

# Francis Turretin and Barthianism: The Covenant of Works in Historical Perspective

By James J. Cassidy

## I. INTRODUCTION

The doctrine of the covenant of works has been in recent days much maligned, even as it has been scarcely and unsympathetically studied. It is as if theologians are so anxious about getting to the covenant of grace that they have very little patience to reckon with a doctrine which now seems so “moot.” After all, the covenant of works may be relegated to the prelapsarian state of man, and thus of no practical value for us today. Or, perhaps such angst has something to do with speaking about human obedience as the way in which a covenant with God can be fulfilled. For many, this smacks of a medieval view of human merit—whether of the condign or congruent sort. For others, the doctrine is held to be speculative and not exegetically tenable.<sup>1</sup>

However, in these discussions what is too often missing is the significance of the doctrine of the covenant of works for the covenant of grace. In other words, for the covenant of grace to be truly gracious, a robust doctrine of the covenant of works must be set forth. This was certainly the opinion of many of the Protestant Orthodox in the seventeenth century. Wilhelm à Brackel encapsulates the concern well:

Acquaintance with this covenant is of the greatest importance, for whoever errs here or denies the existence of the covenant of works, will not understand the covenant of grace, and will readily err concerning the mediatorship of the Lord Jesus.... Whoever denies the covenant of works, must rightly be suspected to be in error concerning the covenant of grace as well.<sup>2</sup>

For à Brackel there is a “mirror effect” in the doctrinal formulation of the covenants of works and grace. What is of the former has implications and effects in the latter. In other words, the theologian cannot rework

the doctrine of the covenant of works—or eliminate it altogether—without suffering consequences to the doctrine of the covenant of grace. And what is perhaps most ironic is that the more the covenant of works is diluted in one’s doctrine of the covenant, the more diluted grace becomes in one’s doctrine of the covenant of grace.

No one was more aware of this fact than Francis Turretin. Serving as both a pastor and a professor, this second generation Italian refugee living in Geneva built his understanding of salvific grace upon the foundation of the covenant of works. Even so, the ages have not been particularly kind to the doctrine of the covenant of works, especially in the twentieth century. Karl Barth and those who have followed him have criticized the doctrine as being speculative, legalistic and even a corruption of the early Reformers’ theology. They view covenant theology in general and the covenant of works in particular as

... a dangerous innovation that undermines and ultimately destroys a theology of grace. In particular, [the critics] argue that covenant theology removes Christ from his central place in God’s reconciliation and leads to a skewed understanding of various doctrines,

---

THE AUTHOR: James J. Cassidy is the pastor of Calvary Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Ringoes, New Jersey. His article “Critical-Realism & the Relation of Redemptive Act to Revelatory Word” appeared in volume two of *The Confessional Presbyterian* (2006).

1. See the helpful survey and the literature cited in J. Mark Beach, *Christ and the Covenant: Francis Turretin’s Federal Theology as a Defense of the Doctrine of Grace* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2007) 78–80.

2. Cited in Richard A Muller, “The Covenant of Works and the Stability of Divine Law in Seventeenth Century Reformed Orthodoxy: A Study in the Theology of Herman Witsius and Wilhelm à Brackel.” *Calvin Theological Journal* 29 (April 1994): 76. Hereafter *CTJ*. A similar position is taken, more recently, in M.G. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue* (Overland Park, Kans.: Two Age Press, 2000) 109.

especially the doctrines of predestination, atonement, and assurance.<sup>3</sup>

But is this an accurate assessment? This essay will seek to review the critique of the covenant of works offered by Barth and Barthians, and compare and contrast that critique with the doctrine as it was held by Francis Turretin himself.

## II. FRANCIS TURRETIN *Turretin on the Covenant of Works*

It is not an exaggeration to say that for Turretin the covenant idea is of the utmost importance in theology and for understanding God's self-disclosure in the Bible. After all, the covenant is "the center and bond of all religion, consisting in the communion of God with man and embracing in its compass all the benefits of God towards man and his duties towards God."<sup>4</sup> However, to properly understand the idea of a covenant, we must go to the original covenant in the prelapsarian realm of creation.

Now, it should immediately be kept in mind that the act of creation itself does not constitute God's covenant with man. Rather, as J. Mark Beach states it, the Creator-creature relation "establishes the foundation that *makes possible* the more intimate covenant relationship."<sup>5</sup> This would imply, Beach shows, that God was under no obligation to make a covenant with man. However, given the fact God did choose to enter into a covenant with his human creature we might ask: what is that covenant like?

3. A.T.B. McGowan, "Karl Barth and Covenant Theology," in *Engaging with Barth: Contemporary Evangelical Critiques*, ed. David Gibson and Daniel Strange (Nottingham, U.K.: Apollos, 2008).

4. Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr. (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R Pub, 1992–1997) XII.I.I. Hereafter *IET*.

5. J. Mark Beach, *Christ and the Covenant*, 96. Emphasis is his.

6. See the summary in Stephen R. Spencer, "Francis Turretin's Concept of the Covenant of Nature," in *Later Calvinism: International Perspectives*, ed. W. Fred Graham (Kirksville, Mo.: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1994) 74.

7. *IET*, VIII.III.I. See also Ostella, "The Merit of Christ in the Covenant of Works: Francis Turretin and Herman Bavinck Compared" (Th.M Thesis, Westminster Theological Seminary, 2007) 9.

8. Beach, 83. Emphasis is mine.

9. Spencer, "Francis Turretin's Concept," 74.

10. This distinction between man-as-created and man-in-covenant—as Beach points up—was common in 17<sup>th</sup> century Reformed Orthodoxy. He cites from John Ball, Samuel Rutherford, and the Westminster Confession of Faith (7.1). See Beach, *Christ and the Covenant*, 84.

Turretin begins his discussion of the question concerning God's covenant with man by asking: "of what kind was it" (*IET*, VIII.III)? First, he defines a covenant on human terms. In sum, a human covenant is a mutual agreement between two persons in which mutual goods and offices are exchanged for their common utility. And this theory includes at least three things; (1) that the persons involved be equal, (2) each party should have it in their power to bestow such goods and thus be perfectly independent, (3) they should not be bound to bestow those items without the covenant.<sup>6</sup>

From this Turretin concludes that a covenant, "strictly speaking," between God and man cannot exist.<sup>7</sup> And it cannot exist for the following reasons: first, there is no equality of persons, goods given, or duties rendered between God and man; second, man is not perfectly independent and thus is bound to give unto God obedience even without a covenant; and third, man cannot bring anything to the covenant and is utterly dependent upon God for providing any goods or duties. Yet, despite all this, God does in fact condescend to man and wills to enter into a covenant with him. From this we can clearly see that Turretin eschews any notion of a "secular" contract in his notion of covenant.

Further, Turretin explains that God was under no obligation to enter into this covenant with his human creature. He could have "by his own right" required full obedience of man—by virtue of his being the creature—without a promise of reward (*IET*, VIII.III.II). Beach helpfully explains:

We see that, for Turretin, humans as created are obliged to render to God all that is due him as God. As created, being the creatures God made them to be, they are *already and immediately under the obligation to give God his due*, for God is God and they are his creatures. In this sense, even *apart from any sort of covenant relationship*, humans (*in their bare existence*) are under the demand to love and serve God according (*sic*) their capacity as creatures made in the divine image. Moreover, this obedience is without compensation or reward; it is simply owed to God.<sup>8</sup>

Yet, God freely and willingly entered into this covenant promising a reward on the condition of obedience. This covenant was an act of his "highest benignity" by which he enters into a "nearer communion" with man.<sup>9</sup> In this way, God binds himself according to his inherent faithfulness and justice.<sup>10</sup>

Further, it is true that the covenant idea in the Bible may denote a promise of God without any stipulation

or demand of obedience (i.e., one-sided or monopolemic) such as you see in the Noahic covenant and in the order of the universe (*IET*, VIII.III.III). Strictly, however, a covenant is dipolemic or two-sided/mutual: God promises and man responds in duty and worship. And this we see nowhere more clearly than in the covenant of nature.

Turretin explains that this is called a covenant of “nature” because eternal life was on the basis of innocent man’s “perfect and personal obedience.” It is based on man’s own natural God-created abilities to do what the Creator commands. However, he is quick to note that this does not place God under obligation to man. It is a covenant of nature *not* because there is something inherent in the created order which makes God indebted to man. That would posit a law which stands above even God himself. This cannot be the case as God is the creator and the originator of all things—including law and order. So here we see that the proper creator-creature distinction—over against all kinds of medieval *analogia entis* metaphysics—is jealously maintained. Therefore, any idea of God as the giver of rewards to man who merits them must always and everywhere be covenantally conceived. If man is said to merit the reward, that is only the case because God has bound himself in covenant to reward obedience. Secondly, the covenant of nature is also called legal because the condition is Adam’s obedience to the law of God engraved in him. And, lastly, it is of works because it depends upon his own personal obedience, and not the obedience of another (*IET*, VIII.III.V).

