

## **Mono-covenantalism**

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God at the creation established a relationship with Adam in which he promised Adam life and threatened death. Some understand the life promised by the tree of life as entrance into eternal life, a glorified life beyond that which he experienced at first. Others regard the life promised as continuation in the life which Adam already had. And this life he already had was God's gracious gift to him. But God also threatened Adam with death if he ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. To continue in life or to attain to eternal life, Adam had to never sin. One sin, one eating of the forbidden tree, and the result would be death. ... but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die. (NIV Genesis 2:17)

Presbyterians refer to this relationship between God and Adam as a covenant. Some have questioned whether this term is correct. But regardless of term used, God certainly established a relationship with man at the creation. Presbyterians distinguish this relationship with man before Adam's sin with the relationship God has established with men as sinners through the mediation of God's Son, Jesus Christ. Again, Presbyterians regard all the covenants from the first promise of a redeemer in Genesis 3:15 through the new covenant as essentially one covenant in essence. Thus in classic Presbyterian theology, there is the first covenant at creation which Adam violated thereby bringing sin and death into the world; and the second covenant God established to deliver man from that sin and death through a redeemer.

Recently it has been expressed in some Presbyterian circles that there are not two covenants, essentially different from each other. Rather, there is only one covenant. This is sometimes called "mono-covenantalism." In contrast the traditional view is called "bi-covenantalism." In the bi-covenantal view, the first covenant (or relationship if you don't like the word "covenant") was a covenant of works as to its essential nature. In contrast, the second covenant is called the covenant of grace. But it has been objected that the concept of works earning life is not really biblical, but rather an imposition of medieval notions of merit. It is said that Adam had life only by grace. God graciously give life to Adam and promised him continuation in life if he kept the covenant. In particular, if he did not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If Adam was faithful to the covenant, he would continue in life. So to in new covenant, God gives us life by grace. If we remain faithful to the new covenant, then we too will continue in life as Adam would have continued if he remained faithful.

Looked at from this perspective, it appears that there is only one covenant as to its essential nature. In this covenant God gracious gives life and men retain life by being faithful to the covenant. This is mono-covenantalism. Without a doubt there are numerous parallels between the relationship before the fall, and the relationship with God we now have in Jesus Christ. There are other indications of a parallel between the covenant at creation and the covenant in Christ. For example, during the era of the Mosaic covenant the land of promised was pictured as a new Eden. In book of Revelation, the New Jerusalem has in it the trees of life.

Furthermore, Adam's sin began with doubting the Word of the Lord, namely, "In the day that you eat... you will die." Similarly, in the new covenant we enter into that covenant and remain in it by believing the Word of the Lord. Adam needed faith to keep the first covenant. We need faith to keep the new covenant. We might even say that it was by faith that Adam would have attained to life (or remained in life). And we also attain to life in the new covenant through faith. Such parallels and similarities might lead someone to question whether the dual covenant structure of classic Presbyterianism is overstated.

But such a conclusion is based upon a series of equivocations and confusions. On a more thoughtful reflection on the first relationship and the relationship we have in Christ, it will be clear that the first covenant was profoundly different in its essential nature from the new covenant in Christ. And the difference is centered in one word - Jesus. Jesus, God the Son incarnate, was not the mediator of the first covenant. Jesus is the mediator of the second covenant. The death and resurrection of Jesus were not necessary for Adam to have life in the first covenant. The death and resurrection of Jesus are necessary for us to have life today. God did not establish a relationship with man at the creation based upon a redeemer. Man didn't yet need a redeemer. But our relationship in the new covenant is based upon the redeemer, Jesus Christ.

This is sufficient to indicate that the first covenant was profoundly different than the new covenant. But we ask the question, "why do we now need a covenant based upon a redeemer?" The answer is obvious. Adam broke the first covenant and brought upon himself and his posterity sin and death. "Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men..." (NIV Romans 5:12) The first covenant was made with a sinless Adam and promised him life as long as he remained sinless. But he sinned.

The second covenant is made with sinners who are dead in their sins and trespasses. "And you were dead in the trespasses and sins... and were by nature children of wrath... But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ-- by grace you have been saved..." (ESV Ephesians 2:1, 3, 4-5) Adam may have had life by grace, but it was grace to a sinless creature who needed no atonement for his sins, who had not offended the justice of God and had not kindled the wrath of God. God did not promise Adam life through the death of the savior. God promises us life only through the death of Jesus our Savior.

