

## **Is There A "Covenant of Works"?**

*A study about the shaky basis of Covenant Theology*

*By Rev Earl Jackson*

I think there is a gigantic problem in our 21st century form of Reformed Baptist Theology which springs from a major deficiency in the 1689 Baptist Confession drawn up in London. There has always been an evil tendency to seek justification at the Cross and then sanctification at Mount Sinai. The idea is that you bring Christians to the redemptive restoration of Calvary, and then as soon as they meet Christ, who delivers them from their sins, we send them to Moses so He can tell them how to live by the Ten Commandments. This is a serious doctrinal flaw in the Reformed tradition, and it stems from what is called "the Covenant of Works". Here is the basis for the Old Adam Improvement society error. That's what I like to call this heresy that says Christ saves us, but we sanctify ourselves through obedience and good works. It's as false as any doctrine ever hatched. The correct view is that Christ both saves and sanctifies by Grace. Moses does not sanctify anyone. The Law Kills, it does not make alive. It does not even contribute toward life. Moses bows to Christ, and gets His sanctification not by keeping endless commandments but by the grace of Calvary's finished work. The same grace that saves, sanctifies.

## **"The Covenant of Works Error"**

I always have great fear and trepidation when I go against the traditional Reformed Confessional positions. I respect our Reformed heritage, and I highly esteem the wisdom of the men who formulated our great doctrinal standards and our historic statements of Faith. But the Confessions are not infallible documents. They are writings which seek to inform us of what a particular group of Christian scholars believed at a particular point in time. Many people treat the Confessions as though they are the "be all and end all" of all truth. They are great guides, but they are also fraught with human viewpoints and errors. They are not the word of God.

Since I am a Baptist I will be using the 1689 London Baptist Confession for the basis for my comments in this article. That is the most widely used historic Baptist Confession among confessional Baptist Churches. It is very similar to the Westminster Confession of Faith which predated it, and was the most popular Reformed statement of Faith among the Puritans. The Westminster and The Savoy declaration, were sisters in the Puritan churches, and the 1689 Baptist Confession became their Baptized brother. We are on very orthodox

ground when we discuss the 1689, the Westminster, or the Congregational Savoy declaration of Faith and Order. My issue is not with the orthodoxy of the 1689 Baptist Confession, it is with the "Covenant Theology" views which were carried from the Presbyterian and Congregational Documents of the time and inserted almost verbatim into the Baptist standards. I have problems with that, because Baptist's should be stating doctrines in their Confessions which are derived from the Bible, not from other popular and widely circulated Confessions of other sects or branches of Christianity. One of our Baptist distinctives is Sola Scriptura. And it prompted Spurgeon to add in His introduction to the 1689 Baptist Confession these words...

*This ancient document is the most excellent epitome of the things most surely believed among us. It is not issued as an authoritative rule or code of faith, whereby you may be fettered, but as a means of edification in righteousness. It is an excellent, though not inspired, expression of the teaching of those Holy Scriptures by which all confessions are to be measured.*

Notice Spurgeon's wise understanding of the role of the Confession. *"It is not issued as an authoritative rule or code of faith, whereby you may be fettered, but as a means of edification in righteousness."* The 1689 is not to be understood as having any authoritative rule in the Baptist Churches. In other words Spurgeon did not see it as anything more than a sound doctrinal teaching tool. *"It is an excellent, though not inspired, expression of the teaching of those Holy Scriptures by which all confessions are to be measured."* I believe this view is the correct view that all Reformed Baptist's should have, of not only the 1689 Baptist Confession, but of all the other Statements of the Baptist faith, that are also in our historical framework and context.

With that in mind lets look at just one passage in Chapter 19:

**19:1** *God gave to Adam a law of universal obedience which was written in his heart, and He gave him very specific instruction about not eating the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. By this Adam and all his descendants were bound to personal, total, exact, and perpetual obedience, being promised life upon the fulfilling of the law, and threatened with death upon the breach of it. At the same time Adam was endued with power and ability to keep it.*

**19:2** *The same law that was first written in the heart of man continued to be*

*a perfect rule of righteousness after the Fall, and was delivered by God upon Mount Sinai in the ten commandments, and written in two tables, the first four containing our duty towards God, and the other six, our duty to man.*

These statements on the Law of God are not the only "Covenant of Works" statements in the confession but they are pretty clear, and pretty easy to understand. Here are the salient points:

1. God wrote the Law on Adams Heart Before The fall.
2. It was not just specific instruction about a specific tree, but it was "The Moral Law (i.e. the Ten Commandments).
3. Adam and all his descendants were bound to personal, total, exact, and perpetual obedience.
4. Life is promised for fulfilling the Law.
5. Death is threatened upon disobedience.
6. The same law that was first written in the heart of man continued to be a perfect rule of righteousness after the Fall.
7. The same Law which was written on Adam's Heart was delivered upon Mount Sinai in the Ten Commandments.

