also, 36-40.

⁴⁰ Beeke and Jones, *A Puritan Theology*, 227-29.

⁴¹ Beeke and Jones, *A Puritan Theology*, 228-29; also listed in favor of this position are William Gouge and Jeremiah Burroughs.

Goodwin followed Cameron's view of 1 Corinthians 15:45ff, that Adam was of the earth and Jesus was the heavenly man. Adam was natural and Christ was supernatural. Therefore, Adam's reward could only be natural since only the supernatural blessing of eternal life could come through Christ.⁴²

Only this proposal is possible without a probationary period.

Third, against "H. Witsius and some other prominent theologians of the Puritan period," Pink expresses agreement with Goodwin's sentiment that it was not a heavenly life that was promised:

Had Adam complied with the terms of the covenant, then he would have been confirmed in his creature standing, in the favor of God toward paradise; he would then have passed beyond the possibility of apostasy and misery. The reward, or additional good, which would have followed Adam's obedience was a state of inalienable blessedness both for himself and his posterity.⁴³

But, according to Pink, the promise was more than continued, earthly existence; Adam would have obtained an "indefectibility of holiness and righteousness," to which Rhodes refers, using Romans 5:14, as the *inability to sin and the inability to die*.⁴⁴

Extent

Sixth, Hoeksema says, giving the last point in summary of Hodge's traditional covenant of works formulation, "the fruit of this obedience of Adam would have been reaped by all Adam's posterity."⁴⁵ The answer to the question "Who?" or "To whom?" rests upon the idea of federal headship. Using the language of WCF 7.2, Fesko writes,

⁴² Fesko, *Adam and the Covenant of Works*, 44.

⁴³ Pink, *The Divine Covenants*, 45.

⁴⁴ Pink, *The Divine Covenants*, 47, 50; Rhodes, *Covenants Made Simple*, 23-24; see also, 26-27. Hoeksema himself seems to suggest this possibility when he says, "If Adam had been obedient for some thousands of years, he would by that time certainly have reached the state of being 'not able to sin' (*non posse peccare*)"; see Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:256.

⁴⁵ Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:307.

God made an agreement with Adam that he would reward his obedience with eternal life and that his faithful actions would also fall positively upon his offspring or negatively should he disobey. In technical terms, the covenant of works designated Adam as the federal head of humanity – God would impute his obedience or conversely his disobedience to those whom he represented.⁴⁶

Adam’s glorification and betterment would have included the children which he and Eve were commanded to bring forth (Gen. 1:28).

How this was to be accomplished is not a matter of universal agreement. Schilder’s presentation, though, is quaint: If Adam had met the condition,

the garden would have unfolded to fullest beauty for him. The first human pair would also have multiplied to the full number of humanity ordained to life ... The ‘city’ [reference to Revelation 22:2] would have blossomed forth even as the garden.⁴⁷

In conclusion, despite some differences of opinion as to the establishment of the covenant of works (creation, Gen. 2:16-17, or both) and its end (heaven, earthly indefectibility, or earthly continuity), it has been observed that regarding six features—establishment, essence, elements, probationary character, end, and extent—there is a consensus of opinion which may be said to constitute the traditional formulation. Having been presented, they will next be placed under the microscope of Hoeksema and his theological descendants in the PRC.

PR Objections to the Traditional “Covenant of Works” Formulation

Hoeksema’s five objections to the covenant of works in his *Reformed Dogmatics* follow immediately his summary of the traditional formulation as presented by Hodge. They do not correlate exactly with the six features of the doctrine that were listed; rather, unsurprisingly, they

⁴⁶ Fesko, *Adam and the Covenant of Works*, 318; Beeke and Jones, *A Puritan Theology*, 235. Though Hoeksema speaks of Adam as the legal head of the human race in his dogmatics chapter on the covenant with Adam, he does not connect Adam’s federal headship to the covenant as explicitly as Fesko does here; see Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:318-19.

⁴⁷ Klaas Schilder, *HEAVEN—What is it?*, trans. and condensed Marian Schoolland (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1950), 91-92.

center on exactly the two features which were most contested among its proponents: When was the covenant established? And what was the promise made to Adam? As to the latter, the fact that Reformed theologians—all in favor of the covenant of works—could not agree on the answer to this significant question indicates a weakness in the construct. A promised reward of eternal, heavenly life necessarily implies merit. This weakness Hoeksema exposes and Engelsma later exploits.

Further, Hoeksema points out the inescapable difficulties weighing down the idea of a probationary period and the place of Adam's children in the covenant of works. As the doctrinal framework begins to collapse with inadequate scriptural support, he finds that it, with all men in Adam, falls short of the glory of God. This leads him to the matter of the establishment of the covenant, where his objections get to the foundation and the heart of the whole issue: What *is* a covenant? The covenant of works is an agreement. Hoeksema's answer is very different and will be explored in the final section of the paper.

As was done for the presentation of the doctrine, this paper will proceed along Hoeksema's line. Explanation and counterarguments will be added to his objections, as well as counters to the counterarguments as he or another theologian from the PRC makes them.