At this point Turretin turns to address more directly the Arminian denial of a prelapsarian covenant and to set forth a positive case for the doctrine. The doctrine can be proven under four points. First, the principle parties which make up a covenant are present in the garden—God and man. Because God is creator, he must also be governor and legislator. But God is also good. Citing Hebrews 11:6 the implication is drawn that since God is good he is the rewarder of those who seek him. This does not, however, mean that God is at all obligated to man, for man must always depend upon God for the reward. In this way, Turretin maintains the initiatory nature of God’s dealings with man. Even the covenant of nature must be understood from—as it were—the top down. Man is always dependent upon God in the covenant, and never the other way around (*IET*, VIII.III.VI).

The second proof offered by Turretin is the fact that a law was imposed on Adam, which itself denotes a “federal agreement.” The one to whom the law is given must

obey it; and he who gave it must reward its obedience. The reward for obedience, Turretin adds, is there in the text by way of implication and sacrament. The tree of life sacramentally signifies the promise of reward offered to Adam on condition of his obedience. But also, “by reason of contraries,” since death was threatened for disobedience, life must be promised for obedience.<sup>11</sup> The law referred to here, however, is not law given in general,<sup>12</sup> rather Turretin has in view the specific command that comes in the covenant itself to not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.<sup>13</sup>

Next, two Scripture texts are invoked to support the idea of a covenant in the prelapsarian situation. The first is Hosea 6:7. Already, Turretin shows that he is familiar with the exegetical discussions concerning this verse.<sup>14</sup> He states, from the Hebrew, that it is best translated “transgressed the covenant like Adam.”<sup>15</sup> He knows that others object to this translation and prefer to render the Hebrew “transgressed the covenant like man”—making the referent of the transgression humanity in general rather than the one man Adam in particular. Interestingly, Turretin does not pit the one interpretation against the other. Rather, he reasons that the two are *not* mutually exclusive and may refer to both humanity in general *and* Adam in particular. In support of this thesis, he brings in the teaching of Job 31:33 which speaks about the transgression of Adam—this time a clear reference to the one man of Genesis 3. This buttresses his contention that what is referred to in Hosea 6:7 is the one man Adam—if not also humanity in general. Far from being enraptured with speculation, Turretin shows himself concerned for and capable of detailed exegesis of the biblical text.<sup>16</sup>

11. *IET*, VIII.III.VII. Cf. Beach, *Christ and the Covenant*, 97ff.

12. Pace Stephen Spencer, “Francis Turretin’s Concept of the Covenant of Nature,” 79.

13. See the helpful observations, contra Spencer, in Beach, *Christ and the Covenant*, 100.

14. For a helpful overview of early Protestant exegesis of this text see Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003) 436–441.

15. Pace John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray: Lectures in Systematic Theology*, v. 2 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1978) 49.

16. *IET*, VIII.III.VIII. For an extensive interaction with the literature that is critical of Turretin’s exegesis here, and a detailed answer to those objections, see Beach, *Christ and the Covenant*, 101–102. For a view that is not persuaded by Turretin’s exegesis, see Spencer, “Francis Turretin’s Concept,” 80–81. It appears that Spencer does not understand how Turretin argues from Hosea and Job. For instance, he says that the Hosea passage is a problem that “concerns translation.” Actually, there is no debate over the translation. The matter is one concerning interpretation of *ha ’adam*; one interpretation is broader (Turretin), the other is more narrow.

Lastly, the covenant of nature is proven by the fact that man had a desire for happiness which God placed in him. It would be altogether blasphemous to say that God placed this desire in man and not offer to man eternal happiness and communion with him. This would only serve to frustrate man and drive him ultimately to unhappiness (*IET*, VIII.III.IX). Such a cruel work is unworthy of God given his divinely just nature and infinite goodness.

Having disposed with the proofs for the doctrine, now Turretin turns to speak about the respective parties in the covenant and the pact itself. The pact itself includes the things agreed upon—on the part of God the promise of blessing and on the part of man the stipulation of obedience. The parties are God as creator/Lord and man as creature/subject. And here there is a two-fold relation. God as Lord has the power to make laws and also the goodness to reward the keeping of those laws. In this way, God as covenant Lord has these two aspects grounded in his very nature. God cannot *not* govern his creature, and he cannot *not* reward him if he is obedient. The covenant, in other words, is established by his unchangeable attributes.<sup>17</sup>

As God was understood in a two-fold relation, so must man be understood. Man is perceived as “just” or “the first.” As just, Adam is able to obey the law given to him. As first, he represents the whole human race. Adam serves as the federal head for all those who would be born from him. This federal union between Adam and his posterity is also in a two-fold relation: natural and forensic. As a “natural union,” Adam is the father of all the human race; as a “forensic union,” he is made the representative head in which he holds or loses the goods given to him on behalf of those he represents (*IET*, VIII.III.XI). What he loses, humanity loses; what he gains, humanity gains.

Therefore, the pact itself had two parts. The first part consisted of the demand of God to duty and the obedience of man. The second part consisted of God’s promise to bless and man’s acceptance. Now, the duty which was required is also two-fold: general and special. The

general consists of man’s obligation to worship God and love his neighbor; the special consists of his not eating of the forbidden fruit. The former is a law which is inherent to man, written on his heart by nature. In other words, it is an internal testimony to God’s pact and law. The latter is a law that is revealed externally to man by way of the symbol and verbal command from God. What is interesting is that Turretin argues that the internal law given to man is primary and as such is all the more to be obeyed. The external verbal command given by God served merely as a further explication of what was given internally. In other words, had the external command never been given, the internal would sufficiently serve to render Adam accountable for his disobedience (*IET*, VIII.III.XII).

Turretin continues by articulating what exactly it means to obey God’s law. It means, (1) that it be performed sincerely, from the whole heart; (2) that the obedience be fulfilled with reference to things universally; (3) that it be fulfilled with right intension and thus perfect and complete; and (4) that the obedience be perpetual (*IET*, VIII.III.XIII). Turretin further explains that while man was obligated to fulfill these requirements by virtue of being the creature, yet he was all the more to do so because of the external pact made with him by God. To be sure, as not fallen, Adam was able to perform this requirement. However—and this is all important—to actually perform it Adam required the “help of God” in order to accomplish and continue in this obedience. And it is this aspect of the covenant, the preservation of Adam in obedience, that does not belong to the covenant of nature as such; but only upon the “most free good pleasure (*eudokia*) of God” (*IET*, VIII.III.XIV). It is important here to underscore this very point. The kindness and benevolence of God is required for the fulfillment of even the covenant of works. It ought to be noted, however, that Turretin does not go so far as to use the term “grace” with reference to the preservation of Adam in the prelapsarian covenant. That is a term he will reserve exclusively for the post-fall covenant.

Continuing on to discuss the sanctions of the pact, he says that they are two-fold: (1) threatening of punishment and (2) promise of the reward of eternal life in heaven (*IET*, VIII.III.XV). Therefore the obligations of the covenant unto the fulfillment of these sanctions are also two-fold. On the part of man he was obligated to it, not just on the basis of the pact itself, but by the very nature of the Creator-creature distinction. However, on behalf of God his obligation to reward such obedience is altogether “gratuitous” because he is bound to reward

17. *IET*, VIII.III.X. Spencer here detects a second and contradictory “strain” in Turretin’s covenant of nature; see “Francis Turretin’s Concept,” 88–89. He says the first strain is that the covenant is distinguished from and in addition to the creator-creature relationship. The second strain is that the covenant is necessary because of the creator-creature distinction. This, however, is to set up a false dichotomy. The truth is, the covenant relation is in addition to God’s act of creation, *and* that relation is made necessary because of the infinite gulf that exists between the creator and the creature. In fact, the latter is necessary precisely because of the former! Far from being conflicting strains, they are in harmony in Turretin’s thought.

obedience. Now, this binding is not by man; rather, God is self-bound. What makes God's promise to reward obedience is not that man has some claim upon God and has placed the Creator into his debt. Rather, it is because of the divine nature itself as one who is inherently faithful and true. Therefore, Adam may never level a charge of debt against God. Thus, Turretin describes God's owing the reward to an obedient man as a "debt of fidelity" (*IET*, VIII.III.XVI). Therefore the reward which would have come as a result of man's obedience is never due to some condign merit found in the work of man. Even after Adam had done all he was required to do, he would still be regarded as an unworthy servant. Hence the basis for the reward is never found in man or in his work, but in God who is faithful and just.

Therefore, Turretin concludes this section by making it clear that had man obeyed, his merit could not be understood in a strict sense. Man, as the creature, owes all things to God—and that relation may never be transposed. God may never—and can never—become man's debtor. The source of the debt that God owes to obedience is found exclusively within himself. Also, the reward can never be based on the condignity of the obedience. This is because the reward is far greater than the act—thus, the reward and the obedience are out of proportion. God's reward is magnanimous.