God offers us life through faith in Jesus Christ, our Savior. God offered Adam life based upon his own perfect keeping of the commandment. Certainly Adam needed faith in order to keep the covenant. But it was no "saving faith" because Adam needed no saving at the creation. He was not under the wrath and curse of God.

The faith required of Adam in the first covenant was to believe the curse-threat Word of God. "You will surely die." Believing that threat-curse Word of the Lord, and

having no sinful nature (i.e., being innocent), Adam had such liberty of will so as to continue in sinless obedience. But instead he disbelieved the Word and transgressed the commandment. He turned his heart to evil and sinned. The covenant word to us in Christ is not the curse-threat: "You will surely die." We are dead. We have no power to make ourselves alive. Our hearts are evil and our wills are inclined to sin. But in the new covenant, in the Gospel, we have proclaimed to us a different Word of the Lord. It is the message about our mediator, who took our nature, obeyed where we sinned, and died to pay for our sins. It says to us "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved?" But from what are we saved? We are saved from the curse-threat of the first covenant. We are saved from death in all of its hideous fulness. We are saved from the consequence of the breaking of the first covenant.

In the new covenant we are summoned to believe that God sent His Son to save sinners. Life is offered to us, not on condition of our own sinless obedience as life was offered to Adam. Rather life is offered to us by the sinless obedience and atoning sacrifice of our mediator, Jesus Christ. Surely Adam needed faith and we need faith. But the object of that faith was very different. Adam needed to believe God's Word that he would die if he sinned, and so he needed to never sin. We need to believe that though we sinned in Adam, and sin continually in thought, word and deed, Jesus paid for our sins. Jesus satisfied God's justice and removed from us God's wrath by his work. Adam was to believe that if he never sinned, he would live. We believe that because someone else never sinned, but offered himself to pay for our sins, we sinners will live forever.

In the new covenant we are justified (judged to be righteous, pardon for our sins) by faith alone in Christ alone. The basis of this justification is the obedience and righteousness of another - Jesus Christ. "Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men." (NIV Romans 5:18) In contrast, when God would have put Adam in the dock, he could have had no other plea but "I never sinned." "I have done the work you told me to do without fail." "I have not eaten of the tree." In the first covenant man was to be justified (judged to be righteous) by his own righteous works. He had no mediator to stand in his place. Justification in the first covenant by its very nature was by works. That is why it is rightly called a covenant of works. Justification in the New Covenant is for us by faith alone in the redeemer. God gracious gives us a life for which Jesus paid the price required. Thus the second covenant is rightly called the covenant of grace.

Life in the new covenant still requires a sinless obedience. But Jesus offered that sinless obedience. "...so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men... so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made (lit. appointed) righteous." (NIV Romans 5:18b, 19b with editorial comment) And this sinless obedience had as its consummation, Jesus' offering of himself on the cross to pay for all our sins. We are justified equally by his obedience and by his redemption. We "are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." (NIV Romans 3:24) Had Adam never sinned he would have been justified by his sinless works.

But we can only be justified “by his [God’s] grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.”

To sum up, the covenant at creation made no provision for redemption, for the atonement of sins, for cleansing for sinners. The new covenant in Christ is nothing but the provision for a redeemer, the atonement of sins and the cleansings for sinners. The first covenant is about justification by one’s own works. The new covenant is about justification for sinners whose works deserve condemnation. But the mediator stands in our places, does the righteous work, offers the atoning sacrifice, and pays the redemption price. And all this we have by faith alone.

So then, it is plain and obvious from scripture that the covenant at creation was profoundly different from the new covenant. To miss the difference is to miss the essential meaning of scripture. So then, the Westminster standards exposition of two covenants, of works and of grace, is a faithful exposition of scripture. The advocacy of mono-covenantalism is obviously a rejection of the Westminster Standards, the classic creed of Presbyterians. The Westminster Standards teaches a bi-covenantalism. But in this matter the Standards are correct because, as we have seen, the scripture teaches a bi-covenantalism (or a bi-relationship-ism if you don’t want to use the word covenant.)

<b>At Creation</b>	<b>In Christ</b>
made without a mediator	made through a mediator
life for Adam based on Adam’s own obedience	life for sinners (including Adam) based on the obedience of another
justification by works	justification by faith alone
made with the sinless	made with sinners
no provision for redemption, atonement	provision for redemption, atonement
threatened death to those alive	promises life to those who are dead
resulted in all men being condemned	resulted in all elect men being justified