No support in Scripture

First, Hoeksema says, “there is the chief objection that this doctrine finds no support in Scripture.”⁴⁸ In a way, this objection summarizes all his other objections. Where in the text can

⁴⁸ Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:308. Not only this objection and the following objections, but also the preceding and much of the subsequent material in the chapter on “The Covenant with Adam” is virtually copied in Herman Hoeksema, *The Triple Knowledge: An Exposition of the Heidelberg Catechism*, Third Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: RFP, 1990), 1:102-117. For this objection, see also, Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed*, 67; Herman Hoeksema, *Knowing God and Man* (Jenison, MI: RFP, 2006), 92; Hanks, *God's Everlasting Covenant of Grace*, 30.

one find an agreement? a promise of life at all, let alone a promise of eternal life? Engelsma answers these questions strongly:

There is absolutely nothing of all of this in the word of God in Genesis 2:17. Finding the essence of the covenant of God with Adam in the command of Genesis 2:17 and then defining that covenant as an agreement between the commanding God and the listening Adam have to be among the most egregious instances of what the Dutch call *inlegkunde* (reading something into a passage of Scripture, rather than drawing the truth out of the text; Greek: *eisegesis*, rather than exegesis) in all the proud history of the development of Reformed dogma.⁴⁹

Proponents of the covenant of works are not without an answer of their own. Fesko says, “an inspection of works that explain the doctrine, however, easily reveals that there is a whole host of biblical texts to which theologians appeal,” namely, Romans 2:14-15, Genesis 2:16-17, Leviticus 18:5, Isaiah 24:5, Hosea 6:7, Galatians 4:24, Romans 5:12-21, and Romans 7:1-6.⁵⁰ Their use of one of these texts, Leviticus 18:5, indicates their willingness to bring in later Old Testament and New Testament passages and allow the passages to cast light on the garden, as Fesko points out:

Proponents of the covenant of works [cited] in support of the doctrine because they read it against a larger canonical backdrop. They used the analogy of Scripture and the Bible’s own intra-canonical interpretation of Leviticus 18:5 and thus believed that the verse was applicable to Adam’s pre-fall state.⁵¹

Setting aside for the moment the idea of an “agreement,” the objection of the PRC here is made too lightly, considering it does not enter into the exegesis of the texts presented as proof for the covenant of works (nine passages in WCF 7.2 and 19.1). On a strict reading of the narrative in Genesis 1-3, it is indeed true that the language used by proponents of the doctrine will not be

⁴⁹ Engelsma, “The Covenant of Creation with Adam,” *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*, 40, 1 (November, 2006): 30.

⁵⁰ Fesko, *Adam and the Covenant of Works*, xxix; see also, Brown and Keele, *Sacred Bond*, 53-54, with the addition of 1 Corinthians 15:21-22; Barcellos, *Getting the Garden Right*, 58-77, with the addition of Romans 3:23.

⁵¹ Fesko, *Adam and the Covenant of Works*, 14.

found. However, Scripture must be allowed to interpret Scripture, in which case the objection must shift to the way in which the supporting texts are interpreted. PR theologians objecting to the covenant of works have not fought on these battlefields.

That said, the doctrine does depend on some assumptions and speculation. As Hoeksema quotes Hodge, in just one paragraph Hodge uses the following words or phrases: “probably,” “it seems to be reasonable in itself and plainly implied,” and “it is therefore to be inferred.”⁵² This is especially true for a supposed probationary period, as well as the complications concerning Adam’s posterity that are present.⁵³ At what point would the probationary period be over for Adam and eternal life, whether earthly or heavenly, obtained? Would Adam’s children be held to the same standard of obedience for the maintenance of unblemished life? If not, how could the earth be prepared for future glorification with the potential for sin tainting some of its human population? These questions are difficult, if not impossible, to answer.

Impossibility of merit

Second, Hoeksema says, “it is impossible that man should merit a special reward with God.”⁵⁴ By “special reward” he refers to eternal, heavenly life. For this reason, any conception of a covenant of works which makes temporal, continued existence the contents of the implied promise of Genesis 2:16-17 escapes the objection (the formulations of Thomas Goodwin and A. W. Pink, for example). Still, against the majority, the argument here rests on Luke 17:10, which reads: “So likewise ye, when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded you, say,

⁵² Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:306.

⁵³ See Fesko, *Adam and the Covenant of Works*, 327.

⁵⁴ Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:309.

We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do.” Concerning Adam, Hoeksema poignantly asks,

How, then, seeing that he himself, with all his powers, was the Lord’s possession, and seeing that everything round about him equally belonged to the Lord—how, then, would he ever be able to bring anything to the Lord or to merit anything with Him? ... Out of free grace he was also actually placed in that covenant relation to his God.⁵⁵

Merit goes hand-in-hand with indebtedness, as Engelsma writes, and “man must always be indebted to God; God can never be indebted to man. For God to be indebted to mere man would be the ‘ungodding’ of God.”⁵⁶ Obligation is always in the direction of man to God, by his obedience, and never in the direction of man to God. Hoeksema charges that the notion of merit is “fundamentally corrupt,” “thoroughly unscriptural and fundamentally irreligious.”⁵⁷ Strip it away, according to Engelsma, and “the traditional doctrine of the covenant of works collapses.... The idea of meriting was inherent in the doctrine itself.”⁵⁸

The objection seems devastating, but the issue is slightly more complicated. Venema voices an appeal, commonly raised in a Reformed defense of the covenant of works, to a qualified *meritum ex pacto*:

God grants Adam the ‘right’ to the reward of eternal life by virtue of the promise of the covenant of works, even though, as a creature, Adam’s obedience could never earn in the sense of ‘strict merit’ (the reward is commensurate with the work performed).⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed*, 73; see also, 66; David Engelsma, *Covenant and Election in the Reformed Tradition* (Jenison, MI: RFP, 2011), 192; Hanks, *God’s Everlasting Covenant of Grace*, 30-31; Hoeksema, *The Triple Knowledge*, 1:109.

⁵⁶ Engelsma, *Federal Vision*, 142-43; see also, Engelsma, “The Covenant of Creation with Adam,” *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*, 40, 1 (November, 2006): 19.

⁵⁷ Hoeksema, *Knowing God and Man*, 92-93.

⁵⁸ Engelsma, “The Covenant of Creation with Adam,” *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*, 40, 1 (November, 2006): 11-12.