In summary, the covenant established between God and man is a covenant on the condition of obedience. Man had the opportunity to secure and even merit his way to eternal life. Granted, the idea of merit is qualified by Turretin. It is not a strict, condign merit in which there is a proper proportion between the work and the reward.<sup>18</sup> The greatness of the reward far exceeds the merit of the work of the creature. Nevertheless, in the prelapsarian covenant, God forms this covenant which is conditional upon the work of obedience of the one man. Far from this being the reintroduction of a medieval form of legalism, understanding the covenant of works in this way is essential for preserving the absolute graciousness of the covenant of grace. Given the two Adam structure of the New Testament's eschatology, if the second Adam is not seen as the one who perfectly, completely, and eschatologically merits the very eternal life which the first Adam forfeited, then the way is opened for the sinner to contribute something to his own salvation. In other words, the idea of the merit of works in the Garden of Eden is crucial for preserving the doctrine of justification by faith alone apart from works in the covenant of grace. And it is this reason that drives Turretin so passionately to answer the Arminians in this section.<sup>19</sup>

That said, however, the link between the covenant of nature and the covenant of grace is of utmost importance for Turretin. Because of space and time constraints we are unable to develop that notion in any in-depth way here. Suffice it to say, however, that we can summarize Turretin's view in this way: *what was a covenant of works for Christ—and only because it was a covenant of works for him—becomes a covenant of grace for us.* Because Christ did it all for our salvation, we need not add anything for our salvation. Because it was all of works for Christ, for us it is all of grace. The covenant of works makes the covenant of grace truly gracious. This is a fact that is missing in Barthian interpretations of the seventeenth century formulations of the covenant of nature. And so, to that interpretation we now turn.

### III. BARTH AND THE BARTHIAN *Setting the Historical Context*

Karl Barth developed his theology in the context of battles on two fronts: neo-Protestantism on the one side and Roman Catholicism on the other. Barth's decided break with his liberal professors over their support for the Kaiser and German aggression, along with the pastoral challenges he faced in day-by-day parish life in Safenwil, forced him to radically rethink theology.<sup>20</sup> In 1914 ninety-three German intellectuals—among whom

18. A point that can be categorized as "muted," at best, in Kline's doctrine of the covenant of works (or, the "Covenant of Creature," as he prefers).

19. Some historical qualification needs to be made at this point. In both the works of Jacob Arminius and in the *Confession of 1621* (authored by Arminius' student Simon Episcopius), there is an explanation offered of the prelapsarian covenant which sounds strikingly similar to Turretin's covenant of nature. Both speak about there being a covenant between God and man in Eden, that there is a law given to Adam, and that the fulfillment of this law would culminate with the reward of eternal life. However, by the time the second edition of Episcopius' *Opera Theologia* is published, it seems the notion of a covenant of nature is rejected. Also significant is that the concept of merit in the prelapsarian covenant is not present even in the earlier formulations as found in Arminius himself nor in the *Confession of 1621*. See, *The Arminian Confession of 1621*, trans. Mark Ellis (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2005) and Jacobus Arminius, *The Works of James Arminius*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986).

20. For the early transition in Barth's theology, see Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, 60–125; Bruce L. McCormack, *Karl Barth's Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology: Its Genesis and Development, 1909–1936*, 177 ff; and Carl R. Trueman, "Calvin, Barth, and Reformed Theology: Historical Prolegomena," in *Calvin, Barth, and Reformed Theology*, ed. Neil B. MacDonald and Carl R. Trueman (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock, 2008) 11ff.

were a number of his former theology professors—signed a declaration in support of the war policy of Kaiser Wilhelm II. Part and parcel of this action was “an easy identification of God with popular movements and dominant ideologies in contemporary culture.”<sup>21</sup> In other words, the signers believed that to be German is to be a Christian, and to be a Christian is to be a German. They believed God was on their side in the pursuit of cultural transformation and domination. In response to this mentality which sought to “make God a predicate of history,” Barth developed his dialectical theology which would allow “God to be God” (Migliore, xxvff). This would, from man’s perspective, objectify God. Contrary to neo-Protestant theology with its revelation of God in man through faith’s feeling of utter dependence, for Barth God is always hidden from man even when he is revealed.

At the heart of this dialectical reconstruction is his pervading *Nein!* to natural theology and any notion of the *analogia entis*. The implied pantheism of the *analogia* was at the root of the problems for both Rome and Berlin. Rather, what needs to become central in theology is the Word of God. Drastically redefined, the “Word of God” is not a “thing” to be handled by man, but rather an act performed by God in Jesus Christ. God’s being is in his act of grace and love for us in Christ. In him revelation and redemption, time and eternity, God’s yes and no, come together in perfect harmony. It is all about Jesus Christ.

It is in this context that we need to understand the rejection of the covenant of works by Barth and the

21. Daniel L. Migliore, “Karl Barth’s First Lectures in Dogmatics: Instruction in the Christian Religion,” in Karl Barth, *The Gottingen Dogmatics: Instruction in the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) xxxi.

22. Although Barth could say many complimentary things about Protestant Orthodox theology; see for instance McCormack, *Karl Barth’s Critically Realistic Dialectical Theology*, 335–337. For the role that Heppel played in Barth’s conceptual connection between the seventeenth century Reformed Orthodox and theological liberalism, see Trueman, “Calvin, Barth, and Reformed Theology,” 17ff. According to Trueman, Heppel linked together the “pietism” of Reformed Scholastics like Cocceius with that of Schleiermacher.

23. Migliore explains that there were three “rounds” of Dogmatics for Barth. The very first is what is referred to as “The Gottingen Dogmatics.” These were, of course, the first lectures he delivered as a professional academic. Originally published in German under the title *Unterricht in der christlichen* (three volumes), to date only the first volume has been translated into English (see fn. 33 above). All three volumes are available in the comprehensive collection of Barth’s works *Gesamtausgabe*, edited by Hinrich Stoevesandt and published by Verlag.

24. Alexander Street Press, Karl Barth Digital Library, <http://libweb.tem.edu/databases.aspx>.

Barthians in current theological discussion. The idea of a covenant which is outside or independent of Jesus Christ is unacceptable as it already smacks of natural theology and the *analogia entis* (cf. McGowan, “Karl Barth,” 122). The idea that man can climb the ladder of God’s favor by virtue of the merits of his own works cuts against the grain of the Barthian emphasis on the triumphant of grace in a theology which is Christocentric to the core. Therefore, seventeenth century theology is seen as the ideological linchpin which holds together two anthropocentric theologies: medieval Catholicism and 18<sup>th</sup> century neo-Protestantism.<sup>22</sup>

But we should not assume that Barth himself was unfamiliar with seventeenth century Reformed theology. After his pastorate in Safenwil, he left for Göttingen in 1921 for his first academic charge—albeit, a somewhat irregular one (Migliore, xvii). He was to work with an all-Lutheran faculty as the sole professor of Reformed Theology, which struck him as strange given that he did not know much about it (Migliore, xviii)! His employer was kind enough to give him a grace period before having to lecture, so he spent his time wisely seeking to catch up on his knowledge of classic Reformed Theology. As he read the primary sources, he grew in his appreciation of both Calvin and the Calvinists. However, “while open to instruction from the old Reformed theologian, Barth was not uncritical of them” (Migliore, xix).

Nothing could be more true with reference to the topic to be discussed here in Barth’s early dogmatics.<sup>23</sup> In his lectures delivered at Göttingen, he criticized the post-Reformation Reformed view of the covenant of works as “a corruption of the Calvinist tradition” (Migliore, xxxviii). In fact, he described the covenant of grace as all-pervasive. The *foedus gratia* is present in the way in which God interacts with man from even before the fall and the *protoeugelum* of Genesis 3:15 (*Unterricht in der Christlichen*, III:15). The only way in which God deals with man is on the basis of grace. To say otherwise is to introduce legalism into the covenant. And, we might suspect for Barth, even worse is how such a view would betray remnants of a natural theology in one’s own thinking.

#### *Excursus: Barth’s Use of Turretin*

All this leads us to ask somewhat of a tangential—though very much relevant—question: How did Barth interact with the thought of Francis Turretin? A search made available by recent advances in Barth scholarship reveals some interesting information.<sup>24</sup> First, throughout his writings the name Turretin appears one hundred

and forty-six times. Second—and of less significance for our purposes here—we see that throughout his writings, Barth refers to Turretin’s son J.A. Turretin at least two times. Third, of the one hundred and forty-six hits, Barth refers to the senior Turretin in the *Church Dogmatics*<sup>25</sup> alone fifty times (excluding references in the index volume). It is this third piece of data which we will analyze in this excursus.