Please re-read each of these points in Chapter 19 of the 1689 Confession, so that you comprehend what they are saying. I was discussing this with another Baptist Scholar and he tried to tell me that the framers of the document "did not actually intend to say what they said. They did not mean to teach that Adam received the Ten Commandments. They actually understood it differently." But the fact is that these were the most educated Baptist preachers of the day, and they knew quite well how to say exactly what they intended. They understood perfectly well what they were saying and doing. They were not communicative cripples. They were highly literate and eloquent preachers. What we have in Chapter 19 is language which was lifted verbatim from the Westminster Confession. And my contention is that they did it deliberately, and they did it intentionally, because the Westminster was the "politically correct" statement of faith at the time. Their inclusion of this language, helped them to achieve credibility and recognition. It helped them to quench the fiery darts of Baptist opposition and persecution. There was a perceived need felt to turn the Baptist community into respectable churches, not just a bunch of non-conformist secessionist. They gladly, willingly and intentionally embraced the "Covenant of Works" idea, either because they were convinced of its accuracy, or they chose to ignore it, in favor of popularity and credibility. But there is no possibility that they did not

understand what they were writing. That argument cannot be substantiated. Here is the exact wording in the Westminster Confession Chapter 19.

**19:1.** *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.*

**19:2.** *This law, after his fall, continued to be a perfect rule of righteousness; and, as such, was delivered by God upon Mount Sinai, in ten commandments, and written in two tables: the first four commandments containing our duty towards God; and the other six, our duty to man.*

You can see quite clearly where the language in the 1689 Confession came from. It was appropriated without alteration from the Westminster Confession of Faith. This was done deliberately. My contention is that it never should have been done, because the doctrines in this "Covenant of Works" idea cannot be substantiated from the Scriptures.

## **Here is why these statements in the Confession should never have been included in it.**

**1. The "Written on the heart" terminology is strictly New Covenant language** which is not applicable to either Moses or Adam, because in the technical sense, the New Covenant did not exist at the time. But the confession says Adam had the moral law "written on His heart". Such language is problematic, and the doctrines derived from such language cannot be substantiated from the Bible itself.

**Jer 31:31-33** *Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: 32 Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, saith the LORD: 33 But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the LORD, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people.*

**2. The Confession Places the Ten Commandments in Eden** and makes Sinai simply the place where they were written on Stone. But if you read the Bible, without this preconceived notion, you would never conclude that the Ten Commandments were instituted before Mount Sinai. In fact Moses Himself expressly denies that they existed before Sinai. Look:

**Deut. 5:2-4** *The LORD our God made a covenant with us in Horeb. 3 The LORD made not this covenant with our fathers, but with us, even us, who are all of us here alive this day. 4 The LORD talked with you face to face in the mount out of the midst of the fire*

The legal covenant of Sinai, did not exist prior to it's creation and ratification. Paul contrasts the Law and the Promise in Galatians 3, and it is clear that "the Law" was "Added to" the Covenant of Promise. It did not preexist before it was actually added!

**Gal 3:17-19** *And this I say, that the covenant, that was confirmed before of God in Christ, the law, which was four hundred and thirty years after, cannot disannul, that it should make the promise of none effect. 18 For if the inheritance be of the law, it is no more of promise: but God gave it to Abraham by promise. 19 Wherefore then serveth the law? **It was added because of transgressions**, till the seed should come to whom the promise was made; and it was ordained by angels in the hand of a mediator.*

Paul speaks of a time when "The Law Entered", or when the law came on the scene, in Romans 5:20 *"Moreover the law entered, that the offense might abound."* That time is not before mans fall (Rom. 5:15-19), but clearly on mount Sinai.

This Biblical language is in stark disagreement with language of the Confession which says Adam had the Moral Law in the Garden of Eden, before the Moral Law was actually given!

**3. The Confession states that Adam and all his descendants were bound to personal, total, exact, and perpetual obedience.**

Ask yourself a couple of simple questions?

1. Are you one of Adams descendents?

2. Are you therefore bound to perpetual, total, exact personal obedience to the commandment that God Gave to Adam?
3. Where does the Bible say anything like this?