⁵⁹ Venema, *Christ and Covenant Theology*, 32-34; see also, 424-25, where he claims Turretin employed the same distinction in different language. Fesko adds Cocceius, Witsius, à Brakel, and others; see Fesko, *Adam and the Covenant of Works*, 102-03.

Venema here refers to a distinction between “strict merit” and a “covenanted merit.” Could Adam ever have been obedient enough in the covenant to earn, on the basis of the weight and worth of his own works, eternal, heavenly life? Strictly meritorious works, no; Adam’s performance and the promised reward would always be disproportionate. But in “voluntary condescension” or “condescending grace,” God would overlook this disproportionality and reward Adam’s obedience anyway.⁶⁰ He concludes, “In this latter, subordinate sense, you might say Adam would have ‘merited’ or ‘deserved’ the fellowship his obedience maintained.”⁶¹

And so it appears, by this theological construct, the condemnation of merit per se as raised by Engelsma can be avoided. After all, he refers to “strict merit” when he says:

In the matter of meriting there ought to be a definite agreement between the worth of the meritorious work and the value of the payment that is earned by the work. One does not pay the surgeon who performed a successful heart transplant with a half bushel of home-grown tomatoes. The mere man who merits is not thankful to God for the good thing he has earned, nor should he be. He has the good thing coming. He deserves it. God owes it to him. It is payment. Indeed, he may legitimately boast of having got the good by his own (meritorious) work.⁶²

However, Engelsma goes on to reject the distinction and use of *meritum ex pacto* out of hand:

Rome also resorts to such distinctions to make merit palatable to the unwary. In addition to its merit *ex condigno*, Rome has invented a merit *ex congruo*, that is, the merit of a work that does not earn divine payment by inherent worth of the work, but only because the work pleases God. The Reformed merit *ex pacto* is essentially the same as the Roman Catholic merit *ex congruo*. All such distinctions are worthless and deceiving. Merit is merit. All merit by mere men is earning with God so that payment is deserved.⁶³

⁶⁰ Beeke and Jones, *A Puritan Theology*, 229-32; Myers, *God to Us*, 71.

⁶¹ Venema, *Christ and Covenant Theology*, 35.

⁶² Engelsma, “The Covenant of Creation with Adam,” *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*, 40, 1 (November, 2006): 16.

⁶³ Engelsma, “The Covenant of Creation with Adam,” *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*, 40, 1 (November, 2006): 19; see also, Fesko, *Adam and the Covenant of Works*, 92, 96-97, 397-400.

The PRC share this objection to merit in the covenant of works with FV theologians.⁶⁴

But Engelsma insists the similarity extends no further:

That the first Adam could not merit with God by no means implies that the last Adam, Jesus Christ, did not merit. This is the implication that the men of the Federal Vision like to draw from their denial of the covenant of works.⁶⁵

Whereas the FV uses a rejection of merit in the covenant with Adam to deny the meritorious work of Christ and replace it with a justification by faith and works, Engelsma, speaking for the PRC, affirms:

Jesus Christ merited with God, and could merit with God, because He is personally the eternal Son of God. He is no mere man. Mere man can never merit. God in the flesh can, and did, merit.⁶⁶

No promise of eternal life

Third, Hoeksema says, “how must we conceive of this promise of eternal life to Adam?”⁶⁷ As he points out, “If [Adam] had remained sinless for a thousand years, he still would have lived an earthly life; he could not reach to heaven.”⁶⁸ Indeed, heavenly life would have been a strange concept to Adam! He enjoyed covenantal perfection with God in the garden of Eden; in his mind, what could possibly have been added to that life? Whether he could have conceived of it or not, the reality was beyond the realm of possibility. The basis for Hoeksema’s question (complaint) is 1 Corinthians 15:45-50, which reads,

⁶⁴ Richard Belcher, Jr., *The Fulfillment of the Promises of God: An Explanation of Covenant Theology*, (Fearn, Great Britain: Mentor, 2020), 159; see also, here: <https://federal-vision.com/ecclesiology/joint-federal-vision-statement/>.

⁶⁵ Engelsma, “The Covenant of Creation with Adam,” *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*, 40, 1 (November, 2006): 22.

⁶⁶ Engelsma, “The Covenant of Creation with Adam,” *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*, 40, 1 (November, 2006): 25.

⁶⁷ Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:310.

⁶⁸ Hoeksema, *Knowing God and Man*, 93.

And so it is written, The first man Adam was made a living soul; the last Adam was made a quickening spirit. Howbeit that was not first which is spiritual, but that which is natural; and afterward that which is spiritual. The first man is of the earth, earthy; the second man is the Lord from heaven. As is the earthy, such are they also that are earthy: and as is the heavenly, such are they also that are heavenly. And as we have borne the image of the earthy, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly. Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; neither doth corruption inherit incorruption.

Again, the objection falls away from the covenant of works schemes which refer only to continued, earthly existence, as opposed to a glorified, heavenly state, but it may be registered against the opinion of most of the proponents of the doctrine.

The argument is simple and significant. Adam was a man of the earth, earthy—“dependent on the very creation over which he has dominion.”⁶⁹ He was made a living soul—“put in the same class as the animals as far as his physical existence is concerned.”⁷⁰ Man as a creature “formed,” “sculpted,” and “shaped” out of the earth simply cannot be a heavenly creature.⁷¹ The earthly needs to be put aside. After all, man was made “a little lower than the angels” (Heb. 2:7).⁷² Man, as an earthly being, was not made with quite the glory and honor of angels, heavenly beings.

McManigal takes a different tack and believes that Adam would have been able to attain a higher, heavenly life by receipt of the glorified body to which Paul refers in 1 Corinthians 15:

Adam receives a natural body first. The life promised to Adam in the covenant of works was the reward of a spiritual body ... ‘The first man Adam’ would have received a spiritual body that could never perish.⁷³

⁶⁹ Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:287.