To begin with, of the fifty mentions of Turretin in his *CD* the bulk of the citations are found in I/1 and I/2 (thirty appearances).<sup>26</sup> Of these thirty hits, the majority of them are in settings where Turretin is employed in a generally positive way.<sup>27</sup> But there is indication of some interesting development in Barth’s thinking and attitude toward Turretin in *CD* I/1–2. Throughout the two parts of the first volume, in the citations from *CD* I/1 (pages 6, 22, 192, 309, 313, 475, 478 and *CD* I/2, pages 25, 33 (both times), 34, 35, 55, 147, 189, 193, 195, 201, 202, 477), the Genevan professor is employed in explicitly positive ways; usually quoted in a way that supports the theological point which Barth is trying to make. The same can be said of positive citations from *CD* II/1 on page 574<sup>28</sup> as well as *CD* III/3 on pages 97 and 292. However, there are points in which Turretin is cited negatively: in *CD* I/1 on page 123;<sup>29</sup> in *CD* I/2 on pages 285, 863 (all three times), 864 (the two times), and 866 (the two times);<sup>30</sup> in *CD* II/1 on pages 523 and 578; in *CD* II/2 on page 77,<sup>31</sup> 129, 130 (three times), 131, 132, 133<sup>32</sup>, and 337; in *CD* III/3 on pages 31 (twice) and 32;<sup>33</sup> and lastly in *CD* IV/3 on pages 15,<sup>34</sup> 765 and 767.

How then ought we to evaluate this data? First, we ought to note that the majority of Turretin citations in volume one of the *CD* are positive; at least until the end of the second part. Second, after *CD* I/1–2 the amount of interactions with Turretin drop dramatically. Equally striking, however, is that with the decrease in the number of citations comes a significant *increase* in negative/critical uses. Barth, in the latter half of his *magnum opus* uses Turretin less and less but reveals more and more an antipathy toward the Genevan professor (and with him much of seventeenth century Protestant Orthodoxy). Historically, Barth’s attitude toward Turretin becomes more and more negative. To what do we attribute this phenomenon?

Karl Barth published *CD* I/1—in which we find the most citations of Turretin—in 1932. The second part of that volume—in which we find the second most Turretin quotes—was released in 1936. Then, in 1940 and 1942 the two parts of his second volume on the Doctrine of God are published—respectively. Here we find just about all the references are negative! From here on out

one is hard pressed to find a positive implementation of Turretin or any other seventeenth century Reformed theologian. Obviously, we must attribute something to this shift in Barth’s attitude; but what? What happened between 1936 and 1940?

The Calvin Congress of 1936 in Geneva is what happened. Barth traveled to the city of Calvin and Turretin to hear a series of lectures on Predestination, among

25. Hereafter abbreviated as *CD*. It is worthy of note that the remainder of the hits are references to Francis Turretin and find themselves sprinkled throughout the corpus of his writings.

26. *CD* I/1: pages 6, 22, 114, 122, 192, 309, 313, 475, 478. *CD* I/2: pages 25, 33 (2x), 34, 35, 55, 147, 189, 193, 195, 201, 202, 285, 477, 863 (3x), 864 (2x), 866 (2x).

27. We will not be asking the question here as to whether or not Barth *rightly* implement’s Turretin’s thought, only whether Barth quotes him favorably or unfavorably/critically.

28. Here he quotes Turretin and commends him (along the other Protestant orthodox) for his stand against Molinism. However, note well how Barth takes away what he gave on page 578 where he criticizes Turretin for the way he handled the problem (i.e., as if the problem of Molinism were a mere matter of “logic and metaphysics”).

29. Here Barth speaks about the Protestant Orthodox doctrine of the Word of God and cites Turretin with Gerhard and Hollaz. He says concerning their formulations “All this is true.” But he then goes on to criticize their doctrine of inspiration which—according to Barth—takes away a proper “dynamic” to the Doctrine of the Word of God and which has a “freezing” effect on the relation between Scripture and revelation. So, while he does say that their statements are “true,” we have placed this citation in the negative column because ultimately he expresses criticism of Turretin’s doctrine of Scripture.

30. The five citations between pages 863–866 come in the context of discussing the difference between fundamental articles of faith and non-fundamental articles. Barth works closely here with the text of Turretin’s *IET*, more so than previously in his *CD*. Concerning Turretin’s distinction Barth states, “the principle introduced at this point is one which we cannot whole-heartedly approve.” (864). Furthermore, Barth blames Turretin (with Quenstadt) for the later Neo-Protestant effort to distill theology down to an “essential Christianity” (866).

31. Barth here is critical of a cadre of 17<sup>th</sup> century theologians (among whom is Turretin) for not giving the doctrine of predestination enough consideration (i.e., by separating it and not bringing it into “direct relationship” with their doctrine of God).

32. On pages 129–133 the citations from Turretin are generally set within the context of telling the history of the debate between supra- and infralapsarians. In this way, the citations are used in a relatively neutral fashion. However, in the broader scope of this section of *CD* II/2, Barth is setting forth his doctrine of election which is thoroughly supralapsarian. In addition, he also recasts the traditional doctrine of election and Trinity in actualistic terms and as such is being very much critical of the tradition. See McCormack, “Grace and Being.”

33. Here Barth takes Turretin to task as a representative of the “older Protestantism” for having abstracted the doctrine of providence from the triune God and Christ particularly. Turretin is clearly pitted against Calvin who—in his Genesis commentary—speaks about the role of Christ in creation and providence.

34. Again, here we see Turretin’s formulation cited over and against that of Calvin.

which were those given by his brother Peter Barth and a little known scholar by the name of Pierre Maury.<sup>35</sup> According to Bruce L. McCormack, this conference—but especially the lecture by Maury—was paradigm shifting for Barth in general but in his doctrine of election and the Trinity particularly. In many ways it solidified the actualistic trajectory of his thinking and critical stance toward seventeenth century theology which is manifest early on. We might even say that whereas before 1936 Barth was open—even if critical—to a traditional metaphysic and theology, after 1936 any concept which is not understood actualistically would have been either discarded or reworked significantly. From here on in, Barth would use traditional theologians not to bolster his theological points, but as foils against which he would develop his own uniquely consistent existentialist theological system. He would enter the city of Turretin, only to leave it and the theological ontology of its greatest Italian pastor-professor behind.

*Barth's Rejection of the Doctrine of the  
Covenant of Works*

We now return to explore in greater depth Barth's treatment of the doctrine of the covenant of works itself. It is interesting to observe that Barth draws upon Turretin quite a bit, and he will discuss the doctrine of the covenant of works at length, but never does he deal with Turretin on the covenant of works explicitly. However, we can gain a clear understanding of how Barth would view Turretin's doctrine by how he interacts with seventeenth century formulations in general.

The only appearance in the *Church Dogmatics* of the terminology "covenant of works" is in section fifty-seven (found in IV/1). Covenant is at the heart of understanding the God who is with us. This is at the center of the Christian faith (CD IV/1, 3). In fact, "reconciliation is the fulfillment of the covenant between God and man" (CD IV/1, 22; emphasis is mine). That is to say, "the covenant is with the whole human race."<sup>36</sup> Man's fellowship with God which was originally disturbed is now restored in Jesus Christ—this is covenant. In this

35. See McCormack, *Critically Realistic*, 455ff; and "Seek God Where He May Be Found: A Response to Edwin Chr. Van Driel," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 60/1 (2007): 66f. Hereafter *SJT*. See also Barth's account of the conference in CD II/2, 188ff.

36. McGowan, "Karl Barth," 118. McGowan brings into sharp relief time and again in his summary of Barth's doctrine of the covenant that it is universal in scope.

37. See the fine summary of this section by Bromiley as cited in McGowan, "Karl Barth," 116.

way, the very idea of covenant is understood actualistically.<sup>37</sup> The covenant is God's revelation and act of reconciliation in Jesus Christ. In fact, "Jesus Christ is the atonement" (CD IV/1, 34; also cf. 127; emphasis is mine). Thus atonement, revelation, and reconciliation are understood as different words for the same reality: Jesus Christ. Barth explains:

... if Jesus Christ is the content and form of the first and eternal Word of God, then ... the beginning of all things ... is preceded by God's covenant with man .... At the beginning of all things in God there is the Gospel and the Law.... For Jesus Christ ... He is both at one and the same time. He is the promise and the command, the Gospel and the Law ... He alone is at once and altogether very God and very man. To that extent He alone is there at the beginning of all things. As the basis and purpose of the covenant He and He alone is the content of the eternal will of God which precedes the whole being of man and of the world.... Ultimately, therefore, Jesus Christ alone is the content of the eternal will of God, the eternal covenant between God and man (CD IV/1, 53–54).

Jesus Christ alone—who is very God and very man—is the covenant between God and man. Further, observe how the covenant is something which precedes even God's act of creation. There is no other kind of covenant of which we may speak: none before, after, or besides Jesus Christ. And since it is Jesus Christ, God's covenant with man is—and can only be—gracious.