These questions are not unreasonable. Not asking them is unreasonable; because being "perpetually bound as a descendent of Adam to some Law system" (the covenant of works) is a pretty serious concept. Where does the Bible say anything at all like this?

Let's look at the verses given as proofs for these statements in the Confession, and let's see if any of them indicate that you are bound to the same law that Adam was bound to in perpetuity? Here are the proof texts listed in the Confession. Do they mean what the Confession says they mean? My idea is that none of them say anything at all even remotely similar to the statements in the confession? You decide for yourself? Here are all the verses...

**Gen 1:27** *So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.*

**Ecc 7:29** *Lo, this only have I found, that God hath made man upright; but they have sought out many inventions.*

**Rom 10:5** *For Moses describeth the righteousness which is of the law, That the man which doeth those things shall live by them.*

**Gal 3:10** *For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse: for it is written, Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them.*

**Gal 3:12** *And the law is not of faith: but, The man that doeth them shall live in them.*

**Rom 2:14-15** *For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves: 15 Which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another;)*

**Deu 10:4** *And he wrote on the tables, according to the first writing, the ten commandments, which the LORD spake unto you in the mount out of the midst of the fire in the day of the assembly: and the LORD gave them unto me.*

### **Please notice:**

1. These proof texts talk about Moses.
2. These proof texts talk about "the Law"
3. These proof texts talk about tablets of stone.

4. These proof texts talk about man being created in God's image.
5. These proof texts talk about "the curse of the law".
6. These proof texts say that the Law is not of Faith.

### **But:**

1. The proof texts do not mention Adam at all, except to say that God created Him in His own image and in an upright state.
2. The proof texts do not say that Adam received the moral law.
3. The proof texts do not say that all of Adam's descendants are bound to obey the law which he supposedly received.
4. The proof texts do not say that the law which Moses received on Mount Sinai was the same Law that Adam received.
5. The proof texts do not say that the "pre-fall" law continued to be the law for righteousness "post-fall".

None of the proof texts say any of these things, but these are all the exact assertions made in the Confessional doctrine called "the covenant of works"? What is going on?

### **Here's what I think happened.**

The framers of the 1689 Baptist Confession, incorporated the borrowed "covenant of works" language, because the doctrine was extremely popular at the time, even though it clearly falls into the realm of "speculative Theology". The doctrine was formulated without one shred of Biblical support, using an unorthodox process of insertion. The ten commandments are lifted from Exodus 20 and are arbitrarily inserted into Genesis 2 and 3 where they never belonged in the first place. The purpose of sticking them there is to develop a doctrine of works salvation as a adjunct to the plan of salvation by Grace. These two overarching "covenants", as they are false called (the covenant of works and the covenant of grace), are then used as the basis to interpret the entire Bible. This form of hermeneutics (biblical interpretation) is called "Covenant Theology", and as you can see it rests on very shaky ground. Anytime you take verses out of context, and out of their actual historical setting (like the law given at Sinai), and stick them where they do not belong, you are committing a serious exegetical error. The very same people who do this, arbitrarily inserting the Mosaic Law before the Fall of man, condemn the dispensationalists when they arbitrarily insert a gap of over 2000 years into Daniel's vision of the 70 consecutive weeks. They condemn the gap theory

showing it's arbitrariness and total lack of Biblical support, while they have accepted the very same sort of "creative inserting" hermeneutics in their own doctrinal formulation for hundreds of years. The Westminster, The Savoy, and yes even the 1689 Baptist Confession all utilize this speculative theology as the basis for Biblical interpretation, when it is just as bad, just as foreign to the scriptures and just as nonsensical as the much newer "Dispensational" system of Biblical interpretation.

## **New Covenant Theology is a Sound Alternative to False Doctrine!**

This problem with the so called "covenant of works" theory, is one reason that many Reformed Baptist's, like myself, have now quit using the 1689 Confession and have returned back to the 1644 or the 1646 Baptist Confession where these fallacious interpretations are not included. There is a movement of sound Baptist scholars in the world today, who have completely abandoned both Covenant Theology, and Dispensationalism. We are called "New Covenant Theologians", and we base our Biblical interpretation not on artificial covenants that appear nowhere in the Bible, and not on slicing and segmenting the Bible into artificial compartments. Instead we base our entire theological interpretation around the idea that Christ was the embodiment of all God's truth. Grace and truth came by Jesus Christ, and all Biblical interpretation should begin with Him and with the vast light of the New Covenant which He established.

[CLICK HERE](#) to read "The New Covenant Confession of Faith"

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