⁷⁰ Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:282.

⁷¹ Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:285-86.

⁷² Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed*, 71.

⁷³ McManigal, *Encountering Christ in the Covenants*, 24. Also, McManigal contends not that Adam would have been *raised* to a higher plane of life, but rather, on the basis of Revelation 21:1-3, that God would have

But Hanks, using John 11:25, 26⁷⁴ and John 17:3,⁷⁵ shows that this idea comes up short:

For Adam to receive eternal life would have involved a change, even before the fall, in his entire nature which is possible only through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.⁷⁶

Another attempt to prove otherwise comes from Barcellos, who draws from the typical relationship between Adam and Christ the conclusion that just as “the life-unto-death obedience of Christ constitutes a righteousness ‘to eternal life’ [Rom. 5:21],” so also the obedience of Adam “would have brought upon him a status not his by virtue of creation.”⁷⁷ Similarly, Brown and Keele assert,

Christ is the covenant representative of his people so that his free gift of righteousness leads to eternal life for those in Christ. If this is true of Christ, then it is true of Adam ... The covenant relationship between the covenant heads and God are analogous.⁷⁸

But according to Engelsma, making such an analogy—to the point of equality—between the first Adam and the second Adam is in conflict with the preeminence of Christ:

God created Adam merely as a ‘figure,’ or type, of Jesus Christ, the real covenant head (Rom. 5:14). The figure is not on a par with the reality, does not compete with the reality, and surely is not in a position to outdo the reality—in this case take the entire human race to the heights of life and glory, whereas Jesus Christ takes only some to these heights. Rather, the figure faintly pictures, serves, and then gives way to the reality. Adam faintly

descended to dwell on the earth with mankind: “The crowning reward of Adam and his children’s work would be God himself descending to the earth and dwelling among them.”

⁷⁴ “Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Believest thou this?”

⁷⁵ “And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.”

⁷⁶ Hanks, *God’s Everlasting Covenant of Grace*, 31.

⁷⁷ Barcellos, *Getting the Garden Right*, 68-70.

⁷⁸ Brown and Keele, *Sacred Bond*, 54-55.

pictured the coming Christ by his headship of an inferior covenant—in the words of 1 Corinthians 15—a covenant of merely natural, earthly life and glory.⁷⁹

Finally, it should be noted that some Dutch Reformed theologians have held that the doctrine of the covenant of works can be drawn from the Three Forms of Unity. G. H. Kersten does so from Belgic Confession (BC) Article 14; Heidelberg Catechism (HC), Questions 6 and 7; and Canons of Dordt (CD), Heads III/IV, Article 2.⁸⁰ This is also the position of the United Reformed Churches (URC): “the absence of the terminology of a ‘covenant of works’ in the Confessions does not alter the fact that all of the elements or components of the Reformed doctrine are present ‘materially’ in them.”⁸¹ But even the explicit phrase “eternal happiness” in HC, Question 6 ought not be said to refer to heavenly glory, for it is not so explained in the commentary of Ursinus on the Catechism.

Covenant not incidental and accidental, and not an agreement

Fourth, Hoeksema says, “the covenant of works presents the covenant relation as something incidental and additional to man’s life in relation to God.”⁸² The objection here is really two-fold. In the first place, PR theologians, following Hoeksema, have opposed the idea that covenant and creation may be uncoupled. Hanko explains,

⁷⁹ Engelsma, *Covenant and Election in the Reformed Tradition*, 197; see also, Engelsma, “The Covenant of Creation with Adam,” *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*, 40, 1 (November, 2006): 27.

⁸⁰ G. H. Kersten, *Reformed Dogmatics: A Systematic Treatment of Reformed Doctrine* (n.p.: Netherlands Reformed Book and Publishing Committee, 1980), 1:202-03. Just prior, following his scriptural support, he says, “the church has always taught the doctrine of the Covenant of Works.”

⁸¹ “Report of the Synodical Study Committee on the Federal Vision and Justification”: https://www.urncna.org/urncna/StudyCommittees/FederalVision/Federal_Vision_Study_Committee_Report.pdf, 36; see also the Conclusions of Utrecht (1905) in J. L. Schaver, *The Polity of the Churches*, Third Edition (Chicago 21, IL: Church Polity Press, 1947), 2:35.

⁸² Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:311.

This view of the covenant of works becomes some sort of addition to Adam's original state ... As he came from the hands of his Creator, he lacked an important ingredient to his full blessedness: the covenant had still to be added.⁸³

Rather, God's act of creation is one with His establishment of a covenant with Adam. Therefore, Engelsma insists, the negative command of Genesis 2:16-17

was not the establishment of the covenant. No covenant is established by a command, much less by a negative command. Rather, the command presupposed an already existing covenant between the commanding God and his duty-bound son and servant.⁸⁴

In the second place, PR theologians have objected to the idea that the nature or essence of the covenant is an *agreement*. For that reason, Hoeksema stated emphatically that the "giving of the probationary command and [the] threat of the penalty of death are no covenant or agreement, and constitute no *transaction* between God and Adam."⁸⁵ The word "*transaction*" implies a mutuality that is simply not present in the biblical narrative.⁸⁶

Fesko finds the main objection to the covenant of works to be at this point, the doctrine's "contractual nature."⁸⁷ He argues that detractors "impose a modern definition of *contract* upon early modern uses of the term."⁸⁸ Also baked into the disagreement is the role secular contracts are allowed in one's coming to an understanding of biblical covenants,⁸⁹ as well as the propriety

⁸³ Hanko, *God's Everlasting Covenant of Grace*, 31-32.

⁸⁴ Engelsma, *Covenant and Election in the Reformed Tradition*, 192; see also, Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:308-09.