It is at this point that Barth enters into a lengthy small print section where he speaks about a development in the history of theology; namely, the idea of the covenant in Federal Theology (CD IV/1, 53–66). He explains that Federal Theology was an advance on medieval Scholasticism in that it sought to view Scripture dynamically and historically (McGowan, "Karl Barth," 122). The Bible was perceived—as we see for example in Cocceius—as a history of God and man in covenant from the creation to the judgment (CD IV/1, 55). The Federal Theologians are even paid a high compliment in that "they saw excellently that the Bible tells us about an event" (CD IV/1, 56). However, the Basel professor levels an even larger complaint about their theology:

But they did not see that in all its forms this narrative has the character of testimony, proclamation, evangel, and that it has as its content and subject only a single event, which in every form of the attestation, although they all relate to a whole, is the single and complete

decision on the part of God which as such calls for a single and complete decision on the part of man. They overlooked the fact that in all the forms of its attestation this single and complete event is a special event which has to be understood in a special way.... As becomes increasingly plain in the sketches of the Federal theologians, the atonement accomplished in Jesus Christ ceases to be the history of the covenant.... They brought the whole under the concept of the covenant, but they did not read the concept out of this one event. Instead, they imported the concept into this one event like all the others ... (CD IV/1, 56).

In sum, the problem is that the Federal theologians “downloaded” the concept of the covenant into their doctrine of the atonement, instead of “downloading” the concept of the atonement in Jesus Christ into their doctrine of the covenant. In other words, they conceived of a covenant which was apart from and outside of Jesus Christ.

Barth continues by lamenting the way in which Federal theology “obliterated” the earlier Reformed theology of Zwingli and Bullinger with their emphasis on a universal covenant (CD IV/1, 57). He argues that in these two Reformers the covenant concept “does seriously apply to all men and is made for all men” (CD IV/1, 57). However, by the time Cocceius writes, the doctrine of the covenant has shifted to teach “that Christ did not die for all men but only for the elect” (57). This particularism Barth describes as being “grim,” “pessimistic,” “gloomy,” and even “unfriendly.”<sup>38</sup> He explains that the problem is when the idea of the covenant is abstracted from the atonement in Jesus Christ. So, Jesus Christ is no abstract *Logos asarkos*. Rather, he is always the God-man. And as “God with us,” he has reconciled God and man once and for all.<sup>39</sup> Again, here we see Barth’s revolutionary actualistic view of election—this time in the context of the covenant—come into sharp relief. Jesus is God for us (i.e., humanity).

He then goes on with a description of the *foedus naturae* as it was found in Ursinus. He rightly explains that for Ursinus we have two covenants which are in “rivalry” with each other—the one of nature the other of grace. The former is on the basis of perfect obedience and thus is dubbed by Polanus and Wolleb the *foedus operum*. Using Cocceius as his guide, Barth enters into a lengthy summary of the doctrine of the covenant of works. According to Cocceius, the ongoing history of the covenant is understood in negative terms; i.e., as a series of five abrogations of the covenant of works: (1) abrogation by way of sin, (2) abrogation by the institution of

the covenant of grace as an unfolding of a pretemporal covenant between the Father and the Son, (3) abrogation by way of God overlooking (paresis)—though not forgiving (aphesis)—sin, (4) abrogation by way of sanctification in which the Law is no longer a means by which we are justified but by which we fight the spiritual warfare against the devil and mortify our old sinful nature, and (5) abrogation by way of the eschatological reawakening of the body in the consummate state.<sup>40</sup>

Barth notes “two discordant features” of the idea of the covenant of works; which was not found in the theology of the Reformers.<sup>41</sup> First, the idea of an eternal—or timeless—covenant between the Father and the Son goes against the grain of the rest of Cocceius’ “historicism.” Second, any notion of the New Testament as an “autonomous” covenant independent of the Old Testament is missing (CD IV/1, 61). He continues by asking the critical question: how could the seventeenth century theologians put this idea of a covenant of works first, and thus make it the standard and reference for the covenant of grace (62)? Barth answers that there is only one possible explanation for this “innovation:”

... biblical exegesis had been invaded by a mode of thought in which this history, however extraordinary the course it took, could only unfold itself and therefore only begin as the history of man and his works, man who is good by nature and who is therefore in covenant with God—a God who is pledged to him by virtue of his [i.e., man’s] goodness (CD IV/1, 62).

In other words, a “mode of thinking” crept into post-Reformation thought which was legalistic—or at least anthropocentric—to the core. Barth attributes this to increasing pressure within the context of the day towards

38. It is also described as a “blind allay.” See the discussion in McGowan, “Karl Barth,” 123–124.

39. For further discussion on how this view of election eliminates any notion of a *Logos asarkos* for Barth see Bruce McCormack, *Orthodox and Modern: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008) 184–192. Interestingly, and apparently unbeknownst to McCormack, Cornelius Van Til made the same observation nearly fifty years previous in “Karl Barth on Chalcedon,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 22 (1960): 158. Hereafter WTJ.

40. Cocceius’ scheme is referred to by Richard Muller as a “rather idiosyncratic notion of a gradually abrogated covenant of works.” However, Muller argues that this “idiosyncrasy” was overcome during the high orthodox theologians Burman and Witsius—a fact not noted in Barth’s treatment. See *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, 78 and 206 along with the literature by William J. van Asselt cited there.

41. We will examine this claim below, as it comes up again in the later Barthian historiography.

a way of thinking that begins with man. Cocceius, under the intellectual pressure from his contemporaries who embraced Cartesianism, was not free to control his thinking according to the biblical text. For it is in the text that we see God—from the beginning—turned toward man *in grace*. Therefore, there are not two diametrically opposed ways in which God deals with man in the Bible. Rather, there is only one; namely, in a covenant of grace. However, what seems to concern Barth most of all is that “this side of the *eschaton*, in time, there is no effective abrogation of the covenant of nature and works, either in the Old Testament economy or consequently in the New” (63). In other words, there is a constant fear placed upon man—a fear of punishment and the expectation of a reward—which makes the Federal Theology doctrine of the covenant of grace legalistic and demanding.

Next, Barth asks a series of rhetorical questions concerning the relation between the eternal Father-Son covenant, and the idea of a covenant of works. After all, what is the need to speak of a covenant of works when already in eternity there is the basis of the covenant of grace established:

Even where it was thought necessary to speak of a first covenant of nature or works, was it really possible to see anything but the one covenant of grace, which has been instituted in eternity.... Why was it thought necessary to see man in any other light than that of the pledge which God Himself had made for him in His Son even before he ever existed? (*CD IV/1*, 64).

The argument behind these questions is clear: if we can speak about an eternal covenant which is gracious through and through, then it must be an illegitimate

42. See his “Grace and Being: The Role of God’s Gracious Election in Karl Barth’s Theological Ontology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed. John Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 92–110; and republished in *Orthodox and Modern*, 183–200. McCormack’s proposal is not without protest; see George Hunsinger’s paper delivered at the 2007 Barth Conference, Princeton, NJ, “Election and the Trinity: Twelve Theses.” This lecture has recently been published under the title “Election and the Trinity: Twenty-Five Theses on the Theology of Karl Barth,” *Modern Theology* 24/2 (2008): 179–198. Paul Molnar, *Divine Freedom and the Doctrine of the Immanent Trinity: In Dialogue with Karl Barth and Contemporary Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2002); and more recently, “The Trinity, Election and God’s Ontological Freedom: A Response to Kevin Hector,” *IJST* 8/3 (2006): 294–306. Also, Edwin Chr. van Driel, “Karl Barth on the Eternal Existence of Jesus Christ,” *SJT* 60/1 (2007): 45–61. For a sympathetic critique see Kevin Hector, “God’s Trinity and Self-Determination: A Conversation with Karl Barth, Bruce McCormack, and Paul Molnar,” *IJST* 7/3 (2005): 246–261.

move to propose a works-based covenant afterwards. How can we move from grace to works? Cocceius was correct in his doctrine of the covenant of grace, for it was grounded in God himself. However, the intrusion of a covenant of works only serves to break the symmetry. The covenant of works appears to be a superfluous (Barth might say, “infelicitous”) insertion of an extra covenant that does not need to be there. It is far better to think of God’s covenant with man as gracious from beginning to end; from eternity past through to the consummation.

Barth then turns to consider the eternal intratrinitarian covenant of the Federal theologians, and finds three doubtful features about it. First, was there any need to propose a contract within the Godhead which was distinguished from the being of God? This presupposes an abstract notion of the righteousness of God—that is, a God who is essentially righteous and thus can be no other. Barth sees this as an infringement upon the freedom of God in not allowing him to be gracious from the beginning. Instead, God’s righteousness and his graciousness were seen as two separate things. Yet,

... this proposition of a covenant of works could obviously never have arisen if there had been a loyal hearing of the Gospel and a strict looking to Jesus Christ as the full and final revelation of the being of God. In the eternal decree of God revealed in Jesus Christ the being of God would have been seen as righteous mercy and merciful righteousness from the very first (*CD IV/1*, 65).

This is a concept that Barth has developed previously in his *CD*. In II/2 he treats the relation between the being of God as triune and his act of election. As Bruce McCormack has demonstrated Barth’s doctrine of the Trinity is actualistic through and through.<sup>42</sup> Therefore, we may not speak about a divine nature or essence or even Trinity prior to or apart from his act of electing in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is not only the object of election from eternity, but also its subject as well. Jesus Christ is both elect man and electing God. Thus, from all eternity the second person of the Trinity is and must always be Jesus Christ and never a *Logos asarkos*. If this is the case, then God is and must be essentially gracious, and thus there is no place in God’s dealing with man for a strictly legal covenant.

Second, we must not think of God as two subjects entering into obligations with one another. This he calls “mythology” and says it has no place in an orthodox doctrine of the Trinity. God is one, and as such cannot enter into a contract with himself. This would only serve

to reintroduce uncertainty by way of conditionality in the covenant of grace (CD IV/1, 65). Barth further asks, “how can the will of God seen in the history of the covenant of grace be known to be binding and unequivocal, the first and final Word of God” (CD IV/1, 65)? In other words, if God has multiple wills then his covenant with man is not dependable. And this then opens the door for uncertainty and thus legalism, along with an anthropocentric view of the covenant.

Third, and closely related to these other two, Barth criticizes the eternal covenant and its consequent doctrine of the covenant of works at this most “decisive point”: in it there is no Jesus Christ. Again, his recast doctrine of election is in view:

In this free act of the election of grace the Son of the Father is no longer just the eternal Logos, but as such, as very God and from all eternity He is also the very God and very man He will become in time. In the divine act of predestination there pre-exists the Jesus Christ who as the Son of the eternal Father and the child of the Virgin Mary will become and be the Mediator of the covenant between God and man, the One who accomplishes the act of atonement... He who in Scripture is attested to be very God and very man is also the eternal *testamentum*, the eternal *sponsio*, the eternal *pactum*, between God and man ... to know the eternal and therefore the only basis of the divine work in the work itself, in its temporal occurrence, to know the eternal divine Logos in His incarnation (CD IV/1, 66).

Put another way, to speak about an eternal covenant between the Father and the Son is to say too little. The covenant between God and man, the eternal decree, is not made between the Father and the *Logos asarkos*, but between the Father and the God-man Jesus Christ. It is made with him who *is* the act of atonement, and thus with all men. Had this remained front and center in the minds of the Federal Theologians, they would never have lost (from what was delivered to them from the Reformers) the universalism in the idea of the covenant. Instead, law entered in and took the place of grace.

### The Barthians

Along similar lines, J.B. Torrance in his 1970 article argues that Federal Theology marked a significant move away from the the theology of Knox and Calvin.<sup>43</sup> The seventeenth century was a time of social and political upheaval where non-conformists spoke about “contracts” and “covenants” which would provide for

individual human rights and liberties against an imposing central government. This idea of “social contract” would “provide a conceptual framework within which Reformed theology was to be recast.”<sup>44</sup> Therefore, there is a radical difference between contract and covenant.<sup>45</sup> A covenant is a promise which binds people together unconditionally, whereas a contract is conditional.<sup>46</sup> The former and not the latter is what we find in the Bible when God makes covenants with man, whether in creation or redemption.<sup>47</sup> The problem occurs when, as happened in Puritan Calvinism, God’s costly grace is turned into conditional grace.

Even so, while in the Bible covenant is all of grace and unconditional, yet it does demand a response. Put another way, the indicatives are always prior to the imperatives (“Covenant or Contract,” 56). However, the order was inverted in the eighteenth century during the Marrow Controversy when the General Assembly upheld the idea that repentance is a condition for the forgiveness of sins. So, asks Torrance, why did this idea of conditional grace and legalism creep into the church? The answer is because of Federal Theology (“Covenant or Contract,” 61). Federal Theology made a hard and fast distinction between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. It made the original covenant with

43. J. B. Torrance, “Covenant or Contract: A Study of the Theological Background of Worship in Seventeenth-Century Scotland,” *SJT* 23 (Feb 1970): 52. Cf. his later article, “Strength and Weaknesses of the Westminster Theology,” *The Westminster Confession in the Church Today: Papers Prepared for the Church of Scotland Panel on Doctrine*, ed. Alasdair I.C. Heron (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1982) 48–49. Due to space limitations, we will not be examining the views of Holmes Rolston III here. However, suffice it to say that they very much parallel Torrance’s. See his “Responsible Man in Reformed Theology: Calvin Versus the Westminster Confession,” *SJT* 23 (1970): 129–156; and *John Calvin Versus the Westminster Confession* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1972).

44. “Covenant or Contract,” 53. Cf. T.F. Torrance, *Scottish Theology: From John Knox to John McLeod Campbell* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996) 136.

45. For a similar view of the relation between contract and covenant see Stuart D. McLean, *Humanity in the Thought of Karl Barth* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1981) 56f.

46. One point of interesting distinction between Torrance and Barth is that the latter does not shy from using the term “contract” to describe the covenantal relationship; see for example CD IV/1, 25. However, Barth does deny the *concept* of contract as defined by Torrance, even if not the *terminology*. See also McGowan, “Karl Barth,” 117.

47. “Covenant or Contract,” 54. Torrance states that this is how the Reformers viewed covenant, as opposed to seventeenth century Calvinists. For more on the Calvin versus the Calvinists” theory see Carl R. Trueman, “Calvin and Calvinism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to John Calvin*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 225f., and the literature cited there.

Adam into a contract in which eternal life was conditioned upon Adam discerning and obeying “the laws of nature by the light of reason” (61). Such a conditional contract, however, was unknown to Calvin and the Reformers who taught only one covenant between God and man: the covenant of grace in Christ. In fact, such a distinction between the covenant of nature and the covenant of grace is a throwback to the pre-Reformation period of the nature/grace dualism (67). Torrance even goes so far as to place blame for racial discrimination and policies of segregation at the feet of the covenant of works (“Covenant or Contract,” 67)!

Another example of how the idea of works in the covenant of grace is treated by Barthians is found in Bruce McCormack. He is arguably Karl Barth’s premiere interpreter in the current theological landscape. He offers us a helpful review of the Swiss pastor-theologian’s doctrine of justification in his recent “*Justitia aliena*: Karl Barth in Conversation with the Evangelical Doctrine of Imputed Righteousness.”<sup>48</sup> While the study focuses primarily on Barth’s doctrine of justification, the Princeton professor touches on issues concerning the relationship between Christ’s redemptive work and the application of that work to the believer; and thus touches on the issue of the role of the covenant of works in salvation.

McCormack begins his explication of Barth’s doctrine of justification against the backdrop of current discussions among advocates of the so-called New Perspective on Paul. In particular he interacts with Douglas Harink whose thesis is that Barth’s recasting soteriology in exclusively objective terms overlaps at significant points with current trends among New Perspective scholars.<sup>49</sup> Harink believes that this convergence sets both the New Perspective and Karl Barth over and against the traditional Protestant doctrine of justification. For both Barth and the New Perspective, imputation—as it was developed in the thought of John Calvin—is rejected (McCormack, “*Justitia aliena*,” 172).

However, McCormack’s contention is that Harink is wrong to draw such a strong dichotomy between the evangelical doctrine of justification (as represented in the theology of John Calvin) and that of Karl Barth. In

fact, McCormack’s thesis is that “a relationship of shared interest exists between Karl Barth and today’s defenders of classical Protestant teaching on justification” (169). Even so, he offers the qualifier that “[Barth’s] doctrine is not precisely [the evangelical’s]” (169). Nevertheless, the similarities are significant:

But the two are compatible on the most fundamental level. Again, this is not to deny the parallels that Harink is able to establish between Barth’s teaching in *Romans* especially and some of the exegetical conclusions now emerging under the banner of the New Perspective on Paul. But these parallels touch only upon Barth’s corrections of the Reformation doctrine; they do not offset in any way the still deeper-lying continuity that joins him to the Reformation (McCormack, “*Justitia aliena*,” 169).

So, to summarize McCormack’s thesis: where the New Perspective and the Reformation diverge, Barth is always and everywhere on the side of the Reformation and not the New Perspective. In other words, Barth has far more in common with Calvin than with Sanders.

After this, McCormack then develops Barth’s doctrine of justification. He admits up front that Barth’s thinking will sound strange to the evangelical.<sup>50</sup> He explains that the reason why this may sound so strange to evangelical ears is because of Barth’s radically different theological ontology (McCormack, “*Justitia aliena*,” 178). Yet, this radical difference does not preclude Barth’s soteriology from sharing important concerns with evangelicals. Barth’s soteriology may begin from a different ontology, yet his concerns are radically Protestant. Even so, Barth’s doctrine differs from traditional evangelicalism in significant ways. For him, there is no “dualism” between the objective work of Christ on the one hand, and its subjective appropriation of it on the other. McCormack explains:

For much of the Protestant tradition, ‘justification’ could be regarded as taking place in Christ only in an improper sense. Actual justification, it was thought, occurs in the historical existence of the believer; what takes place in Christ provides only the basis for a further act of God in the present that is to be distinguished from it. For Barth, this way of thinking fails to understand that *what Jesus Christ accomplishes is not merely the possibility of reconciliation but the reality of it ...* justification is not first made effective when the Holy Spirit awakens faith in us; rather, the Spirit awakens faith in us so that we might live from and toward the reality of

48. In *Justification in Perspective: Historical Developments and Contemporary Challenges*, ed. Bruce L. McCormack (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006) 167–196.