⁸⁵ Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:308, emphasis mine—IVB; see also, 1:304.

⁸⁶ Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed*, 65.

⁸⁷ Fesko, *Adam and the Covenant of Works*, xviii-xix, xxiv-xxv.

⁸⁸ Fesko, *Adam and the Covenant of Works*, xxv, xxviii; see also, 55-76. Contra David Engelsma, *Trinity and Covenant*, 116; see also, Hanko, *God's Everlasting Covenant of Grace*, 13.

⁸⁹ Brown and Keele, *Sacred Bond*, 16.

of conditional language.⁹⁰ The topic is too large to be faced adequately in this paper. Let it be said simply that a presentation in which the covenant is an agreement is incompatible with a presentation in which the covenant is fellowship. It is the latter explanation which will be investigated in the final section of the paper.

Unworthy of God

Fifth, Hoeksema says, “from the viewpoint of God’s sovereignty and wisdom, this theory of a covenant of works appears quite unworthy of God.”⁹¹ In picturesque language, he explains what is meant by the objection:

Nor is there anything attractive about it; nor does it open one’s eyes for the glorious work of God with respect to His covenant. It really always makes us stand nostalgically with our noses against the fence of Paradise, with the futile wish in our souls that Adam had not fallen! For after all, if it be true that Adam also was able to earn that which Christ now bestows on us, if only he had remained standing, then it remains eternally tragic that the first Paradise is no longer there and that we did not receive eternal life through the obedience of the first man. If only he had remained standing, then the entire history of struggle and suffering could have been prevented, and then all men would have entered eternal life through him. But now there is not only the fearful history of struggle and sorrow and misery, with the cross of Christ at the center, but also the fact that at the end of history’s course thousands and millions sink away into an eternal night of misery and hellish suffering. Then it may be true that the Lord ultimately has the victory, but the fact remains that the devil succeeded through his temptation in striking a tremendous breach in the works of God. And thus we arrive at the point of actually criticizing the counsel of the Lord Jehovah, who certainly conceived and willed all these things from before the foundation of the world.⁹²

In the covenant of works, the first Adam is said to have been able “upon condition of” or “in the way of” his perfect obedience to merit (*ex pacto*) eternal life.⁹³ The possibility of his

⁹⁰ Engelsma, *Covenant and Election in the Reformed Tradition*, 195.

⁹¹ Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:312.

⁹² Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed*, 67.

⁹³ Venema uses these phrases interchangeably, along with “manner,” when speaking of *meritum ex pacto*; see Venema, *Christ and Covenant Theology*, 27, 426.

success in doing so pushes Christ, the second Adam, out of the focal point of the counsel of God. God's plan of salvation was "to perfect all things and to establish His covenant forever" by the Lord from heaven "along the deep way of sin and grace."⁹⁴ That becomes "Plan B":

God was forced to fall back on an alternate plan to bring men to heaven, a plan which included the work of Christ; a plan which now becomes second best, conceived in desperation to undo what man had done.⁹⁵

Engelsma seals the deal:

The teaching that Adam might have merited eternal, heavenly life diminishes Jesus Christ and His work. The incarnate Son of God merely accomplishes what the mere man Adam could have done. All that Christ did by His incarnation, atoning death, and resurrection, Adam could have done by not eating a piece of fruit. Indeed, Adam could have done more: he could have brought the entire race into the highest, heavenly life. Christ only brings a remnant into glory. At least with regard to their powers and potential, Adam and Christ are equal.⁹⁶

In conclusion, five objections to the traditional covenant of works formulation made by PR theologians beginning with Herman Hoeksema have been set forth, explained, and defended. The main lines of argumentation are as follows.

In the first place, it was seen that the doctrine's proponents must resort to speculation when faced with certain difficulties, such as the length of Adam's probation or the inclusion of his children in the enjoyment of his reward. However, it must also be admitted that the burden of responsibility presently lies with the PRC to do more exegetical work against the covenant of works in texts brought forward by its supporting theologians outside the narrative of Genesis 1-3.

Secondly, the charge that the doctrinal construct depends on merit can be avoided by appealing to a distinction between "strict merit" and "covenanted merit" (*meritum ex pacto*) or to

⁹⁴ Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed*, 71; see also, 74.

⁹⁵ Hanko, *God's Everlasting Covenant of Grace*, 31.

⁹⁶ Engelsma, "The Covenant of Creation with Adam," *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*, 40, 1 (November, 2006): 20; see also, 21.

God's voluntary, gracious condescension in the covenant. Therefore, Engelsma's identification of this distinction as one and the same with Rome's merit *ex condigno/ex congruo* distinction is an important step forward from Hoeksema and should give any Reformed theologian using the distinction serious concern. It was also proven that a denial of merit in the first Adam's obedience before God does not preclude the possibility—indeed, the reality—of merit in the second Adam's work for the salvation of His elect.

Third, Hoeksema's basic objection to the promise of eternal life in the covenant of works stands, firmly planted in 1 Corinthians 15:45-50. A spiritual Adam is necessary to accomplish translation beyond the level of the earthly to which all living souls are bound.

The foundational objection, Hoeksema's fourth, was acknowledged but largely deferred, with some positive development on the establishment and essence of the pre-fall covenant to follow in the next section.

Finally, it was observed that the doctrine of the covenant of works crowds out God's purpose in Christ, leaving a sort of dissatisfaction with the way things turned out in the garden of Eden that misses the point of God's plan from the beginning.

At certain points a minority opinion was noted which escaped one or more of the objections of Hoeksema and his theological successors. This raises the question: Is there a covenant of works view that steers clear of every objection? It may be; regrettably, however, there is little value in identifying such formulations, for so long as they carry the name "covenant of works," they are problematic simply by association with the consensus.⁹⁷ The effort is futile in that the PRC would remain outside the stream of broadly Reformed thought on the subject.