49. See his *Paul Among the Postliberals: Pauline Theology Beyond Christendom and Modernity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2003).

50. McCormack, “*Justitia aliena*,” 177. Remember, when McCormack says “evangelical” he means a view of justification as formulated in the theology of Calvin.

a justification that is already effective for us even before we come to know of it.<sup>51</sup>

He continues by showing how Barth utterly rejects any talk of an *ordo salutis* (McCormack, “*Justitia aliena*,” 180–181). This is because all of God’s saving is accomplished not by some subjective union between the believer and Christ, but *through the act of the incarnation*:

The unity of the divine and the human in the God-man means this: reconciliation is effected in and through a unitary movement of God toward the human in Jesus Christ, a movement that embraces both the humiliation of God (in which is our justification) and the exaltation of the human (in which is our sanctification) (McCormack, “*Justitia aliena*,” 182).

At least three points need to be made in response to these two previous citations. First, notice that for Barth his theological ontology—i.e., actualism—forms the basis for his soteriology in general and his doctrine of union with Christ in particular. It is not that we speak about justification or sanctification in the abstract. We never speak about these things *an sich*. But we speak about them only in so much as God in Christ has *actually* performed them. Justification, sanctification, union, etc., are events. More specifically, they are Christ events. That is, they are acts accomplished *and* applied in the life event of Jesus Christ. They are wholly and completely objective because they are wholly and completely actualized in God’s life-event in Jesus Christ. To put it another way, the so-called dualism between redemption accomplished and applied is eliminated by unification in Christ. The God-man at once and at the same time accomplishes justification, sanctification, etc., and applies these things to humanity in his own flesh.

Second, notice the role of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit does not—as is traditionally thought—unite the sinner to Christ and thereby communicate all of Christ’s benefits to him. Rather, the Holy Spirit merely “awakens” the sinner to show him that redemption has been already accomplished *and* applied to him. When was the sinner justified, sanctified, and united to Christ? The answer for Barth is in the Christ event. But in the Christ event these things are *both* accomplished *and* applied. So, for the sinner in his life history there is no transition from wrath to grace. And there is no receiving of the benefits of Christ’s work to him. The Holy Spirit merely opens his eyes to a fact that is already a reality for him—both before and after he believes. Nothing actually changes existentially in

the unbeliever-turned-believer. The Christian cannot look at the time before he was a believer compared to his life as a believer and say “I once was lost, but now I am found.” For Barth, Jesus was the man lost and then found for us, so that we are lost and found in the Christ event; but never in our own personal life histories:

Christ’s history is *as such* our history ... ‘participation’ in Christ is not something that has first to be realized by means of an independent work of the Holy Spirit but is already real even as the God-man carries out his work (McCormack, “*Justitia aliena*,” 191).

Third, the incarnation is the absolute key to unlocking all of Barth’s soteriology. By virtue of God’s “move toward humanity”—in the God-human, Jesus Christ—reconciliation is effected. It is here that atonement is made. As Trevor Hart would say, following T.F. Torrance, “the Incarnation *is* the Atonement” (Hart, “Humankind in Christ,” 83). It is in this act—the event of incarnation—that man is united to God *in Christ*. To be in Christ is for the eternal Logos to be man exalted to God (sanctification) and to be God humiliated to man (justification).

Notice that for the “evangelical”<sup>52</sup> view of union with Christ there is a twofold benefit that comes by that union—justification and sanctification. Barth uses these two items here to describe the benefits given to humankind, albeit not by the Holy Spirit applying them to the believer in a subjective act of union with Christ. Rather justification and sanctification are accomplished and applied by way of the incarnation. Language usually reserved to describe the application of redemption in the *here and now* is taken up by Barth to describe what happened in the incarnation *there and then*.

In summary, for Barth—according to McCormack—the doctrine of union with Christ (along with the other traditional aspects of the *ordo salutis*) is objectively conceived because it is incarnationally effected. And while McCormack does not draw into his discussion directly the notion of the covenant of works, the implications working back from justification to the prelapsarian covenant are clear: *the role of the merit of works is not*

51. Ibid., 179. Emphasis is his. This concern of McCormack’s here seems to parallel that of Trevor Hart in his article, “Humankind in Christ and Christ in Humankind: Salvation as Participation In Our Substitute in the Theology of John Calvin,” *SJT* 42 (1989): 67–84. Hart is reacting against any “polarization between objectivity and subjectivity” in soteriology.

52. Again, here we are using the term “evangelical” in the way McCormack has previously defined it as the view of Calvin.

needed. Any notion of the imputation of Christ's active obedience, as we see in Turretin, is utterly superfluous. Justification is not conceived in terms of the imputation of a righteousness which Adam should have originally secured for himself and his posterity. Rather, justification occurs at the moment of the hypostatic union—prior to and apart from the work of Christ as second and last Adam who secures obedience-merit. Anything which would take away from this Christ-focused understanding of justification—such as a putative covenant by which man himself could merit his own salvation—would smack of natural theology and anthropocentric religion. In this way, McCormack has helpfully shown us exactly why Barth rejects the covenant of works—this time from the perspective of the doctrine of justification.

#### IV. EVALUATION OF THE BARTHIAN PROPOSAL

Returning to Turretin, then, can we say the Barthian proposal accurately represents the doctrine of the covenant of works? At least as far as Turretin is concerned, the answer is a resounding no. For starters, the idea that the seventeenth century Orthodox developed the doctrine of the covenant of works in contradistinction to the theology of Calvin has been shown to be thoroughly misguided by Muller, Letham, and Lillback.<sup>53</sup> But we can also see that in Turretin, while the covenant of works contains conditions, it is not a crass covenant by which man pulls himself up by his own boot straps. Beach explains:

God does not begin to be gracious to Adam upon the fulfillment of an obligation. Rather, that God enters into a relationship with Adam at all, that he fashions Adam as a moral agent who can know him; and that God so arranges Adam's relationship with himself that human obedience issues forth unto eternal happiness, each of these testifies to God's kindness and favor.... That God chooses to 'reward' humans for giving the Creator his due is according to God's graciousness and love, for the

creature does not have rights over the Creator (Beach, *Christ and the Covenant*, 85).

Turretin is able to go so far as to explain that God could have demanded obedience from his creature without a promise of reward at all (*IET*, VIII.III.II). Even so, God binds himself in covenant to Adam to reward him with eternal life upon the stipulation of obedience. In other words, this covenant was not necessary. God could have demanded perfect obedience from Adam without a promised reward—and Adam would have owed that to God by virtue of his creatureliness. The fact that God condescends to Adam by way of covenant and binds himself to reward that which man owed to God anyway, is an act of kindness and “philanthropy” (II).

From this it ought to be clear that having conditions in the covenant does not in anyway contravene the benevolent nature of it or the fact that it is all of God's own initiative. For Turretin, God's covenant of nature, no less than the covenant of grace, is of God, by God, and through God. It is by his initiation, it is on the basis of his “highest benignity” (II), and thus even the fulfillment of the conditions are given by God. Further, it is true that the covenant idea in the Bible may denote a promise of God without any stipulation or demand of obedience (i.e., one-sided or monopleric) such as you see in the Noahic covenant and in the order of the universe (*IET*, VIII.III.III). Ordinarily, however, covenant is dipleric: God promises and man responds in duty and worship. And this we see nowhere more clearly than in the covenant of nature—which is replete with benevolence.

But what of the Barthian “consistent grace” approach to the covenant idea? This is more difficult to argue against. For Barth and his followers it is grace “all the way down.” And, after all, who can argue against grace? It is no exaggeration to say that for Barth grace is all triumphant. God never did, nor did he ever intend, to reward man for obedience. And this is the case for both the first Adam and the second Adam. Christ's salvific work is not contingent upon his having to merit a righteousness for those that he represents. Again, it is grace all the way down.

How then ought we to respond to this? Is not the Barthian way better? Is it not more safe—if we want to guard against legalism—to simply posit grace as the all comprehensive element in God's covenant with man? Why even bother to introduce the element of law at all? Given the perennial battles which have surfaced within the history of Reformed theology over the role of works/law with reference to justification, would it not simply

53. Richard A. Muller, “The Covenant of Works and the Stability of Divine Law in Seventeenth Century Reformed Orthodoxy: A Study in the Theology of Herman Witsius and Wilhelmus A. Brackel.” *CTJ* 29 (April 1994): 75–100; esp. 88. Richard A. Muller and Rowland S. Ward, *Scripture and Worship: Biblical Interpretation and the Directory for Worship* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2007) 69–82. Robert Letham, “The *Foedus Operum*: Some Factors Accounting For Its Development,” *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 14.4 (1983): 457–67. Peter A. Lillback, “Ursinus' Development of the Covenant of Creation: A Debt to Melancthon or Calvin?” *WTJ* 43 (1981): 247–188 and *The Binding of God: Calvin's Role in the Development of Covenant Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001) 276–304.

be easier to hop on the gracious Barthian bandwagon and let it just be grace all the way down?

In response to these questions we can say simply—even if it sounds somewhat simplistic—that the Bible does not allow for us to take this position. Whatever one’s exegetical opinions are with reference to the finer details of the prelapsarian covenant, one thing is for sure, God demands obedience to his law. This is clear not only from Genesis 1 and 2, but also from a slew of other biblical references. The Barthian antinomian<sup>54</sup> notion—while ideal in the abstract—simply cannot make sense of the Scriptural witness. Scripture time and again witnesses to the holiness of God and the correlate demand of holy behavior from his creatures in passages such as Leviticus 18:5, Isaiah 6, Romans 6:23, Galatians 3:10 and 12; not to mention passages which refer to the perfect obedience of Christ and his just reward for said obedience as in John 17:1–5, Philippians 2, and Romans 5:12–21. An in-depth exegetical study of these texts is beyond the scope of this study, nevertheless their very presence stand as a monumental challenge to the Barthian rejection of law in general and of the covenant of works in particular.

But also, are there not ramifications for making it “grace all the way down?” Surely, if the Barthian paradigm cannot account for a large portion of the biblical witness, there will be adverse effects in one’s system of theology. And as we saw in McCormack’s work, denying the covenant of works has a profound affect on the doctrine of justification. Like playing a game of chess, a player cannot expect to move even one piece without affecting the situation at other places on the board. In this instance, the rejection of the covenant of works affects the gospel itself. For example, if sin is not essentially the breaking of the covenant of works, then what happened to Christ on the cross? In fact, what was the entire process of Christ’s humiliation all about if it was not to obey where Adam sinned and to take upon himself the just punishment for Adam’s breaking and our breaking God’s law? If that is taken away, then the cross and the resurrection becomes something else. And once it becomes something else, Christ’s work becomes something other than good news.

## V. CONCLUSIONS

We can appreciate both Barth’s and the Barthian’s zeal to do away with a medieval and neo-Protestant notion of the *analogia entis* and natural theology. We can also appreciate their desire to set forth a system of doctrine in which grace is triumphant. However, we cannot go down the path of their rejection of the covenant of

works. It is clear from Turretin’s writings that the covenant of nature is not the same as the medieval natural theology with its resident notion of nature and grace. For medieval Scholasticism, man in the state of nature is in an inherently neutral position with all its accompanying autonomy and independence from God. However, for Turretin, in the covenant of works Adam is always and everywhere utterly dependent upon the initiatory benevolence of God and his revelation—both internally and externally. Secondly, in the medieval conception of man in the natural state, Adam and God shared a common ontology; albeit on different ends of the metaphysical spectrum. Man stood on the same ladder of being with God; man towards the lower rungs with God at the top. The garden, on this conception, represented man’s opportunity to climb that ladder by virtue of condign merits. Yet, in Turretin the Creator-creature distinction is all pervasive and with it the rejection of both condign merit and the *analogia entis* in the probationary period.

To be sure, the Barthian critique of theological liberalism as being an aberration of Reformation theology and thus standing closer to medieval rationalism and metaphysics is spot on. But a close reading of Turretin’s theology as a whole, and his doctrine of the covenant of nature in particular, belies the Barthian clustering of seventeenth century Reformed orthodoxy with medieval and eighteenth/nineteenth century Protestant rationalism. There seems to be a common thread that runs throughout the writings of Barth and his followers which manifests an allergy towards speaking of God’s demands on man and man’s response to those demands. A proper reaction against the moralism and legalism of both Roman Catholicism and Liberalism is not antinomianism. Rather, the proper response is to understand the truly gracious nature of the covenant of grace. And the only way to do that is to fully comprehend what exactly it was that Christ came to do. For in understanding that Christ came under the law to fulfill all righteousness, we can see that what was for him a covenant of works becomes for us a covenant of grace. Only if Christ has truly fulfilled the covenant of works, can we say that “it is finished;” that is, that there are no works left for us to do which can earn God’s favor. According to this understanding—and only on this understanding—can we put to rest any notion of legalism or moralism whatsoever.

*Continued on Page 323.*

54. An allergy towards the law is manifested in Barth’s thinking at least as early as his 1923 Göttingen lectures on Reformed Confessions. See *The Theology of the Reformed Confessions* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2002) 144ff.

***Francis Turretin and Barthianism: The Covenant of Works in Historical Perspective.* Continued from Page 213.**

To again invoke the impression of à Brackel mentioned in the beginning of this study, only when we understand aright the covenant of works will we understand aright the covenant of grace.<sup>55</sup> Only when we first understand what Adam failed to do, can we fully appreciate—to the glory of God alone who is abundant and rich in mercy—what Christ succeeded to do on our behalf. For if we are to be justified, and justification is to truly be by grace alone, it must be on the basis of a righteousness that is not our own. It must be on the basis of a perfect righteousness that is imputed to us by faith alone because of Christ alone. Perhaps ironically, only with *this* understanding of the covenant of works can the covenant of grace be truly gracious. ■

***In Brief: The Intent of Larger Catechism 109 Regarding Pictures of Christ's Humanity.* Continued from Page 228.**

The wording of public ordinances and subsequent widespread destruction of depictions of Christ, the Parliament's authorization of views such as those held by Vicars and others, Laud's view contrary to the Homilies noted in his trial, and the involvement of the four London ministers in identifying idols for destruction which included pictures of Christ, as well as the work by the Assembly on Parliament's list of scandalous sins, all indicate that if indeed the Westminster divines were of a mind to omit pictures of Christ's humanity from their proscriptions in Larger Catechism 109, they would surely have needed to have stated this explicitly. Clearly, subsequent generations of Presbyterians understood this to be the intent of the Westminster Assembly, which can be traced in the many sources cited in Dr. VanDrunen's article.

CHRIS COLDWELL ■

***The Sabbath Day and Sabbath Recreations.* Continued from Page 238.**

the ministry is a failure to engage the Puritan view of the Sabbath. One is tempted to think that no exegetical or historical work has been done by these candidates. It behooves candidates coming into a confessional church to examine the reasons why the standards say what they say. If they plan to take an exception to the "no recreation" clause, they need to have a better understanding of what Isaiah 58:13–14 mean in the context, and in the overall scope of redemptive history, and not simply argue that "pleasure" means "business," when the context of the passage does not lend itself to this interpretation.

On what can and cannot be done on the Sabbath, there is endless debate, stretching all the way back to Talmudic times (the Talmud has an entire treatise on the Sabbath). Rather

than asking about a specific activity, as to whether or not it is lawful (and usually with the mindset of what the person can get away with), it is more helpful to remember that the rest in view is not simply physical rest, but rather a rest of worshipping the Lord. Therefore, if the activity is conducive to worship, then it is lawful. We cannot ignore the human conscience here either, since an activity that might be conducive for worship to one person may not be conducive to worship for someone else. To take one example, it is certainly wise to let small children let loose some of their excess energy on the Sabbath (contrary to Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Farmer Boy!*). Otherwise, they will not be able to sit still and pay attention in worship. One does not have to take the attitude of Almanzo Wilder's father in order to have a Puritan view of what is acceptable on the Sabbath! It is certainly a work of necessity to do something about the energy of small children. We must avoid both extremes of legalism and antinomianism here, as well as everywhere in our treatment of the law. ■

***Psallo: Psalm 42:1–11.* Continued from Page 296.**

of God. In the companion Psalm which follows, he asks for that deliverance which results once again in joining in those public ordinances. In a day when the lightest or slightest things become excuses for missing the public worship of our day, this is indeed a refreshing encouragement not only to be diligent in attendance upon those ordinances, but to count them as the precious gifts that they are from the Lord.

Let us then learn from this "Wisdom Psalm". Let us, with the Psalmist, confess that the Lord is our necessary sustenance, and that we are indeed dried and parched apart from Him. Let us confess that our affections are not as they ought to be, and bewail, and confess our indifference and coldness toward the Lord. Let us also confess that the public ordinances of worship are our necessary food, and turn away from the pietistic notion that we can be content in private and secret worship. Let us prize the Day the Lord has set apart for Himself, and those ordinances by which He communes with us. Let us prepare to meet the Lord week by week, and have a proper sense of anticipation which befits the greatness of His blessing in these signal benefits. Let us long for Him as the thirsty deer long for the valley springs!

TODD L. RUDELL ■

55. And therefore we cannot agree with the points of agreement that McGowan has with Barth on the covenant. McGowan argues that Barth's rejection of the covenant works/grace distinction and denial of the priority of law over grace was a helpful critique of traditional covenant theology. He therefore concludes that to advocate these things is potentially "fatal." However, as for us, it appears to be just the opposite; the preservation of the gospel depends upon the priority of law and the distinction between covenant of works and grace. "Karl Barth," 130.