⁹⁷ Engelsma, "The Covenant of Creation with Adam," *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*, 40, 1 (November, 2006): 34.

Formulation of Covenant with Adam as Structured Fellowship

The doctrine of a covenant of works as held by the consensus of theologians in the past and present is objectionable. Most seriously of all, it misidentifies the essence of the covenant as an agreement. Thus, it moves the moment of its establishment from Genesis 1:26-27 (creation) to Genesis 2:16-17 (command) and introduces a conditionality and a mutuality into God's covenant with Adam which is improper for the Creator/creature relationship.

Hoeksema's objection to the doctrine of a covenant of works is not an objection to the idea of covenant in the garden of Eden *per se*. On the contrary, the "Doctor of the Covenant" writes, "The holy Scriptures abundantly testify that the fundamental relationship between God and man is that of a covenant." He points to Hosea 6:7⁹⁸ and continues,

It is true that the first chapters of the book of Genesis do not make literal mention of this covenant relation, but all that we read of God's dealings with Adam in paradise presupposes such a relation. God spoke with Adam as a friend speaks with his friend.⁹⁹

In keeping with his understanding of "covenant" throughout redemptive history, Hoeksema saw that God's relationship with Adam was essentially *friendship* and *fellowship*. Engelsma, however, found this explanation to be deficient and made a small, but significant, modification: "The covenant [with Adam] was fellowship, but it was *structured* fellowship." He

⁹⁸ "But they like men [lit., 'Adam'] have transgressed the covenant: there have they dealt treacherously against me." Though it is not the purpose of this paper to enter into the exegesis of this passage and others, notice that Hosea 6:7 is given in support for the covenant of works; see Fesko, *Adam and the Covenant of Works*, 239-261. However, Fesko does not do more than prove that the relationship between God and Adam was covenantal; that is, from the passage he does not prove that the relationship between God and Adam was a covenant of works. The same is true of his exegesis of Isaiah 24:5; see Fesko, *Adam and the Covenant of Works*, 217-237.

⁹⁹ Hoeksema, *Knowing God and Man*, 87-88; see also, Hoeksema, *The Triple Knowledge*, 1:114-15. These pages open the ninth chapter, called "Man, the Friend-Servant of God." Though the exact language is in some places different, it is obvious that Herman's son Homer borrowed heavily from this source in his later work on the subject; see Homer Hoeksema, *From Creation to the Flood*, *Unfolding Covenant History: An Exposition of the Old Testament* (Grandville, Michigan: RFP, 2000), 1:90-97. "Hoeksema" refers in this paper to Herman, not Homer, unless otherwise specified.

found the importance of the word *structured* in doing justice to the reality that God and Adam were not just friends—though the organic idea must be emphasized, considering many think instead of an “agreement.” They were indeed *friends*. More, God was Friend-Sovereign and Adam was friend-servant: “In the covenant God was Adam’s friend-sovereign—his Father; Adam was God’s friend-servant—His son.”¹⁰⁰

In this section, Engelsma’s modified formulation of “covenant” as *structured* fellowship will be used to analyze God’s relationship with Adam as recorded in Genesis 1:26-27, 2:7 (the establishment at creation) and Genesis 2:16-17 (the prohibitory command).

Establishment at creation

Hoeksema objected to the traditional covenant of works formulation in that it produced a disjunction between the creation of Adam and the establishment of the covenant. In Hoeksema’s own system of thought, these events are one and the same, by virtue of the image of God in Adam. He says,

Adam stood also as God’s covenant friend-servant in Paradise. Unto that purpose he was created after God’s image, so that he possessed that creaturely likeness of God which was necessary to live in that covenant relation with his God ... He was not merely a creature who was adapted to God and who might along a certain way enter into God’s covenant; but he had received from his God all that was necessary in order to stand and to live in that covenant.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Engelsma, “The Covenant of Creation with Adam,” *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*, 40, 1 (November, 2006): 34, emphasis mine—IVB; see also, for application of the modified definition to the covenant of grace, Engelsma, *Trinity and Covenant*, 117. Myers offers an interesting and similar definition: “a relationship within parameters”; see Myers, *God to Us*, 3; see also, 8-10. That Myers claims to draw this definition from Turretin is fascinating and worthy of further study.

¹⁰¹ Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed*, 72-73; see also, Hoeksema, *Knowing God and Man*, 90. As seen here and in what follows, Engelsma’s modification to Hoeksema’s covenant formula is not to be overstated. The phrase “structured fellowship” may be new, but the *idea* behind it—a relationship between a Friend-Sovereign and a friend-servant—is found throughout Hoeksema’s writing; see, for example, Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed*, 62-63, 65; see also, 68; Hoeksema, *Knowing God and Man*, 67, 91-94.

What is immediately striking about this presentation is its consistency with the biblical picture for covenant that is the family. Adam was the son of God the Father (Lk. 3:38).¹⁰² There is no agreement in the relationship between parents and their children. His covenant life was an earthly extension, a merely human (though temporarily perfect) reflection of God's own Triune family life of *fellowship*:

That life of God is a covenant life, a life of the most intimate communion of love and friendship, resting in the unity of God's Being and living through the personal distinction.¹⁰³

Prohibitory command

The *structured* character of God's covenant relationship with Adam was set by the prohibitory command of Genesis 2:16-17, by which Adam's responsibility in the covenant was defined. Engelsma explains:

In this covenant relationship, Adam had the privilege and calling to serve his Father and sovereign out of pure love and simple gratitude. He must carry out his calling by obedience to the covenantal demands ... Since obedience—sheer, unquestioning, humble, trusting obedience—is always the calling of man in the covenant, God tried Adam with the perfectly lawful and utterly easy prohibition against eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil ... In the biblical covenants, the human friend of God is always also an obedient servant. Adam, the servant, must serve his Lord also by heeding the prohibition against eating the fruit of one tree in the garden.¹⁰⁴

The prohibition was not the establishment of God's covenant with Adam, but the superimposition of the law on the covenant relationship that set the bounds and the limits, the *structure*, within which the fellowship and friendship of God and Adam would be enjoyed. This appropriately draws attention to the legal, or federal, side of the relationship between God and Adam.

¹⁰² Engelsma, *Covenant and Election in the Reformed Tradition*, 191.

¹⁰³ Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed*, 61; see also, Hoeksema, *Knowing God and Man*, 90-91; Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:315.

¹⁰⁴ Engelsma, *Covenant and Election in the Reformed Tradition*, 191-92.

Moreover, the prohibitive clause is not a condition which God demands of Adam, but God's declaration of the antithetical nature of the covenant, as Hoeksema points out:

Adam stands before the calling, as the friend of God, to reject all that is not of God, but against God, before the calling to fight against and overcome the Evil One and to maintain himself as friend-servant of the living God ... Servant of the Lord, friend of God, of the party of the living God over against the devil—such was Adam's covenant relation to his God in the first Paradise.¹⁰⁵

Conclusion

The PRC are in many ways outsiders when it comes to the “conservative” ecclesiastical landscape today. Especially on the doctrine of the covenant, beginning with Hoeksema the PRC has fought against a mighty tide of mainstream Reformed thought that has centuries-long inertia. Particularly, this theological isolation may be felt when facing the matter of God's covenant with Adam. For all that, the PRC's distinctive position on the covenant of works is a necessary one. As formulated by the consensus, the doctrine does not hold up under careful scriptural analysis.

The disagreement came down in the end to the question: What *is* a covenant? Is it an arrangement between two parties with a blessing, a curse, and stipulations? Or is it essentially a relationship of friendship and fellowship? Hoeksema answered the one; the covenant of works is the other. The PRC position can only be strengthened by embracing a slight modification of Hoeksema's covenantal formula so that it includes a *structured* element and thereby does justice to the legal aspect of God's relationship with Adam.

The nature of this covenant may seem to be an abstract issue. But Reformed theologians have always recognized that the significance of a proper understanding of God's relationship to

¹⁰⁵ Hoeksema, *Believers and Their Seed*, 69-70; see also, 76; Hoeksema, *Knowing God and Man*, 112-13; Homer Hoeksema, *From Creation to the Flood*, 115-17, 122-27; Herman Hoeksema, “The antithesis in paradise,” *Standard Bearer*, 1, 1, reprinted (4/1/2024): 331-33.

Adam extends beyond the garden. In fact, there are clear implications in the pre-fall covenant for the covenant of grace. Engelsma says,

One very real danger of conceiving the covenant with Adam as a conditional agreement by which Adam could have merited, or obtained, eternal life is that this conception leads to a doctrine of the covenant of grace as a conditional contract by which the sinner may likewise obtain, if not earn, eternal life by performing the condition.¹⁰⁶

Because such a conception of the covenant with Adam is the consensus among broadly Reformed theologians, his warning packs a punch.

In this connection, other questions may be asked: What is the connection between the covenant of works/covenant of grace distinction and the law/gospel distinction?¹⁰⁷ Can the law/gospel distinction be maintained without the covenant of works/covenant of grace distinction? Another related question pertains to the connection between Adam and Israel: Was the covenant of works republished in the covenant of grace at Sinai? Cornelis Venema takes a side against some prominent theologians at Westminster Seminary California when he argues that “republication” theory fails to do justice to the historic Reformed position on two points: 1) “the Mosaic covenant was *substantially* a covenant of grace and only *accidentally* distinct from other administrations of the covenant of grace”; 2) “the abiding validity and function of the moral law of God as a rule of conduct for the covenant people of God.”¹⁰⁸

These issues warrant further study.

¹⁰⁶ Engelsma, “The Covenant of Creation with Adam,” *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*, 40, 1 (November, 2006): 31; see also, 32.

¹⁰⁷ Marrow theologian John Colquhoun (1748-1827) clearly draws a line between these concepts in his treatise; see the Giveaway Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: RHB, 2023), iii-v.

¹⁰⁸ Venema, *Christ and Covenant Theology*, 37-144, especially 130-33, 136-39; see also, Engelsma, “The Covenant of Creation with Adam,” *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*, 40, 1 (November, 2006): 38-40. One of the theologians is J. V. Fesko, cited in this paper. His use of Leviticus 18:5 to prove the doctrine of a covenant of works becomes more interesting considering its featured role in this debate; see Venema, *Christ and Covenant Theology*, 52-56, 106-16; see also, Fesko, *Adam and the Covenant of Works*, 199, 336.

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Appendix 1: PRC Synod 1985 and the “Covenant of Works”

PRC Synod 1985 made a judgment distinguishing the original intent of the authors of the WCF from the modern interpretation of the covenant of works, and said the former has “no conflict with our position.”¹⁰⁹ The following spring, “prior to the meeting of Classis West in South Holland, Illinois, [an] Officebearers’ Conference was held” on the subject of “the differences and similarities between Presbyterianism and the Reformed faith,” occasioned by this decision. In a speech presented at the conference and later published, Hanko explains,

To us it is clear that the promise to Adam of everlasting life on condition of obedience and the idea of merit are woven of the same fabric. Whether it was so clear to the Westminster divines is another question.¹¹⁰

He concludes:

Taking all these things into consideration, it is our conviction that while the Westminster Confessions are clearly Presbyterian and while differences certainly exist between English Presbyterian theology and continental Reformed theology, these differences are certainly of such a kind that they are non-essential, that no barriers to true unity exist between those who hold to them in their doctrine and life and those who maintain the continental Confessions as their confessional basis, and that they stand solidly in the tradition of the Calvin Reformation.¹¹¹

As has become clear in the preceding sections, the prevailing view that lies behind the statement of the WCF is doubtless subject to the objections raised by Herman Hoeksema and his

¹⁰⁹ See *Acts, 1985*, Article 23, page 31: “1/ Concerning the ‘offer’ mentioned in Chapter 7, III and Chapter 10, II and concerning the ‘covenant of works’ mentioned in Chapter 7, II of the Westminster Confession, the B.P.C. has assured our Committee of Contact that they understand these doctrines in their original intent and meaning and not according to their modern interpretation so that there is no conflict with our doctrinal position as Protestant Reformed Churches.” Reference was made to this decision twice later; see *Acts, 1986*, Contact Committee Report, Supplement 12, pages 95-96, and *Acts, 1994*, Article 11, pages 13-14.

¹¹⁰ Hanko, “A Comparison of the Westminster and the Reformed Confessions,” *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*, 20, 1 (November, 1986): 11; see also, Hanko, *God’s Everlasting Covenant of Grace*, 29; David Engelsma, “The Covenant of Creation with Adam,” *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*, 40, 1 (November, 2006): 15-16.

¹¹¹ Hanko, “A Comparison of the Westminster and the Reformed Confessions,” *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*, 20, 1 (November, 1986): 19.

doctrinal heirs in the PRC. The writings of authors of the WCF do contain the language of merit, a promise of heavenly life, and an agreement between God and Adam. To some, the fact that these elements are left unstated in Article 7.2 means that freer interpretations are permitted.¹¹² However, to do so on the basis of a supposed distinction between “original intent and meaning” and “modern interpretation” of the consensus is historical revisionism; in fact, it has been convincingly demonstrated that “original intent and meaning” and “modern interpretation” of the consensus are one and the same.

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¹¹² The Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Australia (EPCA) does exactly that. From the beginning, the issue of the covenant of works was an area of disagreement between the EPCA and the PRC: “They hold to the W.C. on the covenant of works, but do not believe in a covenant of works which includes a probationary period, the possibility of merit, and eternal life in heaven as the reward of obedience”; see *Acts, 1989*, Contact Committee Report, Supplement 4, Appendix 5, “Report on Evangelical Presbyterian Church of Australia, September 16, 1988,” page 76. For a representative EPCA objection to the PRCA objection to the covenant of works, see David Torlach, “The Covenant of Works and its Significance,” *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*, 48, 1 (November, 2014): 23-39. He writes, “There are a number of wrong conceptions of the covenant of works that have arisen over time, just as there are wrong conceptions of the covenant of grace. And some of these wrong conceptions have been held quite widely among various theologians. But these wrong conceptions do not make the basic doctrine itself wrong”; see 30-31. In his “Editor’s Notes,” Ronald Cammenga introduces the article this way: “EPCA pastor, the Rev. David Torlach, presents a rather unique explanation of the so-called covenant of works—an explanation that is within the bounds of the Westminster Confession of Faith and is, at the same time, distinct from the traditional (objectionable) covenant of works view popular among most Presbyterian and Reformed theologians”; see 1-2.

Appendix 2: Genesis 3:8

Following Hoeksema, the PRC has always emphasized that the essence of God’s covenant with man is fellowship and friendship. As for His people today, so also for Adam in the garden. Often Genesis 3:8 is employed for proof of this idea.¹¹³ Hoeksema says, “All God’s dealings with Adam in paradise presuppose this relation: God talked with Adam and revealed himself to him, and Adam knew God in the wind of day.”¹¹⁴ The text referred to reads,

And they heard the voice of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day: and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God amongst the trees of the garden.¹¹⁵

Hebrew grammarian Miles Van Pelt differs significantly from the interpretation offered by theologians of the PRC. With the help of “study of other, sister languages in the ancient Near East (cognate studies),” he now reads the verse this way:

‘Then the man and his wife heard the thunderous voice of Yahweh God as he was going back and forth in the garden in the wind of the storm, and they hid from Yahweh God among the trees of the garden.’

God and Adam were not “taking a pleasant after-dinner stroll”; rather, “Yahweh God is coming in storm theophany to judge his disobedient servants.”¹¹⁶

¹¹³ See Hoeksema, *Knowing God and Man*, 88, 111-12; Hoeksema, *The Triple Knowledge*, 1:114; Homer Hoeksema, *From Creation to the Flood*, 112, 167-68; Hanks, *God’s Everlasting Covenant of Grace*, 32; Engelsma, *Covenant and Election in the Reformed Tradition*, 191; Harold Decker, in Engelsma, *Always Reforming*, “God’s Unconditional Covenant,” 263; Engelsma, “The Covenant of Creation with Adam,” *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*, 40, 1 (November, 2006): 8, 33; Dennis Lee, “A Brief Study of the Doctrine of the Covenant of Works in the Reformed and Presbyterian Tradition: Pre-Creedal History, Varying Interpretations, and Critique,” *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*, 37, 1 (November, 2003).

¹¹⁴ Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:313.

¹¹⁵ The verb for “walk” is the same as is used in Genesis 17:1 to describe Abraham’s relationship with the covenant God. Here, though, God is the subject of the action.

¹¹⁶ Gary Pratico and Miles Van Pelt, *Basics of Biblical Hebrew Grammar* Third Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2019), 235-36.

This seems to indicate that the use of the text by Hoeksema and subsequent PR theologians is based on a mistranslation. Nevertheless, it has been demonstrated from the preceding biblical narrative in Genesis 1 and 2 that the essence of covenant life is fellowship and friendship—indeed, as Engelsma says, *structured* fellowship.

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